

CHAPTER I  
THE TRADITION



The greatest changes of all come not as a thief in the night, as the oak-tree from the acorn. The most radical of thinkers is soaked in tradition; he spends a lifetime bending ancient ideas to a slightly different use, and his followers soon revert to the familiar pattern while still mumbling the novel terms. And it is so: men can work only upon what they have inherited. Fresh experience and novel problems they must understand with instruments they have learned from those who came before them. New ideas they must grasp in the concepts they already know, for they have no others; new habits they must work slowly into the accustomed pattern of their lives.

—J. H. Randall Jr., *The Career of Philosophy*

Aristotle's theory of *stasis* may be viewed as an oak tree arising from the acorn of an antecedent intellectual tradition. Rendering the entire history of this tradition from the emergence of the root meaning of the word, to the growth of its conceptual trunk and its branches of differentiated meaning, is not possible, given the passage of time and the destruction of sources. Another difficulty that the historian of ideas faces is that the tradition cannot be reduced to an analysis of the word's every appearance in the surviving texts. Oftentimes the concept of *stasis* will

dominate as a theme, without a single appearance of the word. For example, Edmunds (1987) has convincingly argued that Aristophanes' *Knights* has *stasis* as its subject; Juffras (1988) has argued that Sophocles' *Ajax*, *Oedipus Colonnus*, and *Antigone* are works in which *stasis* looms large; and Euripides' *Orestes* has been interpreted as a play in which the city is dismembered through political decay and *stasis*.<sup>1</sup>

Our purpose is to identify those generic traits of the tradition that influenced Aristotle's own outlook. In this we are fortunate, because the writings on *stasis* exemplify a tendency of the Greeks for what K. von Fritz called "an amazing consensus concerning principles of practical life together with the most total disagreement concerning what in antiquity may be called the metaphysical background of life."<sup>2</sup> The poets, the historians, the philosophers, and medical writers came to share common assumptions. Their common outlook was prior to any differences in treatment within a given discipline, as well as prior to specialized analyses by the various disciplines. When Demokritos writes that "envy is the starting point of *stasis*"<sup>3</sup> he is providing an explanation for the rise of *stasis*. Though his explanation differs from Plato's, Aristotle's, Sophocles', and Solon's, he begins from a common ground that all these thinkers would have agreed to, namely, that *stasis* is an evil, that it brings harm to the *polis*. Perhaps Solon would have preferred to posit *hubris* as the culprit; or in the case of Sophocles, at least in his work *Ajax*, *stasis* might stem from unrequited *charis*; or as we find in Theognis' poems it could be attributed to the ignobles' lust for power and gain. Whatever the differences, not one of these thinkers would have found any point of disagreement with Demokritos' aphorism that "fratricidal *stasis* is an evil to each, for to both the victors and the vanquished the destruction is the same" (Diels, *Vorsokr.* B. 249).

None of these thinkers would have argued that *stasis* has redeeming value; that there are positive aspects to its conflicts or that it could have healthy therapeutic outcomes for the city. This should be compared to the modern views on revolutions, where there is no common agreement either within the different fields, or across the disciplines as to their moral or political desirability. Some artists have found intrinsic value in revolutions, while others have described them as perverse disruptions to the normal evolution of human culture. When we turn to contemporary social and political sciences, which one would expect to be definitive regarding the fundamental traits of their subject matter, we find that divisions on the status of revolutions are as vast as in the arts. There is no unifying tradition that would serve as a common ground for all disciplines. There is no common starting point for a plurality of treatments

of the subject matter. The point is not whether revolutions are good or bad, so much as the absence in our times of any evolution toward a common view. The Greeks had such a unifying perspective: *stasis*, to quote Solon (Edmonds, 4.27), was a "public evil" (δημόσιον κακόν). The words of wise Nestor in the *Iliad* (9.63–64) that "a clanless, lawless, heartless man is he that loveth dread strife among his own folk" resonate in Bacchylides' phrase that *stasis* is a "destroyer of all things"<sup>4</sup> and echo throughout every piece of writing on this subject without exception. The prayer of the chorus in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* that: "May *stasis*, insatiate of ill, ne'er raise her loud voice within this city"—was the common prayer of Hellas.<sup>5</sup>

### THE DIFFICULTY OF TRANSLATING *STASIS*

Before we turn to examine these generic traits a few words must be said about the differences between *stasis* and the words that are used to translate it into English. There are at least three major problems with rendering *stasis* and its cognates into English. First, there is no accepted definition, as such. Second, the words used to translate it often suggest meanings that are misleading. Third, the noun form for the persons engaging in *stasis*, οἱ στασιῶται, often rendered as "revolutionaries" or "factionaries," is absent from most Greek writings on the subject. That the verb in the original Greek, "to engage in *stasis*" is more naturally rendered as a noun, "revolutionary" or "factionary" in English translation should alert us to a bias embedded in our modern views.

Let us begin with the two related problems of definition and translation.<sup>6</sup> The events that *stasis* was used to describe were very diverse, from the slaughter of political opponents and their families, to political disputes of every variety and shade of expression. Like so many other words that had profound meaning for Hellenic culture, we have no direct counterpart for the range of experiences to which these Greek terms referred; nor do we have access to all the shades of meaning that these words acquired over a long time. The context of *stasis*, the ancient *polis*, with its direct citizen participation and direct citizen control over all aspects of life, is at best a museum piece for us. Our modern semantical radar screen is calibrated to register only certain types of conflict, and thus, other types, that would set off alarms in antiquity don't even appear on the modern screen.

The modern political vocabulary of conflict, which includes terms like "revolution," "civil discord," "strife," "sedition," is inadequate,

because each of these captures only a portion of the many meanings that the Greeks had assigned to the word, and each suggests meanings that the original term does not always possess. The word 'revolution' is especially misleading. The images that the modern notion of revolution conjures, that of the destruction of an obsolete political, social, and economic order and its replacement by a new, causally necessary system,<sup>7</sup> are completely absent from the ancient view of *stasis*.<sup>8</sup> The collapse of old values, which the modern world has perceived as desirable also does not find its counterpart in Greek intellectual life. Whereas revolution and its cognates carry a positive moral value, the ancient Greek term for political innovations, *neōterizō*, carried with it a pejorative meaning implying self-serving change conjoined with brute force.<sup>9</sup>

In this light the violent events, such as those in Miletos, Kerkyra, and Argos, which the ancient historians labeled as *staseis*, present little problem for the translator because they suggest a state of civil war. Our modern radar recognizes them as familiar objects. This very familiarity should forewarn us that we may be accentuating a single facet of a complex process, that of fratricidal strife, one that is easiest for us to interpret in light of our own experiences, at the expense of other traits, especially subjective factors, that have little importance for us today. To clarify the point, and to establish several reference points to some of the *staseis* that captured the attention of ancient authors, a brief description of several of these conflicts is in order.

Miletos was one of the great Ionian centers, the birthplace of philosophy, a *polis* that founded over seventy colonies from the Black Sea to Egypt. During the sixth century the city was divided between the laborers and the rich. The conflict reached its high point when the rich, having suffered defeat, fled the city, leaving behind their families. The poor seized their property, rounded up their children, took them to the fields outside the city where they had their oxen trample them to death. When the aristocrats returned to power, they took hold of their enemies and their children, and after tarring them, set them on fire.<sup>10</sup> When Herodotus in his *Histories* refers to this period in Miletos' history he describes the city as if it had been a sick patient, writing that "it had suffered disease for two generations."<sup>11</sup>

Diodorus Siculus, an historian who wrote in the first century B.C. preserved the story of *stasis* in fifth century Argos. We are told that the democrats in an insane rage clubbed 1,200 of their fellow citizens to death and then turned to slaughter the demagogues who had incited them to commit these atrocities in the first place.<sup>12</sup> As if describing a mad scene taken from Euripides' *Bacchae*, he ends the narration by noting the return of the popu-

lace to sanity after committing its final massacre: "the *dēmos* having ended their fury were restored to their previous clear-headedness."

The *stasis* at Kerkyra occurred during the Peloponnesian Wars. A conflict between oligarchs and democrats took on a violent turn after the intervention of Spartan and Athenian forces. On the heels of successive attacks and counterattacks, the democrats gained the upper hand; the oligarchs, fearing for their lives, sought refuge in the island's holy sanctuary, the temple of Hera. Some of the oligarchs were tricked into leaving their sanctuary and were executed. Thucydides then describes how:

The mass of suppliants . . . on seeing what was taking place, slew each other there in the consecrated ground; while some hanged themselves upon the trees, and others destroyed themselves as they were severally able. During seven days . . . the Corcyraeans were engaged in butchering those of their fellow-citizens whom they regarded as their enemies: and although the crime imputed was that of attempting to put down the democracy, some were slain also for private hatred, others by their debtors because of the monies owed to them. Death thus raged in every shape; and, as usually happens at such times, there was no length which violence did not go; sons were killed by their fathers, and suppliants dragged from the altar or slain upon it; while some were even walled up in the temple of Dionysus and died there. (Thuc. 3.81.2–82.1, trans. Crawley)

From these instances of *stasis* one might conclude with Wheeler (1951) that *stasis* was quintessentially a condition of violent internal conflict.<sup>13</sup> The image that naturally comes to the fore is that of conflict between hopelessly divided and intransigent factions. This, however, was not the dominant image for the Greeks, who instead, comprehended these events through the governing concept of νόσος (*nosos*) or disease. They came to the conclusion that violent outbreaks were the advanced stage of disease in which the normal noetic processes of political life were radically altered for the worse.

When we think of classifying revolutions and civil wars we automatically place them under the rubric of conflict and their study under the heading of conflict theory. Even though reflections on strife were important in Greek philosophy, there is no evidence, to my knowledge, to suggest that the Greeks tried to understand *stasis* as a species of universal conflict. Pre-Socratic philosophers had inquired into strife, especially as a possible factor underlying processes in nature; however, they did not then turn these theories into a general framework within which

*stasis* could be understood as a subspecies of strife. When Heraclitus pronounced that "war is the father of all things,"<sup>14</sup> he did not have *stasis* in mind, nor does Empedocles' "cursed strife,"<sup>15</sup> a factor causing change in the universe, appear to be relevant to *stasis*. The Greeks, at least as far back as Solon, had concluded that *stasis* and conflict, though related, were different.

If the term *stasis* had simply referred to the outbreak of conflict, to what Hobbes called "sedition," or what the American Founding Fathers called "faction," then the rendering of the term would be straightforward. Both of these Latin words emphasize the presence of entrenched, intransigent parties ranged against each other in conflict; they connote a "going apart" (*seditio*) or "a taking of sides" (*factio*). Miraculously, the Greek thinkers did not conclude that *stasis* was a problem of factions or class conflicts, even though the empirical evidence showed that class war was most often involved in these disputes.<sup>16</sup> A striking archetypal example of this view is provided by Solon's famous elegy in which he condemned both rich and poor for what he described as an affliction, a spreading ulcer, in the Athenian *polis* (Sol. 4.17–20). Solon blamed the illness on the moral corruption of the populace, claiming that *stasis* had its origins in the minds and habits of the *polis*' citizens. The result of this approach was that early detection of the political signs of *stasis* called for a philosophy of the soul that could diagnose and correct the malaise in its nascent stages.

The third problem of translation is associated with the hazards of the words "factionary" or "revolutionary" for describing the persons engaged in *stasis*. For this study I have chosen to follow A. E. Taylor, who in his translation of a passage in Plato's *Laws* (715b5), renders *stasiōtas* as "factionaries." Because the word "factionary" is uncommon in English it has the advantage of limiting the types of misconceptions that would arise, and lengthy caveats that would be required, from the use of more popular renderings such as "revolutionaries," "seditionaries," or "partisans." The drawback is that the word "factionaries" suggests that the defining trait of persons who engage in *stasis* is that they form factions, a presumption that is at odds with the argument of this study. Indeed the texts show that the Greeks avoided this nuance in their own language as is evidenced by the rarity of the noun forms of the word "factionary" (ὁ στασιώτης). The word is rare in Plato, non-existent in Aristotle and Thucydides, and infrequent in the writings of other historians. In Aristotle it is the verb forms of στασιάζω, a word that means "to engage in *stasis*" or "to be in a state of *stasis*," that are quite common. The preference of Greek writers for the verb over the noun indicates that the condition of *stasis* is considered to be prior to the acts of factionaries. The verb always

conveys the meaning of a conflict condition that engulfs the entire *polis*, not just its combatant factioneers. Its frequent use, relative to the infrequent use of *stasiōtai*, indicates that the factionaries are conceived as outcomes of a more inclusive process. As we shall have occasion to discuss in chapter 6, it is the "inclination" to engage in *stasis*, what Aristotle called *pōs echontes*, a term usually rendered as "state of mind," that is taken to be a cause. The factionary is in this way viewed as a consequent of an abnormal subjective condition that has to be explained. The modern notion, however, which has been shaped by the experiences of the French and Russian revolutions, tends to view revolutions and their relationship to revolutionaries in an opposite way, namely, the former are a consequent of their causal agent, the revolutionary. Provided it is kept in mind that "factionaries" refers to persons in a subjective condition that inclines them to engage in *stasis*, and not to autonomous engineers who, with fixed resolve and singular traits of character, cause *staseis*, then perhaps the hazards of this unfortunate rendering can be overcome.

### GENERIC TRAITS OF *STASIS*

The connection of *stasis* to disease may have had its origins in the very ancient belief that injustice is punished by divine visitation whereby any injustice perpetrated by an individual or part of the community would bring physical misfortune to the whole. What injustice violated was the natural order, the health of things, such that a balance would have to be established over time. We find this view in Homer, for example, where the Achaean army, as a whole, is punished with a plague for Agamemnon's offense against a priest of Apollo; and we are told by Hesiod that Zeus' punishment for unjust deeds embraces the entire *polis* (ξύμπασα πόλις).<sup>17</sup> As the word *stasis* evolved to signify a state of political disorder, it came to encompass a causal relationship between injustice and consequent punishment. The violated order would respond, as it does in Hesiod's poem, with disease and infertility and the punishment arrives as a community-wide scourge. Underlying this perspective is that the infraction itself is not personal and therefore punishment will not be a personal affair between transgressor and deities. The person committing the foul deed pollutes the entire community with his corruption. When one comes to the sixth-century poetry of Solon, *nosos*, as many scholars have noted, is no longer figurative, personified, or a quasimagical visitation; it is an actual process of wasting away from the injustice afflicting the city.<sup>18</sup>

The frequency of the connection between *stasis* and *nosos* is so great that it bears emphasis. The pair *nosos-stasis* appears and reappears. We find it in Aeschylus, Euripides, Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Isocrates, Lysias, and others.<sup>19</sup> The concept of *stasis* as a *nosos* will serve Aristotle as an unstated first principle, which he will not refer to in any special way because it was so commonplace in his culture. Keeping this in mind will help us to avoid an illicit transfer of contemporary assumptions regarding rebellions and revolutions when we turn to interpret Aristotle's theory of *stasis*. The universal castigation of *staseis* as disease, a plague, the worst of all evils, will lead us to cast doubt on modern interpretations that claim that Aristotle could have entertained a positive role for them.<sup>20</sup>

To divulge the generic traits of *stasis* one could analyze the poetry of Solon, Theognis, Aeschylus, Euripides, to demonstrate the presence of a shared outlook. Analysis of any of these works, however, demands philological rigor not to mention special skills for confronting the numerous challenges of literary interpretation. My approach in this chapter is to forgo these difficulties by turning to passages from Thucydides' *Histories* on the *stasis* at Kerkyra. It is here, in passages 3.81–84, that Thucydides turns to explore the causes, what Aristotle would have called the *dioti* (διότι), the 'because' or the 'reason why' of *stasis*. The *stasis* at Kerkyra was presented by Thucydides as the paradigm for the internecine slaughters that spread to all of Hellas during the Peloponnesian Wars.<sup>21</sup> It describes a *stasis* that has progressed to an advanced form so that its inner nature and defining elements are disclosed.

By limiting ourselves to these passages, many of the problems of interpretation which would be encountered in trying to decipher the poets are thus avoided, while we gain direct access to the central themes that were later treated by Aristotle in his own theory of *stasis*. Among these themes we find:

1. The classification of *stasis* as a deviant political process
2. The observation that *stasis* is accompanied by transformations in values; the tendency being for the replacement of common-interest with private-interest values
3. The dissolution of familial and political friendship ties, and replacement of these bonds by 'party associations' that exist outside of the constitutional framework
4. The identification of honor and gain as the objectives of *stasis*, and terror and fraud as the means



5. The variability and unpredictability of *stasis* and the prominence of unbounded passions in this process.

We shall now turn to briefly consider each of these themes, though the reader should keep in mind the warning of Connor (1984, p. 249), a noted commentator, that Thucydides' *Histories* "defies reduction and resists simplification."

## 1. *STASIS* AS A DEVIANT PROCESS

Like his predecessors, Thucydides placed *stasis* in the category of deviant political processes that had accompanying psychological consequences.<sup>22</sup> Commentators have often presumed that his assessment of how people act in civil wars was derived from a pessimistic theory of human nature, but it is more likely that it was an inductive generalization drawn from the events that he directly observed or were reported to him. Extrapolating beyond the constraints of the text and attributing to Thucydides a pessimistic theory of human nature threatens to remove the subject matter from the specific context of human failure and to universalize it for all time as an essential substratum of the human *psyche*. Thucydides' reflections are the results of a profound, microscopic examination of human conduct within a context delimited by the stresses and strains of *stasis*. Thucydides states:

Many were the calamities which befell the Greek city states through this civil strife: they happened then and will happen again so long as human nature remains the same, with greater or less violence and varying only according to the changing conditions in each state. (Thuc. 3.82.2.1–2.5, trans. Gomme)

What will continue happening forever are not *staseis*, but many grievous acts whenever *stasis* breaks out. Such is human nature. Take human nature and place it within the framework of this abnormal process, *stasis*, and one may be assured that processes culminating in savage acts between citizens will occur. Sometimes these actions will happen with greater, sometimes with lesser severity, the dynamics of the process, though, will be along the lines observed by Thucydides. An advance in his analysis is that he places the irrational conduct that is a dominant trait of *stasis* within a process context. Thucydides brought this process of noetic decline to the surface and whatever shortcomings his systematic presentation had, it served as a starting point for the philosophic reflections that came soon after.

## 2. SUBJECTIVE PROCESS: TRANSFORMATION OF VALUES

The actions of *stasis* are preceded by a subjective inversion: types of public behavior that would have been condemned as reprehensible under normal conditions, suddenly emerge as admirable. The underlying process involves a reprioritization of values that no longer respond to common interests and, hence, have no need for a common framework of dialogue. Thucydides also showed that this demise in *logos* involves a corruption in both speech and rational calculation. The new modes of expression allow for an arbitrary redefinition of just and unjust actions such that the passions and the appetites find a pliant medium for their operations.

And they modified at their discretion the customary valences of names for action. For example, irrational boldness was considered "bravery in the cause of party"; cautious delay was "a smokescreen for cowardice"; moderation, "an excuse for the timid"; assessment of every issue, "sloth on every front." To strike out sharply was "acting like a man"; to plan with and for security was "a nice-sounding excuse for desertion." The advocate of atrocity was always reliable, his opponent was a man to be suspected. If you succeeded in a plot, you were shrewd; if you anticipated someone else's plot, you were even cleverer. (Thuc. 3.82.4.1–5.3, trans. Connor)

The first sentence of this passage explains that words changed their meanings in accordance with a transformation of values: "the customary *valences*" of words were changed to justify deeds, or as Thomas Hobbes would translate "the received *value* of names imposed for signification of things, was changed into arbitrary."<sup>23</sup> This resulted in a corruption of *logos*, whereby the established meanings of words, as carriers of social values that predict consequences for a given type of behavior were tampered with. Once a word was cut off from its common historical usage and tied to a private cause, then the meaning of the word could be recast according to the arbitrary interests of the prevailing parties. Words ceased to have a common meaning. Vocabulary itself became a source for determination of alternatives according to a private set of desired outcomes. Relativism and subjectivism became the norm.<sup>24</sup>

For fifth-century Hellenes this was a devastating diagnosis, because the *polis* was based, regardless of its constitutional form, on the power of public deliberations. Every constitutional form embodied the notion that community bonds required a *logos* by which words have designated meanings, as set by a common evaluation of the experiences to which

they refer. Words are carriers of social values that predict consequences about a given type of behavior. For example, temperance (*sophrosunē*), a virtue, was praised, whereas its absence was held to be a harbinger of dire consequences and a sure sign of imminent catastrophe. Now if the word is cut off from its commonly accepted historical use and is superimposed onto a factional cause, then the meaning of the word may be cast according to the arbitrary interests of the respective parties.

The abuse of *logos* in public life was something that the Hellenic *polis* could not live with. Its cohesive institutions could not survive the stress and strain of competing prioritizations of values and private interests. The dark side of human nature, which emerged as a prominent theme in Euripides' works, is a reflection of the intrusion of the unbounded, the arbitrary, the private, as a dominant influence over public life. Meanings were distorted to function as signals for communicating passion-driven objectives within a private reference frame. Two important aspects of this communication were the ignition of intemperate emotions to vanquish factional opponents and the elevation of private ends in speech to noble, common-interest purposes.

The rhetoric of *stasis* replaced *logos*. The link between rhetoric and *logos* was severed in a manner that permitted an illegitimate substitution of passions as principles for major premises. Fear, greed, desire for unjust gain, *hubris*, and so on could serve as principles for statements since the purpose of speech, in the context of *stasis*, was to arouse passions against supposed perpetrators of injustice, and to keep comrades in a state of self-righteous outrage. Simultaneously its rhetoric was necessarily tainted with deceit for it aimed to lull and disarm opponents rather than to inform and persuade for common action.

### 3. DEMISE OF FRIENDSHIP AND PIETY

The bonds of party alignments replaced political and familial friendship ties. A consequence of the transformation was the elimination of the primary regulatory function of friendship (*philia*) in Hellenic social life. According to Aristotle, the family was the source for the modes of justice and friendship of the political association (*Eth. Eud.* 1241b27–31). His model is one where principles of equality (democratic, oligarchic, and aristocratic) are intelligently mixed for an harmonious regulation of functions and relations between family members. The family, in his view, provides early training in those principles of equality and friendship that in adult life are vital to one's participation as a citizen. The family served

also as the training ground for piety. Knowing what was shameful and what was likable to the gods was socialized through familial cult worship that extended to *polis*-wide worship of values with interrelated kinsmen. A weakening of these ties represented an institutional and moral crisis of the first order:

Kinship became more foreign than party, for party friends were readier for action without demur; for such associations were formed not for the sake of mutual aid under the existing laws, but for gain by illegal means. Good faith between the members of a party was secured not by the sanction of divine law so much as by partnership in crime. (Thuc. 3.82.6.1–7.1, trans. Gomme)

Family friendship and normal personal friendships contained within them, as all forms of *philia* did, explicit norms for reciprocation. The popular saying “to do harm to one’s enemies and good to one’s friends” delineated the limits of reciprocation and specified the type and the just degree of action to which a good *philos* was bound. One might find fault with the standard, as did Socrates in the *Republic*, the point is that it was a standard nevertheless. In other words, friendship embodied notions of justice and imposed limits to action. *Philia* shared at least this attribute with more primitive retributionist conceptions of justice in that reciprocation establishes defined limits to action.<sup>25</sup> In contradistinction, *stasis* associations removed limits to retribution. The actions of *stasis* are accompanied with passions which Thucydides often refers to as *orgē* (wrath).<sup>26</sup> These actions are “outside of place” (ἄτοπία), outside of the restraints, outside of the mean that circumscribed Hellenic political life.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4. THE ENDS AND MEANS OF *STASIS*

The erosion of *philia* contributed to a breakdown of law. The process stemmed from the unlimited nature of the associations through which *staseis* were transacted. Unlike familial friendship relations that functioned to secure extended household aims within the cooperative context of the constitution, party associations were often formed outside the law for unlimited benefits that were in discordance with the aims of the broader political order. Their aims of illicit gain (πλεονεξία), and love of honors (φιλοτιμίαν)<sup>28</sup> could only be fulfilled by conditions that lay “outside of the city’s constituted order.”<sup>29</sup> What kept factionaries together was not a set of purposes for mutual benefit of a specific limited sort,

such as business, pleasure, cult worship, or some type of limited utility. Their associations were often characterized by an open-ended goal of changing or even overturning the entire political system and within that transformation realizing, in an unspecified manner, the spoils of victory. The compact based on gain and power further subverted traditional constraints and gave sway to what Thucydides calls "uncultured," or "untamed" passions (*apaideusia orgēs*, 3.84.1.7). It is therefore not surprising that the means for achieving these unbounded ends involved the initiation of "movements" (*kinēseis*) in which violence, perversion of the law, and deceit became the norm.

### 5. THE VARIABILITY OF *STASIS*

Thucydides was careful not to reduce *stasis* to conscious calculation, because all the evidence pointed to an irrational self-destructive process. Rational pursuit of power and gain were not taken to be the substance of *stasis*, even though they defined its objectives. By themselves, the objectives could not account for the vindictive irrationalism of *stasis*: "there were the savage and pitiless actions into which men were carried not so much for the sake of gain as because they were swept away into an internecine struggle by their ungovernable passions" (Thuc. 3.84.1-2, trans. Warner). The peculiar process brought in its wake a legitimization of passions whose appearance in public life was heretofore subject to severe controls. Law, language, and values were reconditioned, and through extralegal mechanisms were unfastened from institutional restraints: "The cause of it all was love of power to gratify greed and personal ambition; from that came the eagerness to quarrel which appeared once strife had begun" (Thuc. 3.82.8.1-3, trans. Gomme). The love of power is a universal receptacle for illimitable desires, since it is presumed that all appetites can be satisfied with the acquisition of power. But the quest for power, as Hobbes was to emphasize, provokes a counterreaction, a war of all against all, which undermines all stability and order. The result was a "love of quarrel" on all sides, which is to say *stasis*, at some point, became a self-sustaining process with unpredictable and incalculable outcomes. The results were rarely what the perpetrators had envisioned.



## CHAPTER 2

# PLATO: *STASIS* AS THE "WORK" OF INJUSTICE



Thucydides' observations are the rudiments for a theory of *stasis*. He isolated the recurring pattern of events, many of which continue into our own times. The private ends and means of *stasis*, its corruption of *logos*, the spread of enmity, and the demise of friendship, were all identified and connected in a manner that prepared the material for systematic inquiry. A theory, however, had to answer the question of "why?" It had to give a systematic account of the causes underlying these undesirable events. Most importantly, a theory had to account for all facets of *stasis* as arising from disease (*nosos*), since this was universally and without exception held to be its most prevalent trait.

A complete theory for explaining these traits required philosophy. The most brilliant insights into political conflict would be insufficient without an account of the healthy *polis*, for an explanation of disease presupposes a preexisting science of health. A healthy *polis* raises the issue of a healthy citizenry and its psychological well-being. What is called for is an evaluation of types of life and the values that direct cooperative efforts to these ends. Such a theory is presented by Plato in the *Republic*, a dialogue in which the criteria for a normal constitution are elaborated. His views on *stasis* flow directly from his analysis of justice where he treats *stasis* as a pathology resulting from injustice. Justice is the connective tissue of political society and from this perspective he explains its internal cohesiveness, and conversely, its disunity and ultimate dissolution. His method is strikingly different from most modern

reflections on conflict, which treat revolutions and rebellions as an independent subject matter within a specialized field of political science.

Plato put forward a theory of *stasis* from a naturalistic perspective. The brief account provided in this chapter aims to show that in his view *stasis* is a state where the just internal order within an organic entity is disrupted and its normal functions undermined. The exposition is divided into the following sections: (1) the types of things that undergo *stasis*; (2) *stasis* as a disease; (3) the work of justice in promoting political friendship or *homonoia*; (4) the relationship between *stasis* and constitutional transformations; (5) the ends and means of *stasis*; and finally (6) the justification for claiming a continuity between Plato and Aristotle's writings on *stasis*. Plato's theory, as I shall attempt to show, provides the starting point for Aristotle's subsequent reconstruction. A full account or even an outline of Plato's writings on this subject, which underwent development and enrichment over the course of his life, is well beyond the purpose of this study. The aim here is limited to identifying a few common elements that establish a continuity between the two thinkers, and only in so far as these continuities give us insights into Aristotle's own theory of *stasis*.

## THE TYPES OF BEINGS THAT UNDERGO *STASIS*

Plato uses the term *stasis* in contexts other than strictly political, such as when he speaks of *stasis* between friends, or within the human body, a ship's crew, an army camp, and the human soul (*Resp.* 351c7–10). The common, invariable attribute of all these beings is that they are compounds composed of cooperating parts that can undergo change. Simple beings that have no parts are excluded, since they are naturally one with themselves; so too disordered composites, what Aristotle will call "heaps," since these have no discernible unity or purpose. Also excluded from *stasis* are the imperishable and perfect intelligibles.<sup>1</sup> The things to which *stasis* refers have a work to perform to which all members contribute. Unlike heaps, the parts have an internal structure and the whole has an abiding identity that is derived from its work. The synthesized whole is more than the sum of its aggregate parts, for the function of the whole is different from the partial functions of its contributing members.

A necessary trait of the cooperating parts is that they are related, or more precisely that they share a *συγγένεια*, a word that literally signifies a kinship relation. An added qualification is that the kindred relation between the elements is natural, for *stasis*, we are informed by the Eleatic Stranger in the *Sophist*, is a disease that involves "disagreement in the



naturally related."<sup>2</sup> The qualification "naturally kindred" specifies that the internal relatedness is objectively placed and that the ties are neither conventional nor arbitrary. Identification of *stasis* in any being thus requires the ability to discern naturally kindred elements within any whole, both within their proper condition, as well as in an unnatural condition of difference or strife. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates states that for complex beings, one must first determine the normal functions of the parts and their natural capacities, and then one must ascertain what each part or power can do and how each can be acted upon (*Phdr.* 270d1–5). According to this approach, elements are found to be kindred when they have the power to perform a function that contributes to the whole. Hence, a correct division of parts entails a prior understanding of the work to be performed. It requires the introduction of teleology to evaluate what the partial good of the parts may be in relation to the whole. In each compound the identification of these parts and their kindred relations is no small matter; it is a science of division, of knowing where and how to cut, and it is reserved for the higher dialectic.

The criterion of "naturally kindred" allows Plato to make distinctions between things, which, even though they are externally identical, lack an internal relatedness between their elements. For instance, he holds that the term "war" should be used only to refer to hostilities against alien barbarians, whereas conflicts among Greeks should be called "*stasis*." Externally, there is war in one case and war in the other. The difference is that in the former instance the combatants, he says, are unrelated, whereas in the latter they are "friendly and . . . kindred" (*Resp.* 470b6–7).

A word of caution. When we speak of related parts, it is important that we do so free of modern-day machine analogies. Machine parts, though they may function in unison, lack powers in their own right apart from those assigned to them. Their operations occur within a specified range. Plato's kindred elements have telic powers. They have an innate tendency to move themselves and other parts on their own volition to a desired end. The parts of the soul, for example, include desires and appetites that can cause a part to assert its own autonomy or its own advantage at the expense of the whole.

## THE DISEASE AND ITS SYMPTOMS

Plato's association of *stasis* with the organism's inability to carry out its work (*ergon*) was a reworking of the traditional view of *stasis* as disease. Plato was rigorously able to account for *stasis* as a condition in

which the telic operations of the organism are arrested or brought to a halt.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, this connotation of bringing or coming to a standstill, or stopping was one of the meanings of the verb ἵστημι and its passive intransitive form, ἵσταμαι, from which the noun *stasis* is derived. For example, we find this meaning of ἵστημι as “stopping” in Homer, such as in the *Iliad*: “Then white-handed Hera *stayed* the horses” [ἔνθ’ ἵππους στήσασα θεὰ λευκώλενος Ἥρη].<sup>4</sup> Also, one of the meanings of ἵσταμαι (*LSJ*) is that of “rest,” such as when Socrates in the *Republic* (436c5–6) asks whether it is possible for the same thing to be “at rest and in motion?” Ἔσταναι, εἶπον, καὶ κινεῖσθαι τὸ αὐτὸ ἄρα δυνατόν); while in medical terminology we find it used as a term for constipation (*Aris. HA*. 588a7–8: καὶ ἐάν ἡ κοιλία στή). Sometimes verb forms of ἵσταμαι are used to simply state that “one comes to a stop” (*LSJ, Arist., Apr.* 43a37). The image of something arrested is also used by Theophrastus when he defines the calmness of the air as a *stasis* (ἡ δὲ στάσις νηνεμία; *Frag.* 5.18.8, *Περὶ ἀέρων*). One might add, simply to accentuate the rootedness of this aspect of meaning, that “a stop” continues to be one of the primary meanings of *stasis* in the Greek language.

This brings us to an important point having to do with the root sense of the word *stasis*. Modern scholars generally, with a few notable exceptions, have taken the root meaning of *stasis* to be that of a “standing,” an interpretation that has led them to place emphasis on the presence of factions and intransigent conflicts between them as the governing image of the word. M. Finley’s (1962, p. 6) claim that *stasis* is to be thought of as a “standing” between opposed factions has unreflectively been repeated by almost all scholars that have written on the subject:

Its [i.e., *stasis*] root-sense is “placing,” “setting” or “stature,” “station.” Its range of political meanings can best be illustrated by merely stringing out the definitions to be found in the lexicon: “party,” “party formed for seditious purposes,” “faction,” “sedition,” “discord,” “division,” “dissent,” and finally, a well-attested meaning which the lexicon incomprehensibly omits, namely, “civil-war” or “revolution.”

A serious problem with this interpretation is that it fails to explain why the Greeks had to invent a new word for “factions” or “division” or “sedition” or “conflict,” given the existence of a rich vocabulary of conflict words that had existed from the Homeric period.<sup>5</sup> This view fails to link *stasis* to its actual root image, which in a political context, as we have shown earlier, was *nosos*, or disease. Another problem with the interpre-

tation of *stasis* as a standing is that it mistakes the fragmented residue of dissension—the effect of disease—for a cause, and elevates the splintered parts and their relations to the status of subject. Quite lawfully this view ends in circularity, in which *stasis*, a state of conflict, is said to be caused by a standing of conflicting parties. That which has to be explained, namely, the standings between intransigent opponents, is inevitably used in the explanation. By placing factions and their standings in the subject position it makes the mistake of dislodging the actual subject of inquiry, which is the *polis*. The *polis* is the compound whose diseased condition is indicated by the presence of *stasis*.

Plato's explanation of disease, which probably had its origins in the humor theories of early Greek medicine, helps us gain some insight into how the word *stasis* as *nosos* could also logically encompass the debilitating, fractious traits that are described by the lexicon meanings cited by Finley. *Stasis* as a medical term was used for describing a disequilibrium among conjoined elements. This association of *stasis* with disease suggests that at some point in the evolution of the term, the medical meaning was added to *stasis* in order to distinguish it from other conflict terms. It may be possible that the Hellenes, because they viewed the *polis* teleologically, borrowed the meaning from medical practice to describe unhealthy political conditions that brought disease to the associative body and thus aborted its end. To the meanings of "standings," that is, of difference and discord, which we find for example in Alcaeus' collection of poems *Στασιωτικά*, a new dimension of meaning (which applied to diseased organisms in general) was at some point added to *stasis* to designate it as a type of political pathology. In at least one medical account of disease, that of *Menecrates*, health is attributed directly to a harmonious, non-*stasis* equilibrium between the elements that compose the human body:

When these [i.e., the four elements] do not disagree (μη̄ στασιαζόντων), but are in a state of harmony, the body is healthy; when they are not in harmony, it is diseased. For then there are expelled from our bodies phlegms, boils, and the like.  
(*Anonymus Londinensis* 19.26–31, trans. Jones)

Of course, it is quite risky to make hypotheses about such a distant past when the sources that could decide the matter are lacking. In this case we are fortunate to have Plato's own account of disease in the *Timaeus*, an account that was included in a collection of medical papers in the papyrus known as *Anonymus Londinensis*. In his etiology of disease, Plato

holds that disease and *stasis* are the same and that both are caused by a disruption to the normal order of the elements composing the body:

Now everyone can see whence diseases arise. There are four natures out of which the body is compacted—earth and fire and water and air—and the unnatural excess or defect of these, or the change of any of them from its own natural place into another, or, since there are more kinds than one of fire and of the other elements, the assumption by any of these of a wrong kind, or any similar irregularity, produces disorders (*staseis*) and diseases (*nosous*). For when any of them is produced or changed in a manner contrary to nature, the parts which were previously cool grow warm, and those which were dry become moist, and the light become heavy, and the heavy light; all sorts of changes occur. For, as we affirm, a thing can only remain the same with itself, whole and sound, when the same is added to it, or subtracted from it, in the same respect and in the same manner and in due proportion, and whatever comes or goes away in violation of these laws causes all manner of changes and infinite diseases and corruptions.<sup>6</sup>

In Plato's view *stasis* and disease are effects, outcomes rather than causes. The cause of *stasis* is an unnatural order within the organism. Several of the ways in which the internal disarrangement might occur include the introduction of the wrong elements, or the wrong types of the right elements, or changes to the right elements or changes to their proper place contrary to their nature. A violation of proportion, too much or too little, excess or deficiency, can lead to disorder as well.<sup>7</sup> A sure sign of the presence of *stasis* is the generic symptoms of divisiveness, dysfunction, and wasting away.

A consequence of this causal relationship was the rejection of the claims of factions, no matter how justified, as premises for political analysis. Even when the injustice was blatant, such as the enslavement of citizens during Solon's times, the statesman was obliged to view the disorder as a consequent. The role of the statesman was therapy. Like a doctor he looked to rehabilitation of the entire body. He eschewed partisanship or advocacy on the grounds that management of the intransigent positions of the warring parties was not the proper means for effecting a therapy. The uncooperative "standings" between the parts, their unnatural enmity, once understood as symptoms, should lead back to the diseased organism and its disrupted order. From the initial observation of parts in disarray, one proceeds to the functions of the organism and its internal order that are to be restored.

Where should the statesman look for the causes of disruption? Since *stasis* is not a cause but a resultant condition, the question is what type