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Nietzsche on Thucydidean Realism

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Abstract: It is now conventional in both pedagogical and scholarly venues to characterize Thucydides as a "realist." Few, however, have noted that the first major writer to describe him in these terms is not Machiavelli or Hobbes (alongside whom he is frequently placed), but Friedrich Nietzsche. This article seeks to investigate the particular character of Thucydides's realism through a close reading of Nietzsche's discussions of Thucydides and his *History*. Three interpretations are explored: realism as a mode of investigating or understanding the world, realism as a set of ideas about the possibilities of establishing grounds for justice in the world, and realism as a matter of character.

> Of what is great one must either be silent or speak with greatness.
>
> —Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*

When introducing students to the literature on political realism, there are certain conventions which nearly all textbooks and syllabi adhere to, from the lowliest freshman survey courses to graduate seminars. Among these conventions, they must begin with a section on classic texts, which will frequently go unmentioned for the remainder of the year. Foremost among these classics stands the unholy trinity of Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes.[1]

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[1]On Thucydides's status as a realist, see G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (London: Duckworth, 1972), 26; Robert Gilpin, "The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism," *International Organization* 38, no. 2 (1984): 287–304, and *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 127; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), 163; Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical*

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This common designation implies that the three writers are joined by a common teaching of realism. But this represents a contemporary viewpoint superimposed upon thinkers separated from one another and from us by time and space; it does not necessarily arise out of the texts themselves. Machiavelli's explicit connection to Thucydides is limited to a single paragraph in his *Discourses on Livy*.[2] Thomas Hobbes famously translated Thucydides's history into English (the first such translation), and offers brief remarks on Thucydides's life and teaching at the outset of that work.[3] Thucydides's influence on Hobbes's later thought—particularly in the account of the *stasis* in Corcyra—is clear enough. But Hobbes never refers to Thucydides as a "realist" (an anachronistic term in his day).[4] Whatever the character of Hobbes's thought,[5] and the uses to which he put

Illustrations (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 4–13. For a more qualified view of Thucydides's place in the realist canon, see Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. chap. 6; Michael W. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism & Socialism* (New York: Norton, 1997), esp. chap. 1; and Nancy Kokaz, "Moderating Power: A Thucydidean Perspective," *Review of International Studies* 27 (2001): 27–49. For critiques of how contemporary realists have appropriated Thucydides, see Peter J. Ahrensdorf, "Thucydides' Realistic Critique of Realism," *Polity* 30, no. 2 (1997): 231–65; Laurie M. Johnson Bagby, "The Use and Abuse of Thucydides in International Relations," *International Organization* 48, no. 1 (1994): 131–53; Steven Forde, "International Realism and the Science of Politics: Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Neorealism," *International Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1995): 141–60; Daniel Garst, "Thucydides and Neorealism," *International Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (1989): 3–27; and Paul A. Rahe, "Thucydides' Critique of Realpolitik," *Security Studies* 5, no. 2 (1995): 105–41. For a more nuanced elucidation of Thucydides's compatibility with contemporary realist theories, see Jonathan Monten, "Thucydides and Modern Realism," *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2006): 3–25. For the view that Thucydides is not a realist at all, see Richard Ned Lebow, "Thucydides the Constructivist," *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 3 (2001): 547–60. For what remains the most jaundiced take on the use of Thucydides by modern scholars, see David A. Welch, "Why International Relations Theorists Should Stop Reading Thucydides," *Review of International Studies* 29, no. 3 (2003): 301–19.

[2]Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3.16.1. See Steven Forde, "Varieties of Realism: Thucydides and Machiavelli," *Journal of Politics* 54, no. 2 (1992): 372–93.

[3]Thomas Hobbes, "Of the Life and History of Thucydides," in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. William Molesworth, vol. 8 (London: Bohn, 1839).

[4]It is common enough, however, to draw this connection; see Lebow, "Thucydides the Constructivist," 547.

[5]For the argument that Hobbes does not comport well with realism as we understand it today, see Michael C. Williams, *The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), chap. 1. For

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Thucydides's work in it, it is far from clear that he endorses Thucydides on the basis of some shared realism—at least not explicitly.[6]

The earliest thinker of comparable stature explicitly to discuss Thucydides in such terms is Friedrich Nietzsche—a philosopher with a more tenuous connection to political realism.[7] Nietzsche repeatedly refers to Thucydides as a kind of realist, and accordingly praises him in the highest terms. True, in his sober way Hobbes too undertakes to vindicate Thucydides—arguing against the preference of Dionysius of Halicarnassus for Herodotus's histories. Yet Hobbes's support for Thucydides differs from Nietzsche's not only in tone (who can readily imagine a yea-saying Hobbes?) but on the grounds for which he champions him. Nietzsche is also the earliest thinker to make the now-common association of Thucydides with Machiavelli.[8]

Realism is an admittedly woolly term, referring less to a concrete theory or set of theories and more to a broad set of claims—sometimes in the form of unchanging laws—about power and interest as enduring elements of political life, combined with skepticism about the applications of justice to human affairs. Consequently, perhaps, iterations of realism tend to be shaped as much by the particular concerns of scholars and practitioners as by any overarching commitment to a "realist" ethos. Present-day realists, for example, are largely concerned with challenging the dominance of liberal political thought,[9] or disclosing the structural or systemic constraints under which states operate.[10] In recent years, a number of scholars have turned to Thucydides as a source of particular wisdom about realism in politics.[11] Yet

the claim that Hobbes actually sits at the fount of liberal thought, see Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

[6]On the Hobbes-Thucydides connection, see Richard Schlatter, "Thomas Hobbes and Thucydides," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 6, no. 3 (1945): 350–62; Ioannis Evrigenis, "Hobbes' Thucydides," *Journal of Military Ethics* 5, no. 4 (2006): 303–16; and Laurie M. Johnson, *Thucydides, Hobbes, and the Interpretation of Realism* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993).

[7]Though cf. Paul E. Kirkland, "Nietzsche's Tragic Realism," *Review of Politics* 72, no. 1 (2010): 55. Raymond Geuss, an avowed realist, has also claimed Nietzsche as a major influence.

[8]See note 51.

[9]For an excellent overview of this tendency, see William Galston, "Realism in Political Theory," *European Journal of Political Theory* 9, no. 4 (2010): 385–411.

[10]See note 2.

[11]A by no means exhaustive list would include Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), both of which draw heavily on Thucydides, as does Ioannis D. Evrigenis, *Fear of Enemies and Collective Action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Edith Foster, *Thucydides, Pericles, and Periclean Realism* (New York:

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Thucydides's text is notoriously elusive, offering grist for a variety of mills.[12] Like realism itself, it is easily subject to particular interpretive agendas. It is worth returning to the philosopher who first explicitly perceived in Thucydides a realist ethos, but who shares few if any of the presuppositions of contemporary realists, to discover a surprising Thucydides—one whose realism is apparent without being easily assimilated to modern categories. Of course, the attempt to learn about Thucydidean realism from Nietzsche should not be taken as equivalent to wholesale acceptance of Nietzsche's reading.[13]

Nietzsche's references to Thucydides broadly take two forms: he comments—sometimes directly, sometimes obliquely—on specific historical events chronicled in Thucydides's history, and he comments on Thucydides himself. The relationship between the two kinds of references will require some elaboration. Taken together, these references indicate three dimensions to realism and to Thucydides's realism: realism as a set of ideas about the possibilities of establishing grounds for justice in the world, realism as a mode of investigating or understanding the world, and realism as a matter of character. The first two align more closely with conventional accounts of realism, though Nietzsche's interpretations are characteristically distinctive; the third, however, which is arguably a precondition for the other two, offers a particularly novel understanding of realism.[14]

What Is a Realistic View of Justice?

To begin with, for Nietzsche, Thucydides's realism is indistinguishable from his status as a sophist (about which more below). Like the sophists, Thucydides entertains no illusions regarding the competing priorities of power and justice:

Cambridge University Press, 2010); Gregory Crane, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity: The Limits of Political Realism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and Geoffrey Hawthorne, *Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[12]See S. Sara Monoson and Michael Loriaux, "The Illusion of Power and the Disruption of Moral Norms: Thucydides' Critique of Periclean Policy," *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 2 (1998): 285–97.

[13]For a case in point, see Brian Leiter, "In Praise of Realism (and Against 'Nonsense' Jurisprudence)," *Georgetown Law Journal* 100 (2012): 868–71.

[14]The focus here is on Thucydides by way of Nietzsche, rather than on how Thucydides may have influenced Nietzsche's own thought. For examples of the latter, see Scott Jenkins, "What Does Nietzsche Owe Thucydides," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 42 (2011): 32–50; and Robert Eden, *Political Leadership and Nihilism: A Study of Weber and Nietzsche* (Tampa: University Presses of Florida, 1983), chap. 4.

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> The Sophists are no more than realists: they formulate the values and practices common to everyone on the level of values—they possess the courage of all strong spirits to *know* their own immorality—
>
> Do you suppose perchance that these little Greek free cities, which from rage and envy would have liked to devour each other, were guided by philanthropic and righteous principles? Does one reproach Thucydides for the words he put into the mouths of the Athenian ambassadors when they negotiated with the Melians on the question of destruction or submission?[15]

Not incidentally, the Melian dialogue is the hinge for Nietzsche's reading of Thucydides.

> *Origin of Justice.*—Justice (fairness) has its origin among people of approximately *equal power*, as Thucydides correctly understood (in the terrible dialogues of the Athenian and the Melian ambassadors); where there is no clearly discernible superiority and a struggle would lead to ineffectual damages on both sides, the thought arises of coming to an understanding and negotiating the claims of both sides: the character of *exchange* is the original character of justice. Each satisfies the other, in that each receives what he values more than the other. We give the other person what he wants, as henceforth belonging to him, and receive in return what we wanted. Justice is therefore requital and exchange under the assumption of an approximately equal position of power.[16]

According to this reading, justice for Thucydides (whom Nietzsche equates with the Athenians at 5.85–113) is not an independent moral category but a term of convenience applied to certain negotiations between equally powerful actors, wherein a mutually beneficial exchange of interests replaces a mutually destructive exchange of blows.[17] Thus, justice has its origins in expediency. Where it is expedient to be "just," one is just. Or, to paraphrase Clausewitz, justice is expediency by other means. Among states or peoples, it is the balance of power that induces considerations of justice as recourse.

Meanwhile, what is left for the Melians? Nietzsche provides an answer of sorts later in the same work:

> *Of the right of the weaker.*—If someone submits under certain conditions to someone stronger, as for example a besieged city does, the reciprocal condition is that he can destroy himself, burn the city, and thus cause a great

[15]Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 233–34. See also aphorism 428.

[16]Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. Gary Handwerk (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 70. See also aphorism 259 in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966).

[17]References to Thucydides's *History* are given in text and are by book, chapter, and sentence in *The Landmark Thucydides*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, trans. Richard Crawley (New York: Touchstone Books, 1996).

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> loss to the stronger foe. Hence, a sort of *equivalence* arises here, on the basis of which rights can be stipulated. The enemy gains an advantage from one's preservation.[18]

Right in this instance equals power, or is commensurate with power.[19] This is also the basis of equality, though it is a rougher equality than Hobbes's version, where equality derives from the mutual potential to do harm to the other's person and the consequent fear this engenders. Here, equality derives from the ability to do harm to another's interests, which is less equal and more circumstantial. That is to say that interest rather than fear is the basis for mutuality, whereby the stronger and weaker parties can come to some negotiated agreement, short of the stronger party simply imposing its will. This equality is premised upon a deeper inequality. For rights here are not intrinsic and immutable but are instead contingent upon the calculations of the stronger party. If the survival of the weaker is judged to be of value to the stronger, there arises the basis for (unequal and limited) negotiation. It is notable how this logic parallels Diodotus's insight during the Mytilenian debate, which anchors his logic of the expediency of Athenian leniency toward Mytilene:

> Consider a moment! At present, if a city that has already revolted perceive that it cannot succeed, it will come to terms while it is still able to refund expenses, and pay tribute afterwards. In the other case, what city think you would not prepare better than is now done, and hold out to the last against its besiegers, if it is all one whether it surrender late or soon? And how can it be otherwise than hurtful to us to be put to the expense of a siege, because surrender is out of the question; and if we take the city, to receive a ruined city from which we can no longer draw the revenue which forms our real strength against the enemy? (3.46.2–3)

How does Nietzsche's interpretation comport with Thucydides's text? A different set of Athenian envoys making their case before the Spartans and Corinthians at Sparta before the start of the war suggest that warring parties continue to invoke justice on the basis of expediency:

> And it was not we who set the example, for it has always been the law that the weaker should be subject to the stronger. Besides, we believed ourselves to be worthy of our position, and so you thought us till now, when calculations of interest have made you take up the cry of justice—a consideration which no one ever yet brought forward to hinder his ambition when he had a chance of gaining anything by might. (1.76.2)

According to this logic, questions of justice do not arise in disputes between parties of unequal power. Rather, the stronger proceeds as their interests

[18]Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 71.

[19]Cf. Benedict de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 195–97.

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dictate and the weaker "makes way." At most, the degree of interest that the stronger may have in claiming an unspoiled city or territory allows some latitude to the interests of the weaker. Between parties of more or less equal power, however, a mutual interest in "judicious self-preservation" results in strategic negotiations that, if successful, yield mutual advantages. These negotiations thus take on the aspect of justice, though they are hardly the same. For justice is typically viewed as the denial of egoistic interests in view of a higher right. But right is coeval with power.

Accordingly, the Melian dialogue ends in mutual failure—the Melians and the Athenians suffer destruction and the loss of the revenues of a potential tributary ally, respectively—due to the failure of the Melians to grasp the significance of the imbalance of power between them. Yet the Melian dialogue occurs within the context of Athens's much larger war with Sparta, a more equally matched adversary—indeed, so well matched that their conflict does not conclude for twenty-seven years. And, as Nietzsche's aphorism would have predicted, it ends to the ultimate detriment of both parties (not to say Hellenic civilization).

Yet the Spartans do not seek negotiation. Instead they issue a series of demands, culminating in an ultimatum (1.139). As Pericles (though not without his own interest in the matter) notes, "they wish complaints to be settled by war instead of by negotiation" (1.140.2). Moreover, the Spartans' proximate stated cause for declaring war is their judgment that the Athenians are guilty of injustice, specifically in their treatment of Sparta's allies and more generally in their acquisition and keeping of the Athenian empire (1.187). This is especially the argument made by the bellicose Sthenelaidas, who warns his countrymen not to "deliberate under injustice" (1.86).

But this partly inverts Nietzsche's logic regarding the relationship between justice and power. Justice in this case is not the given name for an attempt at mediation between groups of like power; it is instead the stated reason for choosing destructive war over mediation. The Nietzschean account of power equilibrium as the basis for arbitration more accurately describes the armistice ten years into the war (5.14–26), though this too fails and war is resumed.

It is also worth noting that Nietzsche's claims regarding justice are disputed by the Athenian envoys at Sparta, when they argue that "praise is due to all who, if not so superior to human nature as to refuse dominion, yet respect justice more than their position compels them to do" (1.76.2). In this formulation, justice is a function of *inequality*; it is the forbearance of the stronger party, rather than a mutual exchange between equal parties.

Clifford Orwin suggests that, according to the nameless Athenian envoys at Sparta (whose speech is thematically linked with the Melian dialogue), it is precisely when there is an imbalance of power between states that justice becomes significant: "Justice among nations is the grace of the strong

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towards the weak, rooted in the grace of nature towards man."[20] For only in such cases can a state be said to be acting from motives other than fear, honor, and interest. Thus, the Melian case would seem to have presented an opportunity for the Athenians to exhibit justice in their geopolitical affairs.

To return to Nietzsche's original statement, Thucydides's realism entails an acknowledgment of justice as a function of power, and a refusal to cling to delusions about the nature and extent of one's own power. If this constitutes Thucydides's political and ethical realism, it is not especially unconventional as far as realism goes. But what is the mode by which Thucydides establishes this understanding?

Realism as a Mode of Understanding the World

A hallmark of political realism is supposedly its ability to uncover truths not evident to most men. A realist sees the underlying reality, and discerns causal relationships that are obscure to mere observers. This is realism as skepticism. The skeptical realist does not accept what is merely observable, but attempts to discover first causes and true reasons.[21] Thucydides would seem to be no exception, most famously his discussion of the true causes of the Peloponnesian War (1.23.6).

Similarly, Thucydides notes that "the way most men deal with traditions, even traditions of their own country, is to receive them all alike as they are delivered, without applying any critical test whatever" (1.20). He contrasts himself with such men so as to establish his authority:

> On the whole, however, the conclusions I have drawn from the proofs quoted may, I believe, be safely relied upon. Assuredly, they will not be disturbed by the verses of a poet displaying the exaggeration of his craft, or by the compositions of the chroniclers that are attractive at truth's expense; the subjects they treat of being out of the reach of evidence, and time having robbed most of them of historical value by enthroning them in the region of legend. Turning from these, we can rest satisfied with having proceeded upon the clearest data, and having arrived at conclusions as exact as can be expected in matters of such antiquity. (1.21)

This passage concludes a longer section of the Archaeology, throughout which he replaces mythical accounts of Hellenic history with his own materialist one.[22] This is Thucydides as proto–scientific historian.[23]

[20]Clifford Orwin, "Justifying Empire: The Speech of the Athenians at Sparta and the Problem of Justice in Thucydides," *Journal of Politics* 48, no. 1 (1986): 84.

[21]Brian Leiter, "Classical Realism," *Philosophical Issues* 11 (2001): 245.

[22]See Bernard Williams, "What Was Wrong with Minos? Thucydides and Historical Time," *Representations* 74, no. 1 (2001): 1–18.

[23]See Gilpin, "The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism," 291.

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> Thucydides is here dealing with a whole line of political development which no longer belongs to the present and which no longer involves any choice; it is shown as made up of good and bad elements which are indissolubly linked together by the very necessity of this development. Thucydides takes note of this development and explains it; and, in his impartial, theoretician's mind, the particular case brings out the general law. This scientific detachment, on which Thucydides's impartiality is based, enables him to understand, and consequently to justify, without prejudice and without illusions.[24]

Thus the connection between Thucydides's political and epistemological realism: the Thucydides who confirms his sources and refuses to print hearsay, who demythologizes the Trojan War and reduces it to economic causes, who insists on distinguishing between fact and superstition (to say nothing of his complicated treatment of popular religious belief), is of course the same Thucydides who does not flinch at presenting the horrors of the Corcyrean revolution or the brutal dealings of the Athenian ambassadors at Melos.[25]

Treating Thucydides as a kind of scientific realist may be problematic generally, but is necessarily problematic vis-à-vis Nietzsche's interpretation. Consider his ironic missive "to the realists" in aphorism 57 of *The Gay Science*: "you call yourselves realists and insinuate that the world really is the way it appears to you: before you alone reality stands unveiled."[26] Nietzsche similarly derides the skeptic type ("a delicate creature"), which is so congenial to realism.[27] The causal logic that Romilly, among others, sees at the heart of Thucydides's analysis is especially mistaken:

> One should not reify "cause" and "effect" as the natural scientists do (and whoever, like them, now "naturalizes" in his thinking) according to the prevailing mechanical doltishness which makes the cause press and push until it "effects" its end; one should use "cause" and "effect" only as pure concepts, that is to say, as conventional fictions for the purpose of designation and communication—*not* for explanation. In the "in-itself" there is nothing of "causal connections," of "necessity," or of "psychological non-freedom"; there the effect does *not* follow the cause: there is no rule of "law." It is *we* alone who have devised cause, sequence, for-each-other, relativity, constraint, number, law, freedom, and purpose; and

[24]Jacqueline de Romilly, *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism*, trans. Philip Thody (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), 272. Cited in Crane, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity*, 261.

[25]Cf. Darien Shanske, *Thucydides and the Philosophical Origins of History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 130–33. Shanske argues that Nietzsche denies the connection between the two types of realism in Thucydides.

[26]Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2001), 69.

[27]Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 129.

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> when we project and mix this symbol world into things as if it existed "in itself," we act once more as we have always acted—*mythologically*. The "unfree will" is mythology; in real life it is only a matter of *strong* and *weak* wills.[28]

For Nietzsche, sophistic realism is not a scientific approach as we understand the term. Thucydides cannot be a mere rationalist. Nietzsche's Thucydides is not that of, for instance, Charles Norris Cochrane.[29] He does not propose anything like nomothetic explanations concerning human conduct.[30] Whether or not Thucydides is a forerunner to or influence on scientific historians, he is not one of them.[31]

What is otherwise presumed true of Thucydides is largely true of most conventional realists: that their political teaching derives from assumptions about an underlying reality that may be discerned through proper study.[32] For Nietzsche, the underlying reality—the mechanistic scheme of cause and effect—is itself a fiction, an invention of the "realists."[33] After all, there are no facts, only interpretations.

It is in fact this *absence* of common ground, rather than any firm basis in human nature or the international system, that induces conflict.[34] One does not grasp this central conceit by retreating to stable systems of thought. Thucydides (like the sophists) accepts the "apparent" diversity of the world and opinions about it, rather than relying upon abstract explanations of the causes of political things.[35] Whether or not Thucydides's accounts of, for instance, the rise of Minoan civilization (1.4–8) or the fall of the Pisistratid tyranny in Athens (6.54–59) are *truer* is less relevant than the fact that they do not entail a flight from the actual into mythologizing (especially Platonic mythologizing).

[28]Ibid., 29. See also Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 58–62.

[29]See Charles Norris Cochrane, *Thucydides and the Science of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1929).

[30]See R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 30.

[31]See also Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 162–63.

[32]This error is in no small measure the basis for contemporary praise and use of Thucydides; see Robert Gilpin, "The Theory of Hegemonic War," in *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars*, eds. Robert I. Rotberg and Theodore K. Rabb (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 15–38. Though cf. Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 181–82.

[33]See Catherine Zuckert, "Nietzsche's Rereading of Plato," *Political Theory* 13, no. 2 (1985): 228.

[34]This comes quite close to Hobbes's conception of the state of nature, though Hobbes's "solution" is hardly congenial to Nietzsche.

[35]Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 46, 49.

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What is of greatest importance is not Thucydides's acuity in seeing the origins of maritime empires or the causes of the Peloponnesian War, but the manner in which he chooses to see them. This is in marked contrast to how we might evaluate a scientific historian. But, as Nietzsche notes, the scientific man "is not noble."[36] For Nietzsche, Thucydides's nobility is what defines him and makes possible his other virtues.

Realism as a Matter of Character

> *A model.*—What is it I love in Thucydides, why do I honor him more highly than Plato? He takes the most comprehensive and impartial delight in all that is typical in men and events and believes that to each type there pertains a quantum of *good sense: this* he seeks to discover. He displays greater practical justice than Plato; he does not revile or belittle those he does not like or who have harmed him in life. On the contrary: through seeing nothing but types he introduces something great into all things and persons he treats of; for what interest would posterity, to whom he dedicates his work, have in that which was *not* typical! Thus in him, the portrayer of man, that *culture of the most impartial knowledge of the world* finds its last glorious flower.[37]

Nietzsche's reading of Thucydides is useful, because he does not distinguish between Thucydides's scholarly virtues and his human ones. Thus he reminds us that before being a historian or political philosopher, Thucydides was a man—that he was a wartime general and citizen of Athens before he took up his history. His primary response to the conditions in which he found himself was an active one. Thus both the writing of his history and the manner of its writing must also be viewed as a kind of response to his conditions and not apart from them.

This is also what distinguishes what Nietzsche will elsewhere call Thucydides's realism. It earns praise not merely (or even) for factual accuracy, as one might praise a modern scholar's theories, but because it entails a refusal to turn away from or condemn what is troubling in humanity. Realism is first and foremost a human response to our condition.[38] It incorporates courage and openness to humanity. In a very different spirit than his discussion of the Melian dialogue, Nietzsche even employs the word "justice." Thucydides, who according to Nietzsche is not a philosophical believer in justice, nonetheless displays a sense of fairness in his refusal to condemn

[36]Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 125. Though cf. *The Will to Power*, aphorism 443.

[37]Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 169.

[38]The obvious contrast here is with Socrates and Plato, whom Nietzsche indicts not for being in error about the truth of things but for displaying cowardice and dishonesty.

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what is human. Plato's rhetorical commitment to justice requires unjust treatment of Socrates's interlocutors. By contrast, Thucydides's quietism (as Nietzsche sees it) on questions of justice and morality frees him to treat all perspectives with magnanimity. As for those who harmed him directly, he has little to say on the matter, and does not expressly indict his city of birth for crimes against him. Tellingly, in the scant references to himself strewn throughout the history, he continues to refer to himself as "an Athenian" (1.1; 5.26). Cleon, the figure allegedly most responsible for his banishment, admittedly comes in for some rough, if circumspect, treatment. In the course of the history, Cleon is depicted as first bloodthirsty and demagogic (3.37–40), then as an advocate of continued war in pursuit of his personal interests and at the cost of his city's (5.16), and ultimately as a coward (5.10.9).[39] To this one might also adduce Thucydides's presentation of Athenagoras at Syracuse (6.36–40), who so resembles Cleon in both tone and substance.[40]

It is his refusal to indulge in moral condemnation of certain perspectives that particularly marks Thucydides as a sophist in Nietzsche's eyes. Nietzsche notes of the sophists, among whom he includes Thucydides:

> The Sophists verge upon the first critique of morality, the first insight into morality:—they juxtapose the multiplicity (the geographical relativity) of the moral value judgments;—they let it be known that every morality can be dialectically justified; i.e., they divine that all attempts to give reasons for morality are necessarily sophistical.… They postulate the first truth that a "morality-in-itself," a "good-in-itself" do not exist, that it is a swindle to talk of "truth" in this field.[41]

Thucydides, then, is most sophistic in his unprejudiced depiction of an array of (often incompatible) perspectives from the speakers in his work. His mode of presenting speeches from men of different classes in different cities throughout the Hellenic world—each speaker intent on justifying his own cause—allows for a just rendering of each account (in contrast to Plato's depiction of Socratic dialogues, in which, per Nietzsche, one position inevitably triumphs).[42]

[39]Donald Kagan argues that Cleon did not wholly merit Thucydides's depiction of him in Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 187; though Thucydides is not the only ancient writer to take a negative view of Cleon (see Aristophanes's *Hippeis*).

[40]See W. Robert Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 171–72.

[41]Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 233. If the sophists only "verge upon the first critique of morality," who actually makes it?

[42]Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 235–36; Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 42. See Tracy B. Strong, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1988), 119.

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In this respect, Thucydides's particular method of composition actually serves, rather than detracts from, his meritorious position.[43] Thucydides famously replaces what was specifically said with what was needful according to the occasion (1.22.1). He might appear at first blush to be engaging in something like Platonic idealization or mythologizing—for example, doing for Pericles what Plato did for Socrates—by making his speakers, in their own ways, young and beautiful. Seen from Nietzsche's viewpoint, however, it is precisely Thucydides's own hand in the composition, rather than the mere recording and transmission (an impossibility in many cases), of the speeches in his work that reveals his realism. For he does not merely avoid misrepresenting the particular claims of his speakers or elide the harshness of their statements, but contributes his own measure of art to present the claims as fully as the historical record allows—regardless of the nature of the claim.

Nietzsche's discussion of Thucydides's "practical justice" also offers insight into the two figures in his work who most resemble him: Diodotus and Hermocrates.[44] During the Mytilenean debate, Diodotus seemingly exonerates the Mytileneans, who have revolted against the Athenian empire, in the following terms:

> Was there ever city rebelling that did not believe that it possessed either in itself or in its alliances resources adequate to the enterprise? … As long as poverty gives men the courage of necessity, or plenty fills them with the ambition which belongs to insolence and pride, and each of the other conditions of life remains subjugated to some fatal and master passion, so long will the impulse never be wanting to drive men into danger. (3.45.2–4)

Though Athens may pursue its imperial policies, it should not resent its tributaries for rebelling, given the opportunity. Like Nietzsche, Diodotus does not speak of justice between the vastly disparate powers, though he inverts this logic to impel moderation on the part of the stronger, rather than futility on that of the weaker.

At Gela, Hermocrates uses similar logic to view Athens from the other end of the telescope: "That the Athenians should cherish this ambition and practice this policy is very excusable; and I do not blame those who wish to rule, but those who are too ready to serve. It is just as much in men's nature to rule those who submit to them, as it is to resist those who molest them" (4.61.5).

Later, at Syracuse and then at Camarina, he goes beyond absolving the Athenians of guilt in acquiring their empire to blaming the Sicilians for

[43]See Clifford Orwin, "Thucydides' Contest: Thucydidean 'Methodology' in Context," *Review of Politics* 51, no. 3 (1989): 345–64.

[44]Clifford Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 200–206. Though cf. Arlene W. Saxonhouse, *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 175–76 for the argument that that Hermocrates's understanding of politics falls short of Diodotus's in crucial ways.

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failing to stop them. He observes that the Athenians "have a right" to move against them in light of their obvious failure to ally with the Spartans earlier (6.34.8). Hermocrates, apparently considering it futile to blame the Athenians for injustices committed, focuses instead upon the myopia of the Sicilians who have failed to unite against the Athenians despite the ample evidence of the Athenian imperial formula at work: introducing their forces under the pretext of settling local disputes (6.77).[45] What these two speakers have in common is a certain Thucydidean detachment, and the recognition that, paradoxically, justice is understood not in terms of conventional right or wrong, but in the refusal to label certain political actions unjust when such categories themselves are wholly inappropriate.

Nietzsche does not suggest that Thucydides's justness goes beyond his impartiality in presenting the range of human interests and claims.[46] For the bulk of the speeches in the work are necessarily self-serving. They are rhetorical devices employed on behalf of a political objective, whether to motivate soldiers, win allies, advocate a specific policy, or advance the self-interest of the particular speaker.

On a deeper level the speeches serve to justify the motivations or impulses that underlie the speakers' goals. What the speeches almost uniformly have in common is that they are intended to benefit or exonerate the speaker or the speaker's cause. Diodotus's complex account of human nature, while similar to that presented by the Athenian envoys at Sparta, is used to justify the behavior of cities adversarial to Athens. Conversely, Hermocrates provides a justification for Athenian behavior even within the context of urging the formation of a wartime alliance against Athens.

The speakers' rhetoric transcends their particular political interests, not being limited to achieving their immediate goals, and possibly being harmful to them insofar as its universal application would justify actions taken against the speakers. Nonetheless, the universal scope of their rhetoric is not in the end politically counterproductive, but continues to serve political ends. And generally applicable insight does not come at the expense of political success. The justness they display is more akin to the justice that Nietzsche attributes to Thucydides himself: they do not use idealism or partisanship to condemn the self-interested behavior of others. One could argue that unlike Thucydides they are Thucydidean characters or at least figures in his history, but this is to forget that Thucydides himself was a player in those events as well.

Like Thucydides's work, the speakers' claims go beyond the merely interested or "political" and point to more generally applicable principles,

[45]See Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 2.1.

[46]Though cf. Donald Kagan, *Thucydides: The Reinvention of History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010) and George Cawkwell, *Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War* (London: Routledge, 1997), both of which attribute partiality to Thucydides's account, particularly with respect to Pericles.

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principles that would apply even to political enemies. Like theirs, however, Thucydides's thought is irreducibly political because he remains a citizen of Athens, even in exile. He personally knew many of the statesmen and generals of the war, and his native city was one of its principal antagonists.

The reader may wonder how Thucydides's ability to portray the multiplicity of perspectives accords with the fact that he himself is but one perspective among them, both as participant in the events of the war and chronicler of them, especially given Nietzsche's derision of claims to objectivity, of a perspective that transcends perspectivism—what Thomas Nagel calls the "view from nowhere."[47] For, if Thucydides intends objective status, it would place him closer to the philosophers than to the sophists.

Though Nietzsche does mock pretentions of objectivity, he suggests that if one were to approach objectivity, it would only be done not by surrendering one's perspective, but through mastering many perspectives:

> let us not be ungrateful towards such resolute reversals of accustomed perspectives and valuations with which the spirit has, with apparent mischievousness and futility, raged against itself for so long: to see differently in this way for once, to *want* to see differently, is no small discipline and preparation of the intellect for its future "objectivity"—the latter understood not as "contemplation without interest" (which is a nonsensical absurdity), but as the ability *to control* one's Pro and Con and to dispose of them, so that one knows how to employ a *variety* of perspectives and affective interpretations in the service of knowledge.… There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival "knowing"; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our "concept" of the thing, our "objectivity" be.[48]

Because Thucydides shows his hand in the reproduction of the speeches (1.22.1), he has not merely reported on what was said, but has been compelled, however provisionally, to adopt the perspective of the given speaker.[49] This may be what Nietzsche has in mind when he elsewhere praises Thucydides for his impartiality.[50] Thucydides's method is praiseworthy for Nietzsche because he does not attempt to separate himself from his subject—the war. For such a separation would only be a retreat into subjectivity masquerading as "objectivity." Rather, he recreates the war by reliving its

[47]See Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 207.

[48]Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 119. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for this reference. See also Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 117.

[49]See W. R. Connor, "A Post Modernist Thucydides?," *Classical Journal* 72, no. 4 (1977): 289–98. Though note that Nietzsche goes further in linking this perspectivism to political realism.

[50]See note 37.

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myriad experiences of it—experiences which the reader is compelled, willy-nilly, to share.

In considering the human requirements for pursuing this way of knowing, Nietzsche's most extensive discussion of Thucydides may be useful.

> My recreation, my preference, my *cure* from all Platonism has always been *Thucydides*. Thucydides, and perhaps the *Principe* of Machiavelli, are related to me closely by their unconditional will not to deceive themselves and to see reason in *reality*—not in "reason," still less in "morality"… For the deplorable embellishment of the Greeks with the colors of the ideal which the "classically educated" youth carries away with him into life as the reward of his grammar-school drilling there is no more radical cure than Thucydides. One must turn him over line by line and read his hidden thoughts as clearly as his words: there are few thinkers so rich in hidden thoughts. *Sophist culture*, by which I mean *realist culture*, attains in him its perfect expression—this invaluable movement in the midst of the morality-and-ideal swindle of the Socratic schools which was then breaking out everywhere. Greek philosophy as the *décadence* of the Greek instinct; Thucydides as the grand summation, the last manifestation of that strong, stern, hard matter-of-factness instinctive to the older Hellenes. *Courage* in face of reality ultimately distinguishes such natures as Thucydides and Plato: Plato is a coward in face of reality—consequently he flees into the ideal; Thucydides has *himself* under control—consequently he retains control over things…[51]

Here, Nietzsche once again emphasizes the importance of control and links it to the virtue of courage. These qualities allow Thucydides to include himself and his fate in the political world he coldly surveys. In describing the horrific plague that afflicts Athens, he makes use of his own suffering to improve the accuracy of his report, without dwelling upon his distress, noting only that "This I can… do, as I had the disease myself, and watched its operation in the case of others" (2.48.3).[52] On the subject of his exile, he merely offers the terse remark: "It was also my fate to be an exile from my country for twenty years after my command at Amphipolis" (5.26.5). More importantly still, Thucydides's self-control allows him to adopt his famously detached tone without clinging to Platonic idealized abstractions. Because self-control and not objectivity is the criterion, Thucydides's realism is (as stated above) ultimately due to his character rather than his wisdom.[53]

[51]Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 117–18.

[52]Contrast this austere presentation of his condition with the responses of his fellow Athenians in 2.51–53. Note also that Thucydides make no reference to supernatural causes of the plague, as compared with 2.54.

[53]See also Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorisms 41 and 284, particularly in light of Thucydides's exile.

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The Limits of Nietzsche's Account of Thucydides's Realism

Having argued for the way in which Nietzsche surpasses the limitations of contemporary accounts of Thucydides's realism, a few words may be in order on the ways in which Nietzsche's reading may itself be limiting. First, a good deal seems to turn upon Nietzsche's association of Thucydides with the sophists.[54] Nietzsche presents the sophists as the acme of Hellenic civilization. That is to say, the sophists are a direct (and admirable) projection of the authentic Hellenic spirit, prior to the perversion of Platonism. By placing Thucydides among the sophists, Nietzsche presents him as a peak Hellenic type, as the sophists represent the peak of Hellenic culture.[55] "The Sophists were Greeks: when Socrates and Plato took up the cause of virtue and justice, they were *Jews* or I know not what."[56]

It is worth bearing in mind that while Thucydides may appear in Nietzsche's scheme to benefit from his association with the sophists, the reverse holds true as well. As none of the sophists' writings has come down to us as wholly as Thucydides's history, it is certainly useful for Nietzsche to recruit a ringer like Thucydides to the team he is championing against Plato and Socrates. This is especially true given that, unlike many of the sophists, Thucydides's recorded thoughts exist wholly independently of the Platonic corpus; we need not depend on Plato (or Xenophon) for our understanding of him.

Defining Thucydides's actual relationship to the sophists is no easy business.[57] As Nietzsche conceives of them, the sophists exemplified and demonstrated mastery of the agonistic pursuits that came so naturally to the Hellenic spirit: "Every talent must unfold itself in fighting: that is the command of Hellenic popular pedagogy."[58] There are two manners in which Thucydides might be understood as an agonistic writer. The first is the arrangement of the speeches within his work, frequently juxtaposing one against the other (e.g., Archidamus-Sthenalaidas, Cleon-Diodotus, Hermocrates-Euphemus, Nicias-Alcibiades). As individuals, the speakers are counseling that specific policies be pursued, but they are also engaged in dyadic contests with one another, albeit contests with very real political stakes. The second is that Thucydides himself is engaged in agonistic competition with prior accounts of Hellenic history, most notably Herodotus's and Homer's (1.2–22).

[54]Nietzsche may have been the first writer to explicitly label Thucydides a sophist.

[55]Joel E. Mann and Getty L. Lustila, "A Model Sophist: Nietzsche on Protagoras and Thucydides," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 42 (2011): 51–72.

[56]Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, aphorism 429.

[57]Orwin is skeptical of attempts to demonstrate sophistic (or other) influences on Thucydides: see *The Humanity of Thucydides*, 13–14.

[58]Friedrich Nietzsche, *Homer's Contest*, cited in Scott Consigny, "Nietzsche's Reading of the Sophists," *Rhetoric Review* 13, no. 1 (1994): 10.

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Thucydides seeks to supplant older interpretations, which resort to or reproduce mythologies, with his own.

And, of course, the sophists were realists. Thomas Johnson has argued that not only were the sophists realists as we would use the term, but they were forerunners of present-day realists owing to their denial of transcendent principles of justice, low view of human nature, and (given the first two) a belief in the primacy of power in human affairs.[59] Even if this is correct, it does not altogether capture the spirit of the sophists as either Plato or Nietzsche presents them.

Obviously, Thucydides himself need not be either a sophist or a Platonist (and there is something unsatisfying about simply positioning him between the two). He may be a singular figure, much like Aristophanes—who also comes in for high praise from Nietzsche.[60] Achieving an independent evaluation of Thucydides's actual relation to the sophists is a difficult task, given the fragmentary record of the sophists' writings. One might begin by questioning Nietzsche's positioning of the sophists as a natural extension of Greekness, rather than a newer and possibly radical development in Hellenic culture.[61] Is the Hellenic world that flourished prior to the Peloponnesian War better characterized by a "strong, stern, hard matter-of-factness" or by an "ancient simplicity" (3.83)?[62]

In Thucydides, the two are not altogether mutually exclusive. That is to say, his writings do demonstrate a "hard matter-of-factness," for example, in his accounts of the plague in Athens (2.48–54), the *stasis* in Corcyra (3.81–84), the ultimate fate of Plataea (3.68), and the destruction of the Athenian expedition at Syracuse (7.84–87). Certainly, various characters in his work display a certain "matter-of-factness" and then some throughout, especially Brasidas, Alcibiades, and the nameless Athenians at both Sparta and Melos.

Yet even in passages where his austere tone holds sway, the mere fact of calling our attention to certain details (e.g., the degree of attention paid to strategically insignificant Plataea or to the massacre perpetrated by the

[59]Thomas J. Johnson, "The Idea of Power Politics: The Sophistic Foundations of Realism," in *Roots of Realism*, ed. Benamin Frankel (Portland: Frank Cass, 1996).

[60]See Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 28. Like Thucydides, Aristophanes is specifically presented as a kind of antidote to Platonism—one imbibed even by Plato himself.

[61]Both Jacqueline de Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) and G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981) lean toward the latter possibility. Romilly (137) also considers the very Thucydidean possibility that the sophistic turn was an effect rather than a cause of upheavals in the Hellenic world, chiefly the Peloponnesian War.

[62]For an extended discussion that traces a consistent line of thinking about power from the oldest Hellenic writings through the sophists to Thucydides, see Crane, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity*, chap. 3.

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Thracians at Mycalessus [7.29–30]) may indicate that there is more at work than the stern relaying of terrible deeds.[63] And unlike, for example, Callicles or Thrasymachus, Thucydides never expresses contempt or disregard for the expressions of simplicity in the work (see his attentiveness to the religious controversy in 4.97–99). Rather, he contrasts the ancient simplicity favorably with the horrors of the Corcyrean revolution (3.83). Finally, it is especially difficult to imagine a true sophist offering a valediction akin to the one Thucydides provides for Nicias (7.86.5). This is not to say that Thucydides himself piously endorses that ancient simplicity; merely that he demonstrates a very unsophistic respect of it. Again, he may be a more singular figure than co-option by the sophists would allow for. He is especially attentive in his history to the changes wrought within his lifetime across the Hellenic world—changes that Nietzsche perhaps elides by so tightly linking Thucydides with the sophists and with the Greeks generally.

As some of the foregoing may demonstrate, it is perhaps too easy at times to go along with Nietzsche's account of Thucydides. For all his vituperative gifts, for which he is justly known, Nietzsche also excels at praise. Indeed, the fulsomeness of his praise is the flip side to the corrosiveness of his scorn. Nietzsche can venerate what is great with such passion precisely because he is an excellent reviler; thus his endorsement of one thing is almost always at the same time a reproach of another, related thing.[64] Because we so admire Thucydides, who left us his "possession for all time," we are inclined to offer our assent to expressions of admiration for Thucydides, especially when expressed by so gifted a writer as Nietzsche. The power of Nietzsche's writing and the forcefulness of his thought is such that it is difficult for us readers (this reader, in any case) to make use of Nietzsche's praise of Thucydides without willy-nilly acquiescing in his categorization of him as a sophist, ineluctably opposed to Platonism as Nietzsche understands it.

It is necessary, however, to recall that Nietzsche's most extended encomium to Thucydides (in the *Twilight of the Idols*) does not take the form of a discrete chapter, but flows directly out of his scathing remarks on Plato.[65] This is not an isolated incident, but is rather true generally for Nietzsche's discussions of Thucydides, which are inextricably bound up with his vendetta against Socrates and Plato. Thucydides's inclusion among the ranks of the sophists, in Nietzsche's account, pits him against Plato and Socrates. None of which settles the question over Thucydides's actual debt to the sophists (besides his rumored personal connection to Antiphon).

[63]This idea is central in both Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides* and Connor, *Thucydides*.

[64]See Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, I §7.

[65]See also the entire chapter entitled "The Problem of Socrates," which is produced earlier in the same work.

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A second possible limitation: while Thucydides does not order the personages in his work according to an explicit ethical scheme or moralize about their conduct after the fact, it may be asked whether his account does not in fact resolve into a complex hierarchy of human types. That is to say, whether his supposed impartiality does not prove in the end to be a partiality toward particular figures whose understanding of political things surpasses that of the other characters in the work. This is not as such a problem on a Nietzschean reading, given how Nietzsche is himself free with evaluative judgments. Yet it remains in question whether Nietzsche's evaluative claims about the character of Thucydides (or any other writer he praises) can stand in the absence of an intelligible order. This, however, is ultimately a Nietzschean, rather than a Thucydidean, problem. Nietzsche's original reading calls our attention to the relationship between Thucydides's character and his realism about human affairs. Whether Nietzsche's epistemology offers sufficient ground in the end for assessing that character remains an open question, albeit one beyond the scope of this work.

What We Learn from Nietzsche's Account of Thucydides's Realism

Without conclusively settling such questions, what can we still gain from Nietzsche's reading of Thucydides, beyond the cavalier assumption that any meeting of two great minds must perforce be edifying? Nietzsche presents a Thucydides who is far stranger to us than the Thucydides as godfather of realism that we learn of today; a Thucydides whose realism is of a categorically different strain from the one with which we are familiar. As noted at the outset, whenever Thucydides is called a realist, we can expect that his history is about to be yoked to some theory of politics, whether it concerns the balance of power, hegemonic war, the fragility of human order, and so forth. But these are largely contemporary perspectives. Nietzsche's reading allows us to see Thucydides with older eyes. More specifically, his remarks on Thucydides suggest three potentially original (to us) ways of understanding both Thucydides and realism.

First, Thucydides's realism consists not of discerning an underlying reality made visible through careful scrutiny (or worse, through the prism of a "system of thought"). Rather, it consists of simply observing the apparent reality; it is in this sense a negative proposition. "The 'apparent' world is the only one: the 'real' world has only been *lyingly added*."[66] The real is not a dark underside of human nature, hidden from ordinary view,

[66]Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 46.

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that accounts for political evils—which realism always implies an element of moralism.[67]

Nor is it the Platonic real as ideal ("Plato is a coward in the face of reality—consequently he flees into the ideal"). Thus reality neither amounts to an underlying order nor a transcendent one. Put another way, Thucydides does not attempt (in Nietzsche's reading) to replace *nomos* with *phusis* in our understanding of human conduct.[68] Indeed, in such a reading, there is no *phusis*. He instead portrays, without fear or prejudice, the conflictual relationship of competing *nomoi*. For Nietzsche, then, Thucydides's realism does not consist of the belief that power necessarily "inheres in social practices."[69] Rather, in the absence of true grounds for moral beliefs, human social life will be defined by conflicts arising out of clashing values.[70] Thucydides's work is the classic depiction of the partiality of moral views and their clash, which he himself presents without partiality. In sum, Nietzsche reminds us via his discussions of Thucydides that a world of radical perspectivism is not liable to be a pacific or moderate one.

Second, and consequently, there is Thucydides's unique understanding of the relationship of human life—especially human political life—to the possibility of establishing or uncovering a comprehensive moral order. The tension between the two Nietzsche draws out perhaps better than any other commentator. It would not be accurate to say that Thucydides (or Nietzsche!) is pessimistic about these possibilities;[71] rather, that he is in a profound sense neither optimistic nor pessimistic.[72] By this, one intends that there be a ruthless moderating of the hopes that one's sense of justice will be confirmed by

[67]See also, Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 197. Of course, how much one accepts this interpretation will likely be affected by how one views the authenticity of 3.84 in Thucydides.

[68]For a fine consideration of this theme in Thucydides, see Arlene W. Saxonhouse, "Nature and Convention in Thucydides' *History*," *Polity* 10, no. 4 (1978): 461–87. Saxonhouse contends that, unlike the sophists, Thucydides is sensitive to the importance of treating *nomoi* as natural for the good of the social order (464).

[69]P. T. Jackson and D. H. Nexon, "Constructivist Realism or Realist-Constructivism," *International Studies Review* 6 (2004): 340. See also Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

[70]Kirkland, "Nietzsche's Tragic Realism," 56. Mark Philp also makes this claim in his discussions of realism, but he associates it with Bernard Williams rather than Nietzsche (or Thucydides) in "Realism without Illusions," *Political Theory* 40, no. 5 (2012): 640.

[71]Though cf. Joshua Foa Dienstag, "Pessimistic Realism and Realistic Pessimism," in *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme*, ed. Duncan Bell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 159–76.

[72]Raymond Geuss, *Outside Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 231.

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political outcomes, or, to put things in more philosophic terms, that our ethical aims can be fitted to an intelligible world.[73]

It is clear enough that this vision is not optimistic (though it contrasts well with what might be termed the optimism implicit in a certain kind of realism whereby rationalism about politics yields both better understanding and better politics);[74] but, seen through Nietzsche's eyes, it is not pessimistic either. And if it is tragic, it is a tragic perspective of a very particular kind.

This wedding of the tragic and the realist views is not specific to Thucydides or his readers, but recurs frequently as a rhetorical trope among realists.[75] The rhetorical use of the tragic tends to take one of two forms. The first form, best exemplified by Richard Ned Lebow's work, might be called tragedy as phronetic education. Lebow's vision can be summed up as follows: a proper appreciation for the tragic possibilities of politics, especially international politics, instills prudence which is precisely what is needed to avoid tragic outcomes. Properly conceived, then, Lebow's vision is in fact not tragic but hopeful.[76] The second form is what might be called tragedy as pessimism, a hallmark of the writings of Hans Morgenthau and E. H. Carr.[77] But this mode of tragic discourse is premised upon raising certain hopes that are themselves contrary to a realistic spirit; it is only the collapse of these hopes that induces a sense of pessimism, which certain writers call the tragic.[78]

Though Thucydides's characters declaim their hopes regarding specific political events (5.102; 7.77), he himself does not participate in expressing these hopes.[79] And it is the failure of these hopes to be realized—which failure Thucydides duly records (5.116; 7.84–87)—that lends his work its air of pathos.[80] It is this sense of pathos that has led certain commentators on

[73]Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 163–64.

[74]See Charles L. Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994–95): 50–90.

[75]See Hans Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967) and Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

[76]Lebow, *Tragic Vision of Politics*, 43, 364.

[77]Ibid.; Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1946), 101.

[78]See Michael Oakeshott, "Scientific Politics," *Cambridge Journal* 1 (1947–48): 347–58. See also Nicholas Rengger, "Tragedy or Skepticism? Defending the Anti-Pelagian Mind in World Politics," in *Tragedy and International Relations*, ed. Toni Erskine and Richard Ned Lebow (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 53–62.

[79]The speeches of Pericles are especially knotty when it comes to this theme. He specifically rejects pious hopes as a factor in political outcomes (2.62), yet nonetheless maintains that the Athenians' fortitude and daring (so close to Machiavellian *virtù*) will allow them to prevail—which is to say he paradoxically expresses a species of hope. See also Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 174.

[80]Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 292.

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Thucydides to read him in the spirit of tragedy.[81] But Thucydides's work does not exemplify either of the above approaches to tragedy—and for related reasons. Thucydides does not hold out the hope that a tragic (or other) pedagogy will ameliorate our hubristic impulses. But precisely because it does not project such hopes, Thucydidean realism avoids the slide into a pessimistic philosophy.[82] Whether this realism might accurately be called "tragic realism," Nietzsche's remarks on both Thucydides and tragedy suggest that such a vision would be far removed from how modern realists interpret the tragic sensibility. Or, as Nietzsche puts it elsewhere: "There are heights of the soul from which even tragedy ceases to look tragic."[83]

Finally, to ask how such a perspective is possible is to ask what realism about the world requires. Here, Nietzsche draws out what is appropriately Nietzschean but not simply Nietzschean: the importance of courage in Thucydides. Thucydides's courage is inseparable from his realism.[84] Courage prevents him from fleeing into idealism or the systematic thought so beloved of modern realists (and itself a form of idealism),[85] on the one hand, and a pessimism that is contrary to the true spirit of tragedy on the other.[86] And courage is the precondition for Thucydides's justness, which flows from his ability to harness myriad competing perspectives. It is likely no accident, then, that Nietzsche's presentation of Thucydidean realism is ultimately about character—about *ethos*.

By way of closing remarks, one should probably attach a caveat to this paper's approach to reading Thucydides through Nietzsche. In keeping with Nietzsche's agonistic teaching, one does not simply use his works to reflect or illuminate; one also tries to avoid being wrestled into submission by the force of his interpretations. After several rounds, one is no longer certain if he sees Thucydides more clearly, or simply Nietzsche's Thucydides.[87]

[81]Francis Macdonald Cornford, *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (London: Edward Arnold, 1907); Lebow, *Tragic Vision of Politics*. Nietzsche does not classify Thucydides as a tragedian, but it is striking how his praise of Thucydides echoes his praise of the Greek tragedians.

[82]Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 165.

[83]Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 42.

[84]John Zumbrunnen, "'Courage in the Face of Reality': Nietzsche's Admiration for Thucydides," *Polity* 35, no. 2 (2002): 237–63. Zumbrunnen, however, does not treat courage as being of a part with realism, instead contending that Nietzsche's reading prefigures "constructivist" interpretations of Thucydides. See also Lebow, "Thucydides the Constructivist."

[85]See Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 35.

[86]Ibid., 49, 93, 121.

[87]Though the purpose of this paper is to clarify what Nietzsche reveals about Thucydides, not vice versa, it would be useful to consider how Nietzsche's appreciation for Thucydides in turn clarifies what is unique to Nietzsche's mature thought. It

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One would not wish to say that Nietzsche's reading provides a clear window onto Thucydides, where others are murky. Such a reading would not only be naive, but would also run counter to Nietzsche's own epistemology. Nietzsche's account of Thucydides cannot help being illuminating, given its source. Where it is most distortive, this is chiefly due to the warping effect of Nietzsche's larger project, what Werner Dannhauser calls his "quarrel with Socrates." Because he unquestioningly places Thucydides among the sophists, whom he champions, Nietzsche must amplify the opposition between Thucydides and Plato.

But one might say that part of the value of Nietzsche's reading is that whatever distortions he may introduce into his discussions of Thucydides, they are profoundly different distortions than those of our contemporaries (not to say of other thinkers of stature, e.g., Hobbes). The strangeness of Nietzsche in some ways prepares us for the strangeness of Thucydides. Though they are not at all the same, they are both far removed from the comforting modern readings of Thucydides as proto–social scientist,[88] or Thucydides as secret moralist who shows how imperial aggrandizers ultimately receive their comeuppance.[89] Guided by Nietzsche's reading, Thucydides's history can be read less as a teaching (much less a theory) of realism than as an expression of it.[90]

might even be that one cannot fully appreciate Nietzsche's concept of the new philosopher until one has fully thought through the importance of Thucydides for him.

[88]E.g., Josiah Ober, "Public Action and Rational Choice in Classical Greek Political Theory," in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Political Thought*, ed. Ryan K. Balot (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 70–84.

[89]E.g., Foster, *Thucydides, Pericles, and Periclean Realism*.

[90]See Ahrensdorf, "Thucydides' Realistic Critique of Realism," 254.

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