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Moderating power: a Thucydidean perspective

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Abstract. Thucydides is generally regarded as the founder of Realism in IR because of his vivid descriptions of war and power politics. A strong Realist account rests on sharp dichotomies between domestic and international politics, power and justice, nature and convention. Reading Thucydides through these dichotomies is not limited to IR; in fact, most classical and philosophical scholarship on the historian is informed by this vocabulary. I argue that such readings cannot hold under close scrutiny because they turn Thucydides too much into a sophist. As closer attention to how nature and convention, power and justice, domestic and international are deployed in the *History* reveals, Thucydides is deeply concerned with moving beyond standard sophistic oppositions. He does this by articulating a conception of how nature and convention are intimately connected to each other through proper use in the practice of excellence in a way that foreshadows Aristotle. Repositioning Thucydides in the tradition of classical political thought as a predecessor of Aristotle rather than a follower of the sophists has important implications for both theorists and practitioners of world politics. Well aware of the importance of both nature and convention for the practice of excellence, Thucydides recognizes the importance of power politics as well as institutions in human affairs, and yet endorses neither uncritically. He develops a distinctively normative theory of world politics by placing proper use and moral judgement at the centre of his account. As such, the primary message Thucydides gives, to theorists and practitioners alike, is to deplore human suffering and to struggle towards moderation and practical wisdom in politics, making the best use of tendencies in human nature as well as available institutions to that end.

Thucydides belongs to the Realists. They belong to him.

Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace*[1]

Sophist culture, by which I mean realist culture, attains in [Thucydides] its perfect expression.

Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*[2]

Thucydides is generally regarded as the founder of Realism by international relations (IR) scholars because of his vivid descriptions of war and power politics

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Notes on citations: All square brackets in citations are my own and have been added for the sake of stylistic and contextual clarity. The only exception concerns the square brackets in the citations from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which have been added by Terence Irwin, the translator of the text I have used, to 'denote insertion of words not found in the manuscripts'. See translator's note in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1985), p. xxv. All emphases in citations are original, unless otherwise indicated. The references in Thucydides are given by using the traditional book number-paragraph number format.

[1] Michael Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism, and Socialism* (New York: Norton, 1997), p. 91.

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 106.

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among sovereign states operating in an anarchic international system.[3] Inter-state interactions, on the Realist view, are characterized above all by the ruthless pursuit of power driven by necessity and the overarching importance of survival. In such a world, it is argued, there can be no room for justice: self-interest is paramount, power is vital for the successful promotion of the interests of the state, talk of justice is at best futile, and at worst dangerous. When push comes to shove, the dictum of foreign policy becomes: 'help yourself lest you perish!'

A strong Realist account rests on sharp dichotomies between domestic and international politics, power and justice, nature and convention. Reading Thucydides through the lens of these dichotomies is not uncommon at all. Neither is it limited to IR. In fact, most contemporary classical and philosophical scholarship on the historian is informed by this vocabulary. I argue that these readings cannot hold under close scrutiny because they rely too heavily on a sophistic conception of the opposition between nature and convention. Thucydides not only did not subscribe to this particular formulation of the relationship between nature and convention, but he was highly critical of it in a way that is suggestive of Aristotle. Indeed, closer attention to how nature and convention, power and justice, domestic and international are deployed in the *History* reveals that a proto-Aristotelian rendition of these categories which shows how they are tied together in the practice of excellence is a more accurate interpretation of the historian's thinking. In that sense, Strauss is wrong in presenting Thucydides and Aristotle as rivals.[4] *Contra* Nietzsche and Strauss, and with Connor, I hold that 'the work leads the sympathetic reader—ancient or modern—far beyond the views and values it seems initially to utilize and affirm'.[5]

My analysis leads me to explore an alternative conception of politics, domestic and international, which does not see the requirements of sovereignty and power politics to be in tension with those of global moral responsibility as most Realists suppose. I do this by repositioning Thucydides in the tradition of classical political thought as a precursor of Aristotle rather than a follower of the sophists. Sophists, and especially later sophists, are famous for articulating the tension between nature and convention, and emphasizing the priority of nature in their questioning of convention. This position is based on their observation that conventions vary over time and from city to city while nature remains constant.[6] Our unchanging human nature is posited to correspond to the unbridled drive to power and domination which is revealed when the traditional restraints of convention lose their hold. Aristotle, by contrast, explores how a changing and inconstant human nature on the one hand, and changing and inconstant conventions on the other, were intimately connected in the practice of excellence. Crucial to this account is the concept of proper use and the central role it plays in Aristotle's understanding of excellence.[7] It is in this respect that Thucydides is much closer to Aristotle than to the sophists.

[3] I capitalize terms like 'Realism', 'neo-Liberalism', 'neo-Institutionalism', 'Feminism', and 'post-Structuralism' to loosely refer to schools of thought in IR theory.

[4] Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1964), p. 143.

[5] Robert Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 15.

[6] Almost all surviving works by the sophists are collected in Michael Gagarin and Paul Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought from Homer to the Sophists* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995). See especially the writings of Antiphon, Hippias, and Gorgias.

[7] I am indebted, for this understanding of Aristotle, to the work of Jill Frank. Without the idea that proper use matters and constitutes an essential part of the practice of excellence for Aristotle, this

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Reading Thucydides in an Aristotelian light has important consequences for how we think about nature, power, necessity, and expediency—categories that are all-too-central to Realist theories of world politics. Furthermore, contemporary critics of Realism, whether they have a neo-Liberal, neo-Institutionalist, Feminist, or post-Structuralist orientation, have just as much to learn from the historian's treatment of institutions, conventions, and excellence. In this essay, I focus primarily on the nature side of the nature-convention distinction. A detailed discussion of Thucydides' views on institutions is the subject of a separate article. The main point of the study of how these conceptual categories are used in the *History* is to show that neither the strict dichotomy between nature and convention, nor the common tendency to map other dichotomies onto it—namely, power and international politics onto nature, and justice and domestic politics onto convention—are tenable in a Thucydidean framework. Instead, I highlight how the opposing sides of these dichotomies simultaneously shape and are shaped by each other in the practice of excellence. What emerges is a rich account of the interconnections between nature and convention, as well as power and justice in politics, domestic or international.

On my interpretation, Thucydides is very difficult to label. He recognizes the importance of power politics as well as institutions in human affairs; and yet endorses neither uncritically. He notes how the dynamics of domestic and international politics may differ depending on the circumstances of the particular case; and yet does not see the two as radically different. Most importantly, he places moral judgement at the heart of political decision-making and action by insisting on the importance of proper use for the practice of excellence. Thus, he develops a distinctively normative theory of world politics, one that emerges from practice but goes beyond it. I conclude that to be a Thucydidean in our times entails recognizing the complex relationships between standard oppositions like nature and convention, power and justice, domestic and international. It also involves feeling serious distress in the face of never-ending human suffering, and being a relentless advocate of moderation and practical wisdom in the practice of politics.

I. Thucydides, IR theory and sophistic legacies

IR scholars, Realist and non-Realist alike, tend to appropriate Thucydides as the founding father of Realism.[8] An evaluation of this common appropriation first

article could not have been written. See Jill Frank, 'Democracy and Distribution: Aristotle on Just Desert', *Political Theory*, 26:6 (December 1998), pp. 784–802. See also Jill Frank, 'Trust and Politics: Aristotle on the Practice of Property' (forthcoming).

[8] For examples of prominent IR scholars who present Thucydides as a Realist or cite him in support of Realist positions, whether they are Realists themselves or not, see: Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), pp. 66, 127, 186; Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), pp. 159; Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th edn, revised (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), p. 38; Robert Keohane, 'Realism, Neorealism, and the Study of World Politics', Robert Keohane, 'Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond ', and Robert Gilpin, 'The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism', all three in Robert Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 7, 163, 164, 306; Michael Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace*, p. 49; Stanley Hoffmann, *Duties Beyond Borders: On the Limits and Possibilities of Ethical International Politics* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1981), p. 11; Barry Buzan, 'The Timeless Wisdom of Realism?', and Robert Jackson, 'Is There a

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requires a brief depiction of the Realist position. Whether they derive their conclusions from a pessimistic view of an unchanging human nature or the systemic dynamics of an anarchic international system or both,[9] Realists argue for the necessary centrality of power politics[10] and self-help[11] in world politics. For most contemporary Realists, the nasty realities of such a world make moral choice and action, and even moral investigation, inappropriate for international affairs.[12] As a result, a sharp line is drawn between domestic politics and international relations,

Classical International Theory?', both in Steve Smith, Ken Booth and Marysia Zalewski (eds.), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 47, 211; David Baldwin, 'Neoliberalism, Neorealism, and World Politics', and Duncan Snidal, 'Relative Gains and the Pattern of International Cooperation', both in David Baldwin (ed.), *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 11, 13, 170; Michael Joseph Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), pp. 1, 4; Steven Forde, 'Classical Realism', and Jack Donnelly, 'Twentieth-Century Realism', both in Terry Nardin and David Mapel (eds.), *Traditions of International Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 62, 85; Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), pp. 4–5; Martin Wight, 'Why is There No International Theory?', and James Der Derian, 'A Reinterpretation of Realism: Genealogy, Semiology, Dromology', both in James Der Derian (ed.), *International Theory: Critical Investigations* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 31, 382; Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (London: The Women's Press, 1990), p. 179.

[9] Morgenthau is a famous advocate of the 'human nature' thesis while Waltz is the contemporary formulator of the 'anarchic system' view. Some scholars challenge this separation, finding elements from all levels of analysis in both camps. For good discussions of the distinction between the so-called 'classical Realist' and 'neo-Realist' schools, see: Keohane, 'Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond', p. 165; Donnelly, 'Twentieth-Century Realism', p. 88; and Buzan, 'The Timeless Wisdom of Realism?', pp. 49–50. See also Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is What States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics', in James Der Derian (ed.), *International Theory: Critical Investigations*, p. 133.

[10] For discussions of the centrality of power politics for Realism, see: Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 113; Gilpin, 'The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism', p. 305; Buzan, 'The Timeless Wisdom of Realism?', pp. 47, 60; Keohane, 'Realism, Neorealism, and the Study of World Politics', pp. 7–8; Keohane, 'Theory of World Politics', p. 163; Wendt, 'Anarchy is What States Make of it', pp. 132–3. See also: Helen Milner, 'The Assumption of Anarchy in International Relations Theory: A Critique', in David Baldwin (ed.), *Neorealism and Neoliberalism*, pp.153, 159; James Der Derian, 'Introduction: Critical Investigations', in James Der Derian (ed.), *International Theory: Critical Investigations*, p. 4.

[11] For discussions of self-help and its implications, see: Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, p. 238; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 104, 107, 111, 113, 118; Gilpin, 'The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism,' p. 304; Forde, 'Classical Realism', pp. 63, 71; Snidal, 'Relative Gains and the Pattern of International Cooperation', p. 170; Buzan 'The Timeless Wisdom of Realism?', p. 53; Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace*, p. 43; Milner, 'The Assumption of Anarchy', pp. 144, 145, 153; Wendt, 'Anarchy is What States Make of it', p. 130; Der Derian, 'Introduction', p. 4. See also Stephen Krasner, 'The Accomplishments of International Political Economy', in Steve Smith, Ken Booth and Marysia Zalewski (eds.), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, p. 115.

[12] For very good discussions of the circumscribed role of morality in international affairs, see: Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger*, ch. 1; Donnelly, 'Twentieth-Century Realism', pp. 93–7. The justification of whether morality has a place (or not) in international affairs is a complex question which has been the subject of a vast discussion. My aim here is not to review the different positions taken on this issue, but simply to describe Realism in general terms in order to contextualize the implications of my reading of Thucydides. For helpful discussions of this topic see: Marshal Cohen, 'Moral Skepticism in International Affairs', in Charles Beitz, Marshall Cohen, Thomas Scanlon and John Simmons (eds.), *International Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 3–50; Stanley Hoffmann, *Duties Beyond Borders*, ch. 1; Arnold Wolfers, 'Introduction', in Arnold Wolfers and Laurence Martin (eds.), *The Anglo-American Tradition in Foreign Affairs: Readings from Thomas More to Woodrow Wilson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), pp. ix–xxvii; Charles Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations*, 2nd edn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), ch. 1 and afterword.

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'inside' and 'outside', especially with respect to the issue of moral responsibility.[13] On this account, the pursuit of power and self-interest is all-negative and tragic, it makes for a truth that humans cannot bear to look straight in the face, a truth that Realists nevertheless have to come to terms with to survive in a world where life is nasty, brutish, and short, as Hobbes most memorably put it.[14] Thus, Realists oppose power and self-interest to justice, sovereignty to global moral responsibility, and nature to convention in the jungle that constitutes international relations.

Two important exceptions to the above picture should be noted. First, classical Realists were well aware of the connection between moderation and the pursuit of interest defined as power. Morgenthau's work is exemplary in this respect. His six principles of political Realism are a recipe for a politics of moderation in a world where moralism is diagnosed to lead either to political folly or crusading excess.[15] Similarly, his guidelines for diplomacy emphasize compromise and condemn crusading doctrines.[16] Morgenthau was not alone in this respect either, as most classical Realists have emphasized the moderating effects of making foreign policy on the basis of power and interest.[17] However, it is almost as if the connection is a lucky coincidence. There is nothing particularly positive about power and interest in the classical Realist account, other than the supposition that foreign policies based on power and interest produce better consequences than those based on idealistic moralizing. But this is only a second-best solution. Ultimately, for many Realists, the only complete remedy for the tragedy of world affairs is world government, given the alleged nastiness of power politics.[18]

A second exception arises in the case of more recent post-Structuralist criticisms

[13] Martin Wight makes a particularly strong use of the distinction between inside/outside in his provocative suggestion that there is no international theory: 'The reason is that the theorizing has to be done in the language of political theory and law. But this is the language appropriate to man's control of his social life. Political theory and law are maps of experience or systems of action within the realm of normal relationships and calculable results. They are the theory of the good life. International theory is the theory of survival. What for political theory is the extreme case (as revolution or civil war) is for international theory the regular case'. Martin Wight, 'Why Is There No International Theory?' in James Der Derian (ed.), *International Theory: Critical Investigations*, p. 32. It should be noted that this strict separation between the realms of domestic politics and international affairs has been criticized by neo-Liberals, neo-Institutionalists, Feminists, and post-Structuralists alike. Nevertheless, the critics tend to take the Realist position described above for granted before they embark on their critiques.

[14] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 89. See also Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 15 for the other linguistic allusions.

[15] Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 11. It should be noted of course that, in the minds of most classical Realists, moralism is not equivalent to moral investigation, but refers to an excessive moral rhetoric that leads to imprudent policies.

[16] Ibid., pp. 551, 552, 554.

[17] Hoffmann, *Duties Beyond Borders*, ch. 1; Forde, 'Classical Realism', p. 73. See also: Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins Press, 1962), ch. 4; E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Year's Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964); George Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, expanded edn. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[18] Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, pp. 499, 529; Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, p. 238. See also: Stanley Hoffmann, *Janus and Minerva: Essays in the Theory and Practice of International Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), p. 30; Lea Brilmayer, 'Realism Revisited: The Moral Priority of Means and Ends in Anarchy', in Ian Shapiro and Lea Brilmayer (eds.), *Nomos XLI: Global Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), pp. 207, 210.

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of mainstream IR that display an astute awareness of the productive side of power.[19] As Ashley puts it:

> An important contribution of post-structuralist argument, most especially Foucault's, is to put in question the disposition to view power as essentially negative, that is, as a constraint on freedom. As I shall be stressing, power must be viewed as productive, and among the things that knowledgeable practices of power produce are subjects of social action and the conditions of their autonomy.[20]

However, post-Structuralists immediately go on to criticize these productive relations of power by examining 'the way in which knowledgeable practices work in history to control ambiguity, privilege some interpretations over others, limit discourse, discipline conduct, and produce subjective agents and the institutional structures of their experience'.[21] By contrast, the productive side of power I wish to stress, which I believe was essential to both Thucydides and Aristotle, is the way in which power enables actions, and especially excellent actions. This side of power quickly gets eclipsed by the emphasis post-Structuralists place on sovereign subjects over actions.[22]

Nevertheless, neither the classical Realist nor the post-Structuralist exception changes the main tenets of the more familiar Realist picture. Thus, the standard oppositions between nature and convention, power and justice, domestic and international remain in wide currency, setting the terms of the debate even for the critics of Realism. It is against this background that Thucydides is appropriated as the founder of Realism, by Realists and non-Realists alike. Even commentators especially sensitive to the complexities of Thucydides' *History* claim that the historian upholds these binary categories.[23] As for critics of the Realist appropriation, they tend to emphasize the neglected side of the binaries, without challenging the conceptual oppositions themselves and asking whether Thucydides did in fact see nature and convention, power and justice, domestic and international to be opposed to each other. I would suggest that it is precisely for this reason that the critics do not go far enough. Adopting the conceptual universe of the sophists, they remain unable to fully appreciate the complexity and originality of Thucydides' critique of sophistic categories.

[19] I use the term 'post-Structuralism' very loosely to refer to the critiques of mainstream IR theory exemplified by the works of Richard Ashley and R.B.J. Walker. I have chosen to label these works as post-Structuralist rather than post-Modern merely to emphasize more strongly the structuralist orientation of the contemporary mainstream, and for no other reason. As already mentioned, I capitalize to denote a loose reference to a school of thought in IR.

[20] Richard Ashley, 'The Powers of Anarchy: Theory, Sovereignty, and the Domestication of Global Life', in James Der Derian (ed.), *International Theory: Critical Investigations*, pp. 126, fn. 11.

[21] Ibid., p. 101.

[22] See Frank's discussion of Aristotle's conception of action for a parallel argument. Frank, 'Democracy and Distribution', p. 786.

[23] Thus, in an effort to formulate Realist ethics, Doyle argues that, for Thucydides, a striking difference remains between domestic politics and international affairs, even if we grant that the difference is not as absolute as it is made out to be by most mainstream Realists. As Doyle puts it, 'though Thucydides's sense of the constraints of strategic necessity and the opportunities for moral action hold in both domestic and international politics, the moral difference between them was crucial'. Hence, on Doyle's reading, to be a Thucydidean 'is to recognize that interstate and intrastate politics are not the same, even though human beings play out their hopes and fears in both'. For Doyle, it is precisely this difference that explains why Thucydides supposedly justifies 'placing the security of the polis over the rules of universal morality'. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace*, pp. 89, 92.

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Before embarking on Thucydides' critique, it is worthwhile to consider an explicit example of how the appropriation of Thucydides in IR is tainted by sophistic vocabulary. Saxonhouse's work provides the perfect illustration. Saxonhouse suggests that the relationship between the internal and external affairs of the city in Thucydides 'can be made intelligible in terms of the sophistic distinction between universal nature and convention'.[24] Saxonhouse quickly makes clear that she refers to the later sophists who saw nature (*phusis*) and convention (*nomos*) to be in opposition to each other and who prioritized nature in their criticisms of conventional practices.[25] She then proceeds to discuss Thucydides' treatment of domestic politics and international affairs in terms of this distinction:

> In his history, Thucydides deals with two levels of political activity, which shall be referred to here as the intra-polis and inter-polis levels, each with its own criteria for action: within the city, moderation and the preservation of the nomoi, outside and between cities, nature (phusis), the unrestrained drive for power and gain.[26]

As such, *nomos–phusis* is mapped onto inside/outside: domestic politics is imagined as the realm of law, morality, and conventional values; while international politics is equated with the natural pursuit of power and advantage.

It should be noted that Saxonhouse does not uncritically endorse the *nomos–phusis* distinction. In fact, she argues that even though *nomos* and *phusis* are relegated to their respective realms in theory, Thucydides shows us how it is impossible to keep domestic politics and international affairs separate in practice.[27] I agree that the separation is impossible to maintain in practice. However, I do not think that Thucydides ever suggests the two realms should be kept separate in theory in the first place. My disagreement is based on Saxonhouse's deployment of the *nomos–phusis* distinction, which turns Thucydides too much into a sophist. Accordingly, Saxonhouse points out that Thucydides understood nature 'defined as in Antiphonian terms of the natural pursuit of pleasure and the power to acquire and preserve that pleasure'.[28] Furthermore, she emphasizes how 'Thucydides gives powerful descriptive statements in his own words of what man is like [by nature] when he is released from the restraints which the *nomoi* and religious laws have placed on him'.[29] As a result, for Saxonhouse, the most dramatic Thucydidean statements on human nature come at times of 'political and physical upheaval', namely in the accounts of the plague at Athens and the civil war at Corcyra.[30] In these instances, men, being forced to respond to necessity, disregard the 'higher standards' of the *nomoi* which have collapsed. In Corcyra, '[t]he first expression of this is the

[24] Arlene Saxonhouse, 'Nature and Convention in Thucydides' *History*', *Polity*, X:4 (Summer 1978), p. 461.
[25] Saxonhouse refers to these thinkers as the radical sophists and specifically discusses Antiphon in this connection. Ibid., p. 462.
[26] Ibid., p. 466.
[27] The impossibility lies in the fact that even though *nomos* and *phusis* must rule in their respective realms, ultimately they impinge on each other: conventional values end up affecting imperial decisions and foreign policy where they have no place, while nature encroaches on domestic politics and leads to the disintegration of the *polis*. For Saxonhouse, the Sicilian expedition illustrates this political dilemma, it shows that Thucydides 'also recognizes the interdependence of these two levels of political behavior and yet the impossibility of maintaining moral and legal restraints on human nature internally while rejecting them externally'. Ibid., pp. 466, 480.
[28] Ibid., p. 464.
[29] Ibid., p. 465.
[30] Ibid., pp. 465, 472.

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change in the meaning of words', a very telling development because '[w]ords are a prime example of the conventions on which society is based'.[31] With the collapse of conventions, the domestic political arena becomes more like international affairs. As Saxonhouse puts it, '[t]he acquisition of power which is the standard for inter-polis relations defines the intra-polis situation in Corcyra'.[32] Thus, Corcyra and the plague become paradigms for human nature on Saxonhouse's reading.

It is ironic that the paradigms of nature, which are supposed to be the driving force in international affairs, come from domestic political situations, and not *vice versa*. Corcyra, instead of being modelled on inter-polis relations, becomes the model for inter-polis relations. The logical conclusion is that inter-polis affairs are conducted in an environment of complete lawlessness where words have no meaning, where all depends on the unrestrained drive for power and gain. As evidence, Saxonhouse reminds us of the Melian affair, where the strong Athenians order the weaker Melians to surrender or die to illustrate the 'priority of power' and the 'futility of moral values' in international affairs.[33] The Melians refuse, trusting in the justice of their cause, and the help of the Gods and the Spartans. As a result, they are conquered by the Athenians, who put all the men to death and sell all the women and children into slavery.[34] The dreadful destruction of Mycalessus, where the Thracians 'burst into Mycalessus, sacked the houses and temples, and butchered the inhabitants, sparing neither the young nor the old, but methodically killing everyone they met, women and children alike, and even the farm animals and every living thing they saw' could be given as another example.[35] Do these incidents not illustrate the nasty prevalence of power in international affairs? Most certainly, in many respects. Yet one important difference remains between these two incidents and Corcyra. As already mentioned, in Corcyra:

> To fit with the change of events, words, too, had to change their usual meanings. What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect to find in a party member; to think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying one was a coward; any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one's unmanly character; ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action.[36]

No such thing happens in the Melian dialogue. The Athenians never claim that their act of aggression is a demonstration of courage, they never try to couch their brutal action in the language of virtue. Throughout the Melian dialogue, there is never a doubt that the Athenian action violates rules of 'fair play and just dealing'; the meanings of the words remain clear.[37] Similarly, Mycalessus is described as a bloodthirsty butchery, 'a disaster [that] fell upon the city, a disaster more complete than any, more sudden and more horrible'.[38] The words and conventions condemning the butchery remain intact even if they are violated in practice.

[31] Ibid., p. 472.
[32] Ibid., p. 473.
[33] Ibid., p. 478.
[34] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin, 1972), V.116.
[35] Ibid., VII.29.
[36] Ibid., III.82.
[37] Ibid., V.90.
[38] Ibid., VII.29.

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This is not to deny that there is an important connection between the plague and Corcyra on the one hand, and Melos and Mycalessus, on the other, but only to suggest that the connection lies elsewhere. Saxonhouse is right to emphasize the parallel between these cases, but wrong to interpret the resemblance through categories foreign to Thucydides. Paying more attention to the language Thucydides uses in describing these events reveals something altogether different. In Mycalessus, just as in Corcyra, confusion and death reigned, 'death in every shape and form'.[39] The incident involved tremendous human suffering. As Thucydides puts it, 'in the disaster just described [in Mycalessus] its people suffered calamities as pitiable as any which took place during the war'.[40] Likewise, the human toll of the plague in Athens was beyond description: people 'died like flies'.[41] 'Words indeed fail one when one tries to give a general picture of this disease: and as for the sufferings of the individuals, they seemed almost beyond the capacity of human nature to endure'.[42] What links Corcyra and the plague to Melos and Mycalessus is not the lawlessness and the disregard of conventions that they occasion, but the human suffering that they entail. Indeed, during the plague, it is precisely because 'the catastrophe was so overwhelming that men, not knowing what would happen next to them, became indifferent to every rule of religion or of law'.[43] Thus, lawlessness was part of the experience of the plague, part of 'what it was like' to suffer through the plague.[44] Herein lies the link between domestic and international upheavals: they both involve great human suffering. Herein also lies the tragic greatness of the Peloponnesian War in comparison with the great wars of the past:

> The Peloponnesian War, on the other hand, not only lasted for a long time, but throughout its course brought with it *unprecedented suffering* for Hellas. Never before had so many cities been captured and then devastated, whether by foreign armies or by Hellenic powers themselves (some of these cities, after capture, were resettled with new inhabitants); never had there been so many exiles; never such loss of life—*both in the actual warfare and in internal revolutions*.[45]

It is this unprecedented suffering that connects internal revolutions and international warfare and makes the Peloponnesian War 'the greatest disturbance in the history of the Hellenes, affecting also a large part of the non-Hellenic world, and indeed I might almost say, the whole of mankind'.[46] It is the greatness of the suffering brought by the war that makes its history the concern of the whole of mankind and a possession for all times.

Saxonhouse emphasizes the lawlessness of internal revolutions over the suffering they occasion in a theory that models nature and international politics on such revolutions.[47] No wonder, then, that Saxonhouse relies so heavily on a sophistic

[39] Ibid., VII.29 and III.81. It is striking that Thucydides uses the same language to describe both events.
[40] Ibid., VII.30.
[41] Ibid., II.52.
[42] Ibid., II.50.
[43] Ibid., II.52.
[44] Ibid., II.48.
[45] Ibid., I.23. Emphasis mine.
[46] Ibid., I.1.
[47] An interesting point to note here is that once *nomos–phusis* is mapped onto inside/outside, it is not clear which produces which anymore. Does the alleged lawlessness of 'outside' define human nature or does the universal drive to pursue power and domination explain the lawlessness of 'outside'? What does the pursuit of power emerge from: lawlessness or human nature? Saxonhouse initially

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version of the distinction between nature and convention to conceptualize the difference between the internal and external affairs of the city. Saxonhouse is not alone in this, either. In contemporary classical and philosophical scholarship, it has become standard to claim that Thucydides wrote under the influence of the sophists and the Hippocratic medical writers.[48] As already mentioned, sophists tended to define nature in opposition to convention, and to discover true human nature in the absence of restraining influences maintained by effective conventions. They noted that laws changed from place to place and over time, but that human nature remained constant. Further, they conceptualized our unchanging human nature in terms of power, understood as domination. Thus, Connor writes that in Thucydides' day, 'the natural right of the stronger to dominate the weaker was vigorously maintained and self-interest asserted as the true guide to conduct'.[49] This sophistic vocabulary of power and necessity dominates practically all discussions of Thucydides and fixes human nature as that which is opposed to convention. As Strauss attests, most contemporary commentators 'hold that Thucydides' comprehensive view is stated by the Athenians in their dialogue with the Melians'.[50] At Melos, the Athenian envoys assert that 'the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept'.[51] They add that 'it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can'.[52] Many Thucydides scholars understand these claims to mean 'that the strong rules the weaker by nature and hence sempiternally with necessity'.[53] In other words, 'the stronger is compelled by natural necessity to rule over the weaker'.[54] Once again, Saxonhouse is indicative of this trend in presenting the Thucydidean conception of nature to be 'the unrestrained drive for power and gain'[55] as disclosed in situations like Corcyra and the plague where conventional restraints fail to control the drive for power. It is precisely this reading of Thucydides that IR scholars appropriate, and its implications for theorizing world politics have already been discussed.

Contra Strauss and Saxonhouse, I would like to suggest that reading Thucydides through a sophistic conception of nature and convention provides a radically one-sided picture and hence does not do justice to the richness and complexity of the *History*. A closer examination of the text reveals that even though Thucydides was

seems to affirm universal human nature as the source of lawlessness and yet depends on occasions of lawlessness to construct what human nature is like. Remarkably, the paradigmatic examples of lawlessness come from 'inside' and then colour how we are to conceptualize lawlessness 'outside'. This move back and forth, as well as the ambiguity it conceals, are quite telling in themselves. It is worth noticing that the ambiguity mirrors and complicates debates about levels of analysis in IR theory, more precisely on the question of whether the anarchy of world politics is produced by human nature or the international system. (See the literature referenced in fns. 9–14.) My thanks are due to Jill Frank for encouraging me to think about this point.

[48] For detailed discussions, see: John Finley, *Thucydides* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963); Donald Kagan, *The Great Dialogue: History of Greek Political Thought From Homer to Polybius* (New York: Free Press, 1965); Simon Hornblower, *Thucydides* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 1987).

[49] Connor, *Thucydides*, p. 14.

[50] Strauss, *The City and Man*, p. 145. See also M.I. Finley, 'Appendix 3: The Melian Dialogue' in Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin, 1972), p. 616.

[51] Thucydides, V.89.

[52] Ibid., V.105.

[53] Leo Strauss, 'Preliminary Observations on the Gods in Thucydides' Work', *Interpretation*, 4:1 (1974), p. 7.

[54] Strauss, *The City and Man*, p. 188.

[55] Saxonhouse, 'Nature and Convention', p. 466.

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influenced by the intellectual climate of his time, he was able to move beyond these influences to create a truly original masterpiece intended to 'last for ever'.[56] Thucydides was no sophist. Indeed, I claim that in many ways, Thucydides was closer to Aristotle than to the sophists in his account of nature, power, and necessity, even if he was not as systematic as Aristotle in his discussion of excellence. A sophistic formulation of nature in terms of sheer power and necessity in strict opposition to convention has an important part to play in the *History*, but does not adequately relay the whole story. This is because a sophistic conception of nature cannot capture the indeterminate character that nature had for Thucydides. Furthermore, a sophistic conception of nature completely overlooks any possible connection between nature and excellence. Finally, such a conception disregards how nature and convention are tied together in proper use in Thucydides' work. It is these three themes in Thucydides' critique of the sophists that I explore in this article.

As a preliminary cautionary remark, I should note two points. First, there is no such thing as a unified sophistic conception of nature. Second, at least for some sophists, the relationship between nature, convention, and excellence was more complex than I have presented it to be. Adkins illustrates this point well in his discussion of the ties between nature and excellence in the thought of the sophist Callicles, as presented in Plato's *Gorgias*. Adkins writes:

> Accordingly, though in the Gorgias passage quoted above Callicles seems to be using the concept of phusis [nature] to determine what is aischron [shameful], and though the effectiveness of the idea of phusis must have been greatly enhanced by philosophical and medical thought and increased knowledge of the wide range of differing customs, nomoi, [conventions] of other lands, it is nevertheless more accurate to say that the traditional idea of arete [excellence] is serving to define the characteristics of phusis than that the concept of phusis is serving to define the characteristics of arete.[57]

It is certainly the case that close readings of some individual sophists reveal more diverse and complicated formulations of the nature-convention distinction. Let me emphasize then that my purpose in this article is neither to make broad generalizations about the sophists, nor to write a nuanced history of sophism, but simply to expose Thucydides' critique of a rather extreme opposition between nature and convention developed by certain leading sophists of his time, such as Antiphon. Ironically, the extreme opposition that Thucydides is critical of provides the most influential lens through which he is read in classical, philosophical, and IR scholarship. It is this radical sophistic vocabulary that lies at the heart of the Realist appropriation of the historian. As such, rereading Thucydides as a critic of the radical sophists is tantamount to offering a new perspective on world politics.

II. Nature, power, and necessity

At first glance, Thucydides does seem to lend some support to a sophistic conception of nature. After all, he maintains that 'human nature being what it is', the

[56] Thucydides, I.22.
[57] See A.W.H. Adkins, *Moral Values and Political Behavior in Ancient Greece* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1972), pp. 109–11.

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events of the past will 'at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future'.[58] He tells us that in the midst of the utter collapse of law and order in the revolution in Corcyra, human nature 'showed itself in its true colors'. He claims that 'love of power' was the cause of all the evils of the civil war there.[59] Multiple speakers in the *History*, ranging from the Athenian envoys at Sparta and Melos, to Hermocrates at Gela, to Cleon and Diodotus in the Mytilenian debate seem to confirm the relationship between power and nature. Is Saxonhouse correct, then, in understanding nature in sophistic terms? Does Thucydides not provide a stunning account of an unchanging human nature as driven by power and necessity in opposition to convention that is bound to give rise to multiple evils time and time again? In some ways, yes. But this is not the whole story.

There is nothing constant about Thucydides' conception of human nature. It may be a natural urge of the strong to dominate whatever they can, but it is just as natural for the weak to resist.[60] Connor is right, I think, to draw our attention to the links between the speeches of the Athenians at Melos and Hermocrates at Gela. In trying to arrange a peace settlement in Sicily to prevent a forthcoming Athenian intervention on behalf of the Chalcidians, Hermocrates asserts that '[f]or men in general, it is just as natural to take control when there is no resistance as to stand out against aggression'.[61] In Hermocrates' mind, Athenian ambitions to rule in Sicily are 'perfectly understandable' in terms of human nature and hence not reprehensible; the ones who deserve to be blamed in this situation are 'those who show an even greater readiness to submit'.[62] It would be a great mistake, argues Hermocrates, if 'knowing all this', the Sicilians still fail to take the appropriate precautions.[63] Connor suggests that Hermocrates' speech offers the possibility for a radical reinterpretation of the sophistic maxim: 'The so-called Law of the Stronger becomes an injunction for the weaker to unite'.[64] The call for unity and resistance is no empty talk either. As Connor notes, in this particular instance, Hermocrates succeeds in temporarily bringing the Sicilian conflict to an end and checking Athenian ambitions there:

> The Sicilians block Athenian intervention. On a very small scale we recognize in this a process of great significance: although Athens' expansion was natural, there are also in nature countervailing tendencies that in the long run can check or even destroy unrestrained growth.[65]

If the urge to dominate and the urge to resist exist side by side in nature, the outcome is indeterminate. Not surprisingly, Hermocrates' speech celebrates indeterminacy and uncertainty in his recognition that the 'imponderable element of the future is the thing which counts in the long run …'.[66] And this is not all bad, 'just as

[58] Thucydides, I.22.
[59] Ibid., III.84 and III.82. As Gagarin and Woodruff point out, the authenticity of III.84 is controversial among Thucydides scholars. Yet, even if it is a work of imitation, it is deemed to be 'thoroughly Thucydidean in thought and style, and of considerable interest in its own right'. See Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, p. 107.
[60] Connor, *Thucydides*, p. 124.
[61] Thucydides, IV.61.
[62] Ibid., IV.61.
[63] Ibid., IV.61.
[64] Connor, *Thucydides*, p. 124.
[65] Ibid., p. 126.
[66] Thucydides, IV.62. A few other examples of the multiple references to the unpredictability of the future that are sprinkled throughout the *History* include: I. 78, I.84, V.102.

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we are most frequently deceived by it, so too it can be of the greatest possible use to us'.[67] In other words, the indeterminacy of the future is an occasion for fear as well as hope. In this case, Hermocrates argues, the greatest possible use of fear is to channel the 'fear of an inscrutable future' and the fear of 'the actual presence of the Athenians' to the cause of Sicilian peace and unity.[68] Thus, in light of the uncertainty of the future, fear, properly used, can assume a positive function in facilitating resistance.

Similarly, hope can be very important in mediating between domination and resistance. The discussion of the plague is very instructive in this respect. 'In the period when the disease was at its height,' Thucydides observes, 'the body, so far from wasting away, showed surprising powers of resistance to all the agony'.[69] Resistance and recovery was possible even in the face of the all-powerful virulent plague and the utter devastation it brought, devastation that 'seemed almost beyond the capacity of human nature to endure'.[70] No 'human art or science [was] of any help at all' in resisting the deadly disease. 'Equally useless were prayers made in the temples, consultation of oracles, and so forth'.[71] It was not a case of the survival of the fittest either, as '[t]hose with naturally strong constitutions were no better able to resist the disease'.[72] How was resistance possible then? Thucydides points to the crucial role of hope in providing the means for resistance. Indeed, once hopelessness took over, the possibility of resistance was greatly undermined. In that sense, '[t]he most terrible thing of all was the despair into which people fell when they realized that they had caught the plague; for they would immediately adopt an attitude of utter hopelessness, and by giving in in this way, would lose their powers of resistance'.[73] Hopelessness led to a similar lack of resistance to calamity in Corcyra, where resignation to the prevailing reign of terror undermined the possibility of changing the situation for the better. 'As for ending this state of affairs,' writes Thucydides, 'everyone had come to the conclusion that it was hopeless to expect a permanent settlement, and so instead of being able to feel confident in others, they devoted their energies to providing against being injured themselves'.[74] In the absence of hope, there could not be any effective resistance to the savage progress of the revolution. It is understandable, then, that people devoted their energies to survival in the midst of the enfolding disaster. What else could they do?

One could object that as important as hope may be for resistance, it may equally lead to devastation. After all, it seems that it was hope—hope of divine assistance, hope of Spartan intervention, hope of some unknown miracle—that led to the sad destruction of Melos. Perhaps the Athenians were correct in suggesting that 'hope is by nature an expensive commodity, and those who are risking their all on one cast find out what it means only when they are already ruined'.[75] Yet, closer analysis of the Athenian argument suggests otherwise. 'Your chief points' the Athenians tell the

[67] Ibid., IV.62.
[68] Ibid., IV.63.
[69] Ibid., II.49.
[70] Ibid., II.50.
[71] Ibid., II.47.
[72] Ibid., II.51.
[73] Ibid., II.51.
[74] Ibid., III.83.
[75] Ibid., V.103.

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Melians, 'are concerned with what you hope may happen in the future, while your actual resources are too scanty to give you a chance of survival against the forces that are opposed to you at this moment'.[76] Blind hope in the indeterminacy of the future with no resources to back it up in the present may prove just as fatal as hopelessness. The Melians are conquered not because they hope, but because they make an improper use of hope.[77] Hope, just like fear, can be destructive or productive depending on its use.

Nature, on this reading of Thucydides, is indeterminate. The strong dominate whatever they can, the weak resist whenever they can, the outcome is mediated through hope, fear, and particular circumstances. Thucydides recognizes the importance of the particular even in his examination of extreme cases of lawlessness, such as civil wars or virulent epidemics. In his analysis of civil wars that is prompted by the revolution in Corcyra, he notes that 'as different circumstances arise, the general rules will admit of some variety'.[78] In his description of the plague, he admits that he 'omitted all kinds of peculiarities which occurred in various individual cases'.[79] Given such variety and peculiarity, the particular procures an immense importance in determining how our universal yet unpredetermined human nature will manifest itself. If human nature is indeterminate in this way, it is also changeable over time. The same holds true for the nature (or character) of cities. Surely, the remarkable contrast between the natures of Athens and Sparta that the Corinthian representatives enunciate in their address to the Spartan assembly just before the outbreak of the war does not remain fixed as the war progresses.[80] As Connor also notes, the character of a city is not established in an unchanging way by nature, but is the product of 'historical circumstances and decisions' of which numerous conventions of various levels of universality constitute a major part.[81] Thus, universal nature is intimately and irrevocably tied to convention in its manifestation in particular cases.

How do we square the account of nature I offer with the numerable references Thucydides makes to the essence of human nature? How are we to understand the claim that human nature being what it is, the past is bound to repeat itself in the future? As a recognition of our tragic human condition, I would propose.[82] Being

[76] Ibid., V.111.

[77] The counter-argument can also be made on the basis of the historical circumstances that characterized the Melian affair. After all, Athens attempted to conquer Melos in 426 BC with no success. The Melian dialogue takes place ten years later, on the eve of the second try. Thucydides does not give us any information about the background circumstances that provoked this effort. Nor does he tell us much about why and how the Athenians succeeded this time. We know that the Spartans did not come to the aid of the Melians, we do not know what prevented them. We also know that the success of the Athenian siege involved some internal treachery (Thucydides, V.116). It is very likely that the Melian affair was much more complex than Thucydides' presentation. Hence, the question of whether the Melians were foolish in hoping that they could repel the Athenians should not be prejudged by the eventual prevailing of Athens. However, it may still be said that regardless of the historical background or ultimate outcome, the Melians made an improper use of hope in the present when their arguments over-relied on fortune and the unpredictability of the future in the debate with the Athenians relayed by the historian (Thucydides, V.102, V.104).

[78] Ibid., III.82.

[79] Ibid., II.51.

[80] Ibid., I.70.

[81] Connor, *Thucydides*, p. 173, footnote 41.

[82] Arendt's distinction between human nature and the human condition is very instructive here. The human condition refers to the conditions of human existence, to the fundamental human activities that we are 'doing' under the basic conditions given to and created by man on this earth. The human condition differs from human nature, because none of the fundamental human activities 'and not even the most meticulous enumeration of them all, constitute essential characteristics of human

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well aware of the destructive and constructive potentialities of human nature, Thucydides could not help but acknowledge that there would always be situations where the destructive side would gain the upper hand. This is what happened in Corcyra, resulting in the utmost savagery. Even more disturbing for Thucydides, as concerned as he was with human suffering, must have been that we are incapable of learning from our dismal history of savageries to end all possible Corcyras once and for all. Corcyra was not followed by 'never again' in deed, but with worse Corcyras:

> So revolutions broke out in city after city, and in places where the revolutions occurred late the knowledge of what had happened previously in other places caused still new extravagances of revolutionary zeal, expressed by an elaboration in the methods of seizing power and by unheard-of atrocities in revenge.[83]

It is sad to admit, but our record since the Peloponnesian War has proved Thucydides right. Hobbes understood the historian very well when he translated 'human nature being what it is' as 'the condition of humanity'.[84] One only needs to read history to grasp the meaning of Thucydides on what 'the condition of humanity' is.

The condition of humanity being what it is, how are we then to formulate the relationship between power and justice? Most importantly, what are we to make of the infamous Melian dialogue? As already noted, it is common to read the Melian dialogue as a treatise on power politics which expounds the law of the stronger and the futility of justice. Examples of this rendition abound in the contemporary literature on Thucydides. To give just a few examples, North holds that, at Melos, '[w]ithout a trace of embarrassment the Athenian representatives assert the right of the strong and reject every appeal to such traditional ideals as justice, religion and aidos'.[85] The logical conclusion, Pearson contends, is that 'questions of justice are not relevant when one party is strong and the other weak'.[86] Similarly, Strauss suggests that the reverse of Pearson's conclusion is also true as 'questions of right only arise when the power to compel is more or less equal on both sides'.[87] But if nature is indeterminate with respect to domination and resistance, such an interpretation of the Melian dialogue is not tenable. This is not to claim that Thucydides denies the importance of power in politics, domestic or international. However, a sophistic conception of nature, which equates power with the natural right of the stronger to dominate and treats conventional understandings of justice with disdain, misses how important the *use* of power is for Thucydides, and how that use is shaped by convention in the practice of excellence. Power, on this reading, does not immediately amount to domination, and offers both constructive and destructive possibilities depending on its use. As a closer analysis of the references to power in

existence in the sense that without them, this existence would no longer be human'. (10) Further, the conditions of human existence 'can never "explain" what we are or answer the question of who we are for the simple reason that they never condition us absolutely'. (11) See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 1–12.

[83] Thucydides, III.82.

[84] Thucydides I.22 and III.82 in the Hobbes translation. See David Grene, *The Peloponnesian War: The Complete Hobbes Translation* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

[85] Helen North, *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 109.

[86] Lionel Pearson, 'Popular Ethics in the World of Thucydides', *Classical Philology*, LII:4 (October 1957), p. 237.

[87] Strauss, *The City and Man*, p. 185.

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the *History* reveals, it is precisely when the use of power is concerned that justice comes back into the picture.

The Melian dialogue deserves special attention here because it provides the backbone of sophistic readings of Thucydides on power. At Melos, the Athenian envoys proudly proclaim to the Melians:

> [Y]ou know as well as we do that, when these matters are discussed by practical people, the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.[88]

This statement is generally understood in a negative vein: when the equality of power does not hold, justice is irrelevant and everything depends on sheer compulsion. Based on this negative construction of the Athenian position, it should come as no surprise that North, Pearson, and Strauss take it to be a rejection of justice. Curiously, this is not what the Athenians say! They only maintain that the standard of justice varies with the power of those concerned, not that justice is irrelevant. True, 'the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept' but the two parts of the assertion are not connected in a relationship of causality and compulsion. It is a matter of common sense 'that the weak accept what they have to accept', it does not follow that what they have to accept is instigated on them by the strong abusing their power. Similarly, of course 'the strong do what they have the power to do' but that does not necessarily mean that they abuse their power to inflict injustice on the weak. In fact, later in the dialogue, the Athenians themselves elucidate what they consider the proper use of power to be: 'to stand up to one's equals, to behave with deference towards one's superiors, and to treat one's inferiors with moderation'.[89] It is striking that the Athenians declare this maxim to be 'the safe rule' not 'the just rule', probably because there could be no conflict between genuine considerations of safety and justice in their minds. Only on a sophistic understanding of nature are the two placed in sharp opposition. On the Athenian view, the standard of justice does depend on the equality of power, but far from being irrelevant to the powerful, justice may require even more from them precisely because 'they have the power to do'. On this reading, Athenian moral language may be complex, but it is far from being an 'amusing twist'.[90]

Unfortunately, the Melians misunderstand the Athenian argument. It is not that they try to do something impossible in trying to inject values where they do not belong as Saxonhouse claims,[91] but quite the opposite. Failing to understand the Athenian conception of justice, they deem considerations of justice to be overruled from the dialogue. 'Then in our view, (since you force us to leave justice out of account and to confine ourselves to self-interest)', they respond, 'it is at any rate useful that you' observe principles of 'fair play and just dealing'.[92] Thus they assume the burden of proof: they must now show that treating the Melians justly is in the Athenian self-interest. As a result, the rest of the dialogue is about what may or may not happen in the future: the Spartans may intervene, the Athenian allies may rebel,

[88] Thucydides, V.89.
[89] Ibid., V.111.
[90] Saxonhouse, 'Nature and Convention', p. 477.
[91] Ibid., pp. 479–80.
[92] Thucydides, V.90.

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and so on. The Melian strategy incurs a significant cost: it relies on and simultaneously tries to subvert a presumed opposition between justice and expediency, especially where the equality of power does not hold. The strategy is doomed to fail, because it denies the Melians the opportunity of talking about the injustice of the Athenian demands and the improper use of their power in Melos. No wonder, then, that they are unable to deter the Athenians from undertaking the siege.

It may be objected that in the final analysis, the Athenians use their power to destroy Melos and to acquire an empire. True as this is, these two instances shed more light on the relationship between theory and practice, and not on the interplay of power and justice. In the case of Melos, the Athenian actions represent a stark transgression of justice. By doing what they do in Melos, the Athenians violate the standards of justice that they propound in their own speech. They also act in contradiction with Athenian character. Pericles, in his famous funeral oration, had found Athenian citizens worthy of praise in that they 'do not think that there is an incompatibility between words and deeds'.[93] In this respect, the Melian incident demonstrates an incompatibility between words and deeds, and hence a deterioration of Athenian character. It is possible to discern this incompatibility even on a less flattering understanding of the Athenian words. As Orwin has perceptively observed, the 'Athenian thesis', understood as the overwhelming force of necessity in politics, may have justified the conquest of Melos, but it did not necessitate the brutal destruction of the city whereupon.[94] On my reading of the 'Athenian thesis', it is possible to go a step further and claim that the words of the Athenians condemned their actions in Melos from the start, first because their denial of neutrality to Melos lacked moderation, and then because they savagely destroyed the city upon conquering it. In that sense, the Melian dialogue is not an illustration of the tension between power and justice, but rather of the tension between words and deeds.

The issue of Athenian imperialism is trickier. Part of the Athenian justification for empire is power. Time and time again, the Athenians declare the natural right of the strong to rule. However, this is only part of the story. As Pericles is quick to point out, 'no [Athenian] subject can complain of being governed by people unfit for their responsibilities'.[95] An analogy with wealth is instructive in showing why that would be so. Athenians, Pericles claims, 'regard wealth as something to be properly used, rather than something to boast about'.[96] Similarly, power is something to be properly used, whether it be in domestic or international affairs. It is not the mere having of power, but the proper use of power, that provides the full justification for Athenian imperialism. It is only in these terms that the proclamations of the Athenian envoys at Sparta become intelligible:

> It has always been a rule that the weak should be subject to the strong; and besides, *we consider that we are worthy of our power*. … Those who really deserve praise are the people who, while human enough to enjoy power, nevertheless pay more attention to justice than they are compelled to do by their situation. Certainly we think that if anyone else was in our position, it would soon be evident whether we act with moderation or not.[97]

[93] Ibid., II.40.
[94] Clifford Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).
[95] Thucydides, II.41.
[96] Ibid., II.40.
[97] Ibid., I.76. Emphasis mine.

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Being worthy of power entails using power with moderation and justice. The Athenian envoys feel that power is properly used in the context of their imperial relations because they treat their subjects as equals through the institutions of the rule of law and the impartial administration of justice.[98] Similarly, Pericles echoes the importance of equality before the law in the domestic affairs of the city.[99] If Athens is 'a model to others' and 'an education to Greece' as Pericles declares,[100] it must be because of the proper use of her power in her internal and external affairs.

Generally, even scholars who note the presence of the humane or the importance of norms and moral values in Thucydides are puzzled as to how to bring power and humaneness together. Most simply note the issue and refrain from offering a solution. Thus, Strauss concludes that 'if one addresses to Thucydides how the power political and the humane are reconciled with one another, one receives no answer from him'.[101] On my reading of Thucydides, the answer comes in the form of proper use. Power and justice are intimately tied together in proper use, or what Aristotle would have called the practice of excellence. This is not to say that power is always conducive to excellence. Need one go further than the disaster in Corcyra to remember how '[l]ove of power, operating through greed and through personal ambition, was the cause of all these evils'?[102] How can we forget how the Athenian empire which was originally defended by an appeal to the proper use of power degenerated into a tyranny based on fear and hatred as even Pericles admits?[103] In both cases, the problem was not the exercise of power *per se*, but the particular form the exercise of power took 'operating through greed and personal ambition'. Aristotle would have agreed; for him, too, greed was closely associated with injustice.[104] Thus, it is the particular (mis)use of power operating through greed that is a threat for excellence, not power itself. Power is an essential part of the practice of excellence, but it can also be the greatest enemy of excellence, depending on how it is used.

Is there any room for necessity in this account of excellence? One could argue, as Strauss does, that even if it is proper to use power with moderation and justice as I suggest, this is true only in normal times. In extraordinary situations, such as those brought about by war, the compulsory force of necessity 'excuses; it justifies an act which in itself would be unjust'.[105] After all, Thucydides tells us that the 'higher standards' that are followed in times of peace are abandoned in Corcyra because people 'are forced into a situation where they have to do what they do not want to do'.[106] The Athenians confess that they retain their empire out of necessity even after it has ceased to be a manifestation of the practice of excellence. There is an

[98] Ibid., I.77.
[99] Ibid., II.37.
[100] Ibid., II.37 and II.41.
[101] Strauss, *The City and Man*, p. 145.
[102] Thucydides, III.82.
[103] Comparing the following statements by Pericles and Cleon is insightful in this respect. Pericles: 'Your empire is now like a tyranny: it may have been wrong to take it; it is certainly dangerous to let it go'. (Thucydides, II.63). Cleon: 'What you do not realize is that your empire is like a tyranny exercised over subjects who do not like it and who are always plotting against you; you will not make them obey you by injuring your own interests in order to do them a favor; your leadership depends on superior strength and not on any goodwill of theirs'. (Thucydides, III.37).
[104] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, (Indianapolis, IL: Hackett, 1985), 1130a20.
[105] Strauss, *The City and Man*, p. 182.
[106] Thucydides, III.82.

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important element of truth in these claims, as best evidenced yet again in Corcyra. Thucydides did not fail to observe that 'war is a stern teacher; in depriving them of the power of easily satisfying their daily wants, it brings most people's minds to the level of their actual circumstances'.[107] As I have already noted, it is understandable that people direct their energies to ensuring their own security under the compulsion of necessity in such extreme circumstances. Necessity justifies prioritizing survival at the expense of conventional 'higher standards' when sheer survival is at stake, for how can one practise excellence if one ceases to exist?

However, one should be very careful in the deployment of the argument from necessity. As Orwin has observed, the originality of the 'Athenian thesis', as he understands it, lies not in its recognition of the role of necessity and its power to encroach on justice, but in its expansion of this role.[108] On this reading, not only safety, but any expediency counts as necessity.[109] As textual evidence, Orwin offers the Athenian justification for not giving up the empire, their insistence that '[t]hree very powerful motives prevent [them] from doing so—security, honor, and self-interest'.[110] Strauss would have been quick to retort that nothing could be deemed unjust if honor and interest count as compulsion alongside safety.[111] Correct as this is, it masks a deeper problem. Expanding the range of necessity in this way renders the notion of injustice meaningless. It also takes away the compulsion that lies at the heart of the justificatory power of necessity, thus undermining the justification itself. Furthermore, a broad conception of necessity becomes underspecified. Orwin recognizes this weakness himself when he notes how what is considered to be of necessity in Thucydides is complicated by and mediated through hope, convention, and pure chance.[112] I would suggest that an Aristotelian conception of necessity, which acknowledges the importance of meeting necessity for the practice of excellence, but construes of it in a much narrower sense, is more appropriate for understanding Thucydides. Just like fear, hope, and power; necessity, too, has a proper use.

Nothing about my reading of Thucydides would have come as a surprise to Aristotle. Aristotle, too, recognized the importance of external goods, such as money, power, and freedom for the activities of virtue. We evidently need 'external goods to be added [to the activity], as we said, since we cannot, or cannot easily do fine actions if we lack the resources'.[113] Not only do we use 'friends, wealth and political power just as we use instruments' in many actions, but also the absence of these external goods 'mars our blessedness' regardless of their instrumentality. On this account, friends, wealth, and power are not only instrumental to excellence but also constitute excellence in their use in the practices of friendship, property, and politics. Strauss perceptively noted the similarities between Aristotle and Thucydides in this respect when he used the language of external goods in his analysis of the historian's treatment of power. 'There is a certain similarity between the city and the individual'; Strauss wrote, 'just as the individual, the city cannot act nobly or virtuously if it lacks the necessary equipment, i.e. power, or in other words, virtue is

[107] Ibid., III.82.
[108] Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides*, pp. 44–50.
[109] Ibid., p. 193.
[110] Thucydides, I.76.
[111] Strauss, *The City and Man*, p. 183.
[112] Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides*, pp. 200–2.
[113] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099a30–1099b5.

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useless without sufficient armament'.[114] Strauss was correct in pointing to the importance of power for excellence but perhaps overdrew the contrast between the two as well as the instrumentality of power. On an Aristotelian reading of Thucydides, it is not that virtue is useless without power; but rather that the practice of virtue depends on power, and consequently, that power has a proper use in the practice of virtue.

This analysis of power comes as part of a more general treatment of the relationship between nature, convention, and excellence. For Aristotle, 'the virtues arise in us neither by nature nor against nature. Rather we are by nature able to acquire them, and reach our complete perfection through habit'.[115] Accordingly, nature is simultaneously opposed and not opposed to habits created by conventions in the activities of virtue. Both the natural and the conventional are changeable, but this does not eradicate the category of the natural and its importance for virtue. As Aristotle put it, 'there is such a thing as what is natural, but still all is changeable; despite the change there is such a thing as what is natural and what is not'.[116] Nature and convention come together in the practice of excellence just as power and justice do. The standard of justice varies, not only according to power, but also according to the position of the actor in the community as shaped by both nature and convention, the type of community in question, and the kind of virtuous activity involved.[117] Finally, Aristotle was well aware of the dangers inherent in this conceptualization of power, nature, and excellence. He recognized that the 'sources and means that develop virtue also ruin it'[118] depending on how they are used. This greatly complicates the account of excellence and how we should act; it means that such questions 'have no fixed [and invariable answers.]'[119] The difficulty and inexactness of the account, however, is not an excuse for giving it up, 'still, we must try to offer help' as well as we can.[120]

I would argue that this is exactly what Thucydides tried to do. He noted the changeability of nature and convention as well as the intricate connections between nature and convention, and yet did not give up on the category of human nature. He considered justice and power to be intimately tied together in proper use. He noticed the destructive potential of human nature and the danger of abuse inherent in the exercise of power, as well as their vital role for the practice of excellence in politics, domestic and international. Above all, he was deeply moved by human suffering and invited us to be sceptical about any manifestation of nature, any exercise of power, and any argument from necessity if it led to disaster in human terms. This, I would suggest, is the common thread that ties domestic and international politics together for Thucydides, without reducing them into each other.

[114] Strauss, *The City and Man*, p. 189.
[115] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a20–1103a25.
[116] Ibid., 1134b30.
[117] Aristotle, *Politics*, Book I, and *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1159b30–1160b10, 1161a10–1161b10, 1178a25–1178b5. The community under consideration may be the household, the *polis*, and one may also add, the world.
[118] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103b5. See also *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1104a25.
[119] Ibid., 1104a1.
[120] Ibid., 1104a10.

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III. Beyond sophism: lessons from Thucydides

What can we learn from reading Thucydides today? I have suggested that contrary to dominant voices that present Thucydides as a 'pupil of the sophists',[121] a central part of the historian's thought is concerned with moving beyond the sophists. Thucydides does this by articulating how the two sides of standard sophistic oppositions, such as nature and convention, or power and justice, are intimately connected in a way that foreshadows Aristotle. Furthermore, Thucydides insists that neither nature nor convention can be privileged as a stone-set guide for action for two reasons. First, both nature and convention are indeterminate. This observation is especially important for understanding the Thucydidean conception of nature, since all too often, commentators base their conclusions about Thucydides on assertions of a constant human nature. Yet, it applies with equal force to how we think about convention.[122] Accordingly, not only are both nature and convention changeable, but they both contain destructive and constructive potentialities side by side. Second, given the indeterminacy of both nature and convention, how they are used in politics assumes crucial importance in Thucydides' narrative. Again in a way that is suggestive of Aristotle, Thucydides understands proper use in light of a conception of excellence. For Thucydides, the practice of excellence requires constant struggle in order to realize the constructive possibilities inherent in nature and convention. At the very least, this necessitates doing one's best to avoid human suffering and to promote moderation and practical wisdom in politics.

Thucydides has a lot to teach contemporary theorists of world politics. With Realists, Thucydides recognizes the central place of power in politics, domestic and international. Against Realists, Thucydides does not see this as a primarily negative enterprise while simultaneously remaining sensitive to its dangers. For Thucydides, power, just like nature in general, has both constructive and destructive potential; what matters most is its use. Similarly, self-interest and expediency are important, not only for survival, but also for the very practice of excellence. The same is true of his recognition of the role of the compulsory force of necessity in politics, albeit in a narrowly circumscribed manner. Furthermore, the prevalence of power, self-interest and necessity in politics does not in any way rule out moral evaluation. Quite to the contrary, they occupy an important place in the very practice of excellence. These themes partly echo the emphasis classical Realists place on moderation. However, the historian goes well beyond the merely instrumental connection classical Realists establish between interest, power, rationality and moderation.[123] Finally, there is no radical difference between the moral fibre of domestic and international politics for Thucydides. Rather, it is through particular circumstances that individual incidents are differentiated, regardless of the realm they arise in.

Thucydides would agree with many of the points made in recent critiques of

[121] Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, p. 402, as cited in Saxonhouse, 'Nature and Convention', p. 464.
[122] A detailed discussion of Thucydides' conception of convention is the subject of a separate article.
[123] Ibid., p. 284.

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mainstream IR.[124] Like Aristotle after him, Thucydides is highly critical of mere 'cleverness' which is required by, but is not equal to, practical wisdom. The practical wisdom that Thucydides celebrates presupposes (and is presupposed by) moderation and justice. This necessitates paying attention to both ends and means, and cleverness alone cannot do that since it only applies itself to choosing the most effective means to a given end, whatever the end chosen. The Thucydidean critique of cleverness is similar in spirit to contemporary Feminist critiques of instrumental rationality—a concept that is at the heart of Realist, neo-Liberal, and neo-Institutionalist analyses of world politics.[125] Such Feminist criticisms of the mainstream are of special interest because in the final analysis, instead of completely dismissing universal reason, they try to develop alternative conceptions of reason that are not opposed to passion. Tickner's accentuation of the close relationship between morality and politics and Cohn's emphasis on the importance of formulating an account of rationality that does not abstract from human suffering in order to be able to work towards the elimination of such suffering are two examples that are especially Thucydidean in character.[126] Thucydides would also support Ruddick's emphasis on the need for struggle for the generation of a politics of peace from the positive potentialities of maternal practice, which exist alongside the potential for violence.[127] Elshtain's analysis offers further examples of Feminist themes that Thucydides would agree with, such as the need to challenge the state and rethink power.[128] Based on these common themes, it could be said that Thucydides offers a quasi-Feminist theory of world politics. However, he certainly does not reach his conclusions by analysing the conceptual category of gender or paying attention to gender bias.

Like contemporary post-Structuralists, Thucydides challenges standard oppositions, he draws attention to the contingency of history and importance of chance in human affairs, and he is well aware of the rootedness of theory in practice.[129] He would concur with Walker's suggestion that 'the most interesting ways forward will be opened up by those who seek to speak of the possibility of new forms of political community' in a world where the 'boundaries between inside and outside do not so

[124] I do not discuss Thucydides' possible critique of neo-Liberal and neo-Institutionalist IR theory here, as this would involve moral considerations about convention that are only hinted at in this article.

[125] For discussions of Feminist misgivings about instrumental rationality and conceptions of universal reason that are opposed to particular passion, see: Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*. See also: Jean Bethke Elshtain, 'Feminist Themes and International Relations', in James Der Derian (ed.), *International Theory: Critical Investigations*, pp. 340–60; Carol Cohn, 'Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals', *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society*, 12 (Summer 1987), pp. 687–718; J. Ann Tickner, 'Hans Morgenthau's Principles of Political Realism', in Rebecca Grant and Kathleen Newland (eds.), *Gender and International Relations* (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1991), pp. 27–40.

[126] Tickner, 'Hans Morgenthau's Principles of Political Realism', p. 37; Cohn, 'Sex and Death', pp. 705–7, 711–12, 717–18.

[127] See Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, pp. 157, 161, 180–4, 219–51.

[128] Elshtain, 'Feminist Themes and International Relations', pp. 350, 354.

[129] See Richard Ashley, 'The Powers of Anarchy', pp. 94–128; Richard Ashley, 'The Poverty of Neorealism'; in Robert Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and Its Critics*, pp. 255–300; R.B.J. Walker, 'History and Structure in the Theory of International Relations', in James Der Derian (ed.), *International Theory: Critical Investigations*, pp. 308–39; R.B.J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Gearóid Tuathail and Simon Dalby, 'Introduction: Rethinking Geopolitics: Towards a Critical Geopolitics', and Simon Dalby 'Geopolitics and Global Security: Culture, Identity, and the "Pogo Syndrome" ', both in Gearóid Tuathail and Simon Dalby (eds.), *Rethinking Geopolitics* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 1–15, 295–313.

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sharply distinguish between a community within and an anarchy of difference without'.[130] However, he would remind us that the quest for such new political possibilities has to be informed above all by ethical considerations about political excellence, and against Walker, he would insist 'that ethics must be grounded in a universalist understanding of both reason and political community'.[131] Thus, Thucydides offers a distinctively ethical way of challenging dichotomies and imagining new political possibilities, a way which starts from practice but goes beyond practice in developing a robust account of proper use and placing ethical judgement at its very centre. Ethical judgement for Thucydides inevitably involves an appeal to universal foundations upon which the practice of excellence, in the form of the avoidance of suffering and promotion of moderation and practical wisdom in politics, can be based.[132]

The emphasis that Thucydides places on moral judgement and proper use in the practice of politics has implications beyond IR theory. The lessons for practitioners of politics are even more urgent. Thucydides would remind contemporary policymakers, domestic and international, of the vital connection between morality and politics, understood as a site for the practice of excellence. He would urge them to remember the importance of moderation and practical wisdom in their political decision-making and actions. He would incite them to deplore the human suffering that is brought about by excess and to try hard to avoid such suffering. To that end, he would recommend making the best use of natural tendencies as well as available conventions and institutions so as to nurture right habits for the practice of excellence, neither by nature nor against nature. Above all, he would demand extreme scepticism of any and all manifestations of nature and convention in politics, domestic and international, which result with human suffering and the destruction of moderation and practical wisdom. As such, Thucydides offers us an invitation to move beyond the sophists and rediscover our human potential for political excellence.

[130] Walker, *Inside/Outside*, pp. 66, 80.
[131] Ibid., p. 74.
[132] Despite this alleged difference, I would agree with Cochran that even post-Structuralist writers 'are invoking ontological presumptions, which by their nature are universal and no less sovereign in character than the ontology behind territorialized ethics'. How else, Cochran asks, would they be able to differentiate between desirable outcomes, such as 'freedom and democratic plurality' and undesirable outcomes such as the totalitarianism of heroic practices? I would add that this is exactly as it should be. See Molly Cochran, 'Postmodernism, Ethics and International Relations,' *Review of International Studies*, 21 (1995), pp. 247–8.

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