

Thucydides the Constructivist

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The most superficial level of Thucydides' history examines the destructive consequences of domestic and foreign policies framed outside the language of justice. His deeper political-philosophical aim was to explore the relationship between *nomos* (convention) and *phusis* (nature) and its implications for civilization. Thucydides concludes that *nomos* constructs identities and channels and restrains the behavior of individuals and societies. Speech and reason (*logos*) in turn make *nomos* possible because all conventions depend on shared meanings. The feedback loop between *logoi* (words) and *ergoi* (deeds) created Greek civilization but also the international and civil strife (*stasis*) associated with the Peloponnesian War. International security and civil order depend upon recovering the meanings of words and the conventions they enable. Thucydides should properly be considered a constructivist.

Movements establish genealogies to legitimize themselves. To make Christianity more attractive to Jews, the New Testament traces Jesus's lineage to King David. Realists claim Thucydides as their forebear. In recent years, a number of international relations scholars have offered more subtle readings of his history that suggest realism is only one facet of his work.¹ I make a more radical assertion: Thucydides is a founding father of constructivism. The underlying purpose of his history was to explore the relationship between *nomos* (convention, custom, law) and *phusis* (nature) and its implications for the development and preservation of civilization.² His work shows not only how language and convention establish identities and enable power to be translated into influence but also how the exercise of power can undermine language and convention. Thucydides' understanding of these relationships was insightful and points to the possibility, indeed the necessity, of a symbiotic and productive partnership between two currently antagonistic research traditions.

REALISTS AND THEIR CRITICS

Since the time of Thomas Hobbes, Thucydides has been celebrated as a realist, as someone who stripped away all moral pretenses to expose the calculations of power and advantage that of necessity motivate suc-

cessful political actors (Bury 1975; de Ste. Croix 1972; Kagan 1969; Meiggs 1972). Neorealists assert that his history vindicates their emphasis on the system level and contains implicit propositions about power transition and the onset of hegemonic war as well as the inability of norms and conventions to keep the peace under conditions of international anarchy (Gilpin 1986; Waltz 1979). Other realists, most notably Michael Doyle (1997), offer more nuanced readings that attempt to understand Thucydides in the context in which he wrote. A growing number of scholars challenge the claims of neorealists, and some question whether Thucydides is adequately characterized as a realist.

Detailed analysis of Thucydides' history in the mid-nineteenth century called into question its consistency and unity. This research gave rise to the *Thucydides-frag*, a controversy about how many distinct parts there are to the history, the order in which they were written, and what this reveals about the evolution of the author's thinking over approximately two decades of research and writing. Thucydides was considered a coldly detached and dispassionate rationalist, a scientist in the tradition of Hippocrates, in search of an "objective" and timeless understanding of politics and war. Because ordered thought and presentation are absolutely essential to such an enterprise, scholars assumed that Thucydides would have "cleaned up" his manuscript to remove all the inconsistencies if he had lived long enough.

The postwar attack on positivism in social sciences and history encouraged a rethinking of Thucydides. Wallace (1964), Bowersock (1965), and Stahl (1966) made the case for a passionate and politically engaged writer who can be considered a critic of the scientific approach to history. Connor's *Thucydides* (1984) represents a dramatic break with the past in that it attempts to restore a "unitarian" reading of the history. To Connor, Thucydides is a masterful postmodernist who carefully structures his text to evoke an intended set of responses. He uses omissions, repetitions, and inconsistencies in the form of arguments and judgments that are "modified, restated, subverted, or totally controverted" (p. 18) to tell a more complex story and convey a more profound understanding of the human condition. Ultimately, Connor (pp. 15–8) argues, "the

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¹ All English references to Thucydides in this article refer to *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler (New York: Free Press, 1996).

² *Nomos* first pertained to customs and conventions before some of them were written down in the form of laws and, later, to statutory law. Hesiod makes the first known usage, and Plato later wrote a treatise, *Nomoi*, in which he suggests that long-standing customs have higher authority than laws. *Nomos* can refer to all the habits of conforming to an institutional and social environment. *Phusis* is used by Homer to designate things that are born and grow and can be derived from the verb *phuein*, and later it became associated with nature more generally.

work leads the reader—ancient or modern—far beyond the views and values it seems initially to utilize and affirm.”

Thucydides’ careful attention to language is the starting point of another seminal study, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, by James Boyd White (1984). According to White, people act in the world by using the language of the world. To understand their behavior and the social context that enables it, we need to track the ways in which words acquire, hold, or lose meanings and how new meanings arise and spread. White contends that Thucydides recognized this truth, and his conception of meaning transcends the lexical to encompass understandings of self, manners, conduct, and sentiment. Changes in meaning involve reciprocal interactions between behavior and language, which are tracked by Thucydides in his speeches, debates, and dialogues. As the Peloponnesian War progresses, the terms of discourse that function at the outset in intelligible ways shift and change, and the language and community (*homonoia*) constituted by it deteriorate into incoherence.

When the Athenians can no longer use the traditional language of justification for their foreign policy, they struggle to find an alternate language, and they finally resort to assertions of pure self-interest backed by military clout. Such a language is not rooted in ideas, is unstable, and deprives its speakers of their culture and identities. By using it, the Athenians destroy the distinctions among friend, colony, ally, neutral, and enemy and make the world their enemy through a policy of limitless expansion. In effect, they abandon the culture through which self-interest can intelligently be defined, expressed, and bounded. By the time of the Sicilian debate, the Athenians can no longer speak and act coherently, and this failure is the underlying reason for their empire’s decline. For Thucydides and for White, the history of the Athenian empire not only indicates the tension between justice and self-interest but also reveals that they validate and give meaning to each other.

Garst (1989) relies on White’s arguments to accuse neorealists of having a narrow definition of power and of unfairly projecting it onto Thucydides. Thucydides shows that Athenian imperialism was successful when power was exercised in accord with well-defined social conventions governing Greek speech and behavior. These conventions are ignored as the war progresses. The Melian Dialogue and the Sicilian debate reveal how the Athenians destroyed the rhetorical culture through which their interests as an imperial power were intelligently formulated and expressed. Their foreign policy became a policy of coercion and limitless expansion. For Garst, this process illustrates the power of agency and reveals that foreign policy is rarely, if ever, a mechanical response to a balance of power.

For Crane (1998), Thucydides’ history is a realist classic because it reveals how the strong dominate the weak and interests trump justice. But Thucydides considered such behavior a fundamental departure from traditional Greek practice, in which foreign policy was an extension of aristocratic family connections and

enmeshed leaders and their *poleis* in a web of mutual obligations. The Corinthian plea to the Athenian assembly not to ally with Corcyra, based on Corinth’s prior restraint during the Samian rebellion, reflects this approach and uses the time-honored language and arguments of reciprocity. The Athenians reject the appeal because they formulate their interests and foreign policy on the basis of immediate interests. They act as if alliances are market transactions: short-term exchanges unaffected by past dealings. Thucydides considered this approach to politics destructive of the relationships that are the true source of security and prosperity. Pericles, who speaks for Thucydides (2.60.2–4) on this question in his funeral oration, insists that the individual is nothing without the state, but at the time of the Sicilian debate Alcibiades asserts that the state counts for nothing if it does not support him as an individual (6.92.2–5). The single-minded focus on self-interest was the underlying cause of discord at home and reckless expansionism abroad. Crane believes that Thucydides’ goal was to reconstitute the “ancient simplicity” (*euethês*) of the aristocracy in a new, rationalized form.

Rahe (1996) also acknowledges two sides to Thucydides: the hard-headed analyst of power politics and the critic of realism. Thucydides’ portrayal of post-Periclean Athens shows how lust (*erôs*) for power ultimately made prudent calculation of advantage and calibration of means and ends impossible. The Melian Dialogue and the debate over the Sicilian expedition indicate that Athenians had lost all sense of measure and proportion; they had become impervious to reasoned argument and therefore to the risks inherent in their initiatives. Thucydides wants readers to recognize that without moral boundaries human beings develop unlimited ambitions. The sober construction of self-interest requires restraint, which in turn requires acceptance and internalization of the claims of justice and human decency.

Forde (1989, 1992) and Orwin (1994) approach Thucydides from a more Straussian perspective. Forde criticizes neorealists for ignoring justice, a concern that was central to such early postwar realists as Hans Morgenthau and John Herz. He contends that Thucydides, like Plato, recognized the possibility of reconciling justice and interest through the citizen’s love for and identification with his *polis*—the principal theme of Pericles’ funeral oration. In post-Periclean Athens, citizens put their self-interest first, and this led to acute discord, domestic instability, and defeat. For Orwin, Thucydides paints an “unflinching” portrait of the harshness and even brutality of the time but with the goal of showing how human beings, through their “humanity,” can transcend both the security dilemma and crippling domestic discord. To do this they must take justice seriously.

Ober (1989, 1998) blends the traditions of classical and international relations scholarship. He invokes Austin’s (1975) conception of performative speech acts and Searle’s (1995) distinction between brute and social facts to analyze Athenian politics (Ober 1998). He argues that Searle’s all-important distinction be-

tween social and brute facts becomes blurred in the context of the awesome power wielded by the Athenian assembly. Debates and decisions became “social facts” because successful orators imposed their own speech-dependent meanings on brute facts. As brute facts and social meanings diverged, the latter became the basis of policy, and this led to disaster. In this conflict between words (*logoi*) and deeds (*erga*), Ober contends that Thucydides’ sides with the latter. The history attempts to reconstruct *erga* through the application of scientific principles of data collection and evaluation (*technê*) to the past, and by doing so it points the way to a similar process in everyday politics.

My analysis builds on these works but differs from them in important respects. I take issue with some of their interpretations or reach the same conclusion by different routes. My main difference with my political science and classical colleagues concerns the purpose of the history; I contend it is about the rise and fall of civilization and what might be done to salvage it.³ My analysis builds on Connor’s insight that the structure of Thucydides’ text provides clues for reconciling some of his seeming inconsistencies. Toward this end, I identify four layers to the history: (1) the nature and relationships among power, interest, and justice; (2) Athens as a tragedy; (3) the relationship between *nomos* (convention, custom and law) and *phusis* (nature); and (4) the relationship between *erga* and *logoi* and its implications for civilization. Each layer addresses a different question, and the successive answers can be read back to provide a deeper understanding of the questions posed by previous layers. For Connor, omissions, repetitions, inconsistencies, and subverted sentiments and arguments are intended to move readers to deeper understandings. I see them playing this role within levels, and I argue that Thucydides offers the structure of his narrative, choice of language, and implicit references to other fifth-century texts—Herodotus’ *History*, the Hippocratic corpus, and the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides—as “signs” (*sêmata*) to move us from one level of the text to the next.

There are sound historical and textual reasons for reading Thucydides this way. Fifth-century sophists considered themselves teachers and intended their works or oral presentations as courses of study. They opened with the statement of a problem and simple responses to it and went on to develop increasingly complex and sophisticated arguments that often undercut their initial argument. At the deepest levels, their arguments were left implicit to encourage students to draw the intended conclusions for themselves. Sophists dominated Athenian philosophy during the second half of the fifth century and had considerable political

influence. Pericles himself was their principal patron. Sophists were subversive of the old aristocratic order in the deepest sense, for they maintained that *aretê* (excellence, especially the kind that made a man a respected leader) could be acquired through study, not just through heredity and lifelong association with men of good breeding. Thucydides rejected some Sophist teachings—he was undoubtedly troubled by the social consequences of Sophist ridicule of objective standards of justice. But he was greatly attracted to their style of argument, which he adopted for his own and quite different purposes.

In his treatment of the origins of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides provides a striking example of his use of the sophistic method. At the onset (1.23.5–6) he attributes the war to “the growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable.” He goes on to describe Athens and Sparta making their respective cases before the court of public opinion. By his use of the word *prophasis*, which was widely used before the law courts as a rationalization for suits, Thucydides signals to more sophisticated readers that charge and countercharge are little more than propaganda that obscures the real causes of the war (Rawlings 1981). The subsequent narrative and paired speeches of Book I describe the deeper causes: Sparta’s fear of its way of life, which is threatened by the political, economic, and cultural transformation of Greece spearheaded by Athens; the ability of third parties to manipulate Sparta for their own parochial interests; and the miscalculation of leaders throughout Greece at critical junctures of the crisis (Lebow 1991, 1996).

Thucydides requires a dedicated and thoughtful audience. Readers must be willing to recognize multiple levels of analysis as well as the questions and arguments specific to these levels, and they must ponder the implications of any apparent contradictions. The history cannot be read in a linear manner; one must move back and forth between sections of the text to grasp the contrasts and ironies embedded in structure and language and the ways in which different contexts and orders of presentation encode insights and interpretations. Not all inconsistencies can be resolved in this way, and those that remain are intended to draw attention to tensions inherent in the situation and the possibility of a deeper truth that helps reconcile them. Heraclitus taught that the world is a battleground between opposing forces and that philosophers must look beneath the surface to find the deeper unity (*harmonia*) that unites them. Thucydides, as did Plato, thought and wrote in this binary tradition.

POWER, INTEREST, AND JUSTICE

Almost all the works I have discussed address questions of interest and justice in the history. There is a near consensus that Thucydides’ depiction of the so-called realism of the Athenians does not reflect his own views. Justice must be considered because it provides the language for any reasonable formulation of interest. Otherwise, interests are equated with power and

³ We must distinguish between Greek civilization and civilizations more generally. Thucydides certainly had in mind the restoration of civil society and international order in Athens and Greece. Did he look beyond Greece geographically or historically? Fifth-century Greeks were aware of other contemporary (e.g., Egypt, Persia) and past (Mycenaean and Homeric) civilizations. Thucydides had a clear sense of the rise and fall of civilizations and describes his history “as a possession for all time,” so it is reasonable to infer that he looked to a future readership beyond the confines of Greece.

result in policies of aggrandizement. White (1984), Garst (1989), Forde (1992), Orwin (1994), Rahe (1996), and Crane (1998) develop this thesis from the “inside out” perspective of Athenians attempting to manage, protect, and expand their empire. Thucydides is also interested in the “outside in” perspective: how allies, enemies, and neutrals respond to Athens and its policies. His work documents not only the process by which Athens succumbed to a foreign policy of limitless expansion but also the reasons such a policy was bound to fail.

As noted elsewhere (Lebow and Kelly n.d.),

Thucydides distinguished between *hegemonia* and *arkhê*, both of which are most frequently translated as hegemony. For fifth- and fourth-century Greeks, *hegemonia* was associated with *timê*—the gift of honor [Meiggs 1972; Perlman 1991]. *Timê* was bestowed informally by free consent of the Greek community as reward for achievements, and retained by consent, not by force. Sparta and Athens were so honored because of their contributions during the Persian Wars. Athens also earned *timê* because her intellectual and artistic accomplishments made her the “school of Hellas.” *Arkhê* connoted something akin to our notion of political control, and initially applied to authority within a city state and only later to rule or influence over city states.

The semantic field of *archê* was gradually extended to encompass tyranny.

By 416, when the assembly voted to occupy Melos and subdue Sicily, Thucydides makes it clear that the Athenian empire was an *archê* based primarily on military might. The structure and language of the Melian Dialogue mark a radical break with past practice. The Melians deny the Athenian envoys access to the people, granting only a private audience with the magistrates and the few (*olgioi*). The exchange consists of brachylogies: short, blunt, alternating verbal thrusts, suggestive of a military encounter. The Athenians dispense with all pretense. They acknowledge they cannot justify their invasion on the basis of provocations or their right to rule. They deny the relevance of justice, which only comes into play between equals. “The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must,” and the Melians should put their survival first and submit (Thucydides, 5.89). The Melians warn that the Athenian empire will not last forever, and if the Athenians violate the established norms of justice and decency their fall “would be a signal for the heaviest vengeance and an example for the world to mediate upon” (5.90). The Athenians insist they are only concerned with the present and the preservation of their empire. The Melians suggest it is in their mutual interest for Melos to remain neutral and a friend of Athens. The Athenians explain that neutrality would be interpreted as a sign of weakness by other island states “smarting under the yoke” (5.99) and would serve as a stimulus to rebellion. “The fact that you are islanders and weaker than others renders it all the more important that you should not succeed in baffling the masters of the sea” (5.91–9). Contemporary Greeks would have been shocked by the failure of Athens to offer any justification (*prophasis*) for its invasion of Melos and by its repudiation of the Melian

offer of neutrality on the grounds that “your [Melian] hostility cannot so hurt us as your friendship” (5.95). Fifteen years into the war the Athenians repudiate, indeed invert, core Greek values.

The rhetorical style of the envoys reinforces the impression conveyed by their words. Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1975, 31) considered their language “appropriate to oriental monarchs addressing Greeks, but unfit to be spoken by Athenians to Greeks whom they liberated from the Medes.” Thucydides seems to have modeled his dialogue on a passage in Herodotus (7.8), in which the Persian king Xerxes discusses with his council of advisors the wisdom of attacking Greece (Connor 1906; Cornford 1984). The language is similar, and the arguments run parallel; Xerxes alludes to the law of the stronger and the self-interest of empires. Herodotus (8.140, 144) also describes an offer of peace and friendship that Xerxes made to Athens and Sparta on the eve of his invasion. The Athenians spurn his olive branch and accept the danger of confronting a seemingly invincible force in the name of Greek freedom and cultural identity, just as the Melians reject an Athenian offer of alliance because of the value they put on their freedom. These parallels would not have been lost on contemporaries. For Thucydides, as for many Greeks, the Athenians of 416 have become the Persians of 480, the symbol of rank depotism in the Greek world.

The Melians offer a long view on the fate of empires. The Athenians focus on the immediate future, and in their pursuit of short-term gain alienate allies and dry up whatever reservoir of good will their early heroic behavior had created. By the time of the Melian Dialogue, they have antagonized even neutrals and close allies, which makes their fear of the security dilemma self-fulfilling. Thucydides tells us through the voice of the Melians that raw force can impose its will at any given moment, but few empires have the military and economic capability to repress their subjects indefinitely. Allies who see themselves as exploited will sever the bonds when the opportunity arises. Oppression also leaves memories that inhibit future attempts at empire building. In 378, when Athens tried to form the Second Athenian Confederacy, most of Greece resisted. *Hegemonia* is an essential precondition of sustainable empire.

Realists define the national interest in terms of power. Many regard international law and associated norms as impediments to state interests unless they provide a rhetorical cover for policies whose real purpose it is to maximize power and influence. Thucydides opposed such a narrow view of state interests. Pericles was praiseworthy because he made foreign policy responsive to his vision of long-term Athenian interests, and he used his personal standing and rhetorical skills to win popular support for these policies. The demagogues who followed him were at best successful tacticians. They advocated foreign policies they expected to be popular with the masses (*ho homilos*) and were more interested in their own fortunes than those of their polis. Pericles understood that the overriding interest of Athens was preservation of the

empire, and this required both naval power and legitimacy. To maintain the latter, Athens had to act in accord with the principles and values that had earned hegemony, and it had to offer positive political and economic benefits to allies. Because post-Periclean Athens consistently chose power over principle, it alienated allies and third parties, lost hegemony, and weakened its power base. The Melian Dialogue and the Sicilian expedition are pathological departures from rational self-interest.

ATHENS AS TRAGEDY

Fifth-century tragedies dramatized the lives of individuals to convey insights into human beings and their societies as well as critically examine or reaffirm fundamental values of the community. Cornford (1907) and Euben (1990), among others, have discussed Thucydides' relationship to tragedy and the structural similarities between his history and the tragedies. Alker (1988, 1996) contends that the history might be read as the tragedy of the empire's rise and fall and the Melian Dialogue as a "morality play" about might and right. Bedford and Workman (2001) suggest that Thucydides adopted the tragic form to develop his critique of Athenian foreign policy. I believe he wanted readers to experience his history as a tragedy and to move from emotional involvement with the story to contemplation of its general lessons, just as they might with a theatrical production.

In his only statement about his intent, Thucydides (1.22) offers his history as "an aid for the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble it if it does not reflect it." The cyclical pattern he has in mind is not just about the growth and decline of empires but, more generally, how success spawns excessive ambition, overconfidence, and self-destructive behavior.

The Greek literary tradition was largely an oral one, and Herodotus, author of the first long historical narrative, was paid to read sections of it aloud (Luce 1997). His words are chosen with their sounds in mind, and his style, *lexis eiromenê* (literally, speech strung together), is related to epic poetry. He introduces an idea or action, defines it by approaching it from different perspectives, and expands its meaning through the apposition of words, phrases, and clauses. Opinion is divided about Thucydides, who wrote at a time when the oral tradition was declining (Havelock 1963; Lain Entralgo 1970). Thucydides can be appreciated if read aloud, but it would be difficult to grasp deeper layers of meaning. His text is written in a complex and idiosyncratic style that requires careful analysis to discover and work through its purpose. Thucydides makes extensive use of parallels in setting, structure, and language with other passages in his work and those of other writers. He intended his history to be read and studied.

The embedding of oral forms in a literary text is common to Herodotus, Thucydides, and Plato. In *The Iliad*, from which so much of this tradition derives, paired and group speeches are as important as narra-

tive and mark critical moments of decision and turning points. The speeches are also vehicles for moving thematically toward greater depth, compassion, and ethical sophistication. In Thucydides, the speeches highlight critical junctures, sometimes suggest their contingency, but always examine opposing courses of action and the justifications provided for them. They also track the progression—really the descent—of Greece from relatively secure societies bound together by convention, obligation, and interests to a condition of disorder and even anarchy, a transformation to which I shall return.

Another commonality in the Greek literary tradition is the use of heroes to provide continuity and structure to the text. Modern writers on the origins, course, and consequences of wars frequently acknowledge the prominent role of key actors, but they almost always provide some kind of general, sociological framework to understand and assess the decisions and behavior of these people (Herwig 1997; Murray and Millet 2000; Weinberg 1994). Herodotus and Thucydides do the reverse; they rely on the words, actions, and fate of heroes to move the narrative along and give it meaning. Herodotus uses the story of Croesus to set up the central saga of Xerxes. Solon warns Croesus to recognize his limits and restrain his ambitions, and Xerxes receives similar advice from Artabanus. Both men nevertheless embark upon ambitious military ventures that end in catastrophe. Early in Book One, Thucydides (1.9–11) uses the story of Agamemnon and the Trojan War—in which an alliance held together by naval power confronts a major land power—to provide an overview of what will follow. Elsewhere in the history, the stories of individuals and cities prefigure the fate of more important personages and major powers, especially Athens.

There is a more fundamental difference in the way ancient Greek and modern historians approach heroes. Most contemporary works dwell on the particular mix of background, personal qualities, and experience that make people distinct as individuals. They do this even when these figures are intended to be emblematic of a class, movement, or set of shared life experiences. Herodotus and Thucydides hardly ever take note of idiosyncratic attributes; like the authors of epic poetry and drama, they are interested in using individuals to create archetypes. They stress the qualities, especially strengths and weaknesses, their heroes share with other heroes. The typicality, not the uniqueness, of actors and situations is a central convention of fifth-century poetry, tragedy, and prose. Even Pericles, whom Thucydides offers as the model of a modern man of politics, is a stereotype. He is the sum of qualities that make him an ideal leader in a transitional democracy and a benchmark for his successors. All subsequent leaders possess different combinations of some of his qualities but never all of them—to the detriment of Athens. Nicias displays honesty and dedication but lacks the skill and stature to dissuade the assembly from undertaking the Sicilian expedition. Alcibiades has intelligence and rhetorical skill but uses them to advance his career at the expense of his city.

Greek tragedies consist of archetypal characters who confront archetypal situations. The tragic hero, like his Homeric predecessor, is a self-centered, narcissistic figure who revels in his own importance and comes to believe that he is not bound by the laws and conventions of man. These manifestations of ego and their consequences are often explored through a standard plot line: Success carries with it the seeds of failure. Success intoxicates heroes; it encourages them to form inflated opinions of themselves and their abilities and to trust in hope (*elpis*) rather than reason. It makes them susceptible to all kinds of adventures in which reason would dictate caution and restraint. The Greeks used the word *atê* to describe the aporia this kind of seduction induces and associated it with *hamartia* (missing the mark). *Hamartia* leads the hero to catastrophe by provoking *nemesis* (wrath) of the gods.

Herodotus frames his treatment of Croesus and Xerxes in terms of this progression (Beye 1987). Intoxicated by his riches, Croesus misinterprets the oracle who tells him that a great empire will be destroyed if he invades Persia. He is defeated and only saved from being burned at the stake by the mercy of his adversary. Xerxes is an ambitious but cautious leader who accumulates enormous power. His exaltation and pride nevertheless grow in proportion to his success, and *atê* makes him vulnerable to *hamartia*. At first, he resists Mardonius' suggestion to exploit the revolt of the Ionians to invade Greece and add Europe to his empire. Subsequent dreams change his mind and lead him to a fatal error of judgment. His sense of omnipotence leads him to attempt to punish the Hellespont for washing away his bridge across it in a storm. *Nemesis* at Salamis is inevitable, and from the perspective of Herodotus and Greek tragedy, the destruction of the Persian fleet and, later, army represents less a triumph of the Greeks than a failure of Xerxes.

Thucydides begins where Herodotus leaves off and shifts the locus of the narrative from Persia to Greece. The Athenians, the principal agents of Xerxes' *nemesis*, repeat the cycle of success, overconfidence, miscalculation, and catastrophe. Indeed, the Athenian victory over Xerxes at Salamis, which marks the emergence of Athens as a military power, sets the cycle in motion. Athens achieves a string of victories until ambition and overconfidence lead to military and political disasters: the complete annihilation in 454 of the expedition to Egypt, the revolt of Erythrae and Miletus in 452, and the defeat at Coronea in central Greece in 446 (Thucydides 1.104, 109–10). These setbacks temporarily compel Athenians to recognize the limits of their power. In 449 they make peace with Persia, and in 446 they agree to the Thirty Years' Peace with Sparta. Under Pericles, Athens devotes its energies to consolidating the sprawling empire. But like Xerxes, Pericles is unable to exercise restraint in the longer term. Convinced of his ability to control events at home and abroad, he persuades an initially reluctant assembly to seize the opportunity of alliance with Corcyra in the erroneous expectation that the worst possible outcome will be a short war in which Sparta will discover the futility of opposing Athens. This initial *hamartia* leads to war,

plague, the death of Pericles, a prolonged war, and abandonment of Pericles' defensive strategy. A second *hamartia*, the Sicilian expedition, urged on the assembly by Alcibiades, leads to *nemesis*.

Cleon, intended to represent a figure intermediate between Pericles and Alcibiades, shows none of Pericles' caution or thoughtfulness. He is as unscrupulous as Alcibiades—Thucydides calls him “the most violent man at Athens”—but not as clever in his pursuit of power (Thucydides 3.36). He launches a stinging verbal attack on Nicias, accusing him and his troops of cowardice in facing the Spartans in Pylos. Nicias offers to stand aside and let Cleon assume command of his forces. Cleon discounts this as mere rhetorical posturing, but Nicias then resigns his command. Cleon tries desperately to back down, but the assembly, remembering his earlier bravura, will not let him do so (4.24–9). Cleon is forced to sail for Pylos, where he and Demosthenes succeed, much to Cleon's surprise and relief, in overwhelming the Spartans in short order (4.29–42). In the aftermath of his victory, Sparta sued for peace to secure the return of its hostages, and the Archidamian phase of the Peloponnesian War comes to an end.

Not content with the peace, Alcibiades convinces the assembly to renew the war and embark upon a policy of imperial expansion. Thucydides regards the decisions to ally with Corcyra and conquer Sicily as the most fateful decisions of the assembly; each is a *hamartia*, and together they lead to *nemesis*. In discussing these decisions, he suggests the real motives of the assembly and hints at the contradictions these entail as well as the unexpected and tragic consequences that will follow (1.44; 4.65). The decision to ally with Corcyra requires a second debate in which the assembly reverses itself. This also happens in the punishment of Mytilene and the Sicilian expedition (1.44; 3.36; 6.8). But the most important similarity, which sets the Corcyra and Sicilian decisions apart from other events in the history, is that Thucydides provides “archeologies” that establish the background for the momentous events that will follow (Thucydides 1.2–13, 6.2–6; see Connor 1984; Rawlings 1981). He not only heightens the connection through his use of this analytical parallel but also suggests that we read the Sicilian debate as a new beginning, a history within the history that describes decisions and events that deserve equal billing with those that led to the war.

Nicias does his best to dissuade the assembly, which is utterly ignorant of the size and population of Sicily, from sailing against an island so large, distant, and powerful. As does Artabanus in his plea to Xerxes, Nicias urges (6.9–14) the Athenians to keep what they have and not risk “what is actually yours for advantages which are dubious in themselves, and which you may or may not attain.” Alcibiades, cast in the role of Mardonius, makes light of the risks of the expedition and greatly exaggerates its possible rewards to the assembly. He does not attempt to rebut the arguments of Nicias but makes a calculated, emotional appeal to a receptive audience. Nicias comes forward a second time (6.20–3) and, recognizing that direct arguments

against the expedition will not carry the day, tries to dissuade the assembly by insisting on a much larger force and more extensive provisions than originally planned. To his surprise, the more he demands from the assembly, the more eager it becomes to support the expedition, convinced that a force of such magnitude will be invincible (6.24–6).

There are striking similarities in plot and language between Thucydides' account of the Athenian assembly and Herodotus' depiction of Xerxes at Abydos (Connor 1984; Rahe 1996). Thucydides describes the Sicilian expedition as more extravagant than any Greek campaign that preceded it by virtue of its *lamprotês* (splendor) and *tolma* (audacity). These are words used by Herodotus and other Greeks to describe Xerxes' court and military plans. Readers of Thucydides would have found his work old-fashioned. He could assume that they were familiar with the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Herodotus and that most would recognize his personification of Athens as a tragic hero and the mordant comparison he intended between Athens and Persia. This format and analogy would encourage readers to consider the story of Athens as the basis for generalizations about Greece and the human condition.

NOMOS VERSUS PHUSIS

Greek city-states were isolated from one another and the wider world by mountain ranges or large bodies of water. In the fifth century, economic growth, immigration, and improvements in shipbuilding enabled the Greeks to expand their travel and trade and learn more about the customs of other peoples. In the process, they began to question their long-standing belief that their social practices were gods-given and moved toward a position of cultural relativism. In Athens there was an intense, century-long debate about the relative importance of human nature (*phusis*) and convention (*nomos*) (Finley [1942] 1967; Kerferd 1981). Pindar, who declared that custom is the master of us all, and Herodotus, who offered a detailed and nonjudgmental account of the diversity of human practices, anchored one pole of this debate. Sophocles resisted their agnosticism and relativism. Plato, in his *Protagoras* and the *Republic*, would offer the most sophisticated defense of the underlying importance of innate qualities.

Realists and some classicists assert that for Thucydides *phusis* trumps *nomos* (Crane 1998; de Ste. Croix 1972; Romilly 1990). They cite references in speeches to universal laws that govern human behavior and behavior that appears to lend substance to these claims. One example is the justification for empire the Athenian envoys offer to the Spartan assembly on the eve of the war. They are doing nothing more than acting in accord with "the common practice of mankind" (*hê anthrôpeia phusis*) that "the weaker should be subject to the stronger" (Thucydides 1.76). The Athenians give the same justification to the Melians. If neorealists and their classical allies are right, then human drives for dominance (*archê*), ambition (*philotimia*), and self-aggrandizement (*pleonexia*) will

sooner or later undermine and defeat any effort to construct an international order based on norms, conventions, law, and underlying common interests. Is this inference warranted?

Heraclitus maintains that nature (*phusis*) tends to conceal itself, and its seemingly contradictory manifestations have an underlying unity (*harmonia*) that can be discovered through reflection. Thucydides bases his inquiry on this assumption and searches for some means of getting beneath the established social order and day-to-day behavior to discover what truths lie underneath. Plato attempts something similar and for much the same reason. Thucydides models his inquiry on medical research (Cochrane 1929). Hippocrates and his followers chart the course of diseases in the human body, noting the symptoms that appear at the onset and how these build to a critical moment or crisis stage (*kairos*) that leads to death or recovery. Thucydides applies this method to the social diseases of revolution and war; he describes their manifestations and charts their course through the body politic to the point of social strife (*stasis*) and the disintegration of civil society. As physicians sought to learn something about the nature of the human body from studying the progression of illness, so Thucydides hoped to learn about the human mind.

Thucydides (2.47–54) makes the link between physical and social diseases explicit in his analysis of the Athenian plague of 430–28. He begins by noting the common view that the disease arrived in Athens via Africa but refuses to speculate about its causes. Following Hippocratic tradition, "I shall simply set down its nature, and explain the symptoms by which perhaps it may be recognized by the student, if it should ever break out again" (2.48.3). He describes in clinical detail the onset of the disease, subsequent symptoms, variation in the course of the illness, the suffering and fatality it causes, and the disfigurement of survivors.

The plague left the city crowded with dead and dying. Bodies accumulated and decayed in houses, half-dead creatures roamed the streets in search of water, and sacred places were full of the corpses of those who came there seeking relief. As rich and poor died off in large numbers, the social fabric began to unravel. "Men, not knowing what was to become of them, became utterly careless of everything, whether sacred or profane" (2.52.3). Family responsibilities were ignored in violation of the most fundamental ethical principle of Greek society: the obligation to help one's own *philoî*. People were increasingly afraid to visit one another, and many sufferers died from neglect. Sacred rituals were ignored, burial rites were dispensed with, and corpses were disposed of in any which way. Some residents resorted to "the most shameless modes of burial, throwing the bodies of their family or friends on the already burning pyres of others" (2.52.3). "Lawless extravagance" became increasingly common, and men "coolly ventured on what they had formerly done in a corner" (2.53.1). Those who suddenly inherited wealth "resolved to spend quickly and enjoy themselves, regarded their lives and riches as alike things of the day" (2.53.2). Fear of the

gods and human laws all but disappeared, as “each felt that a far severer sentence had been already passed upon them all and hung over their heads, and before this felt it was only reasonable to enjoy life a little” (2.53.4).

The other stasis that Thucydides records in detail is political: the revolution, civil violence, and moral disintegration of Corcyra in the 420s (3.70–81). As in the account of the plague, he begins with a detailed, precise, almost day-by-day description of what transpired. This sets the stage for a more impressionistic account, followed by generalizations based on that account, and he ends with a depiction of the gravest atrocities. Violent conflict between democratic and oligarchic factions, intervention by the foreign allies of both, and internal revolution culminate in seven days of “butchery” in which Corcyreans, consumed by hatreds arising from private and political causes, kill as many of their enemies as they can lay their hands upon. As in Athens, every convention is violated: “Sons were killed by their fathers, and suppliants dragged from the altar or slain upon it, while some were even walled up in the temple of Dionysus and died there” (3.81.4–5).

Just as the plague ushers in an era of lawlessness and boldness (*tolma*) that significantly affects domestic politics and foreign policy, so the Corcyrean revolution, for much the same reason, is the precursor of similar developments in other cities. After Corcyra, Thucydides (3.82) tells us, “the whole Hellenic world” is convulsed as democratic factions seek to assume or maintain power with the help of Athens, and oligarchs do the same with the support of Sparta. “The sufferings which revolution entailed upon the cities were many and terrible, such as have occurred and always will occur, as long as the nature of mankind remains the same, though in a severer or milder form, and varying in their symptoms, according to the variety of the particular cases” (3.82.1).

These extreme situations bring out the worst in human beings, and the passage just quoted can be read as support for the universality and immutability of human nature. But Thucydides (3.82.2) modifies his generalization in the next sentence: “In peace and prosperity states and individuals have better sentiments because they do not find themselves suddenly confronted with imperious necessities; but war takes away the easy supply of daily wants, and so proves a rough master that brings most men’s characters to a level with their fortunes.” The arrow of causation is reversed; stasis does not so much reveal the hidden character of people as it shapes that character. People who have little to live for behave differently from people who have much to lose. The qualifier “most” is important because it indicates that not everyone responds the same way to social stimuli, not even in the most extreme situations. In his description of the plague, Thucydides (2.51) uses parallel constructions to describe how some people, fearful of succumbing to the disease, isolated themselves at great costs to friends and family; others placed honor above survival, and “honor made them unsparing of themselves.” Some survivors participated in the greatest excesses, whereas

others were unstinting in administering to the ill and dying. The same bifurcated response can be observed at the other end of the spectrum, in secure and prosperous societies: The majority of people adhere to social and religious conventions, and a minority is unconstrained and destructive in behavior.

Thucydides has a less deterministic understanding of human nature. By removing the constraints and obligations arising from convention, stasis permits the fullest expression of the worst human impulses, but in some people it brings out the best. The plague and Corcyrean revolution, and the wide range of other “tests” to which human beings are subjected in the course of the Peloponnesian War, indicate that human nature encompasses a range of needs, desires, and impulses, some of them contradictory (Kokaz 2001). People appear driven by their needs for self-preservation, pleasure, recognition, and power but also by needs for love, honor, and esteem. The Melian Dialogue offers a nice counterpoint to the Corcyrean revolution in this respect. Opposition to Athens is futile, but the Melians choose to resist because they value freedom more than self-preservation.

The Hippocratic physicians taught that *phusis* varied according to the environment. Some believed that traits acquired through social practice (*nomos*) could, over time, modify nature (*phusis*). Thucydides believes that behavior is the result of a complex interaction between the two. If human nature could not be harnessed for constructive ends, civilization would never have developed. This conclusion refocuses our attention on the meta-theme of Thucydides’ narrative: the rise and fall of Greek civil society and the circumstances in which positive and negative facets of human nature come to the fore.

LOGOI AND ERGA

Ober (1998) maintains that Thucydides privileges *erga* over *logoi*. From Thucydides’ perspective, both deeds and words are social constructions, but he gives pride of place to *logoi*. Social facts and social conventions create the intersubjective understandings on which all action depends. Social facts often misrepresent brute facts, but Thucydides considers this discrepancy a double-edged sword. It can prove destructive, as it did in the Sicilian debate, for the reasons Ober describes. But it is potentially beneficial, if not essential, to the maintenance of community. Democratic ideology in Athens exaggerated the equality among classes and downplayed political, economic, and social inequalities. It reconciled the *dêmos* to the existing social order and muted the class tensions that led to violent conflict and civil wars in many other polities. The Athenian democratic ideology rested on myths: on social facts at variance with reality and on a history that bore only a passing relationship to so-called empirical facts, as the Archeology in Book One convincingly demonstrates.

It is no coincidence that observations about words (Thucydides 3.82) follow directly on a discussion of how the Corcyrean revolution affected the rest of Hellas. “Revolution ran its course from city to city, and

the places which it arrived at last, from having heard what had been done before, carried to a still greater excess the refinement of their inventions, as manifested in the cunning of their enterprises and the atrocity of their reprisals" (3.82.3). Language is the vector by which the disease of revolution spreads, but it is also a contributing cause of constant movement (*kinêsis*) and destruction (Saxonhouse 1996). Not just in Corcyra but throughout much of Greece, "words had to change their ordinary meanings and to take those which were now given them." Thucydides (3.82) gives a string of examples, and all indicate the extent to which meanings and the values they expressed were subverted:

Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal supporter; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question, incapacity to act on any. Frantic violence became the attribute of manliness; cautious plotting a justifiable means of self-defense. The advocate of extreme measures was always trustworthy; his opponent a man to be suspected. To succeed in a plot was to have a shrewd head, and to divine a plot still shrewder; but to try to provide against having to do either was to break up your party and to be afraid of your adversaries.

Words are the ultimate convention, and they also succumbed to stasis. Altered meanings not only changed the way people thought about one another, their society, and their obligations to it but also encouraged barbarism and violence by undermining long-standing conventions and the constraints they enforced. Thucydides (3.82.8) attributes this process to "the lust for power arising from greed and ambition; and from these passions proceeded the violence of parties once engaged in contention." Politicians used "fair phrases to arrive at guilty ends" and degraded and abused the language.

Thucydides follows the introductory remarks in Book One with the so-called Archeology (1.2–21), in which he describes the rise of Hellenic culture. In contrast to other fifth-century accounts of the rise of civilization, less emphasis is placed on agriculture and the development of material technology and more stress is given to the power of tyrants to cobble together small settlements into increasingly larger kingdoms and alliances. He portrays archaic Greece as being in constant movement as a result of frequent migrations due to population growth, depletion of local agricultural resources, and the depredations of pirates and invaders. Civilization, defined as a state of peace and rest (*hêsuchia*), only became possible when communities combined to undertake common action, including the suppression of piracy. Common action required common understanding; language was the vehicle of this understanding and the very foundation of political stability and civilization. Civilization is also due to a reinforcing cycle of *logoi* and *erga*. The Archeology sets the stage for the history of decline that follows.

Greeks distinguished men from animals by their ability to speak and their preference for cooked meat. The word *omos* (raw) is used three times by Thucydides (3.94, 3.36, 3.82.1): to describe an Aetolian tribe so uncivilized that "they speak a language that is

exceedingly difficult to understand, and eat their flesh raw"; in the Mytilenian debate, to characterize what many Athenians think about the previous day's decision to execute all the Mytilenians; and to describe the stasis that convulsed the Greek world beginning with the revolution in Corcyra. Rahe (1996) suggests that the word is used on the last two occasions to indicate that the war, plague, and revolutions reversed the process described in the Archeology. The measure of rest (*hêsuchia*) and peace civilization brought about was disrupted by the movement (*kinesis*) of war, which undermined conventions (*nomoi*), including those of language, and encouraged the kind of brazen daring (*tolma*) that provoked "raw" and savage deeds. The Greeks became increasingly irrational and inarticulate (*alogistos*) and, like animals, no longer capable of employing the *logos* (rational facilities and language) necessary for communal deliberation.

Is the rise and fall of civilization inevitable? Greek myth and saga portray a largely unalterable world, but one that is only tenuously connected to the time in which the audience dwells. The great playwrights carried on this tradition, and the tragic sense of life depends on the inevitability of nemesis and the immutability of things (Beye 1987). Like the plots of so much myth and epic, tragedy also relies on the intervention of the gods and the power of situations to generate pressures and psychological states that move the action along and leave limited choice to the individual. In *Agamemnon* (176–83), Aeschylus explains that "Zeus shows man the way to think, setting understanding securely in the midst of suffering. In the heart there drips instead of sleep a labor of sorrowing memory; and there comes to us all unwilling prudent measured thought; the grace of gods who sit on holy thrones somehow comes with force and violence." Orestes confronts a dilemma not of his own making and from which there is no exit. The chorus, whose lines I quote, reminds us that the most he can do is preserve his dignity and learn from his suffering. Herodotus imported this tradition into prose. His Xerxes has no control over his fate; the power of Persia and the insolence of the Greeks compel him to attempt their conquest. When he has second thoughts, the gods intervene through Mardonius to push him to invade Greece, just as the Argives are compelled to make war against Troy by Athena, who speeds down from Olympus to convince Odysseus to prevent their departure (Homer 2.135–210).

For Herodotus, the stories of Croesus and Xerxes are concrete manifestations of a timeless cycle of hubris-atê-hamartia-nemesis that can be expected to repeat itself so long as humans walk the earth. The same attitude of resignation and acceptance has been attributed to Thucydides. Some of his actors do articulate this perspective. The Athenian envoys at Sparta portray themselves as prisoners of history and seem to understand that they are playing roles in a grand, historical drama, although not yet framed as a tragedy (1.75). Pericles warns his countrymen that one day they, too, will be forced to yield "in obedience with the general law of decay" (2.64).

Thucydides is not as pessimistic as many realist readings suggest. Why would he invest decades in the research and writing of the history and offer it as a “possession for all time” if he thought human beings and their societies were the prisoners of circumstance and fate? He must have believed that people possess at least some ability to control their destiny. The appropriate analogy is to psychotherapy. Freudian therapy assumes that people will repeatedly enact counterproductive scripts until they confront and come to terms with the experiences that motivate this behavior. This can only be achieved through regression; people must allow themselves to relive painful experiences they have repressed and come to understand how these shape their present behavior. Sophists relied on a somewhat similar process. Their works were offered as courses of study that engage the emotions and mind. By experiencing the elation, disappointment, anguish, and other emotions a story provoked, and by applying reason to work through its broader meaning and implications, readers could gain enlightenment. Hippocratic physicians put great store in the curative power of words. Euripides’ *Phaedra* and *Andromache* describe words as sources of power and psychological compensation. The plays of Aeschylus are based on the maxim of *pathei mathos*, of learning and transcending one’s situation through the pain associated with understanding that situation. There is ample Greek precedent for Thucydides’ project.

Like analysts, neither sophists nor tragic playwrights tell people what lessons to learn; all believe that genuine understanding (*saphês skopein*) can only be internalized and influence behavior if it arises from a process of cathartic self-discovery. Thucydides’ history encourages Athenians and other Greeks to relive traumatic political experiences in the most vivid way and to work through their meaning and implications for their lives and societies. I believe he harbored the hope that such a course of “therapy” could help free people of the burdens of the past and produce the kind of wisdom that enables societies to transcend their scripts.

Transcending old scripts requires an alternative vocabulary. Crane (1998) argues that Thucydides wanted to reconstruct the aristocratic ideology, the “ancient simplicity” to which he was born and raised. He was undeniably attracted to the “ancient simplicity.” Evidence for this lies in the location of his discussion of it in the text (3.83), which follows his description of stasis at Corcyra. The intended inference is that religion, honor, and aristocratic values promote a tranquil and secure social and political order, and their decline removes restraints to unprincipled self-aggrandizement.

The passage is unabashedly nostalgic but also brutally realistic. The ancient simplicity had not merely declined; it had been “laughed down and disappeared” (Thucydides 3.83). Here and elsewhere Thucydides recognizes the gulf between the old and the new, and he knows the life-style associated with the ancient simplicity has passed and cannot readily be restored. Greece, and especially Athens, has been transformed by what can only be called a process of modernization.

Population growth, coinage, trade, the division of labor, major military undertakings, and empire have given rise to new classes, new ideas and values, and new social and political practices to cope with a more complicated and competitive world. The Athenian empire has become so powerful that it no longer needs to rely on the standard pattern of client-patron relations, based on obligation and the mutual exchange of favors and services. Success has made the traditional system of political relationships and the values on which it rested look old-fashioned and unnecessary, even a hindrance. The fate of Sparta also testifies to this change. Its influence in Greece derived largely from the symbolic capital it had accumulated in the form of reliability in the eyes of others, especially allies. Spartans had gone to war to preserve this capital and in the vain hope that defeat of Athens would stave off the changes that threatened their traditional way of life. Sparta emerged as the victor in the war, but it was no longer the same polis. Spartans had to become more like their adversary to defeat it, which is perhaps the most compelling evidence that the old ways were doomed.

Thucydides recognizes the impracticality of trying to turn the clock back; the aristocratic order and its values had become anachronistic, and the effort to reimpose oligarchic rule at the end of the Peloponnesian War failed miserably. He has a subtler project in mind: Adapt older values and language to present circumstances to create a more workable synthesis that can accommodate progress but mitigate its excesses. Ober (1998) contends that Thucydides looked to Periclean Athens for his model. It functioned well because of the balance of power between the masses (*ho dêmos*) and the smaller elite of rich, influential, and powerful men (*hoi dunatoi*). The need of each group to take the other into account and the presence of leaders such as Pericles, who mediated and muted these class-based tensions, led to policies that often reflected the interest of the community (*hoi Athênaioi*), not merely the democratic or aristocratic faction.

In Book One, Thucydides portrays Pericles as someone who personifies the ancient simplicity but has mastered the new arts of oratory and statecraft. His success in governing Athens under the most trying circumstances may have convinced Thucydides that such an amalgam was desirable and possible. But his praise of Pericles is another one of his judgments that is in part subverted later in the text. In Book Four, Thucydides offers Hermocrates of Syracuse as another role model (Connor 1984; Monoson and Loriaux 1998). He is intended to be a counterpoint to Pericles and a more accurate guide to how foreign policy restraint can be sold to the public and a more peaceful international order maintained.

In his appeal to Sicilians for unity against Athens, Hermocrates inverts key realist tenets of foreign policy that are associated with Pericles (Thucydides 4.59–64). Connor (1984) observes that the “law of the stronger” becomes an injunction for the weaker to unite, and Hermocrates (4.62) goes on to exploit the widespread fear of Athens to justify forethought and restraint but

urges common defensive action. On the eve of war Pericles sought to inspire confidence in his fellow citizens, but Hermocrates wants to intensify their fears. Athens and its enemies attributed Athenian success to ingenuity, speed of execution, and confidence in the ability to face challenges (Thucydides 1.68–71, 2.35–46). Hermocrates finds strength in the restraint and caution that come from recognition of the limits of knowledge and power and contemplation of the future (*promêthia*) with an eye toward its unpredictability. Pericles urged his countrymen to spurn Sparta's peace overtures, but Hermocrates favors accommodation and settlement. Successors of Pericles, especially Cleon and Alcibiades, encouraged the Athenians to contemplate the rewards from imperial expansion. Hermocrates implicitly urges his audience to consider the advantages they already possess and the loss that war may entail. Hermocrates—and Thucydides—had an intuitive grasp of prospect theory (Levy 1992, 1996; Tversky and Kahneman 1992), which is based on the robust psychological finding that people are generally more concerned with preventing loss than they are with making gains.

Sophists pioneered the rhetorical strategy of “antilogic.” Zeno silenced his opponents by showing how their arguments also implied their negations and were thus contradictory (Kerferd 1981). Thucydides makes extensive use of antilogic. He examines every so-called law of politics, appears to validate it, but ultimately subverts it by showing the unintended and contradictory consequences that flow from its rigorous application. This is most obvious with the principles espoused by demagogues like Cleon, but it is also true of more honorable politicians like Pericles. Thucydides did not spoon feed conclusions; he wanted readers to draw them by reflecting on his narrative, speeches, and dialogues. Hermocrates' speech is the most overt attempt to point readers in the right direction. Through emotions and intellect—feeling the pain of the rise and fall of Athens and grasping the reasons this occurred—readers could experience the history as a course of “logotherapy.” Its larger purpose was to make them wary not only of the sweet and beguiling words of demagogues but also, as Monoson and Loriaux (1998) suggest, of any politician who advocates policies at odds with conventions that maintain domestic and international order. This caution is the first and essential step toward the restructure of language and the reconstitution of conventions that can permit economic and intellectual progress while maintaining political order.

THUCYDIDES THE CONSTRUCTIVIST

Fifth-century Greece experienced the first *Methodenstreit*. “Positivists” insisted on the unity of the physical and social worlds as well as the existence of an ordered reality that can be discovered through the process of inquiry. They were opposed by “constructivists,” who regarded the social world as distinct and human relations as an expression of culturally determined and

ever evolving conventions.⁴ Early Greek thinkers accepted the divine nature of the world and considered human customs part of an overall, unified scheme of nature. The goal of the Ionian protophysicists was to discover the original principle, the archê, that determined all the other regularities, social and physical, of the universe. Reality was out there, waiting to be described in terms of impersonal forces and the agency that also expressed those forces. In the fifth century, sophists directed their inquiry away from nature to human beings. According to Jaeger (1939–45, 1.306), “the concept of *phusis* was transferred from the whole universe to a single part of it—to mankind; and there it took on a special meaning. Man is subject to certain rules prescribed by *his own* nature.”

This shift coincided with exposure to alien cultures and the discovery of practices that differed remarkably from those of the Greeks. People in these cultures also found different meanings in the same events. Philosophical inquiry and experience of cultural diversity combined to encourage a subjectivist epistemology in which *nomos* was contrasted with *phusis* and considered by many a more important determinant of human behavior. The deeds themselves (*auta ta erga*) and concept of the “real world” became problematic, as did the assumption that either could be understood through observation. Democritus (1956, fragments 9 and 11), proclaimed that things were “sweet by convention, bitter by convention, hot by convention, cold by convention,” and he went on to reason that all observation was illegitimate. Such skepticism encouraged the belief that truth was relative (Lloyd 1978).

Given sophistic epistemology, it is not surprising that it spawned a cognate to postmodernism. Protagoras, who is the best known representative, regarded all claims to knowledge as nothing more than rhetorical strategies for self-aggrandizement. Justice was a concept invoked by the powerful to justify their authority and advance their parochial interests. Philosophical nihilism reached its fullest expression in Critias, who defined justice in terms of power and found justification for this in human practice—the very argument the Athenian envoys made at Melos. Critias is good grist for the mill of any contemporary critic of postmodernism. A politician and one of the thirty tyrants who briefly ruled Athens after its defeat in 404, he was infamous for his corruption and brutality (Guthrie 1969; Strauss 1986). Plato represented a reaction to the sophists; he was horrified by their reduction of law to custom and by the equation of justice with tyranny. He parodied sophists in his dialogues (see especially *Protagoras*) and argued against their efforts to explain

⁴ I do not want to exaggerate the parallels between ancient and modern philosophies of social inquiry; there were important differences in ideas and the relative timing of social and scientific advances. In the modern era, advances in mathematics have contributed to modern science and, ultimately, the social sciences. In Greece, the age of mathematical discovery came after these philosophical debates were under way. Athenian interest in mathematics began a generation after Thucydides; Euclid wrote his *Elements* at the end of the fourth century, and Archimedes made his contributions almost a century later.

physical and social reality purely in terms of its phenomenal aspects. He sought to restore objectivity and the status of universal laws by discovering an underlying, ultimate reality that would provide a foundation for a universal nation of justice and social order (Guthrie 1969; Kerferd 1981).

Like contemporary constructivists, Thucydides was fascinated by convention (*nomos*) and the role it played in regulating human behavior. The history makes clear that he regarded conventions not only as constraints but also as frames of reference that people use to understand the world and define their interests. It may be going too far to claim that Thucydides initiated the “linguistic turn” in ancient philosophy, but he certainly shared the constructivist emphasis on the importance of language, which he thought enabled the shared meanings and conventions that make civilization possible. His history explores the relationship between words and deeds and documents the double-feedback loop between them. Shared meanings of words are the basis for conventions and civic cooperation. When words lose their meaning, or their meaning is subverted, the conventions that depend on them lose their force, communication becomes difficult, and civilization declines. Thucydides exploited the growth and evolution of the Greek language for purposes of expression and precision, and he probably coined more neologisms than any other fifth-century author. One goal of the history is the considered restoration of traditional meanings of words to help resurrect the conventions they sustained.⁵ In this sense, he anticipates Plato.

The core of constructivism is hard to define because there is so much variation among authors. In a thoughtful analysis of this literature, Hopf (n.d.) suggests that constructivism has two components. The first is appreciation of social structure, whether understood sociologically, as in the thin institutionalist accounts of Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) and others, or linguistically, as attempted by Kratochwil and Ruggie (1986), Kratochwil (1989), Onuf (1989), and Ruggie (1998). The second component is the acceptance of the mutual constitution of agents and structures (Kratochwil 1989;

⁵ Well before Thucydides, Greek philosophy debated the importance and meaning of language. There was some recognition that it mediated human understanding of reality and thus constituted a barrier to any perfect grasp of that reality. An attempted solution was to assert that names are not arbitrary labels but imitations of their objects. Others (e.g., Hermogenes) insisted that words are arbitrary in origin and do not represent any reality. Socrates tried to split the difference by arguing that things have a fixed nature that words attempt to reproduce, but the imitation is imperfect, and this is why languages vary so much. Moreover, all attempts at imitation become corrupted over time.

Considerable effort went into recapturing the meaning of words and names in the late fifth century, and Thucydides must be situated in that tradition. I see no evidence that he believed in the original meaning of words, but certainly he wanted to restore earlier meanings, supportive of *homonoia*, that had been subverted. Plato, in *Phaedrus*, 260b, makes a similar argument when he discusses a skilled rhetorician who convinces someone to use the name “horse” to describe a donkey and thus transfers the qualities of one to the other. He is clearly tilting at rhetoricians and politicians who advocate evil as good.

Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986; Onuf 1989). Constructivism, in its thicker linguistic version, is interested in the logic of intelligibility, that is, what makes some actions more imaginable and thus more probable than others. The thin version gives more weight to the role norms play in advancing interests than to the creation of norms by identities.

Thucydides is undeniably a constructivist and may have been the original practitioner of the thicker linguistic version. His history examines how language shapes the identities and conventions in terms of which interests are defined. He drives this point home in the most graphic way by showing that it is impossible to formulate interests at all when conventions break down and the meaning of language becomes subverted. Traditional Greek social intercourse, domestic and “international,” was embedded in a web of interlocking relationships and obligations and governed by an elaborate set of conventions. Dealings with foreigners were an extension of domestic relations. There was no specific word for international relations—the closest is *xenia*, which generally is translated as “guest friendship.”

War was not infrequent but was limited in means and ends. With rare exceptions, the independence and social system of other city-states were respected; wars were waged to establish precedence and settle border disputes. Combat was highly stylized and was designed to minimize casualties and allow individuals to gain honor through the display of heroism. Truces were obligatory to permit both sides to gather their dead and the victor to erect a trophy (Adcock 1957). With the introduction of the hoplite phalanx and later developments against massive Persian armies, the character of war changed somewhat, but most conventions were still observed. They did not break down until late in the Peloponnesian War, when even the quasi-sacred truces that enabled proper disposal and honoring of the dead often were no longer observed.

To the extent that realist readings of Thucydides address the breakdown of conventions, these changes are attributed to the effects of war, which is “a rough master” (3.82.2). This explanation is not convincing, because the Persian wars were equally harsh, yet most conventions held. Modern analogies spring to mind. The American Civil War was brutal by any standard, but both sides generally observed the conventions of war. Confederate mistreatment of African American prisoners of war was the principal exception, but even this reflected a convention. Troops on both sides behaved in ways that baffle us today. At Bloody Angle at Gettysburg, New Yorkers refused to follow orders to fire on the remnant of retreating Alabamians and instead threw their caps into the air and cheered them for their bravery. In World War I, German and Allied armies behaved on the whole quite honorably toward each other and civilians, in sharp contrast to World War II, especially on the Eastern front, which approximated Thucydides’ depiction of barbarism. The differences were not due to the harshness or duration of war but to the character of the political systems. When language was subverted and conventions ignored or

destroyed, as in Nazi Germany, the rational construction of interest was impossible, war aims were limitless, and the rules of warfare were disregarded.

Thucydides takes the constructivist argument another step and implies that civil society is also what actors make of it. Following Hobbes, most realists maintain that the distinguishing feature of domestic society is the presence of a Leviathan that overcomes anarchy and allows order to be maintained. For Thucydides, the character of domestic politics runs the gamut from highly ordered, consensual, and peaceful societies to those wracked by anarchy and bloodshed. It is not a Leviathan that is critical but the degree to which citizens construct their identities as members of a community (*homonoia*, literally, being of one mind) or as atomistic individuals. When the former view prevails, as it did in Periclean Athens and in Greece more generally before the Peloponnesian War, conventions restrain the behavior of actors, whether individuals or city-states. When the latter dominates, as in Corcyra and almost in Athens after 412, civil society disintegrates, and even a Leviathan cannot keep the peace. The domestic environment in these situations comes to resemble the war-torn international environment, and for the same reasons.

CONCLUSION

The history drives home the truth that a strong sense of community is equally essential to domestic and international order. Some rational choice formulations—again following Hobbes—acknowledge this reality and recognize that it is necessary to preserve the rules of the game if actors collectively are to maximize their interests. They highlight the paradox that a focus on short-term interests—by individuals, factions, or states—can undermine the order or environment on which the rational pursuit of interest depends. Thucydides would regard the tragedy of the commons as an unavoidable outcome in a culture in which the individual increasingly is the unit to whom advertisers and politicians appeal and in terms of whom social scientists conduct research. He would not find it surprising that a significant percentage of the citizens of such a society cannot see any reason for or imagine any benefit that might accrue from paying taxes.

The importance of community, and of identities defined at least partly in terms of it, was not lost on traditional realists. Morgenthau ([1951] 1982, 61) cited Edward Gibbon's observation that the balance of power functioned well in the eighteenth century because Europe was "one great republic" with common standards of "politeness and cultivation" and a common "system of arts, and laws, and manners." As a consequence, the "mutual influence of fear and shame imposed moderation on the actions of states and their leaders" and instilled in all of them "some common sense of honor and justice" (p. 60). However much they desired to increase their power at the expense of their neighbors, they limited their ambitions because they recognized the right of others to exist and the fundamental legitimacy of the international political order.

Morgenthau regards the breakdown of this sense of community as the underlying cause of both world wars and the threat to humanity posed by the Cold War. The same objection can be raised about liberal, institutionalist approaches that stress the role of institutions in creating and maintaining order. Those institutions may flourish and function as they do—when they do—because of an underlying sense of community.

Thucydides' history suggests that interest and justice are inextricably connected and mutually constitutive. On the surface they appear to be in conflict, and almost every debate in his history in one form or another pits considerations of interest against those of justice. But Thucydides, like Democritus, is interested in the underlying and often hidden nature of things. At that level, the history shows that interests cannot be intelligently considered, formulated, or pursued outside a *homonoia* and the identities it constructs and sustains. The creation and maintenance of *homonoia* depends on enduring individual commitments to justice and respect for other human beings (or political units). In the most fundamental sense, justice enables interests.

Materialist interpretations of Thucydides, which overwhelmingly are realist, offer a superficial and one-sided portrayal. Constructivist readings must avoid this error. Thucydides is both a realist and a constructivist. Stasis and *homonoia* represent two faces of human beings; both are inherent in their phusis. Materialism and constructivism are equally germane to the study of international relations. They need to build on Thucydides' research program, that is, discover the conditions that underlie stasis and *homonoia* and what caused transitions between them. For this reason alone, the history is "a possession for all time."

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