

Why International Relations theorists should stop reading Thucydides

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Abstract. Many regard Thucydides as the first genuine International Relations theorist and a writer of continuing, even timeless importance. His history of the Peloponnesian War is certainly a remarkable work that obviously has had an enormous influence on the development of the field. Its influence, however, is largely pernicious. This article explores why.

In summary, according to Thucydides, a great or hegemonic war, like a disease, follows a discernible and recurrent course. The initial phase is a relatively stable international system characterized by a hierarchical ordering of states with a dominant or hegemonic power. Over time, the power of one subordinate state begins to grow disproportionately; as this development occurs, it comes into conflict with the hegemonic state. The struggle between these contenders for preeminence and their accumulating alliances leads to a bipolarization of the system. In the parlance of game theory, the system becomes a zero-sum situation in which one side's gain is by necessity the other side's loss. As this bipolarization occurs the system becomes increasingly unstable, and a small event can trigger a crisis and precipitate a major conflict; the resolution of that conflict will determine the new hegemon and the hierarchy of power in the system.

Robert Gilpin, 'The Theory of Hegemonic War'¹

Not for nothing is the sycophant Pooh eventually invested by Christopher Robin as 'Sir Pooh de Bear, most faithful of all my Knights'. It is a worthy ending to a series of tales in which every trace of social reality, every detail that might suggest some flaw in the capitalist paradise of pure inherited income, has been ruthlessly suppressed. Only, perhaps, in the ominous old sign beside Piglet's house do we glimpse the truth that this community of parasites is kept together through armed intimidation of the proletariat. 'TRESPASSERS W', says the sign, and Piglet's facetious exegesis of this as his grandfather's name only reminds us more pointedly of the hereditary handing-on of the so-called sacred law of property.

Martin Tempralis, 'A Bourgeois Writer's Proletarian Fables'²

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¹ Robert Gilpin, 'The Theory of Hegemonic War', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 18:4 (Spring 1988), pp. 591–613; 596–7.

² Frederick C. Crews, *The Pooh Perplex* (New York: Dutton, 1965), p. 19.

Let me confess at the outset that I do not mean my title to be taken literally. Every educated person should read Thucydides. What I mean is that those of us in the field of International Relations (IR) who do read him and think him important should stop abusing him.³ We should stop trying to bend him to our will by making him speak to debates about which he would understand little and care even less. We should stop treating him as a mirror for our own assumptions, convictions, and biases. We should stop competing for his imprimatur. And, perhaps most importantly of all, we should stop trying to reduce his subtle and sophisticated work to a series of simplistic banalities.

Lest the reader fear that I am going to engage in an attack upon others, I include myself in the group I propose to criticise, because I have come to the realisation that I have unwittingly abused him as much as anyone. It is true that I find my own readings of Thucydides more compelling than others', but it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that this conceit is hard to justify in the light of the arguments I propose to make below. What I have to say, in other words, I offer in a spirit of self-criticism.

Nor do I propose to single out specific IR theorists as particularly heinous abusers. I speak of the field generally. The pathologies we exhibit are both common and extremely difficult to avoid. Those of us who abuse Thucydides do not do so consciously or intending any disrespect: it seems we simply cannot help ourselves. But the net result of the abuse, taking in the grand sweep of the development of IR theory, has been pernicious. Our mistreatments of Thucydides have encouraged habits of selective reading, misattribution (or at least unjustifiable attribution), the confusion of evidence with authority, and anachronism, the net result of which has been a distortion of the proper intellectual development of the field and the largely unproductive use of a potentially very useful text.

Two obvious questions arise. The first is whether the fault here lies with Thucydides or with IR theory. The answer is a bit of both. To use a currently popular expression, the two simply do not play well together. The second question is whether there is some way to fix matters – or, to put it another way, whether there is something IR theorists might do differently to inspire me to write another article titled, 'Why IR theorists should start reading Thucydides again'. I will offer a few preliminary thoughts on this question toward the end of the article.

I will begin with a general discussion of Thucydides' text and certain key features of it, with the aim of moving fairly rapidly to a deeper discussion about the process of interpretation, the principles that should govern it, and pitfalls that accompany it.⁴ I will then move to a discussion of what IR theorists can justifiably take from it and what they cannot. I will conclude by addressing the two questions I raised in the previous paragraph.

³ I endorse Hollis and Smith's useful convention of capitalising International Relations (IR) when referring to the discipline, and using lower case when referring to its subject. Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 10.

⁴ All in-text references to Thucydides' history are to Robert B. Strassler and Richard Crawley (eds.), *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

An entrée: what exactly were those Spartans doing anyway, and are they us?

All who approach Thucydides even for the first time will surely appreciate that they are in the presence of a truly great writer. His history is a masterpiece. When we realise that it was unprecedented in content, form, and treatment, the appropriate response is a feeling of awe.

What impresses us about the text is its sweep, depth, richness, subtlety, acuity, attention to detail, and, above all, its power. We feel as though we are listening to someone who really knows what's going on and who's telling it like it is. G. F. Abbott puts it thus:

Hardly a problem of statesmanship is left untouched. Here is shown an island state whose constant policy had been to keep out of entangling alliances suddenly waking to the perils of isolation (I.32); there the aim of another state's diplomacy as being, under specious pretences, to subdue by dividing (VI.77, 79). The advantages of sea-power (I.142, 143; II.62), the weaknesses inherent in the nature of a coalition (I.141), the respective merits of severity and magnanimity towards rebellious subjects (III.39–40; 44–48), and many other questions of perennial interest are discussed with a perspicacity which has never been excelled.⁵

The presentation is magisterial and authoritative, and we treat it accordingly. Small wonder it has pride of place in the canon. But what exactly is Thucydides doing? What does he offer us? And what attitude should we take toward what he does offer us?

Thucydides claims to offer us a history that he hopes will be 'useful' to those 'who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future . . .'. 'I have written my work', Thucydides says, 'not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time' (I.23). Thucydides does not offer us a philosophical argument as such. He does not offer us anything that we could immediately recognise as a 'theory'. Because he is so sparing in his commentary, we might not even suspect that he offers us an *interpretation* of the past were it not for the fact, as I discuss below, that there is no such thing as uninterpreted history. As David Cartwright notes, '[P]assages of direct analysis or interpretation by the author are rare in Thucydides'.⁶

In the first instance, then, Thucydides offers us what purports to be about as objective and as accurate a history of a particular twenty-seven year period as anyone could reasonably hope to write. But he clearly thought he was doing more than simply that. For his work to be of enduring relevance – 'a possession for all time' – he must have thought that he was directing his audience's attention to transhistorical truths. What were they? And are they as advertised?

By far the most common take on Thucydides' transhistorical truths is the 'realist' take. Realism in all its varieties, Robert Gilpin writes, assumes 'the essentially conflictual nature of international affairs' and 'the primacy in all political life of power and security in human motivation'.⁷

⁵ G. F. Abbott, *Thucydides: A Study in Historical Reality* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1970), pp. 41–2.

⁶ David Cartwright, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 5.

⁷ Robert G. Gilpin, 'The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism', in Robert O. Keohane (ed.) *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 301–21; 304–5.

Underlying Thucydides' view that he had discovered the basic mechanism of a great or hegemonic war was his conception of human nature. He believed that human nature was unchanging and therefore the events recounted in his history would be repeated in the future. Since human beings are driven by three fundamental passions – interest, pride, and, above all else, fear – they always seek to increase their wealth and power until other humans, driven by like passions, try to stop them.⁸

Realists univocally embrace Thucydides as their founder and inspiration. In a recent volume almost four hundred pages long titled *Roots of Realism*, Thucydides occupies roughly half of the discussion, with the rest divided between such lesser lights as Machiavelli, Morgenthau, Carr, and Niebuhr.⁹ Thucydides obviously had a powerful influence on the thought of Thomas Hobbes, whose first significant work of scholarship was a translation of his history.¹⁰ He had an influence, too, on Hume.¹¹ More recently, 'neorealists' or 'structural realists' have attributed to Thucydides the insights into the balance of power that lie at the core of their theories.¹² While realism itself comes in a number of flavours that do not always coexist comfortably, and while Thucydides does not comport equally well with all of them,¹³ the fact that so many clever people have seized upon this particular transhistorical claim as essential to Thucydides' work forces us to confront the possibility that they are basically right.

The realist take on Thucydides draws upon both a small number of specific passages and a general characterisation of the dynamics between city-states found throughout the text. Among the former category are a number of statements Thucydides makes in Book One, probably the most important of which is his claim that 'The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable' (1.23). Thucydides echoes this point after his presentation of the debate at Sparta in 432, in which the Corinthians attempt to persuade Sparta to declare war on Athens and the Athenians attempt to persuade Sparta to

⁸ Gilpin, 'The Theory of Hegemonic War', p. 593. Peter Pouncey concurs that 'the usefulness of his work' rests upon his 'postulating the constancy of human nature'. Peter R. Pouncey, *The Necessities of War: A Study of Thucydides' Pessimism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 143.

⁹ Benjamin Frankel (ed.), *Roots of Realism* (London: Frank Cass, 1996).

¹⁰ Richard Schlatter (ed.), *Hobbes's Thucydides* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1975); Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Collier, 1962); Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Thomas Hobbes (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959). For a discussion of the influence of Thucydides on Hobbes, see Laurie M. Johnson, *Thucydides, Hobbes, and the Interpretation of Realism* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993); Pouncey, *The Necessities of War*, pp. 151–7.

Interestingly, Thucydides does not appear in Machiavelli's *The Prince*, where one might expect him, but does appear – once – in the *Discourses on Livy* (3.16, which refers to Nicias's opposition to the Sicilian expedition in 6.9). Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, eds. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹¹ 'In all the politics of GREECE, the anxiety, with regard to the balance of power, is apparent, and is expressly pointed out to us, even by the ancient historians. THUCYDIDES represents the league, which was formed against ATHENS, and which produced the PELOPONNESIAN war, as entirely owing to this principle'. David Hume, 'Of the Balance of Power', in *Political Writings*, eds. Stuart D. Warner and Donald W. Livingston (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994), pp. 135–42; at 135.

¹² Most notably, Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979).

¹³ See particularly Steven Forde, 'Varieties of Realism: Thucydides and Machiavelli', *Journal of Politics*, 54:2 (May 1992), pp. 372–93; Michael Doyle, 'Thucydidean Realism', *Review of International Studies*, 16:3 (July 1990), pp. 223–37; Michael T. Clark, 'Realism Ancient and Modern: Thucydides and International Relations', *PS, Political Science and Politics*, 26:3 (September 1993), pp. 491–4.

forbear (1.68–88): ‘The Spartans voted that the treaty had been broken, and that war must be declared, not so much because they were persuaded by the arguments of the allies, as because they feared the growth of the power of the Athenians, seeing most of Hellas already subject to them’ (1.88).

Now, it is possible that Thucydides is correct here, but it is difficult to know why we should believe him. In the first place, it seems that no one actually told him this – or, if they did, he failed to cite his source properly.¹⁴ Moreover, as Abbott writes, ‘For the most part, we are not today in a position to check the statements of Thucydides: his reputation for trustworthiness rests chiefly upon the impression produced by his manner of writing’.¹⁵ His claim has the air of a surmise, and in effect he invites us to take his word for it. He as much as admits this himself when he writes, ‘The real cause . . . I consider to be the one which was formally most kept out of sight’ (1.23).

Not only is it kept virtually out of sight – it is flatly contradicted. King Archidamus counsels patience, arguing in effect that since war with Athens would be a bad gamble under present circumstances, Sparta should play for time, negotiate a settlement if possible, and gird for battle if not (1.80–85). Presumably Archidamus disagrees with Thucydides, because if Athenian power were growing disproportionately quickly, Sparta could not hope to be in any better position to check it than at the moment. And if Sparta could so hope, Athenian power could not possibly have been growing disproportionately quickly. (If Donald Kagan is correct, Athenian power was not growing at all.)¹⁶ But in any case, Archidamus does not carry the day. Sthenelaidas does. Clearly outraged at what the Athenians have been doing, Sthenelaidas argues for action by invoking the injury Athens is doing to Sparta’s allies, Sparta’s duty to assist them, the unseemliness of deliberating in the face of injustice, the honour of Sparta, and the gods’ sure favour (1.86; is this a doctrine, by the way, of ‘right makes might’?). Sthenelaidas does say that Sparta should not ‘allow the further aggrandizement of Athens’, but he does so almost as an afterthought, and not necessarily (to my mind) because he is scared of Athens so much as outraged at the thought that Athens would behave even more reprehensibly if not promptly and properly smitten. Never mind, Thucydides tells us. Sparta went to war out of fear.

What do we do when the text seems so powerfully to contradict what the author concludes about it? Hobbes, at least, was unconcerned:

For it is plain, that a cause of war divulged and avowed, how slight soever it be, comes within the task of the historiographer, no less than the war itself. For without a pretext, no war follows. This pretext is always an injury received, or pretended to be received. Whereas the

¹⁴ As Cartwright puts it, ‘[O]ne feature of his technique that prompts disquiet is his ascription of motives to characters for their actions. We find ourselves asking, How could he have known? Then his inclusion of speeches that were not word-for-word transcripts of the originals (however we may attempt to explain and justify his practice) worries the modern reader’. Cartwright, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, p. 8.

¹⁵ Abbott, *Thucydides*, p. 36. It seems unlikely that Thucydides would have thought that he got everything exactly right. He does not bluntly confess that his own vantage point and his own perceptual lenses are likely to have induced errors in the text, but he is circumspect about the limits of historical accuracy in 1.21, and he notes a number of obvious sources of error in 1.22.

¹⁶ Donald Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), pp. 345–6.

inward motive to hostility is but conjectural; and not of that evidence, that a historiographer should be always bound to take notice of it: as envy to the greatness of another state, or fear of an injury to come. Now let any man judge, whether a good writer of history ought to handle, as the principal cause of war, proclaimed injury or concealed envy. In a word, the image of the method used by Thucydides in this point, is this: ‘The quarrel about Corcyra passed on this manner; and the quarrel about Potidæa on this manner’: relating both at large: ‘and in both the Athenians were accused to have done the injury. Nevertheless, the Lacedæmonians had not upon this injury entered into a war against them, but that they envied the greatness of their power, and feared the consequence of their ambition’. I think a more clear and natural order cannot possibly be devised.¹⁷

Hobbes is perfectly happy to overlook the utter lack of empirical support for Thucydides’ bold claim, and – like Thucydides – is willing to say that he, at least, can divine men’s true motives conjecturally.

This strikes me as going out on rather a limb. It is all the more puzzling in view of realism’s bipolar treatment of motivation in general. On the one hand, we have Hans Morgenthau, who implies that we can never know what motivates conflict: ‘[M]otives are the most illusive of psychological data’, Morgenthau writes, ‘distorted as they are, frequently beyond recognition, by the interests and emotions of actor and observer alike. Do we really know what our own motives are? And what do we know of the motives of others?’¹⁸ On the other hand we have Geoffrey Blainey, who insists that we can *always* know what motivates conflict: ‘One generalization about war aims can be offered with confidence. The aims are simply varieties of power. The vanity of nationalism, the will to spread an ideology, the protection of kinsmen in an adjacent land, the desire for more territory or commerce, the avenging of a defeat or insult, the craving for greater national strength or independence, the wish to impress or cement alliances – all these represent power in different wrappings. The conflicting aims of rival nations are always conflicts of power’.¹⁹ Blainey gives us an unfalsifiable claim, and Morgenthau gives us a performative contradiction – for he spent much of his professional life arguing not only that the pursuit of power *is* and *ought to be* a leader’s chief motive, but that a leader ought to strive to block allegedly unknowable impulses such as the desire to do justice.²⁰

Bear in mind that we are here simply scratching our heads over the *specific* claim that the growth of Athens, and the fear this caused Sparta, was the real cause of this particular war. We have not yet addressed the corresponding latent *general* claim of transhistorical truth, which, it would seem, rests upon a fairly strong view about the centrality of fear to human nature. With respect to the specific claim, those of us who only read standard English translations, and who do not or cannot read the original Greek, are likely to believe that it is at least fairly clear what Thucydides is trying to say and that our immediate task is merely to decide whether he is right.

¹⁷ Thomas Hobbes, ‘Of the Life and History of Thucydides’, in Schlatter (ed.), *Hobbes’s Thucydides*, pp. 10–27; 23–4.

¹⁸ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th edn. (New York: Knopf, 1978), p. 6.

¹⁹ Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: Free Press, 1973), p. 150.

²⁰ Cf. Hans J. Morgenthau, ‘The Mainsprings of American Foreign Policy: The National Interest vs. Moral Abstractions’, *American Political Science Review*, 44:4 (December 1950), pp. 833–54; and Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*.

Those more learned will know that it's not so simple. To what extent was he attributing cause, and to what extent was he apportioning blame? And if he was attributing cause, was he doing so in a modern social-scientific sense, or in some other sense, largely lost to us now, that would have resonated in ancient Greece, and possibly *only* in ancient Greece?²¹ If his understanding of 'cause' was distinctive to ancient Greek thought, how could Thucydides possibly have anticipated that our understanding of 'cause' would be quite different? How, in other words, would he have been able to distinguish a 'possession for all time' from 'a possession for ancient Greece'? What would his attitude have been, standing in the early morning light of Western learning, if he had known that future scholars would take his offering, decontextualise it, shave it with Occam's Razor, wrap it in the Covering Law Principle, wring from it structural realism and power transition theory, and proclaim him the intellectual father? I suspect he would have insisted on a paternity test.²²

I have been giving realists a rough ride largely because they laid claim to Thucydides early and have more or less had the run of him. And in their defence, there is much in the text that resonates with central realist claims. For example, the Athenians speaking before the Spartan assembly insist that 'it has always been the law that the weaker should be subject to the stronger' and maintain that justice is 'a consideration which no one ever yet brought forward to hinder his ambition when he had a chance of gaining anything by might' (1.76). In the Mytilenian debate, Cleon suggests that human nature is 'as surely made arrogant by consideration, as it is awed by firmness' (3.39). The Athenians who speak before the Few in Melos are also candid in their realism: 'Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can' (5.105). There is plenty of evidence of wariness about Athenian power. We see *realpolitik* both deft and heavy-handed. We see balancing and bandwagoning.²³ We see evidence of greed, ambition, envy, violated trust, perfidy, and the naked pursuit of self-interest. And, of course – if I may state the obvious – we see war. This is what I mean when I say that the realist take on Thucydides draws upon specific passages and on a general characterisation of the dynamics between city-states found throughout the text.

The problem is that this is not all that we see. In recent years, identifying realist 'misreadings' of Thucydides has become something of a cottage industry. Some critics are broadly sympathetic to the realist take; others are openly hostile. They all agree, however, that realists commonly overlook the importance in Thucydides of such things as passion, morality, justice, legitimacy, piety, individual character, rhetoric, norms, institutions, and chance. As a counterweight to excessively structural readings of Thucydides by modern social-scientific realists, we are now invited to pay close attention to domestic political structures, national character, ideology, and

²¹ See Clifford Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 32–8, and citations therein.

²² Cf. also Peter Singer, 'The Thucydides Tapes: Imagined Debate between Modern Theorists on the Origins of the Peloponnesian War', *PS, Political Science and Politics*, 32:3 (September 1999), pp. 596–601.

²³ Identifying the conditions under which states will balance or bandwagon remains an unresolved problem central to the realist research programme. Cf. Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990) and Randall L. Schweller, 'Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In', *International Security*, 19:1 (Summer 1994), pp. 72–107.

individual motivation.²⁴ To invoke the devices first popularised by Kenneth Waltz and J. David Singer, we are told that we should no longer read Thucydides merely – or even primarily – as a ‘third image’ or ‘system-level’ theorist, but variously as a second-image/state-level theorist, or a first-image/individual-level theorist.²⁵ We are even invited now to read Thucydides as a constructivist, which, properly speaking, makes him a metatheoretician.²⁶ If Thucydides is all of these things, what is he not?

Meaning, significance, and truth in Thucydides

Of course, it is possible to argue that we can try to read Thucydides however we like, but not all readings are equally compelling. Perhaps the realist take has dominated the interpretation of Thucydides because it is apparent that this is how Thucydides meant to be read. Perhaps this is the best way to read Thucydides, notwithstanding whatever he intended.

Robert Crane insists that Thucydides set the stage for his own appropriation by realists:

The greatest strengths of Thucydides’ narrative are also among its greatest weaknesses. On the one hand, he fashioned a model²⁷ that not only proved extraordinarily compelling and powerful for the events of his own time but also laid the foundations for a realist paradigm that still exerts force today. At the same time, however, Thucydides was able to see some elements by ignoring others: he introduces biases into his work that distract our readerly gaze away from other crucial forces. . . .²⁸

If Crane is right, recent rereadings of Thucydides are certainly a helpful corrective. It seems difficult to imagine how such rereadings would be possible, however, if Thucydides ignored important elements, wittingly or unwittingly biased his presentation, or distracted our gaze from crucial forces. Perhaps Thucydides simply didn’t hide things very well. At any rate, charges that Thucydides did not give us as unvarnished and as objective a presentation as perhaps he (and we) would have liked to

²⁴ For example, Steven Forde, ‘International Realism and the Science of Politics: Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Neorealism’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 39:2 (June 1995), pp. 141–60; William O. Chittick and Annette Freyberg-Inan, ‘Chiefly for Fear, Next for Honour, and Lastly for Profit’: An Analysis of Foreign Policy Motivation in the Peloponnesian War’, *Review of International Studies*, 27:1 (January 2001), pp. 69–90; Peter J. Ahrens Dorf, ‘Thucydides’ Realistic Critique of Realism’, *Polity*, 30:2 (Winter 1997), pp. 231–65; Laurie M. Johnson Bagby, ‘The Use and Abuse of Thucydides in International Relations’, *International Organization*, 48:1 (Winter 1994), pp. 131–53; David Bedford and Thom Workman, ‘The Tragic Reading of Thucydidean Tragedy’, *Review of International Studies*, 27:1 (January 2001), pp. 51–67; Daniel Garst, ‘Thucydides and Neorealism’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 33:1 (March 1989), pp. 3–27; Johnson, *Thucydides, Hobbes, and the Interpretation of Realism*; Nancy Kokaz, ‘Moderating Power: A Thucydidean Perspective’, *Review of International Studies*, 27:1 (January 2001), pp. 27–49; Lowell Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence in Thucydides* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

²⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); J. David Singer, ‘The Levels of Analysis Problem in International Relations’, in James N. Rosenau (ed.) *International Politics and Foreign Policy* (New York: Free Press, 1969), pp. 20–9.

²⁶ Richard Ned Lebow, ‘Thucydides the Constructivist’, *American Political Science Review*, 95:3 (September 2001), pp. 547–60.

²⁷ This claim baffles me. I see no models in Thucydides.

²⁸ Gregory Crane, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity: The Limits of Political Realism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 18–9.

think are not new. Cartwright, for example, claims that Thucydides ‘made no attempt to conceal his own political beliefs and prejudices’, and that ‘the reader must be ever conscious that Thucydides’ portrait of the Athenian democracy and some of its politicians is colored by his antidemocratic convictions’.²⁹

All of this raises the question of how we should approach the text. What criteria should we use to distinguish better readings from worse?

Interpretation is the act of ‘extracting meaning’ from a text. The question arises in the scholarly literature whether the meaning was ‘put’ there by the author, resides ‘in’ the text quite apart from whether or not the author intended to put it there, is supplied by the reader, or some combination of these. Our answer to this question is generally thought to determine how we should apply labels with powerful connotations, such as ‘objectivity’, ‘subjectivity’, ‘relativism’, and ‘indeterminacy’. Without attempting to force a paradigm on these debates, I would suggest the following four ideal-type characterisations of various possible positions on these issues:

1. The author supplies the meaning. There is a correct reading of a text, which is to say that the meaning is objective. It is determinate but not apodictic, as it may be more or less difficult to divine. Questions of author’s intention are typically controversial.
2. The meaning is ‘in’ the text, and somehow independent of the author’s intentions or the reader’s interpretations. It is ‘objective’ in the sense that it is a feature of the words themselves. This conception of objective meaning implies that it is both determinate and apodictic.
3. Meaning is ‘supplied’ by the reader. It is ‘subjective’ and relative. Meaning is thus *indeterminate*, since there are as many readings as readers and no clear way to choose between them. One reading is as good as any other.
4. Meaning is a function of some complex interplay between author, text and reader. Indeterminacy and relativism are present but somehow constrained.

E. D. Hirsch is a fairly good representative of the first position.³⁰ The second position, so far as I can tell, is a straw man, although an unsophisticated reading of ‘independence of the text’ theorists would strongly suggest it. Northrop Frye, for example, writes: ‘When Ibsen maintains that *Emperor and Galilean* is his greatest play and that certain episodes in *Peer Gynt* are not allegorical, one can only say that Ibsen is an indifferent critic of Ibsen. Wordsworth’s Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* is a remarkable document, but as a piece of Wordsworthian criticism nobody would give it more than about a B plus’.³¹ The third position is roughly representative of

²⁹ Cartwright, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, p. 8. This judgment strikes me as a bit harsh.

³⁰ E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967).

³¹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 5. ‘[J]ust as in mathematics we have to go from three apples to three, and from a square field to a square, so in reading a novel we have to go from literature as reflection of life to literature as an autonomous language. Literature also proceeds by hypothetical possibilities, and though literature, like mathematics, is constantly useful – a word which means having a continuing relationship to the common field of experience – pure literature, like pure mathematics, contains its own meaning’. *Ibid.*, p. 351. I say that only an unsophisticated reading bears a resemblance to the second position, because it is manifestly unsustainable (see p. 311, below). Far be it from me to suggest that Northrop Frye subscribes to a sham. In any case, Frye *also* embraces the ‘theory of polysemous meaning’ (see p. 310), which puts him somewhere between the second and third positions: he believes that there are many legitimate interpretations of texts, but he clearly thinks that some are better than others.

Stanley Fish's earlier views, although they evolved into something more akin to the fourth, as described in the remarkable introduction to his book, *Is There a Text in This Class?*³²

Now, we might try to embrace any of these positions when we approach Thucydides, but I would submit that we are not likely to do so with equal success, and that only the fourth is tenable. Unfortunately, IR theorists who read Thucydides generally embrace the first or second.

Certainly the place to begin when trying to make sense of any text is to ask, 'What is the author trying to say?' A text is a tool of communication. It is written by someone, for a purpose. Reading completes a transaction. Different kinds of texts require us to put more or less premium on the author's intention. At one end of the spectrum is a last will and testament: if we do not manage to divine the author's intention quite precisely, we destroy it. In a sense, it ceases to *be* a will. At the other extreme is Haiku, which at its most abstract can resemble a Rorschach test.³³

Literature and music fall somewhere in between. It seems somehow disrespectful to make no effort whatsoever to figure out what a writer was trying to say, but having done so we need not necessarily stop there. Sometimes we are well-advised not to. Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken* is a much better poem when read as a cosmic lament than as an inside joke. Jann Arden's *Good Mother* is more powerful when heard as a *cri de coeur* against sexual abuse than as a ho-hum Generation-X anthem to self-discovery. *Huckleberry Finn* is more interesting if we ignore Mark Twain's warning that 'Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot'.

When we ask what a work of literature means, we may be looking for a moral, a practical lesson, or an insight; we may be looking for information about the author; we may be looking for information revealed about the context in which it was written; we may be looking for all of these, or for something else. Often we think that to suppose a work of literature to have *one* (determinate) meaning is at best naive and at worst insulting to the work, to the author, or both. This is reflected in the 'principle of polysemous meaning', that 'a work of literary art contains a variety or sequence of meanings', as evidenced by a plurality of interpretive schools. 'The student must either admit the principle of polysemous meaning, or choose one of these groups and then try to prove that all the others are less legitimate'.³⁴ The very nature of the literary enterprise seems to rebel against any simple theory of determinate meaning. 'Part of the game' is to get out of literature what one can, as one's interests and one's projects dictate.

³² Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 1–17.

³³ Interestingly, Haiku's original purpose was to amuse. The form itself, of course, permits a fairly clear expression of author's intent: for example,

*Sublime ancient text,
Misunderstood and abused;
Thucydides weeps.*

– Anon.

³⁴ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 72. Frye goes on: 'The former is the way of scholarship and leads to the advancement of learning; the latter is the way of pedantry'.

There are those who are tempted to read Thucydides in a purely literary way. Tim Rood writes: ‘We can inject fresh ironies, fresh points of comparison and contrast, into our reading of Thucydides’ text without supposing that a final closure would (or could) have offered a final answer to the questions it raises: specific questions about Athenian democracy and Athenian imperialism, general questions about power and human nature. His portrayal of an Athens whose ‘greatness’ is implicated in its defeat is intense, complex, ‘poetic’: we cannot disprove it; we can tell different stories’.³⁵ The problem here is that this does not help us collectively learn something about how international politics works, and about how we can make it work better. Thucydides seems to share this goal, and he purports to help us. But he cannot if we simply let a hundred flowers bloom. We must be able to tell good readings from bad. The problem with the third position is that there is no way to do this. According to the third position, we judge an interpretation by how it speaks to us as individuals – how it moves us, how it resonates with us, how it *feels*. No one has a right to question such judgements; no one else can even share them.

So the third position is out. What of the others?

The second position (what some refer to as the ‘doctrine of semantic immanence’) is out, too, because it is manifestly wrong. Words are never self-interpreting. As Sanford Levinson puts it, ‘[T]he plain meaning approach inevitably breaks down in the face of the reality of disagreement among equally competent speakers of the native language’.³⁶

As an historian, Thucydides probably would have inclined toward the first position. Historians are notoriously cool to the idea of others interpreting their works in ways they did not intend. But Thucydides does not make things easy for us. His text is complex and sophisticated. He rarely tells us what he thinks. Other than his declaration that he wishes the text to be useful to posterity, he provides us with no clear guidance as to his intentions in writing it. There is no thesis statement, no argument, and no conclusion (he never finished it). He wrote in a language and in a cultural and intellectual context inaccessible to all but those with specialised knowledge and skills. It is difficult for us to get into his head, as it were. Someone who reads the text in translation, and without the benefit of intensive classical training, is bound to jump to conclusions about what is going on, inevitably substituting his or her own understanding of the text where Thucydides’ understanding is less than obvious.

Put another way, Thucydides and the vast majority of IR theorists are not members of the same ‘interpretive community’ in any but the broadest possible sense (that is, in the sense of sharing in a Western tradition of thought). Members of an interpretive community share a language of discourse, standards of scholarship, and practical interests. The idea of an interpretive community is powerfully heuristic: it contributes to our understanding of the intellectual development of the sciences (Kuhn)³⁷ and the humanities (Fish, who coined the phrase),³⁸ to our understanding

³⁵ Tim Rood, *Thucydides: Narrative and Explanation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 288.

³⁶ Sanford Levinson, ‘Law as Literature’, *Texas Law Review*, 60:3 (March 1982), pp. 373–403; 379.

³⁷ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edn. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

³⁸ Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*

of language (Wittgenstein),³⁹ and to our understanding of truth itself (Putnam).⁴⁰ It is possible to push the notion of an interpretive community too far, and if we do, we quickly run into difficulties. Logic tells us, for example, that if we build it into a theory of truth, in all consistency we must limit its central truth-claim to the interpretive community in which it arises (namely, ours), generating a paradox. Common sense tells us that even though it might be difficult for post-Enlightenment readers to grasp an ancient text fully, we may still be able to overcome enough of the constraints we face, with the appropriate kind and amount of effort, to say that we have learned something. Hence classicists, philosophers, and political theorists well-steeped in things ancient Greek are in a much better position than the average IR theorist to grapple with Thucydides.

The idea of the interpretive community helps account for the way in which the interpreter's situation (social, intellectual, and so on) influences his or her approach to a text. It is a public constraint on interpretive latitude that illuminates how author and reader are able to speak to each other through a text at all: namely, on the basis of certain shared understandings. *Projection* is a *private* constraint that helps explain how a reader inevitably contributes something to a text that affects what he or she gets out of it. Our idiosyncratic goals, attitudes, 'values' and beliefs influence what we see.⁴¹ Projection is what permits a Marxist reading of *Winnie-the-Pooh* and a neorealist reading of Thucydides.

Thus we are left with the fourth position by default. We cannot simply passively receive pristine meaning from Thucydides. We may be able to discover the *significance* of Thucydides (as E. D. Hirsch would call it) – useful truths that Thucydides may or may not have intended to communicate – but we may never quite get his exact *meaning*. We are bound to contribute something of our own to the text. Our task, however, is to discipline the activity in such a way that we minimise our own contributions. The idea is to learn what we can from *him* – and if not from him, then at least from his text.

³⁹ In his reconsideration of the 'picture theory' of language as originally developed in the *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*; see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953).

⁴⁰ Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). As Fish puts it, '[K]nowledge and conviction do not depend on . . . neutrality, but on a commitment to the perspective from which one speaks, a commitment one cannot possibly be without'. Stanley Fish, 'Interpretation and the Pluralist Vision', *Texas Law Review*, 60:3 (1982), pp. 495–505.

⁴¹ For a good general philosophical discussion, see Graeme Nicholson, *Seeing and Reading* (London: Macmillan, 1984). Nicholson characterises textual interpretation as a sort of ventriloquism, by which the interpreter produces the words and projects them upon the text, 'causing the text to seem to speak itself'. He cautions, however, that 'it is not the author who is the dummy here, it is the text; the circumstance of exposition is one in which the text is unable to speak in its own right' (p. 139). The interpreter, in attempting to bring the audience to understand a text, brings them to project upon it the same things as does he or she.

Cognitive and motivational psychologists approach the phenomenon rather differently, but arrive at similar general conclusions. Particularly useful to my mind are schema theory and attribution theory. For a general overview in the context of a discussion of IR theory, see Janice Gross Stein and David A. Welch, 'Rational and Psychological Approaches to the Study of International Conflict: Comparative Strengths and Weaknesses', in Alex Mintz and Nehemia Geva (eds.) *Decision-Making on War and Peace: The Cognitive-Rational Debate* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1997), pp. 51–77.

And what is that?

If you read the secondary literature on Thucydides, you will be struck, if you look for it, by how often you will encounter the phrase, ‘Thucydides means to tell us . . .’, and various cognate locutions. I confess that I have very little idea what Thucydides means to tell us. That may simply indicate some deficiency on my part. Perhaps, compared to my colleagues, I am inattentive, insufficiently learned, or bad at reading minds. But if Peter Pouncey is correct, the fault may not be entirely my own:

Thucydides is a difficult author to see *whole*. . . . The real difficulty in locating the whole of Thucydides lies in the fact that there is genuine ambivalence in the man, especially on questions connected with the pursuit of power, and the abuses to which its exercise can lead. Reticent but also self-aware, he makes room in his history for arguments that speak to each side of this ambivalence.⁴²

Pouncey does not claim to know this ambivalence because he can read Thucydides’ mind; he infers it from Thucydides’ presentation.

Pouncey may be right. Thucydides may have been ambivalent. But even that is hard to know. If he understood his primary task to be relating what happened and why – where by ‘why’ I mean, in the first instance, simply recording the various considerations that bore on decisions that led to actions – then whether or not *he* was ambivalent, the ambivalence of his characters would shine forth anyway. They were often torn. The text is full of angst. Was it Thucydides’ angst, too? More than any other writer in the canon, *he goes out of his way not to tell us what he thinks*. His reticence is simply remarkable. Of all the great writers, his intentions may be the most difficult to fathom.⁴³ IR theorists, I submit, routinely leap to conclusions on this head.

For the sake of argument, let’s assume that the realist take is basically right on Thucydides’ intentions: he wanted to tell a power-political story, and he wanted his readers to draw power-political lessons. Still, we are entitled to conclude that the weight of evidence and testimony in the work suggests that we should not. This is certainly my view.⁴⁴ There is simply far too much else going on in the text for us to justify drawing from it simple general realist aphorisms. Consider four examples:

⁴² Pouncey, *The Necessities of War*, p. ix.

⁴³ This does not appear to be strategic, by the way. We might suspect that he would be reticent so as to avoid the kind of fate Socrates suffered for speaking his mind. But there is no reason that I know of to suspect this. In the first place, he does not appear in Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), even though Strauss knew Thucydides well: Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally, 1964). Second, Thucydides broke with convention by presenting a history free of gods and poets and heroic tales, the kind of iconoclasm that would have invited some opprobrium; see generally M. I. Finley, *The Greek Historians: The Essence of Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Polybius* (New York: Viking Press, 1959). Third, he made powerful people all over Greece look like idiots, and in particular painted an unflattering portrait of his home state, Athens. Presumably he accepted the risks of incurring displeasure, or felt confident that he could avoid them.

⁴⁴ As Donald Kagan puts it, ‘The purpose of Thucydides was to set before us the truth as he saw it, but his truth need not be ours. If we are to use his history with profit, as we can and must, we must distinguish between the evidence he presents and the interpretation he puts on it’. Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*, p. 374.

1. The Corinthian delegation at Sparta offers a cultural/national character explanation for both Athenian and Spartan behaviour. The Athenians, the Corinthians insist, are bold, adventurous, innovative, opportunistic, and energetic. The Spartans, in contrast, are old-fashioned, cautious, passive, and slow (1.70–71). Once you allow scope for national character or local norms to have a powerful influence, you must give up general timeless claims about the immutability of state interests and about certain regularities in state behaviour.
2. Even the Athenians acknowledge the psychological potency of considerations of right, wrong, and justice: ‘Men’s indignation, it seems, is more excited by legal wrong than by violent wrong; the first looks like being cheated by an equal, the second like being compelled by a superior’ (1.77).
3. In the Mytilenian debate, Diodotus makes a very modern-sounding claim about how class interests within states can lead to divergent foreign policy prescriptions, and even hints at an early understanding of what we would now call the Democratic Peace thesis:

As things are at present, in all the cities The People is your friend, and either does not revolt with the oligarchy, or, if forced to do so, becomes at once the enemy of the insurgents; so that in the war with the hostile city you have the masses on your side. But if you butcher the People of Mytilene, who had nothing to do with the revolt, and who, as soon as they got arms, of their own motion surrendered the city, first you will commit the crime of killing your benefactors; and next you will play directly into the hands of the higher classes, who when they induce their cities to rise, will immediately have The People on their side, through your having announced in advance the same punishment for those who are guilty and those who are not. On the contrary, even if they were guilty, you ought to seem not to notice it, in order to avoid alienating the only class still friendly to us (3.47).

This analysis undermines a monolithic realist understanding of ‘national interest’.

4. The discussion throughout the text gives repeated evidence of a sense of mutual identification between Greek city states (for example, in the discussion at Sparta concerning the war against Persia, 1.73–5) and of fairly robust and generally civilised norms of interaction. Thucydides makes it clear that people take their commitments, rights, and obligations seriously.⁴⁵ Virtually everyone in the play considers the breaking of a treaty an injury in and of itself, regardless of the consequences that might follow from it. Most of the actors are willing to take risks to defend what they consider a just international order. The Melians provide the clearest example of this. The Athenians consider their demands moderate: ‘becoming [our] tributary ally, without ceasing to enjoy the country that belongs to you’ (5.111). A self-interested cost-benefit analysis would surely have led the Melians to accept, because the alternative was almost certain destruction. Nevertheless, they refuse. The

⁴⁵ See, for example, Kokaz, ‘Moderating Power’.

demand so offends their sense of justice that they would rather fight, with the '[faint!] hope that we may stand erect', than submit, which would be to 'give ourselves over to despair' (5.102).⁴⁶

It seems to me that the most we can say is that Thucydides paints a picture of a lot of loose-cannon realist Athenians taking realpolitik much too far, temporarily disrupting a fairly well-functioning society of city-states, and at the end of the day reaping as they sowed. If he meant to paint a picture of a timeless Hobbesian state of nature, or an unsentimental balance-of-power system, he clearly failed.

I have always read Thucydides in a generally non-realist way. Contingency and indeterminacy seem more significant to me than situational constraints in explaining what happens. Rhetoric and oratory seem to play an important role. Thucydides does not show us wise statesmen calmly and objectively deliberating national interests in an anarchic, self-help context – he shows us how orators skilled at playing upon people's passions can get their way, whatever their way happens to be. Archidamus's wise, calm prudence is no match for Sthenelaidas's hot-blooded call to arms. Diodotus wins his point because he offers the Athenian assembly a way to gratify their moral qualms about rasing Mytilene without thinking themselves unmanly or insufficiently tough-minded.⁴⁷ If invoking unsentimental self-interest could equally support completely contradictory policies – Cleon's harshness and Diodotus's moderation – it stands to reason that the behaviour of states depends less upon some immutable realist logic than upon contingencies such as the skills and characters of particular leaders. International relations, in short, is something leaders can shape. Moderate, peaceful leaders can shape a moderate, peaceful politics, just as nasty realist leaders can shape a nasty realist politics. Donald Kagan is right: 'The Peloponnesian War was not caused by impersonal forces, unless anger, fear, undue optimism, stubbornness, jealousy, bad judgment, and lack of foresight are impersonal forces. It was caused by men who made bad decisions in difficult circumstances. Neither the circumstances nor the decisions were inevitable.'⁴⁸

But in reading Thucydides thus, do I abuse him? Have I, too, fallen into the 'Thucydides means to tell us' trap? Have I attributed to him intentions I could not possibly have known he had, and that all things considered it seems likely he could not possibly have had? Do I invoke him as an authority, and force him to speak as

⁴⁶ Notice how by framing the choice in this way, the Melians have construed resistance as a rational gamble: Option 1 (submission) has a payoff of disaster with $p = 1.0$; Option 2 (resistance) has a payoff of disaster with $p < 1.0$. (Is this a doctrine of 'right makes might' again?) This, by the way, may be the original inspiration for the unfalsifiable rational-actor assumption undergirding much of IR theory; see William H. Riker, 'The Political Psychology of Rational Choice Theory', *Political Psychology*, 16:1 (March 1995), pp. 23–44, who discusses, *inter alia*, such rationally self-interested actions as soldiers throwing themselves on hand grenades and suicidally charging machine-gun nests.

⁴⁷ For a more sophisticated analysis of the Mytilenian debate, see Clifford Orwin, 'The Just and the Advantageous in Thucydides: The Case of the Mytilenian Debate', *The American Political Science Review*, 78:2 (June 1984), pp. 485–94; and Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides*, pp. 142–62.

⁴⁸ Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*, p. 356.

such (anachronistically) to current debates in the field? Do I focus unduly on particular episodes and passages, and pay insufficient attention to others, because of my own particular concerns? And – like Thucydides himself, and like Hobbes – do I go beyond the evidence, drawing conclusions by conjecture?⁴⁹

I submit that we are almost all of us guilty of such sins. And to some extent it is Thucydides' own fault. His text is too rich, and too raw. It is trivially easy for anyone with any particular angle on international politics to find in it something that they can claim as evidence for their view. Because we all have views, Thucydides becomes a mirror. Because we treat him as an authority, we inadvertently treat ourselves as authorities.

And what of the promised transhistorical truths? To be sure, if they are to be found anywhere in Thucydides, they are to be found in his understanding of human nature. He writes with great passion about the sufferings and evils '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' (3.82.2). Great thinkers tend to hang great claims on strong statements about the essence of human nature – about the relative strength of particular drives, desires, and dispositions. Smith, Kant, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche would have gone nowhere if they had not taken a slice of human nature and ordained it the essence. Thucydides was certainly a great writer; whether he is a great *thinker* I leave to my philosopher colleagues (if he has a philosophy, I fear he leaves it dangerously immanent). But we treat him like a great thinker and assume that he, too, must have had a particular understanding of the essence of human nature. Realists have certainly thought so. There is no doubt that realists read him as placing fear and self-interest front and centre.⁵⁰

Is this fair? Is it useful? I think not. Part of Thucydides' achievement, and much of the beauty and power of his work, consists precisely in the fact that he does such a masterful job – possibly an unrivalled job – of showing us human nature in all its complexity and variety. To some this might (again) look like ambivalence,⁵¹ but to me it seems rather more like perspicacity. Thucydides' characters come in all shapes and sizes, and collectively they demonstrate that there *is* no essence to human nature: there is a range of drives, passions, virtues, vices, capacities and limitations. When I say there is no *essence*, I do not mean to say that there are no *patterns*.

⁴⁹ For example, I might paraphrase my reading of the Mytilenian debate thus: 'The real cause of Athens's mercy to the people of Mytilene I consider to be the one which was formally most kept out of sight: the Athenians voted not to slaughter The People not because this served their self-interest, but because they thought it unjust'. I do not mean here to repudiate my conclusion. I may be right about this. I am simply pointing out that it is hard to justify the conclusion simply on the basis of the evidence in the text alone. I might be able to make the argument more plausible if I could leverage other bodies of research that would lead us to suspect (for example) that in a pathologically masculinist political context such as ancient Athens, the normal moral impulse not to kill innocent people would still have been present, but could not easily have been indulged without appropriately butch cover.

⁵⁰ See pp. 303–4, above.

⁵¹ C. D. C. Reeve, 'Thucydides on Human Nature', *Political Theory*, 27:4 (August 1999), pp. 435–46.

There may well be certain tendencies. But Thucydides makes no claims about them. Some of his characters make very strong claims about the ‘laws of human nature’, but so far as I can tell we have no reason to think he isn’t mocking them for their simplicity. Thucydides knew as well as anyone that, even in ancient Greece, it was *not* true that everyone sought to ‘rule wherever they can’ (5.105; Sparta, for example, generally exercised restraint), and those who tried hardest to dominate others came out at the end much worse for the wear.

How to handle Thucydides

Thucydides is not entirely to blame. Structural realism may be the unfortunate end result of a long process of Thucydidean interpretation, but it was not a process Thucydides could have controlled even if he had been able to anticipate it. Hobbes must share a good deal of the blame, distilling Thucydides as he did, and when Hobbes’s distillate got into the hands of later thinkers inspired by the natural sciences, it became progressively more and more concentrated. It is now positively toxic.

Moreover, the intellectual apparatus of modern social-scientific IR theory, and its particular set of concerns, make it harder and harder for us to benefit from Thucydides. We work today by simplifying, editing, and generalising. We are separators, classifiers, and orderers. We think big, and we think stark. We abhor qualification, contextualisation, and indeterminacy. When Thucydides purports to offer us transhistorical truths, we cannot resist the invitation to take them – but we cannot resist the error of assuming that he is offering us the kinds of trans-historical truths we would *like* him to offer us in the light of our modern enterprise. Because he puts so few constraints of his own on our interpretation of his text, we too easily convince ourselves that we have found in him what we are looking for.

What we need to do is recover our distance from Thucydides. We will then be able to appreciate his richness and complexity on the one hand, and put him in perspective on the other. Thucydides may be the unwitting intellectual forebear of the dominant paradigm in IR today, but we must remember that that paradigm evolved in large part from a *particular* reading of Thucydides reinforced over the centuries by a self-referential hermeneutic. We are beginning now to see alternative readings – challenges to the realist take – but I fear that they will replicate the pathologies that led to the dominance of the realist take in the first place.

What does it mean to ‘put Thucydides in perspective’? In one sense, to state it bluntly, it means to pull him off his pedestal and realise that in certain respects he gives us far less than we actually think. Thucydides tells us a story about a mere twenty-seven years of human history. He tells us a great deal we could not otherwise know about that particular time and place, but he tells us nothing we do not already know (or cannot find out) about other times and places. He gives us poignant illustrations of things we already know – it is possible that in some cases there are none better – but they are nothing more than illustrations. The events he

describes amount to a fairly hefty set of existence theorems – ‘this can happen, that can happen’ – but in and of themselves, they do not amount to a single valid generalisation about anything that happened in the world before or after those twenty-seven years. He tells us very clearly and exceedingly poignantly that human nature is a complex thing, and that individual people – even individual leaders (whom we seem to think are a breed apart) – exhibit a wide variety of elements of human nature in a wide variety of proportions; but he does not tell us anything about human nature that we do not already know, and he does not give us any strong or valid generalisations about human nature on which we might hang strong theoretical claims. His discussion raises virtually every important question of interest to current scholars of international politics, but all by himself he answers none of them for us.

What Thucydides gives us is a rich treasure trove of evidence. To the extent that he gets his facts right – that is, to the extent that he accurately reports deliberations, choices, and events – he enables us to triangulate a comparatively sparsely-documented period of human history with other, often much better-documented periods of human history. And this can help us find the patterns and transhistorical truths that he hoped to give us in the first place. We no more treat his text with due reverence if we approach it deferentially than if we approach it selectively. We treat it with due reverence only if we accept it for what it is: a remarkable window into an otherwise remote and opaque event.

What would we discover if we were to do this? Personally, I think we would begin to question even more seriously the dominant trajectory IR theory has taken in modern times. When seen in bold relief against the histories of other times and places, the story Thucydides tells us would help us better understand, I believe, that international politics is primarily about choices, not constraints; that self-interest is but one motivation among many, and not always the strongest; that people take their moral commitments seriously and sometimes act upon them, even when this conflicts with their ‘self-interest’ narrowly understood; that state behaviour in crisis and war is at least as powerfully shaped by passion as by reason; and that ‘national interests’ are constructed in historically contingent, seemingly arbitrary ways, not ‘given’ by the ‘structure’ of the ‘system’. I think we would come to see more clearly that, whether or not Thucydides was a constructivist himself, constructivists are basically right (as against realists) that interests and identities are negotiated and transformed through interaction; that anarchy is indeed ‘what states make of it’; and that states have some choice as to what they do make of it.⁵² I believe we would more clearly see the gaping gap between the chief real-world problematic of *conducting statecraft* and the chief academic problematic of *explaining behaviour*. I believe we would see that anthropomorphising or black-boxing the state obscures from view the fact that the essentially domestic-political problem of *ruling well* is prior to, and inseparable

⁵² Alexander Wendt, ‘Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics’, *International Organization*, 46:2 (Spring 1992), pp. 391–425. This, by the way, would tend to undercut the realist take on Thucydides’ ‘possession for all time’. If constructivists are right, system dynamics ought to vary dramatically over time – as they clearly do.

from, international-political problems of stability and security. I believe we would see that questions of morality and justice between states are perennially open, cannot be silenced, and are not answered by dismissive aphorisms such as ‘might makes right’ or ‘the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must’ with which Thucydides has been unfairly saddled.⁵³ Treated respectfully, in other words, Thucydides may be the very remedy we need for the damage he unwittingly wrought.⁵⁴

⁵³ See especially, Thomas L. Pangle and Peter J. Ahrensdorf, *Justice among Nations: On the Moral Basis of Power and Peace* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999).

⁵⁴ This could be sheer narcissism on my part, of course, since these various propositions state the upshot of much of my own research agenda to date. As a sampler, see Masato Kimura and David A. Welch, ‘Specifying “Interests”: Japan’s Claim to the Northern Territories and Its Implications for International Relations Theory’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 42:2 (June 1998), pp. 213–44; David A. Welch, *Justice and the Genesis of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); David A. Welch, ‘Can We Think Systematically About Ethics and Statecraft?’, *Ethics & International Affairs*, 8 (1994), pp. 23–37; David A. Welch, ‘Morality and “the National Interest”’, in Andrew Valls (ed.), *Ethics in International Affairs: Theory and Cases* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), pp. 3–12; David A. Welch, ‘Ethics and Foreign Policy’, *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 1:1 (Winter/Spring 2000), pp. 79–88; David A. Welch, ‘Culture and Emotion as Obstacles to Good Judgment: The Case of Argentina’s Invasion of the Falklands/Malvinas’, in Stanley A. Renshon and Deborah W. Larson (eds.) *Good Judgment in Foreign Policy: Theory and Application* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), pp. 191–215.