MORAL LESSONS FROM THE HARSH TEACHER: THUCYDIDES, NIETZSCHE, AND THE SOPHISTS

by

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Abstract

This paper suggests an unconventional solution to the "moral question" regarding Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. The term "moral question" refers to the fact that a significant number of current leading commentators on Thucydides think that the historian must have *some* form of moral outlook, but experience difficulty when they attempt to decipher a moral perspective from the historian's text.

To find a solution to the "moral question", this paper looks back to a short passage written by Friedrich Nietzsche titled "What I Owe to the Ancients." In this short and highly personal essay, Nietzsche suggests that the key to properly reading Thucydides is to interpret him in the context of the sophists, teachers of rhetoric and moral philosophers prominent in Thucydides' 4th century Athens. By comparing statements on the sophists that appear throughout Nietzsche's body of work to the surviving writings of the sophists and their contemporaries, a picture of "sophist culture" is established, in order to test the hypothesis that Thucydides can be profitably interpreted as expressing a sophistic understanding of morality.

A "sophistic understanding of morality", in the simplest terms, centers on the the relativity of morals, the idea that morality has no real, concrete, and universal existence, and that morality is thus a fragile and changeable human construct. By following Nietzsche's picture of Thucydides as the "highest expression of sophist culture" to its fullest extent, we are able to answer the "moral question" of

Thucydides' *History*, and to perceive a work that is itself a bold and challenging

statement on the nature of morality, while containing relatively little explicit

commentary on questions of right and wrong.

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Acknowledgements

To George, Geoff and Ardella, with Love

1   Introduction

This paper, as the title suggests, is about three things: the Greek historian Thucydides, the teachers of rhetoric and philosophy known as the sophists, and Friedrich Nietzsche. The impetus for this paper is a passage from Nietzsche's *Götzen-Dämmerung* (*Twilight of the Idols*) called "Was ich den Alten verdanke" ("What I Owe to the Ancients"). Section Two of this passage, which suggests the connection between Thucydides and the sophists which this paper sets out to explore, is quoted here in full:

> My recreation, my preference, my cure from all Platonism has always been Thucydides. Thucydides and, perhaps, Machiavelli's *Il Principe* are most closely related to me by the unconditional will not to delude oneself, but to see reason in reality – not in "reason", still less in "morality". For that wretched distortion of the Greeks into a cultural ideal, which the "classically educated" youth carries into life as a reward for all his classroom lessons, there is no more complete cure than Thucydides. One must follow him line by line and read no less clearly between the lines; there are few thinkers who say so much between the lines. With him, *Sophist culture*, by which I mean *realist culture*, attains its fullest expression – this invaluable movement in the midst of the morality-and-ideal swindle of the Socratic schools which was then breaking out everywhere. Greek philosophy: the decadence of the Hellenic instinct. Thucydides: the great sum, the last revelation of that strong, severe, hard factuality which was instinctive with the older Greeks. In the end, it is courage in the face of reality that distinguishes a man like Thucydides from a man like Plato. Plato is a coward before reality, consequently he flees into the ideal; Thucydides has control of himself, consequently he also maintains control of things.

In this paper I use Nietzsche to approach a better understanding of

Thucydides, gained by interpreting Thucydides in Nietzschean terms, as an expression of "Sophist culture". Using Nietzsche in this way is not uncontroversial, as passages such as the one quoted above do not engage with ancient authors according to modern scholarly methodology. Richard Thomas defines philological method by means of etymology, arguing that the essence of philology, throughout its existence as a discipline, is a *philia*-relationship of "affection", "respect", and "close proximity" between a scholar and the ancient text under study.[1] The end goal of such a relationship, for a philologist, is the uncovering of "historical, objective truths about language and literature."[2] Clearly, Nietzsche is aiming at a very different form of "truth" when he writes in encompassing terms of a "Sophist culture" in which he sees Thucydides playing a leading role. The existence of sophists is a historical, objective truth. "Sophist culture" of the kind Nietzsche describes did not exist before Nietzsche himself defined it, and *its* "truth" can only be assessed in light of its potential to offer new and helpful interpretive possibilities in our effort to understand ancient texts.

This paper is, on the one hand, a defence of a very unusual form of inquiry into the ancient world. My position is that Nietzsche's "intuitive" method of classical scholarship (to endorse Wilamowitz's derogatory term) is capable of contributing meaningfully to the current academic discourse on the interpretation of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. At the time of Nietzsche's writing, the prevailing assessment of Thucydides was as an objective, "scientific" and dispassionate

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[1]   Thomas 1990, p. 69.
[2]   Thomas 1990, p. 69.

reporter of facts. Nietzsche's Thucydides, however, was a morally-interested, selective and shaping prose artist, a view that significantly anticipates the modern consensus of Thucydides' method. The intervening developments in scholarly approaches to Thucydides and his work are discussed in greater detail in Section 3, *Thucydides (and Thucydidean Morality) in Historical Context*. Further, I argue in this paper that Nietzsche's conception of Thucydides' *History* as an expression of a sophistic world-view offers modern scholars the best means by which to interpret the role played by morality in Thucydides' writing. On the other hand, this paper is also an endorsement of traditional academic methodology. Nietzsche presents his opinions on Thucydides and the sophists in the form of brief, emotional, aphoristic statements (chief among these being "What I Owe to the Ancients"), statements that are free from much exposition and lack explicit connection to the texts of the ancient writers he discusses. Before Nietzsche's idea of a sophistic Thucydides can be made to bear interpretive weight, it must be unpacked and transposed in accordance with modern scholarly standards, and the exact features shared between the historian and the sophists must be surveyed and tested against the writings of both.

The first major task of this paper, then, is to establish a means by which Nietzsche's aphoristic statements on Thucydides, particularly his relationship to "Sophist culture", may be expanded upon and linked to the extant writings of and about the sophists. Having done this, an expanded picture of the essential features of Nietzsche's "Sophist culture" is put forward. Following this, the paper turns to consider the relevant literature on the interpretation of Thucydides, in an effort to

establish the "moral question" in Thucydides as a pressing interpretive problem to which Nietzsche's sophistic Thucydides offers a plausible solution.

Finally, Nietzsche's claims are once again tested against the ancient texts, as shared historical, literary, and philosophical features of Thucydides and the sophists are established. This paper concludes by offering a sophistic reading of Thucydides' *History*, defining Thucydides' sophistic understanding of the world by means of four statements on the nature of morality, and by demonstrating how Thucydides' text functions according to these four "lessons of the harsh teacher".

2   (Re)Assessing Nietzsche

2.1   Nietzsche the Classicist

Consulting Nietzsche as a commentator on classical authors presents some unique challenges. Despite the fact that Nietzsche's first career was in the field of classical scholarship – he served as professor of philology at Basel University from 1869 to 1879 – he reads and writes about classical texts in a manner far removed from the accepted methodology of academia. His first major published work, *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (*The Birth of Tragedy*), was his most explicit and protracted written engagement with the classical world, and it garnered a hostile reception from most contemporary philologists.[3] While today it is considered part of Nietzsche's philosophical corpus, Nietzsche composed *The Birth of Tragedy* as a philologist, and aimed it at an audience of classical academics. Nietzsche wanted the book to be advertised exclusively in scholarly classical journals, and the dedicatory letter to Richard Wagner in the book's preface contains the line, "God help my philologists if they insist on learning nothing now."[4] Unfortunately for Nietzsche, the reaction of the majority of his contemporary philologists (scholars who would likely dispute the notion that they were "his" philologists at all) was overwhelmingly hostile. In 1872, a young academic named Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff published a famously damning review of the book, titled "Future Philology!", a sarcastic jibe comparing Nietzsche's non-academic method of classical inquiry to the

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[3]   Cowan 1962, Preface to Nietzsche 1962, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, xii.
[4]   Silk 1981, p. 95.

self-described "future music" composed by Nietzsche's close friend Wagner.[5]

Although Wilamowitz was, at just 24 years old, four years junior to the notably junior professor Nietzsche, it was widely understood that the promising young academic had been chosen to give voice to the shared opinion of the German-speaking philological establishment.[6] Wilamowitz objected most vociferously to the method by which Nietzsche arrived at his judgments on ancient literature. Rather than carefully compiling arguments supported by closely cited readings of classical texts, Nietzsche, in Wilamowitz's view, presented "insights garnered by intuition."[7] Wilamowitz went on to attack the wide-ranging, often emotionally-tinged, polemical style in which Nietzsche presented his "insights" calling it a "pulpit-style" and "journalistic".[8] Wilamowitz's criticisms, and the disapproval of the academic establishment, greatly tarnished Nietzsche's reputation as a classical scholar, and contributed strongly to his shift from philological to unabashedly philosophical writing. Had *The Birth of Tragedy* been well-received, Nietzsche had planned to publish an extended essay on the sophists and pre-Socratic philosophers. Discouraged by the criticisms of his colleagues, and by the worsening attendance at his lectures, the work was never published in his lifetime, but saw the light of day when the unrevised manuscript was retrieved by his estate and published under the name *Die Philosophie im tragischen Zeitalter der Griechen* (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*).[9]

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[5]   Babich 2000, p. 1.
[6]   Silk 1981, p. 96.
[7]   Babitz 2000, p. 4.
[8]   Babitz 2000, p. 4.
[9]   Wilkerson 2006, p. 8.

In truth, many of the complaints put forward by Wilamowitz are entirely legitimate. The bold, overriding claim of *The Birth of Tragedy* – that ancient Greek consciousness was defined by the interplay of almost elemental "Apollonian" and "Dionysian" states of being – is not supported to an academic standard by the evidence Nietzsche presents. The question becomes whether or not we endorse Wilamowitz's dim view of Nietzsche as a philologist guilty not only of "bypassing scholarly method and relying on unstated evidence," but even "evading scholarship because there was no evidence to support his arguments."[10] The alternative, while remaining mindful of Wilamowitz's legitimate concerns, is to assert that when Nietzsche writes about the classical world he is playing a different game than his philological contemporaries, and that his game has a different set of rules.

I contend that, in much the same way that a musical virtuoso may be seen to flout the established fundamentals of his instrument, Nietzsche's writings on ancient authors contain valuable and worthwhile contributions to our knowledge of the classical world, while admittedly doing some violence to academic standards of evidence and argumentation. If every scholar who sought to understand the ancient world had to approach their work in an identical fashion, we would surely want them to operate more like Wilamowitzes than Nietzsches. Thankfully, the situation need not be so black and white.

Sheldon Pollock, in an essay deliberating on the fate of the "soft" pursuit of philology in the increasingly hardening academic world of social sciences, casts the

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[10]   Silk 1981, p. 97.

dispute between Wilamowitz and Nietzsche as a contest between "historicism" and "humanism".[11] For Wilamowitz, a text must be appreciated *in situ*, by "examining every facet of its historical context, and by doing so completely abstracting it from present-day perspectives."[12] For Nietzsche, such an attitude obscures and deadens what ought to be the real focus of philological inquiry, the ability of ancient texts to offer immediate and vital meaning to the reader in his or her present. In Pollock's view, both methods are extreme, and what is required today is a "double-historicization", an honest effort to engage with ancient texts according to their historical context, combined with an acknowledgment of the historical context, presuppositions, and aims of the inquirer.[13] In this way, it is hoped, it will be possible to approach texts in search of meaning relevant to the present day without ignoring or misrepresenting their own contexts. By investigating Nietzsche's writings on Thucydides and the sophists, and by testing his unsupported claims against the ancient texts themselves, I aim to arrive at a reading of Thucydides that is both presently meaningful and historically sound.

Wilamowitz is exactly right that the kind of knowledge Nietzsche offers regarding the ancient world is best described as "insight", and he is also right that such insights do not fare well when they are read as individual statements of fact, often unsupported by textual evidence. But I do not think that we are dealing with "arguments" in the commonly understood sense when we are reading Nietzsche's comments on ancient authors. If we were to take the specific "arguments" that could

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[11]   Pollock 2009, p. 932.
[12]   Pollock 2009, p. 932.
[13]   Pollock 2009, p. 958.

be derived from "What I Owe to the Ancients", for instance, we would be left with such statements as "Plato is boring; Thucydides is not", "Thucydides is a courageous realist, while Plato retreats into ideals", and "Thucydides is a member of something called 'Sophist culture'". On the face of it, these are attention-grabbing, evocative statements, but not "arguments" calling out for further study. However, I contend that Nietzsche's idiosyncratic, aphoristic method of expression demands to be read in a very particular way. Put simply, Nietzsche's thought must be read in its entirety, as individual passages respond to and inform one another. I will argue in the following section that it is only by reading Nietzsche correctly – that is to say aphoristically – that we can appreciate the potential value of his "insights" into Thucydides and sophistic thought.

2.2   Reading Nietzsche Totally

I do not mean to suggest that Nietzsche's writings on Thucydides and the sophists have been entirely ignored by mainstream scholarship. Numerous significant commentators in the past thirty years have made specific reference, at least in passing, to the very passage of "What I Owe to the Ancients" that forms the impetus for this present study.[14] Very few, however, investigate Nietzsche's statements on a particular subject in their entirety, and incorporate the results of such a survey into their interpretation. Scott Consigny's 1994 paper, "Nietzsche's Reading of the Sophists", is an important exception. Consigny notes that while

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[14]   Connor 1984, Jarrat 1991, Orwin 1994, Shanske 2007.

numerous recent commentators have made reference to Nietzsche and his interpretations in their own studies on the sophists, "none of these scholars has systematically examined Nietzsche's own quite specific and extensive writings about the Sophists."[15] As a result, Consigny feels that although we possess "a variety of Nietzschean readings of the Sophists," they tend to "silence Nietzsche's own distinctive voice."[16] Consigny attempts to allow Nietzsche to speak for himself on the subject of the sophists by examining in depth the brief but important statements he makes about them in his published works (most notably §168 in *Morgenröte* (*Daybreak*), §221 in Part Two of *Human, All Too Human* (*Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*), and our own passage from "What I Owe to the Ancients") as well as the much more lengthy interpretation he offers in the extant notes from the lectures he gave on the sophists at Basel from 1872-73. Clearly, allowing Nietzsche's "distinctive voice" to survive in modern academic interpretations is a more nuanced task than cataloging his statements on the sophists, and involves many reasoned leaps of interpretation to tie Nietzsche's statements on the sophists together with his broader thoughts on the ancient world, morality, language, and reality itself.

What do we mean when we label Nietzsche's writing "aphoristic"? Nearly every modern commentator offers a different appraisal of what Nietzsche intends by conveying his philosophy through maxims that are at times pithy, at times vague, but almost always deeply arresting and intensely personal. Crane Brinton, to my mind, misses the point when he accuses the aphoristic style of offering a "great

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[15] Consigny 1994, p. 5.
[16] Consigny 1994, p. 5.

variety of ideas, sometimes mutually contradictory," that are "difficult if not impossible to reduce to a "system"."[17] Nietzsche himself rails often against systemic philosophy, and he would surely have taken a reader's inability to find a system at work in his own thought to be a compliment; the contradictory nature of his thought, however, is a legitimate concern. Some, such as Karl Jaspers, have highlighted the importance of contradiction in Nietzsche's thought, suggesting that the key to finding an alternative to a disconnected, piecemeal reading of Nietzsche's aphorisms is to not be satisfied until we have "*also* found the contradiction" to any given thought. [18] Walter Kaufmann is not as willing to give such interpretive weight to contradictions themselves, and instead characterizes the aphorisms as individual, provisional thought experiments, subject to being counteracted and reshaped by subsequent aphorisms, and feels that "no break, discontinuity or inconsistency occurs unless there has been a previous error or there is an error now."[19] Despite this notion of aphorisms in some way correcting one another, Kaufmann still feels that there *is* an underlying connection between the diffuse maxims, finding each to be "self-sufficient while yet throwing light on almost every other aphorism."[20]

My own opinion is that both Brinton's view (that contradiction is damning), and Kaufmann's (that contradiction is provisional) err in that they overlook the "genealogical" – or in this sense perhaps more properly "biological" – nature of Nietzsche's writing. "Genealogical" for Nietzsche can assume the meaning of

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[17]   Nehamas 1985, p. 14.
[18]   Kaufmann 1968, p. 72.
[19]   Nehamas 1985, p. 15.
[20]   Kaufmann 1968, p. 80.

"partisan" or "interested", but he also uses the term to mean "biological", i.e., something subject to the biological forces of birth, growth, decay, and death. It is to this latter sense that I refer now. Nietzsche incorporated and embraced the role of emotion and personal temperament in his philosophy more than perhaps any other thinker, and often gives pride of place in his works to a description of his own physical, mental and emotional state during the time of its creation (as only two examples, I am thinking of the references to his returning strength and ability for "yes-saying" in the preface to *Twilight of the Idols*, and the poem "Sanctus Januarius" describing his rejuvenated emotional outlook and literary output that opens Book Four of *The Gay Science* (*Die fröhliche* Wissenschaft)). Nietzsche's ideas are living things; they have ancestors (the passage which is our focus, *"What I Owe to the Ancients"*, is a clear testament to this), and as they and their author grow and change, it is only natural that the relationships between thinker and thoughts develop and shift. Fossilized in the written word, these relationships may often appear contradictory. Such contradiction is not an indictment, à la Brinton, but at the same time I do not think it is an interpretive key, à la Jaspers. Sarah Kofman, I feel, comes closest to recognizing the true intent and potential of Nietzsche's aphoristic style, saying that "the aphorism, because of its discontinuous character, disseminates meaning; it is an appeal to a pluralism of interpretations and to their renewal: nothing is immortal except movement."[21] Her notably Heraclitean description of the aphorism as acknowledging plurality, renewal and change is

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[21] Kofman 1972, *Nietzsche et la métaphore,* p. 168, cited in Nehamas 1985, p. 16 (Nehamas' translation).

useful because it frees us from running around with buckets of water trying to put out isolated contradictory fires, and asserts that Nietzsche, like Heraclitus, uses aphorism to point to truths about reality that both infuse each individual maxim and transcend them. Interestingly, Kofman's appraisal of Nietzsche's style is, in the end, pejorative; she feels that Nietzsche uses aphorism (and metaphor) as an exclusionary tactic, "aristocratically", as a way of keeping "inappropriate, vulgar" members outside of his thought.[22] I agree that this is exactly what Nietzsche is trying to do, but I disagree that it should necessarily be considered a negative feature. Nietzsche, like Heraclitus, is attempting to present a philosophy that would have no value if it were merely absorbed; it must be attained. Aphorism, as Kofman says, is a tool used to disseminate meaning, but a kind of meaning that must be worked for and reconstructed by each individual reader. For a "philosopher of the future," Nietzsche feels, "it must offend their pride, also their taste, if their truth is supposed to be a truth for everyman – which so far has been the secret wish and hidden judgment of all dogmatic aspirations. My judgement is *my* judgement: no one else is easily entitled to it."[23] That meaning, should it be achieved, will necessarily be a product by and of the reader, conditioned and shaped by his or her own interests, presuppositions and character. Nietzsche tells us directly, then, that unlocking the meaning of his aphoristic writing is a participatory act. A single statement from one of his aphorisms, simplistic on its surface – such as the idea that with Thucydides sophistic culture reaches its "fullest expression" – is only a beginning, an invitation

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22 Kofman 1972, *Nietzsche et la métaphore,* p. 166, cited in Nehamas 1985, p. 15 (Nehamas' translation).
23 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §43.

to explore the implications and possibilities of the idea in order to attain, if not *its*

meaning, then *our own* meaning to which it has led us. In this way, Nietzsche tells us

that Thucydides is the highest realization of "Sophist culture", but does not direct us

by any straightforward path to an understanding of what that culture consists of.

Achieving such an understanding is our task. In this effort, Nietzsche's scattered

explicit statements on the sophists and their thought function, in the end, only as

guideposts, and tracing the path between these way-markers will require

independent consultation of the extant writing of (and on) the sophists. Perhaps we

should not be surprised if the best guide to reading aphorism turns out to be

Heraclitus, the thinker with whom the form is most intimately associated. Nietzsche,

like Heraclitus' Apollo, neither conceals nor reveals, but gives a sign.

Or *does* Nietzsche "conceal"? A simple explanation for the scarcity of explicit

references to the sophists in Nietzsche's writing is that, having been chastened by

the cool reception of *The Birth of Tragedy* and the failure to publish *Philosophy in the*

Tragic Age in the Greeks, Nietzsche had turned his back on serious engagement with

sophistic ideas. I do not think that this is the case, however. Rather, I contend that

Nietzsche so identified with (and wished to be identified with) some of the most

fundamental aspects of sophistic thinking – an endorsement of competition, an

acceptance of the completeness of the apparent world, the realization of the

relativity of morals, and the practice of reevaluating the established values of society

– that he downplayed the importance of the sophists, particularly Protagoras and

Gorgias, on the development of his own philosophy in a largely successful effort to

appear more "peerless" than he truly was. I was alerted to this possibility by Adrian Del Caro's paper "Dionysian Classicism, or Nietzsche's Appropriation of an Aesthetic Norm". In this paper, Del Caro shows how Nietzsche suppressed the sources that influenced his notion of "Dionysian Classicism", an aesthetic he meant to resolve the ongoing dispute between Classicism and Romanticism.

It can be attributed in part to Nietzsche's personal, combative style that his attempts to suppress the inspirations and influences on his thought are difficult for us to detect; we are far more accustomed to Nietzsche noisily proclaiming the thinkers against whom he is quarreling, excoriating his intellectual enemies while praising the philosophical and literary allies with whom he feels sympathy. But Del Caro demonstrates that we cannot rely on Nietzsche to honestly inform his readers of the thinkers whose ideas he is incorporating into his own thought. It may be useful to take Wagner and Goethe as the emblems of Nietzsche's two modes of intellectual appropriation – avowed and suppressed. Nietzsche wore his admiration for Wagner on his sleeve in his early works, and openly celebrated the role the composer played in shaping his thinking on the possibility of applying classical tragic values to the modern world; equally public was Nietzsche's eventual disillusionment and disavowal of Wagner. With Goethe, on the other hand, Nietzsche is more subtle. Del Caro argues that in the context of contemporary German literature Goethe was the first writer to formulate health versus illness as an important moral dichotomy, and that once Nietzsche adopted the polarity he re-branded it as his own, referring to it as his own "classical aesthetic" and claiming

that humanity works with the virtues of either an ascending or a descending vitality. [24] Although Nietzsche sustained an admiration for Goethe in his writing for far longer than he did for the other contemporary figures he at one time praised (such as Kant and Schopenhauer), once Nietzsche decided that he had broken through the Classical/Romantic division with the new conception he called "Dionysian classicism", it became necessary for him to distance himself from Goethe as well.[25] Del Caro notes an excessiveness, or predilection for overstatement, that infuses Nietzsche's later writings (the same period, it must be remembered, from which "What I Owe to the Ancients" hails), and feels that in addition to his conscious disavowal of his literary models, Nietzsche had by this time been working in isolation and without critical reader response for so long that he began to *believe* himself to be more peerless than he truly was.[26] This growing trend towards self-aggrandizement in Nietzsche's later writings, paired with his ability to be "as skilled in adapting the classical literary values as he was skilled at marketing his new brand of philosophizing,"[27] suggest that it may be appropriate to look beyond the few sophistic passages specifically cited by Nietzsche to gauge the full extent of the influence of sophistic culture on his thinking.

In the following sections, I sketch out a picture of the range of possible meanings in Nietzsche's use of the phrase "Sophist culture". To do so, I survey all explicit references to particular sophists and to sophistry in Nietzsche's work. In

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[24] Del Caro 1989, p. 597.
[25] Del Caro 1989, p. 603.
[26] Del Caro 1989, p. 604.
[27] Del Caro 1989, p. 589.

addition, I seek out parallels and sympathies between sophistic thinking and Nietzsche's philosophy that are not directly attributed or acknowledged in his writing, in order to ensure that the full implications of "Sophist culture" can be brought to bear on a sophistic reading of Thucydides' *History*. I break down "Sophist culture" into four subheadings: competition, moral relativity, the reevaluation of values, and language.

2.3 Defining Nietzsche's "Sophist Culture"

2.3.1 Competition

Even if Nietzsche may have underreported the role of sophistic thought in the development of his own philosophy, in *Daybreak* §168 he clearly delineates the high place he feels the sophists occupy in the pantheon of fifth-century Greek culture, a culture "which had in Sophocles its poet, in Pericles its statesman, in Hippocrates its physician, in Democritus its natural philosopher," and "deserves to be baptized with the name of its teacher, the Sophists." The sophists achieved such a prominent place as "teachers" of the Greeks in Nietzsche's conception in part because they allowed him to reject the prevailing contemporary view, championed by Johann Winckelmann, that Greek culture was exemplary because of what he called its "noble simplicity" and "quiet grandeur", traits Winckelmann found to be evident in the "writing from its best periods; the writings from the Socratic school."[28] Nietzsche used the sophists to argue for the superiority of an entirely different kind of Greek

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[28]   Consigny 1994, p. 8.

art than that offered by the Socratic schools, one in which competition, or *agōn*, is the predominant value; in Nietzsche's view, it was from the kind of competition encouraged under the tutelage of the sophists that all worthwhile Greek creativity emerged. "Every talent must unfold itself through fighting," was Nietzsche's striking formulation of what he called "the command of popular Hellenic pedagogy".[29] In Nietzsche's view, this competitive spirit was integral to every role in Hellenic education, for both teacher and student: "just as the youths were engaged through contests, their educators were also engaged in contests with each other…in the spirit of the contest, the sophist, the advanced teacher of antiquity, meets another sophist…the Greek knows the artist *only as engaged in a personal fight*."[30]

This correlation between competition and creativity had significant moral, aesthetic and epistemological consequences. For Nietzsche, it was the ubiquity of the *agōn* in Hellenic life – constant competitions, each with their own conditions for victory, creating a plurality of victors – that acted as a bulwark against the misguided search for the dogmatic or unconditional, for truth as a singular entity; "rather than seeking the "unconditional" or the absolute, they encouraged a multiplicity of competing voices, each of which was recognized as emerging from and rendered discernible by the specific constraints of the *agōn* itself."[31] Through rhetorical competition under sophistic tutelage, the Greeks sanctioned a diversity of competing perspectives, and that, says Nietzsche, is "the core of the Hellenic notion of the contest: it abominates the rule of one and fears its dangers; it desires, as a

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[29] Nietzsche, *Homer's Contest*, §37.
[30] Nietzsche, *Homer's Contest*, §37.
[31] Consigny 1994, p. 9.

protection against the genius, another genius."[32]

This concept of competitive truths forms an important locus between the ethical thought of the sophists, Nietzsche, and Thucydides. The "courage in the face of reality" that Nietzsche ascribes to Thucydides in "What I Owe to the Ancients" refers especially to his refusal to "flee into the ideal", to the realm of universal values. Instead, Thucydides stands firm in the confusing, conflicted reality of competing moral claims inhabited by the sophists. On this same issue it is easy to perceive a sympathy between the sophistic conception of competitive creativity and Nietzsche's own philosophy of "perspectivism", his genealogical method of inquiry, and his characteristically combative, partisan staking-out of personal truths.

2.3.2   Moral Relativity

The sophistic notion that each usage of language articulates its own perspective, one that has no objective claim to truth outside of its success or failure in a competitive linguistic *agōn*, has from the time of Plato to the modern day opened up the sophists to charges of immoralism. The most famous ancient example of this accusation came from Aristophanes' *Clouds*. Although the playwright depicted Socrates as running the "thinkery", the school in which impressionable students were taught, immorally, to make the worse argument defeat the better,[33] both the school and the doctrine were explicitly identified with sophistry.[34] Karen

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[32]   Nietzsche, *Homer's Contest*, §37.
[33]   Aristophanes, *Clouds*, lines 1035-1045.
[34]   Aristophanes, *Clouds*, line 1111.

Whedbee describes how successive generations of classicists and general academics carried the Aristophanic/Platonic antipathy towards the sophists into the modern era. In Whedbee's opinion, the force of the received wisdom of sophistic immorality was so strong that surviving sophistic thought was not given serious consideration until Geroge Grote's *History of Greece* in 1850.[35] In the 20th century, W.K.C. Guthrie and George Kerferd were instrumental in leading a widespread reappraisal of sophistic moral thinking. The "dead hand of tradition" having been lifted,[36] it was discovered that sophists such as Protagoras had given nuanced and penetrating thought to the subject of morals. While the sophistic doctrine of moral relativity prevents Protagoras from being called a "moralist" in any traditional sense, at the same time, it certainly does not make him an immoralist by default.

Although the sophists-as-immoralists view is no longer the scholarly consensus, suspicion of moral relativity remains. After all, what possibility can there be for moral action if every truth is personal and contingent? Nietzsche himself at times seems to accede to this Platonic charge of sophistic immoralism, saying at *Will to Power* (*Der Wille zur Macht*) §428 that the sophists "possess the courage of all strong spirits to *know* their own immorality." The logical conclusion of this "immorality" might seem to be the egoism espoused by Callicles; in the absence of objective moral strictures, one's sole objective becomes to advance one's own selfish interests. Scott Consigny offers the sophists a defence in Nietzschean terms against accusations of immorality. He again cites *Will to Power* §428, in which

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[35] Whedbee 2008, pp. 603-604.
[36] Kerferd 1981, p. 8.

Nietzsche credits the sophists with the first "critique" of morality, the realization that a "morality in itself" or "good in itself" does not exist, and that it is a swindle to talk about "truth" in this context. Consigny believes that simply acknowledging that every moral pronouncement is at some level "interested" does not necessitate adopting a Calliclean egoism. He feels that to do so would presuppose the existence of a permanent, being "self", which he argues that the sophists do not do. "If the "self" is a fabrication, then the "immoralism" of the sophists would counsel not the affirmation of one's egoistic desires but rather a "self-overcoming" that encourages an openness to transforming one's desires."[37] By this elegant reading, we can perceive the sophists as becoming thoroughly Nietzschean. "Self-overcoming", rather than satisfaction of desires, is the primary moral imperative, and the self-overcoming is itself directed and shaped through the medium of the *agōn*, which becomes an instrument of continuous revaluation, or, as Consigny puts it, "an opportunity to challenge and thereby to overcome their own limitations and in this manner achieve a greater degree of excellence."[38]

Sophistry, it seems, can be defended from charges of inciting immoralism. It may be equally important to defend the sophists from accusations of amoralism, of having no interest or belief in the validity of moral distinctions full stop. This would be an overstatement of the sophistic position. Instead, the sophistic contribution to moral philosophy is the discovery of the relativity of morals. Just because the sophists arrive at an understanding of moral values without reference to the later

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[37] Consigny 1994, p. 17.
[38] Consigny 1994, p. 18.

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Platonic concepts of universal, objective and independently existent ideals, it does not follow that moral opinions somehow cease to exist or to be a matter of concern; they are simply recognized as being subjective and perspectival. Arguing for the existence of sophistic moral relativity is hardly ground-breaking. W.K.C. Guthrie and George Kerferd both argue that moral relativity is a characteristic belonging to the sophists in general.[39] Richard Bett, however, has done an admirable job of calling into question the commonality of sophistic relativity. Taking the extant writings of various sophists in turn, he argues that there is little evidence in the primary sources to ascribe to them such a radical development in moral thinking. The only text, he argues, that points strongly toward relativity is the famous fragment of Protagoras (DK 80B1), that "man is the measure of all things." Although that fragment itself deals with relativity in terms of establishing the existence or non-existence of things, Bett argues that the exposition of the doctrine in Plato's *Theaetetus* shows that it can feasibly be applied to moral claims.[40] His admonition not to take Protagoras as a representative of the thinking of all sophists is a good one. However, I feel that in two other Platonic dialogues we may find textual support for the idea that both Protagoras and Gorgias perceived the relativity of morals. Protagoras and Gorgias were the only two sophists referenced explicitly by Nietzsche in his philosophical writing, and they are therefore most important sophistic thinkers in our effort to find the aspects of sophistic thought that Nietzsche

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[39] Guthrie 1971, pp. 47, 50-51; Kerferd 1981, ch. 9.
[40] Bett 1989, p. 167: "A respectable case can be made for the conclusion that Plato interprets Protagoras as a relativist, in the deep sense we have throughout been interested in…Plato's *Theaetetus* becomes the *one* piece of evidence for relativism, in the deep sense, among any of the Sophists".

perceived to be at work in Thucydides' *History*.

In *Protagoras* 334a3-c6, Plato has the sophist expound upon things that are variously harmful and beneficial to different living things and in different situations. It is difficult to know how seriously we are meant to take Protagoras' speech in this passage. In Patrick Coby's interpretation, Protagoras makes the beneficial/harmful speech as a kind of skilful feint in order to avoid a potential accusation of immoralism from Socrates. In the preceding lines, Socrates had tried to get Protagoras to agree to the formulation that those who do well by their own wrong-doing may be said to have been "well-advised" (*eu bouleuesthai*), a worryingly close phrase to the "good counsel" (*euboulia*) that forms the backbone of Protagoras' teaching. Protagoras, Coby suggests, sees where Socrates is heading, and avoids the implication by "dispersing the good over a variety of animal and plant life, successfully clouding the issue of the human good and its relation to the profitable and the just."[41] I can accept the idea that, had Protagoras been in greater control of the direction of his discussion with Socrates, he might not have steered the conversation towards the relative merits of olive oil. However, the fact remains that within this passage there is a simple but effective description of the non-universality of goodness. "So complex and various is the good," (334b7-8: *houto de poikilon ti estin to agathon kai pantodapon*), "that in some cases while oil is good for the external parts of the human body, it is extremely harmful for the internal parts." Although applied here to a banal topic, the relativity expressed is authentic and

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[41]   Coby 1987, p. 84.

wholehearted. Neither the the helpfulness of oil for the exterior of the body nor its harmfulness for the body's interior are presented as errors of perception or judgment; oil *is* both good and bad, and its value for a person or situation is conditioned upon perspective and circumstance.

Such relativity is not, contra Bett, confined exclusively to statements of Protagoras. In his eponymous dialogue, Meno gives Socrates the account of virtue that he learned from Gorgias.[42] Meno tells Socrates that there are different virtues for different persons, according to their gender, age, and status. Entirely different actions and aims constitute "good" for a free adult male than for a slave child. Neither the morality of the free male or the slave child is held up as being true or necessarily more right; Meno argues that "to each activity and time of life in relation to each occupation for each of us there is a corresponding virtue."[43] Meno, citing Gorgias, recognizes a multitude of potential rights and wrongs, which derive their meaning not from any relation to a universal ideal, but from the needs, abilities, and perceptions of the perspectives open to different individuals. We can also find in this statement a notable similarity to the multitude of moralities described by Nietzsche's Zarathustra in the chapter titled "On a Thousand and One Goals".[44]

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[42]   Plato, *Meno*, 71e1-72a5.
[43]   Plato*, Meno*, 72a3-5: *kath' hekastēn gar tōn praxeōn kai tōn hēlikiōn pros hekaston ergon hekastōi hēmōn hē aretē estin.*
[44]   Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro: "'Always you shall be the first and tower above others; no one shall your jealous soul love, unless it is the friend' – this is what made the soul of a Greek tremble; with this he walked the path of greatness. 'Speak the truth and be skilled with the bow and arrow' – this seemed both dear and difficult to the people from whom my name derives – the name that is both dear and difficult to me. 'Honor father and mother and comply with their will down to the roots of one's soul' – this tablet of overcoming a different people hung over themselves and became powerful and eternal thereby. ... Indeed, humans gave themselves all of their good and evil. Indeed, they did not take it, they did not find it, it did not fall to them as a voice from heaven."

Although Zarathustra describes the varied moralities of distinct cultures rather than of individuals within a culture, the message is almost exactly the same. Perspective and situation, not a universal ideal, determine in every practical and meaningful way what is considered right and wrong. Following Bett's injunction not to treat Protagoras' fragmentary statement of relativity as deciding evidence for moral relativity as a unanimous feature of sophistic thought, it is still possible to offer strong statements of moral relativity given in the voices of Protagoras and (a follower of) Gorgias. It is these two sophists who figure most prominently in Nietzsche's picture of "sophist culture", and the connection to Nietzsche's own conception of perspectival reality is strengthened by the strong similarity between the notions of virtue offered by Plato's Meno and Nietzsche's Zarathustra.

It has been suggested that Gorgias' engagement with the concept of personal, perspectival formulations of reality may extend beyond explicit argumentation and into the style and structure of his written expression. Gorgias' heavily artistic literary style, and his use of unusual, artificial constructions in particular, may have interesting implications for the sophistic conception of reality. While some critics, both ancient and modern, have chastised Gorgias for what they feel to be his excessive use of artificiality of language and self-imposed artistic restraints, Nietzsche thought that Gorgias used these very features in his speech to point out the illusory nature of "reality".[45] Gorgias presents his discourse as constructed from highly artificial rhetorical figures, and in so doing he suggests that this own

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[45]   Consigny 1994, p. 16.

discourses, despite their persuasiveness, are themselves "fabrications", not literal truths about "reality-in-itself". "Through his own distinctly personal use of artificial figures, the sophist draws attention to his own inescapable presence and thereby underscores the fact that the views he offers are *his own*, and are not to be mistaken as objective, universal 'truths'."[46] It is interesting to compare Gorgias' use of artifice to highlight the subjective nature of the reality he presents with Alexander Nehamas' interpretation of Nietzsche's constant switching and combination of different literary styles in his work. Although he does not make the Gorgianic connection, Nehamas feels that Nietzsche uses literary styles to a similar end, to continuously assert his own authorial presence and the contingency of the "truths" that he is presenting to the reader.[47]

2.3.3   Reevaluating Values

As I have mentioned, Nietzsche makes no specific reference to any particular work of Gorgias in his writing; I would like to discuss one instance where Nietzsche's silence seems particularly interesting. Susan Jarratt argues that Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* uses the sophistic method of antithesis to engage in a form of historical inquiry not dissimilar from the means and ends of Thucydides. Gorgias offers "arguments without conclusions," and uses antithesis "in the establishment of complex causal relations," but rather than setting up a necessary chain of causal reaction, "Gorgias focuses the discussion on the interplay among causes," and

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[46]   Consigny 1994, p. 16.
[47]   Nehamas 1985, p. 14.

"insists upon an indeterminacy, or even an overdeterminacy, of situation in order to speculate on the power of *logos*" in ordering human affairs.[48] Despite the obvious difference of examining the distant mythic past as opposed to recent living memory, Jarratt's final assessment of Gorgias' historical aims might serve equally well to describe Thucydides: "In Gorgias' hands history becomes not the search for the true, but an opening up of questions: an enterprise not so much of reaching conclusions but of uncovering possible contradictions."[49]

Like Gorgias, Thucydides is concerned with reevaluating seemingly established historical facts. At 1.9, Thucydides questions the idea that Agamemnon became leader of the Greeks in the Trojan War due to the terms of the oaths sworn by Helen's suitors to Tyndareus; instead, Thucydides reads the situation in terms of raw power dynamics, arguing that Agamemnon commanded the Greeks simply because he was strongest at the time. Characteristically, Thucydides gives greater weight in interpreting the situation to the relative power of the parties involved, rather than to the oaths and laws that may theoretically bind them. Here we are perhaps able to begin to perceive what Nietzsche meant in describing Thucydides as the perfect expression of sophistic culture.

With the *Encomium of Helen* and the *Defence of Palamedes*, Gorgias may be embarking on an intellectual exercise that bears as much relation to Nietzsche's own objectives as to those of Thucydides – namely, the questioning and testing of his own society's foundational narratives and values. By re-examining the cases of

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[48] Jarratt 1991, p. 22.
[49] Jarratt 1991, p. 22.

Helen and Palamedes, with particular attention to their commonly agreed-upon moral faults and responsibilities, Gorgias has embarked upon a stunning moral revaluation of a narrative foundational to his own culture. In a similar vein, Thucydides uses his historical inquiry to question a narrative central to the foundation of Athenian democracy, the acts of the tyrannicides Harmodius and Aristogeiton.[50] Thucydides questions not only the most basic facts of the narrative, but also the motivation; it was Hippias who was actually *tyrannos* at the time of the slaying, not the assassinated Hipparchus, and the tyrannicides acted to redress romantic, not political grievances. It is difficult not to perceive these efforts of Gorgias and Thucydides as in some way precursory to Nietzsche's own efforts to reevaluate the Biblical narratives foundational to his own society's morality. Gorgias, Thucydides, and Nietzsche are all involved in a most sophistic endeavor, peeling back the veil of their societies' settled moral judgments, and casting light on competing claims of truth. Furthermore, keeping in mind Adrian Del Caro's revelation of a Nietzsche who was keen to appear peerless and originative – to the point of suppressing his influences – it is easy to see why Nietzsche might not wish to highlight Gorgias' position as an originator of his own sophistic brand of perspectival moral revaluation.

The preceding pages have identified and analyzed traces of 'sophistical' references in Nietzsche's thought in an attempt to flesh out the full implications of the "Sophist culture" mentioned in "What I Owe to the Ancients". To complete this

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[50]   Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 6.54-55.

picture, it may be helpful to consider the sophists in relation to their philosophical antagonists, the "Socratic schools", never far away in any of Nietzsche's discussions of sophist culture. The difference Nietzsche posits between the schools of thought initiated by Plato and by the sophists boils down to what he terms the "Hellenic instinct"; the sophists possess this instinct, and are in fact described by Nietzsche as the last Greeks who may lay claim to it, while Plato and his followers do not. But what is the Hellenic instinct? To Nietzsche's mind, it is "a formula for the highest affirmation, born of fullness, of overfullness, a yes-saying without reservation, even to suffering, even to guilt, even to everything that is questionable and strange in existence."[51] From this exhilarating formulation it remains to ask what exactly it is that the sophists "say yes" to; it may or may not be helpful to recall that we might expect Thucydides, as the highest expression of sophistic culture, to say yes to these same things. Is it that the sophists and Thucydides accept the relativity of morals? The completeness of apparent reality? The existence of a plurality of truths? The answer may of course be all of these things, and more. While Nietzsche does not say precisely what it is he feels that the sophists accept, we might glean part of the answer by looking at what he attacks Plato and his followers for denying. Nietzsche describes Plato and the Socratic schools as articulating a "non-Hellenic response" to the same unstated questions to which the sophists answer "yes". Nietzsche links the Platonic response to the "escapism" of Orphic cults, "mystics" who he feels expressed a "disgust with existence...a conception of existence as a punishment and

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[51]   Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, "Birth of Tragedy", §2.

guilt."[52] Scott Consigny explains that "the Sophists channel and encourage the healthiest instincts of Greek culture, while Plato, in the tradition of Orpheus, attempts to repress or escape those very instincts."[53]

2.3.4 Language and Truth

Although not explicitly discussed by Nietzsche, the concept of language, and its implications for the idea of truth, form an important point of opposition between Nietzsche's two camps, the sophists and the Socratic schools of Plato and Aristotle. The sophists offer a radically different, pluralistic conception of truth than the universal model sought after by the Socratic schools. These divergent conceptions appear to arise out of the opposing views of language held by the sophists and by Plato and Aristotle, for whom language is a "transparent window through which one may observe an independent and preexisting reality."[54] A correct term, in Aristotle's view, is able to signify (*sēmainein*) and correspond to the essential meaning of the thing itself to which it refers.[55] Words, therefore, derive their meaning from a direct relationship to the universal, ideal meaning of the thing they describe. The sophists, however, utilize a "rhetorical" model of language, one that holds that every use of language is inherently rhetorical or agonistic, occurring in the context of a contest between adversaries.[56] The meaning of terms, by this understanding, has no external existence, but is determined by and within contests of language, either

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[52]   Nietzsche, *Homer's Contest*, §34.
[53]   Consigny 1994, p. 10.
[54]   Consigny 1994, p. 12.
[55]   Irwin 1982, p. 242.
[56]   Consigny 1994, p. 11.

through consensus or victory in a rhetorical argument.

From Protagoras and Gorgias we get differing views of the capabilities of language, but both are informed by a completely different concept of the meaning of terms than that held by Plato and Aristotle. Protagoras offers an extreme relativity, the idea that it is possible (and necessary?) to argue for or against every possible proposition, including even the very proposition that it is possible to do so.[57] Here again we see the inherent link for the sophists between language, competition and creativity; each use of language is necessarily creative, as it "constitutes a fabrication of a persuasive image or argument designed to persuade an adversary or audience."[58] Gorgias, meanwhile, appears to present a more pessimistic view of the capability of language to communicate meaning. Sextus Empiricus summarizes the position of Gorgias' lost work *On What-Is-Not.*[59] In it, Gorgias maintained that the communication of meaning was impossible without a shared, negotiated and agreed-upon frame of reference, and he offers a conception of language distinct from and opposed to the later Platonic tenet that the meaning of terms (and speech itself) have an existence on par with sense-perceptible objects in the physical world.

I think that language operates in Thucydides' *History* along sophistic lines, and not according to the universal, externally existent model of language espoused by Nietzsche's "Socratic schools". I will attempt to demonstrate in this paper that throughout the *History*, and especially during the plague at Athens and the *stasis* at Corcyra, the meanings of terms shift sophistically, both according to the will of the

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[57] Seneca, *Letters*, 88.43.
[58] Consigny 1994, p. 12.
[59] Sextus Empiricus, *On the Professors*, 7.83-86.

rhetorical (and actual) victors, as well as through shifts in the perspectives of speakers brought on by their experience of calamity.

By now, the essential features of Nietzsche's "Sophist culture" have begun to appear in far greater relief. In this paper's concluding section, I will use the picture of sophistic culture developed here to argue that reality, morality, and language as they appear in Thucydides' *History* can all be best interpreted by the idea that the world presented by the historian is a thoroughly sophistic one. Most of all, I think that Nietzsche's conception of sophistic culture and of Thucydides' expression of that culture hold a significant answer to a pressing issue in Thucydidean interpretation – the moral element of the *History*. In the following section, I will trace important developments in the recent history of Thucydidean reception to argue that, by consulting Nietzsche and probing the implications of his statements on the relationship between Thucydides and the sophists, we are best able to understand how the functioning of morality in Thucydides' thought.

3   Thucydides (and Thucydidean Morality) in Historical Context

The first section of this paper asked how we should approach and interpret Nietzsche's perceptions of the ancient world. Having addressed the major issues inherent in looking for academically viable judgments in Nietzsche's personal, philosophic writing, I attempted to develop a full account of Nietzsche's comments on the sophists, "sophistic culture", and of Thucydides as the embodiment or "fullest expression" of that culture. Nietzsche's concept of a "sophistic" Thucydides was diametrically opposed to the Thucydides pictured by the most prominent historians and classicists of his era. In this second section, focusing on the last one hundred and fifty years of Thucydidean reception, I will demonstrate that over the past century successive generations of scholars have rejected the essential elements of the objective, "scientific" Thucydides celebrated in late 19th century German scholarship. Nietzsche's conception of Thucydides as a necessarily subjective, selective prose artist will be seen to have anticipated the modern appraisal. The most pressing current problem in Thucydidean scholarship is the interpretation of what can be called the "moral element" of the *History*. It is no longer accepted that Thucydides (or any historian) dispassionately arranges and records objective facts; more and more, it is recognized that there is a moral element in Thucydides' thought and in his *History*, but that it is difficult to decipher "Thucydidean morality" from his cool narration and sparse authorial comment. The final section of this

paper will try to do exactly that, using my expanded Nietzschean model of a

"sophistic" Thucydides as a guide. This section, then, is concerned with tracing

briefly the important developments in 20th century Thucydidean reception that have

prepared the ground for a Nietzschean reading of the *History*.

Most of the 20th century in Thucydidean scholarship was spent reacting

against the picture of Thucydides current in Nietzsche's time, a picture developed by

the historians Berthold Niebuhr (1776-1831) and Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886).

Known, along with Wilhelm Roscher and Eduard Meyer, as the "Thucydidean

Germans", they were active at a time when the modern study of history was first

being defined as an academic discipline, and they found in Thucydides an ancient

figurehead whom they considered to embody most important values of modern

historical study, the critical evaluation of sources and an objective impartiality.

Niebuhr supposed, from the accuracy of Thucydides' chronology, that the historian

had been working largely from documentary sources that Niebuhr termed "the

annalist's books".[60] Thucydides is held up as an example for all modern historians

due to his diligence and critical acuity in determining the accuracy and reliability of

his written and oral sources.

Von Ranke, a generation later, elaborated on Niebuhr's admiration, and cited

Thucydides' "superhuman equity", his ability to remain unswayed in his inquiries by

his own personal and political allegiances, as the historian's most noteworthy and

"innate talent".[61] Von Ranke's praise for Thucydides comes close to the journalistic

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[60] Pires 2006, p. 812.
[61] Pires 2006, p. 817.

credo, "fair and balanced", familiar from the present day. The three features which make Thucydides exemplary are his commitment to "[do] justice to both sides...scrupulous adhesion to the simple truth, and the confinement of his investigations to human projects."[62] While Nietzsche (and almost all modern commentators) would agree that Thucydides' inquiries are improved by his exclusion of supernatural explanations, the notion that there exists a "simple truth" capable of being adhered to was attacked by Nietzsche (and rejected by many latter 20th century commentators as well). The capability to "do justice to both sides", Thucydides' impartiality, requires further consideration.

In *Daybreak* §168, Nietzsche twice uses terms of "impartiality" (*unparteiisch, Unparteilichkeit*) to describe what he finds admirable about Thucydides, specifically in comparison with Plato. At a glance, it might appear that Nietzsche's assessment of the historian was similar to that of Niebuhr and Von Ranke, but Nietzsche uses the terms in unexpected ways. In the first instance, Thucydides is said to take "the most comprehensive and impartial delight in all that is typical in men and events." This does, in part, seem to refer to the equanimity praised by the Thucydidean Germans; unlike Plato, Nietzsche applauds the fact that Thucydides did not "revile or belittle those he does not like or who have harmed him in life." We are told, though, that Thucydides' "comprehensive and impartial delight" lies in discovering the "quantum of good sense" that pertains to "each type" of person and situation. Now, rather than holding all parties to the same objective law, Nietzsche seems to suggest that

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62   Pires 2006, p. 818.

Thucydides looks for and finds meaning in something closer to a sophistic relativity, the idea that the truest possible knowledge of the world is cobbled together from differing perspectives.

This sophistic connection to "impartiality" is cemented in *Daybreak* §168's second instance of the term, where Nietzsche says that in Thucydides, "that portrayer of man, that *culture of the most impartial knowledge of the world* finds its last glorious flower." That culture, we are told later in the paragraph, is the same culture of which Thucydides is called the highest expression in "What I Owe to the Ancients" §2, the culture which "deserves to be baptised with the name of its teachers, the Sophists." Nietzsche's sophistic Thucydides "portrays" rather than reports. This conception of the historian as a prose artist, rather than a dispassionate journalist, anticipates many of the features ascribed to Thucydides in the course of his 20th century reception, to which we now turn.

It must be noted that Nietzsche was not the only commentator to consider the sophists to be the closest model for Thucydidean method. Wolfgang Schadewaldt wrote in 1929 of Thucydides as a "historicizing sophist".[63] Notably, the effect of Thucydides' "sophistry" in Schadewaldt's characterization is diametrically opposed to that of Nietzsche's. For Schadewaldt, Thucydides the historicizing sophist was characterized by an obsession with factual precision. In a 1971 updated edition of the same book, Schadewaldt retracted his sophistic appraisal of Thucydides, now giving him more credit for perceiving and representing deeper

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[63]   Schadewaldt 1929, *Die Geschichtsschreibung des Thukydides*, p. 30, cited in Rood 1998, p. 16 (Rood's translation.)

patterns in historical events.[64] For Nietzsche, the process is reversed. It is in his expression of sophist culture that Thucydides transcends precision and demonstrates a deeper understanding of reality, morality, and human nature. Schadewaldt thus reminds us that although every attempt is made in this paper to link the features ascribed to sophist culture to ancient texts written by and about the sophists themselves, it is by no means a set of fixed values, and remains highly influenced by and indebted to Nietzsche's own concerns and perceptions.

In the early decades of the 20th century, two anglophone scholars contributed reassessments of the objective-scientific Thucydides that are crucial to the interpretation proposed by this paper. Francis Cornford's 1907 work *Thucydides Mythohistoricus* questioned the notion of Thucydides as "scientist", regarding him instead as an artist, one who had more in common with ancient dramatists than modern historians. Cornford reacted as much against Winckelmann's concept of Hellenism as much as Von Ranke and Niebuhr's reading of Thucydides, challenging the idea that the *History* was governed solely by rational thinking, and arguing instead that underneath Thucydides' factual narrative was a mythical – specifically a tragic – understanding of the human condition.[65] The idea that Thucydides was heavily influenced by epic and tragedy,[66] and that the *History* can be best understood through reference to these art-forms,[67] retains significant support to this day. Although this paper argues that it is sophistic thought which provides the best

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64   Rood 1998, p. 16.
65   Pires 2006, p. 830.
66   Hornblower 2009, pp. 67-69.
67   Lebow 2003, p. 20.

means to interpret at least the moral position of the *History*, Cornford's establishment of an artistic Thucydides is crucial to the present study; Thucydides creates a history that is grounded in reality and real events, but is itself a rendering of that reality, a work made possible by choices of representation and characterization.

Charles Cochrane, however, remained unswayed by this idea of an artistic Thucydides, and argued that Thucydides was a scientist, but an authentically *ancient* one, in 1929's *Thucydides and the Science of History*. Cochrane argued that Thucydides' methodology was really a fusion of two major strands of "scientific" thought current in his day, the natural science of Democritus and the medical science of Hippocrates. From Democritus, Thucydides derived the idea of the innate causality of things, and from Hippocrates an inductive methodology, the inference of general laws from particular events.[68] I do not personally agree with this understanding of Thucydides' methodology, but the distinction between Thucydides as Cochrane's ancient natural scientist and Thucydides as Cornford's prose artist may be more slight than it first appears. Essentially, the disagreement comes down to a question of where the inference of general laws of human behaviour falls in Thucydides' process of observation, understanding, and representation. For Cochrane, the general laws of human behaviour presented in the *History* are derived, as the result of scientific observation, from the particular events of the Peloponnesian War. I would argue, however, that Thucydides' perception of general

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[68]   Pires 2006, p. 831.

laws of human behaviour allow the events of the war to be interpreted and arranged artistically into the shape of the *History*. In either case, it is important to note that on the relationship between Thucydides and ancient scientific method, Nietzsche again seems anticipatory; in *Daybreak* §168, the sophistic culture of which Thucydides is the "most glorious flower" has Hippocrates for "its" physician, and Democritus for its natural philosopher. The most important lesson learned from Cochrane is his injunction to not reshape Thucydides' aims and methods to align with modern categories, but rather, to the best of our abilities, to understand and situate Thucydides within an intellectual context appropriate to his era.

Hans-Peter Stahl, in *Thukydides: Die Stellung des Menschen im Geschichtlichen Prozeß*, published in 1966, also questioned the inductive methodology supposed by Cochrane. Stahl (sensibly, in my opinion) reversed the teleology assumed by those who view the *History* as being a politically prescriptive, "medicinal" work. It is only the knowledge of already completed events that allows the narrative to be ordered in a comprehensible form, and that narrative illustrates the inability of nearly every participant to make cogent political plans at all, stressing instead the inevitability that non-rational factors, whether personal passions or unpredictable fortune, will shape the course of events.[69] I do not entirely agree with Stahl's characterization of the forces that govern events in the *History* as being themselves unpredictable; the sophistic reading of Thucydides asserts that the *History* presents a stable picture of basic human nature, a nature governed by ambition and fear. This human nature is

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[69]   Pires 2006, p. 832.

generally the same in all people and through all events. The vicissitudes of fortune

do not alter that human nature, they merely determine how much of it is revealed,

and what degree of force it exerts upon human action. When people are successful

and secure, it is possible to keep human nature in check through moral conventions;

to the extent that there is no security, there is a consequent weakening of moral

conventions, and human nature is the main determiner of action. Although Stahl's

emphasis on the non-prescriptive, unpredictable nature of the *History* was an

assessment of the narrative as a whole, elements of his reading apply to the present

attempt to interpret the moral element of the *History*; I will argue that the *History* is

far more concerned with disclosing vital moral truths (that may well not have any

predictive or preventative power over human affairs) than it is with advancing a

prescriptive moral programme.

This notion that the *History* sets out to impart moral understanding to its

readers is clearly anathema to the work of objective fact-reporting celebrated by the

"Thucydidean Germans". Two thinkers in particular, Jacqueline de Romilly and W.

Robert Connor, were instrumental in breaking down the old conception that

Thucydides was (and that historians could be) objective, uninvolved observers of

events. In *Thucydide et l'impérialisme athénien* (1947) and *Histoire et raison chez*

Thucydide (1956), de Romilly argued that the historian, in the construction of a

historical work, engaged in a "creative art", a methodological and structuring art of

interpretation.[70] Although de Romilly still conceived of this process as a "scientific"

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[70]   Pires 2006, p. 831.

art, the artistic decisions made in the process of selection, arrangement, and characterization of persons and events are necessarily subjective ones.

But the advances in Thucydidean interpretation to which this study is most indebted have been made by W. Robert Connor, both in his 1984 monograph *Thucydides*, and in the 2009 updated edition of his influential paper "A Post-Modernist Thucydides?" The collapse of the ideal of historical, even authorial objectivity that occurred in the 1960s and 70s in North American scholarship was of course not limited to Thucydides, but it was Connor who best synthesized the effects of the rejection of objectivity upon our understanding of Thucydides and sketched out a vision of a way forward. The most important result for this paper is the denial of the possibility of ethical neutrality, thrusting the question of the ethical stance of the *History* to the forefront,[71] a question Nietzsche's sophistic model is uniquely suited to address.

Connor announced the arrival of a "post-modernist Thucydides," a Thucydides, in other words, for an age that had rejected the possibility of authorial objectivity. Where generations of scholars, from the Thucydidean Germans onward, had perceived an impartial, emotionally distant and detached writer, a picture began to emerge of a "passionate and intense writer,"[72] one deeply concerned with moral issues in one way or other.[73] This insistence on a moral component to Thucydides' writing is understandable. Thucydides isn't "objective" anymore, but

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[71]   Pires 2006, pp. 834-835.
[72]   Connor 2009, p. 31.
[73]   Creed 1973, p. 225: The *History* exhibits an "obsession...with the question of whether the Athenian empire was immoral."

his history remains relentlessly focused on morally fraught human issues and experiences – suffering, justice, violence, betrayal, deception, *stasis* – topics impossible to approach without reference to *some* ethical viewpoint. But what is Thucydides' moral stance? The lack of direct authorial comment in the *History* is legendary; it was this, after all, that led in large part to its being celebrated for objectivity in the first place. This perceived need for there to be *an* ethical component to Thucydides' writing, combined with the lack of explicit authorial comment (even in passages narrating typically ethically charged situations), creates a problem in our interpretation of the *History* called the issue of "Thucydidean silence" by Francisco Pires.[74]

We are left in the position of having to interpret the *appearance* of objectivity in Thucydides' writing. W.P. Wallace suggested that Thucydides kept his authorial comment to a minimum in an attempt to influence the reader without their knowledge, employing "what one may almost call subliminal persuasion."[75] Unlike Herodotus, who included the reader in his process of accepting and discounting sources in his creation of a narrative, Thucydides keeps this process hidden and offers only the result, *his* result. Despite his expressed concern for the reliability of his sources and his use of written accounts, this methodology leads Virginia Hunter to call Thucydides "the least objective of historians".[76]

Connor suggests that we conceive of Thucydides as consciously employing the appearance of objectivity to his own ends. In other words, that objectivity in

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[74] Pires 2006, pp. 836-837.
[75] Wallace 1964, p. 258.
[76] Hunter 1973, p. 184.

Thucydides is an authorial stance, not a method. By professing to present events as they really happened, *auta ta erga*, Thucydides actually forces the reader to look at events through his own eyes, "imposing [his] own assumptions and interpretations of events."[77] This form of stated-but-false objectivity, then, becomes in Thucydides' writing a kind of literary device that allows the historian to transmit his meaning to the reader without the use of direct commentary. This technique of involving the reader in an almost unwitting creation of meaning will be an important component in my attempt to use Nietzsche's sophistic understanding of Thucydides to solve the problem of "Thucydidean silence" on moral issues. In a coming section, the methodological concerns inherent in searching for the moral component of Thucydides' *History* will be addressed, and Connor's theory of reader-response will be discussed in greater detail.

This brief survey of historical and contemporary interpretations of Thucydides as a writer and moral thinker has revealed the existence of an impasse in our understanding of his work. Commentators like J.L. Creed and W.R. Connor stress the fact that Thucydides considers and grapples with the issue of morality in his *History*, but there is no consensus as to the nature of the the moral viewpoint of the historian and his *History*. It is here that Nietzsche's notion of a sophistic interpretation of Thucydides' *History* can be of considerable value. A reading of Thucydides that incorporates sophistic moral relativity can greatly enhance our ability to understand the moral worldview of Thucydides and his *History*, both by

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[77]   Connor 2009, p. 33.

offering a plausible explanation for the scarcity of authorial moral comment in a

work narrating morally pregnant events, and also by providing an axis along which

to separate the moral lessons conveyed by the *History* from the moral opinions of

the historian himself.

4 A Sophistic Reading of Thucydides' *History*

4.1 Thucydides' Sophistic Connections

The first step in devising a sophistic reading of the *History* will be to survey the connections – historical, stylistic, and philosophical – between Thucydides and the sophists. It seems sensible, before considering connections of style and argumentation, to turn to a more mundane, real-world point of connection between Thucydides and sophistic thinking, the possibility that Protagoras' relationship to Pericles may have helped in part to recommend sophistic ideas to the historian. Jacqueline de Romilly feels that Protagoras' personal politics would likely have been in line with those of Pericles, citing the fact that Protagoras acted as law-maker for the colony of Thurii, founded in 443 at Pericles' behest.[78] Susan Jarratt characterizes him as a "close associate" of Pericles for the same reason.[79] Writing in 1957, Mortimer Chambers does a good job of tempering the unreserved admiration for Pericles ascribed to Thucydides by much of the preceding scholarship, and articulates a position resembling the modern consensus: although Thucydides was no radical democrat himself, and we ought not to conflate the words given to Pericles with the historian's own opinions, Thucydides still admired and approved of Pericles and his leadership, in part because of the politician's ability to guide and control the masses in the assembly.[80] While no great interpretive weight can be placed on the putative political sympathies shared by these three figures, it does not

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[78] de Romilly 1992, p. 214.
[79] Jarratt 1991, p. 49.
[80] Chambers 1957, pp. 80-82.

seem unreasonable to suggest that Thucydides' estimation of Protagoras in particular and sophistic ideas in general would not be harmed by Protagoras' proximity to Pericles.

Philostratus offers testimony – albeit a testimony six centuries removed from the relationships it describes – that Pericles, Thucydides, and other major players in the Peloponnesian War were well acquainted with and admired Gorgias and his techniques. He stresses that Gorgias' influence in Athens spanned generations, listing Alcibiades, Thucydides and Pericles as his adherents.[81] In his letters, Philostratus provides a more colourful account, telling us that it was Aspasia who "sharpened Pericles' tongue" on Gorgias' rhetoric, and that Thucydides adopted Gorgias' techniques as his own, particularly his forcefulness or "might" (*rhōmē*).[82] Admittedly, it is possible to call Philostratus' motivations into question. Himself a chronicler of and participant in the Second Sophistic, Philostratus may have been tempted to elaborate upon, if not exaggerate outright, the extent to which his sophistic forebear had been embraced by the movers and shakers of classical Athenian society. Still, if elements of sophistic style and sentiment can indeed be found in Thucydides' work, and in the characterizations of Pericles and Alcibiades, Philostratus' statements may offer some additional credence to the association.

The fact that Thucydides and the sophists may have shared stylistic choices and methods of argumentation could be interpreted as a case of unrelated persons merely using similar tools. The fact that these tools were put to a similar purpose,

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[81]   Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists,* 1.9.3.
[82]   Philostratus, *Letter* 73, 2.57.2.

however, makes this connection far more interesting. Both Thucydides and the sophists shared a world-view that put social concerns – the life of the *polis*, and of the individual within the *polis* – above all others. The centrality of politics to Thucydides' world-view is a commonplace. It is evident not only from the choice of war and human conflict as his subject matter, but from the manner in which that subject matter is approached, without reference to the gods or divinity, and with little or no reference to the familial, emotional, or otherwise apolitical lives and motivations of the participants. Despite the mass of negative evidence, it must be admitted that Thucydides' opinion of the primacy of politics in human life can only be inferred; Protagoras, on the other hand, explicitly names the development of political skill as the definitive prerequisite for human civilization. In the Platonic dialogue that bears his name, Protagoras states that early humans, armed only with the domestic skills given to them by Prometheus, were able to feed and clothe themselves, but unable to ward off the attacks of animals.[83] They attempted to band together with one another and form communities, but lacking political skill (*tēn politikēn technēn*) they committed wrongs and injustices upon one another and the communities soon broke up again. It was only by the intercession of Zeus, who sent Hermes to bring moderation (*aidōs)* and justice (*dikē*) to mankind, that humans were able to form ordered and friendly ties amongst themselves.[84] In Protagoras' view, it is the order (*kosmos*) of the *polis* that keeps humanity not only from anarchy, but from utter destruction. While we never find this thought put so succinctly or

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[83]   Plato, *Protagoras*, 322b.
[84]   Plato, *Protagoras*, 322c.

forcefully in Thucydides, he fixes his gaze constantly on the breakdown of ordered

relationships within and between cities. I feel that the stylistic and argumentative

similarities that may be perceived between Thucydides and the sophists derive from

this shared conception of the critical importance of political order and,

consequently, the unmatched power of political skill.

Ancient and modern commentators alike have noticed, and criticized,

Thucydides' use of syntactic antithesis, a rhetorical technique most closely

associated with Gorgias. Dionysius of Halicarnassus praises Lysias for not

succumbing, like Thucydides, to overly ostentatious Gorgianic parallelism, word-

play and antithesis;[85] Friedrich Solmsen seems equally distraught that Thucydides

would express himself through the use of this *technē*, calling it an "addiction", and

something he is "not above".[86] Cicero considers Gorgias to have been the originator

of some of the techniques that he would later employ to great effect, such as

isocolon and "connecting contrary with contrary phrases" (*contrariis relata*

contraria), but Cicero too feels that Gorgias' use of these features became excessive

(*sed eis usus est intemperantius*).[87] But denigration of antithesis as a stylistic

technique is not universal. De Romilly insists that while we must credit Gorgias as

being the inventor of an extremely refined prose style, he personally was not able to

employ it to its full potential on account of the often forced artificiality of his

writing; used more "carefully" and "consciously" by Thucydides, who stripped

antithesis of its rigid and obvious Gorgianic isocolon, it becomes a powerful and

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[85] de Romilly 1992, p. 63.
[86] Solmsen 1975, p. 84.
[87] Cicero, *Orator*, 52.175.

effective device.[88] De Romilly points to the Corinthian delegation's description of the differences between Athens and Sparta at 1.70 as a prime example of Thucydides' more artful, subtle style of antithesis. In this passage, Thucydides' Corinthians use a hail of rapid-fire antitheses to characterize the Athenians and Spartans as polar opposites in every conceivable category of temperament, philosophy, and ability. We have an example of Gorgias contrasting different sorts of people from his *Funeral Oration*, surviving in an extensive quotation from the Byzantine grammarian Maximus Planudes. Gorgias' steadfast commitment to parallel construction comes through clearly with passages such as, "For what was absent from these men that ought to be present in men? What was present which ought not be present? Would that I might speak what I will, and will what I ought..." (*ti gar apēn tois andrasi toutois hōn dei andrasi proseinai; ti de kai prosēn hōn ou dei proseinai; eipein dunaimēn ha boulomai, bouloimēn d' ha dei...*).[89] Thucydides seems more willing and better able to allow form to follow sense, as in the Corinthians' Gorgianic assessment of the Athenians: "When they overcome their enemies, they advance the farthest; and when overcome by them, they fall back the least" (*kratountes te tōn echthrōn epi pleiston exerchontai kai nikōmenoi ep' elachiston anapiptousin*).[90] More stereotypically Gorgianic turns of phrase occur elsewhere in the *History*, at one point from the mouth of Pericles. Paul Woodruff cites Pericles' admonition to the Athenians (2.62.3) that they "should take on the enemy at close quarters, and go not only with pride (*phronēma*) but with contempt

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[88] de Romilly 1992, p. 64.
[89] Planudes, *On Hermogenes*, 5.548.
[90] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.70.5.

(*kataphronēma*)," as a "word play of the kind taught by the Sophists."[91]

But what do we mean when we speak of the "power" of antithesis? We mean, first of all, something quite different than the power ascribed to it by George Kennedy, who described the "tintinnabulation" of antithesis that produced a hypnotic effect on listening crowds, presumably making them more pliable to demagoguery.[92] This view of antithesis as a kind of "one-trick pony" can also be found in the historiography of logic, which offers a teleological view of antithesis as a prerequisite stepping stone along the path to Socratic definition, and, eventually, to a fully-fledged Aristotelian logic of non-contradiction.[93] Both Socratic definition and Aristotelian non-contradiction function by eventually disqualifying and excluding one half of an antithetical notion; for Thucydides and the sophists, the power of antithesis lies elsewhere. Mario Untersteiner argues that the use of antithesis by Gorgias and subsequent "sophistic historians" stems from a "tragic" conception of knowledge, one that employs paired opposites not with a view to resolve the opposition, but to alert the listener to a multiplicity of potential truths.[94] In this conception, the goal of the sophistic historian, as opposed to the Socratic philosopher, is not to "confine reality within a dogmatic scheme but [to] allow it to rage in all its contradictions, in all its tragic intensity."[95] Sophistic antithesis, then, rather than being an anticipatory stage in the development of logic, instead expresses a logic of a different nature. Jarratt argues that the sophists, while "fully

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[91] Woodruff, p. 54.
[92] Kennedy 1980, p. 29.
[93] Jarratt 1991, p. 21.
[94] Untersteiner 1954, p. 101.
[95] Untersteiner 1954, xvi.

capable of understanding a logic of non-contradiction", were simply working towards different aims than Platonic philosophers;[96] unconcerned with the academic pursuit of establishing a formal, systemic logic, they instead used antithesis as a means to explore and understand the logical ramifications of actions.

The power of antithesis as an interpretive, diagnostic tool is not fully apparent until we move from a consideration of Gorgianic, stylistic antithesis to the broader notion of semantic antithesis situated within the context of Protagorean metaphysics. The statement with which Protagoras began his *On Truth*, that man is the measure of things, their existence or non-existence, encapsulates for de Romilly the "revolutionary" character of sophistic thinking; after centuries of "cosmic" philosophies, Protagoras introduces a "total relativism" that rules out "all theories of transcendency or certainty."[97] This disavowal of the certainty, objectivity and universality of truth has crucial implications for the kind of knowledge that sophistic antithesis is able to provide. For Protagoras, theses and antitheses "must coexist forever in a confrontation to which there can be no resolution"[98]; although individual theses may claim victory within the context of a particular *agōn*, they never resolve into a synthesis. While Platonic philosophical antithesis aims to discover truth itself, sophistic antithesis is founded on the notion that such a thing does not exist, and yet as a technique it retains tremendous utility. The power of antithesis as a diagnostic tool lies in its ability to discern a different form of truth, the factuality and efficacy of competing claims; used by Thucydides, it is a means of

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[96] Jarratt 1991, p. 22.
[97] de Romilly 1992, p. 85.
[98] de Romilly 1992, p. 85.

assessing a given situation by considering the motivations, possible courses of action and potential constraints at work upon both parties in a dispute. We can see this method at work in both ancient and modern legal settings, both in the more literary, hypothetical guise of Antiphon's *Tetralogies,* and in the modern system that accepts that the truth of a dispute can be determined not only by the presentation of factual evidence but by the competitive rhetoric of two speakers.

In Thucydides, of course, this agonistic process plays itself out in the speeches. De Romilly provides an excellent overview of Thucydides' sophistic method of truth-determination at work. She notes that speeches in Thucydides, much like in an Athenian courtroom, are almost never presented singly, but are paired and pitted against one another on a given topic. The only exception to this rule are speeches given by Pericles, which are allowed to stand on their own without contradiction, "as if there could be no conceivable argument to oppose his". [99] For all other speakers, whenever an adversary exists, the two arguments are presented in contrast, like "two faces of a single block of stone", providing two opposing perspectives on the situation at hand, and two potential courses of action. [100] The close pairing of speeches brings all potential doubts and uncertainties in the arguments into sharp relief, and allows the reader to perceive points on which the course of either argument might be reversed or refuted. With the competing arguments presented, in Thucydidean history it is the narrative that assumes the functions of judge and jury, confirming or disproving the validity of the speakers'

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[99]   de Romilly 1992, p. 88.
[100] de Romilly 1992, p. 88.

thinking. The "clearest, most schematic" examples of this process at work can be found in battle narratives, such as the deliberations leading up to the naval conflict at Naupactos in Book Two (2.86-2.92).[101] Between 2.87 and 2.89 we hear paired, antithetical speeches from the Peloponnesian commanders Cnemus and Brasidas and the Athenian general Phormio. There is significant parallelism between the two speeches, with both sides being moved to speak in an attempt to quell the nervousness of their sailors, outlining the factors that will propel their side to victory and the mistaken assumptions or disadvantages of the opposing force, and commenting on the moral superiority of their own side. With the arguments laid out, the narrative takes over and picks its way through the disputing claims, confirming and denying in turn the generals' thoughts on the material strength, military expertise and moral character of themselves and their enemies. In this way, sophistic antithesis functions as a method for determining the factual realities and contingent, competitive claims to truth that make up Thucydides' history without laying a claim to any synthetic, universal insight.

4.2   The Moral Heart of the *History*

The points of connection between Thucydides and the sophists discussed thus far – the primacy of politics in their thought, the appearance of Gorgianic stylistic antithesis in Thucydides' writing, and the use of semantic antithesis as an interpretive method – all function as evidence supporting Nietzsche's comparison of

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[101]   de Romilly 1992, p. 88.

Thucydides' *History* and the culture of the sophists. But at the very heart of that sophistic culture was the realization of the relativity of morals, and it is this sophistic feature that must form the lynchpin of our reading of Thucydides' text. The preceding section on Thucydidean reception brought the problem of "Thucydidean silence" on moral issues to the fore. The overarching goal of these concluding sections, then, will be to locate and interpret the moral element of Thucydidean thought, and to demonstrate that a sophistic understanding of morality is at work in the text of the *History*. To begin the discussion of moral relativity in the *History*, I will engage with a dissenting viewpoint, Rosalind Thomas' essay "Thucydides' Intellectual Milieu and the Plague", which argues strongly –and, I believe, mistakenly – against the notion that Thucydides endorsed and incorporated sophistic moral thinking in his work.

Thomas is in agreement, at least, with idea that a stylistic and rhetorical connection exists between Thucydides and the sophists. Thomas feels that Thucydides was "utterly aware" of the various techniques of style, argument and persuasion employed by the sophists, and of "certain theories" that we associate with the sophists as a group. Concordant with the view of this paper, Thomas places Thucydides at the "vanguard" of the linguistic and stylistic experiment underway in late 5th century Athens, and notes individually that Thucydides employed a less extreme interpretation of Gorgianic style, demonstrated by his persistent interest in antithesis as a method of argumentation.[102] Thomas also argues that Thucydides

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[102] Thomas 2006, p. 90.

would have been able to distinguish between theories and ideas belonging to sophists, and that it is more fruitful to speak of Thucydides' relationship to Gorgias or to Protagoras than to the sophists as a group, something this paper has attempted to do wherever possible.[103] Thomas then detaches herself from the opinion of this paper at exactly the crucial point described above, the notion that Thucydides subscribed to a sophistic moral world-view.

Thomas states passionately that Thucydides "cannot possibly be said to belong to this [sophistic] school of thought – though he is aware of it", supporting her argument by means of a specific instance of seemingly anti-sophistic sentiment expressed by Cleon, and by an interpretation of the larger, "set-piece" section of the *History* detailing the *stasis* and societal breakdown in Corcyra. I will argue against both these points in turn. Thomas' comments regarding Cleon's anti-sophistic statements are potentially true, but are nowhere near so clear-cut as to confirm the absolute statement that Thucydides "cannot possibly" be interpreted through the lens of sophistic moral thinking; her reading of Thucydides' treatment of the *stasis* at Corcyra, however, is the result of an essential misunderstanding of the moral implications of sophistic relativity.

Thomas highlights 3.38.7, in which Cleon admonishes the democratic audience listening to debates for acting as though they were merely "spectators of the Sophists" (*sophistōn theatais eoikotes*), being "slaves to the pleasure of the ear" rather than acting as a council to the affairs of a city. Using Cleon (a man generally

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[103] Thomas 2006, p. 90.

accepted to be a consistent target of Thucydides' ire throughout the *History)* to

make such a definitive point, is extremely problematic, and raises the perennial

questions surrounding the interpretation of Cleon's statements. One option

employed by some commentators is to use Cleon in the exact opposite fashion as

Thomas, to infer Thucydides' authorial comment from the negative of whatever

Cleon is saying. Alternatively, there is the notion that if we find reasonable-sounding

sentiments coming from Cleon, we can surmise that Thucydides must *really* agree

with the statements to allow Cleon's views to align with his own. Keeping in mind

that these are both shorthand sketches of interpretive tacks, it seems that Thomas is

to some extent using the latter line of reasoning. "The tone is harsh, and Cleon is

hardly Thucydides' favorite politician," Thomas writes, but we may find the notion

that "serious political deliberation is quite opposed to sitting in the audience of

sophistic speeches" echoed by a contrast, again drawn by Cleon at 3.37.4, between

"fair judges" and "competitors".[104] Thomas attempts to tie these statements (and a

general disavowal of the concept of *agōnisma*) to Thucydides' "own person" by

comparing them to the description of the "contest of intelligence" at Corcyra (3.82.7)

being won by those prepared to commit the most rapid and severe treachery.[105] My

response to her treatment of the Corcyra *stasis* as a whole will speak to the

problems of equating moral condemnation with a rejection of moral relativity, but

for now I will say that I find an argument made from and supported by statements of

Cleon to form unsatisfactory evidence that the same opinions were held by

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[104] Thomas 2006, p. 89.
[105] Thomas 2006, p. 89.

Thucydides personally. I feel that Laurie Johnson offers a more persuasive argument for how we ought to read Cleon's statements. Assessing the same passage, in which she agrees that Cleon attacks the Athenian people "for requiring contests of orators and being swayed by hearsay, style, and novelty," Johnson points to the irony inherent in the scene, saying that "at the time, it was Cleon more than anyone else, with his own political interests and power" who used his speech primarily for his own aggrandizement rather than to aid the decision-making of the people.[106] An ironic reading of the scene may not tell the whole story, but in my view it is more tenable than an attempt to work our way into Thucydides' mind through Cleon's mouth.

I have referred already to Thomas' statement that Thucydides could not possibly belong to "this school of thought"; it is necessary before proceeding further to establish what, for Thomas, is the central tenet of the sophistic school. I think her opinions on the matter can be summed up by the sentence immediately preceding her exclusion of Thucydides from the sophistic school, where she says that "one of the common characteristics loosely associated with the Sophists is the notorious "sophistic relativity of values", that is, the idea that a set of values may be accepted by one group, and another set by another, and that neither set is necessarily superior, or clearly correct – an argument famously associated with Protagoras."[107] If the discussion were to stop here, I would agree that this is one way of accurately describing the sophistic thought, but Thomas' contention that Thucydides can be

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[106] Johnson 1993, p. 172.
[107] Thomas 2006, p. 90.

proved to reject the concept of moral relativity in the Corcyra narrative shows that she, unlike Nietzsche, misunderstands the full implications of sophistic relativity. The operative word in the sentence quoted above is "may", in the sense of possibility. The fulcrum of possibility, in the sophistic thought, tips on this word, in that it is undeniably *possible* for opposing sets of values to be held by opposing sides in a dispute for the very reason that it is undeniably *impossible* to determine in an objective or universal fashion the correctness of either judgment, provided that one rejects (as the sophists do, as Nietzsche does, *and* as Thucydides does) the existence of universal, independently existing moral standards. There is no higher authority (ideal, divine, or otherwise) to which the holders of disparate moral judgments can appeal to confirm or deny the correctness of their claims. One's own moral opinions, however ardently or sincerely held, can not simply be willed to become universal, real, or objectively binding; this does not imply, however, as Thomas seems to suggest, that an individual who accepts the relativity of morals cedes the ability to make the kind of moral judgments that Thucydides will in his recounting of the *stasis* at Corcyra. The realization that all moral judgments come from a subjective, partisan perspective does not mean that one ceases to have a perspective. Thucydides, in common with the sophists, affirms the constructed, fragile, contingent nature of moral judgments (it was this shared affirmation that Nietzsche perceived), but he is still capable of holding and does hold strong moral opinions on human actions and the proper ordering of human affairs, opinions he gives voice to in the Corcyra narrative.

"There is nothing about relativity of values here," writes Thomas, "for his analysis of the Corcyrean *stasis* is all about values being perverted, and the meaning of words being changed from meaning something noble to ignoble."[108] Thucydides' analysis does focus on the shifting values of words, but the very fact that this change is *able* to occur, even if such an occurrence is a terrible thing for mankind (which Thucydides certainly thinks it is), places Thucydides squarely in the sophist camp in terms of his conception of the nature of language, and opposed to the Platonic and Aristotelian views of language as an unchanging symbol capable of mirroring things and concepts in the apparent world.[109] The shifting meaning of words at Corcyra is a "perversion" in the sense that words are being used to mean things that Thucydides thinks they should not; but that the meaning of words can shift, and that they remain effective weapons in communicative competitions, fits entirely within the sophistic conception of the "trope", the linguistic wrestling turn, as the fundamental unit of language, language that acquires its own meaning within a particular *agōn* and for which "the only criteria for its 'proper' use are the arbitrary protocols of the contest itself."[110] Thus I find myself in strong disagreement with Simon Hornblower's commentary on Thucydides' statement at 3.83.1 that "Every form of iniquity took root in the Hellenic world because of *stasis*. The ancient simplicity (*to euēthes*) into which honor so largely entered was laughed down and disappeared; and society became divided into camps in which no man trusted his fellow." Hornblower perceives here a "clear, absolute, and conservative authorial rejection

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[108] Thomas 2006, p. 90.
[109] Consigny 1994, p. 13.
[110] Consigny 1994, p. 13.

of the "relativistic" moral teaching of certain of the Sophists."[111] It is entirely possible

for Thucydides to lament the actions of the Corcyrean *stasis*, to blame the

degradation of old bonds on the advent of sophistic thinking (although I am not at

all convinced that this is what we find occurring here), and even to pass a final

judgment that sophistry has had a ruinous effect on human relations in general, all

without denying that the sophistic world-view is a correct interpretation of reality.

Courage in the face of reality must necessarily entail an ability to divorce our

assessment of the way the world is from our own judgment of how the world and

people in it ought to be.

  Although I am forced to accept that it is possible that comments on the

degraded state of *to euēthes* may offer a window into the personal moral convictions

of Thucydides, I do not think that such a reading is either the most correct, or the

most helpful in interpreting the moral thrust of the *History* in its entirety. Modern

commentators generally agree that the plotting, arrangement, and presentation of

events in the *History*, as well as the content of its reconstructed speeches, strongly

indicate a work in which the subject of right and wrong is brought under

consideration. However, the specific moral questions being asked remain open to

debate. J.L. Creed, for example, argues that the *History* betrays an "obsession...with

the question of whether the Athenian empire was immoral,"[112] while Clifford Orwin

does not place the focal point of moral deliberation on one particular belligerent,

highlighting instead the issue of individual and collective human accountability for

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[111] Hornblower 1991, p. 487.
[112] Creed 1973, p. 225.

actions, and the reasoning that underpins punishment and retribution.[113]

But if the *History* is in one way or another a morally interested text, attempts to localize and assign the work's moral content to opinions attributable to Thucydides are generally found to be wanting. Potential examples of moral comment in Thucydides' own voice are discussed in greater detail in the following section. For the time being, it is worth noting that W.R. Connor refuses to construe the "absence of explicit evaluation" in Thucydides' voice to equal an "avoidance of judgment or feeling" in the work.[114] Connor regards the absence of explicit moral comment to be an important instrument in the *History's* larger objective, to force the reader to experience the pains of the conflict in their full horror and visceral intensity without the distancing presence of an interjecting narrator.[115] Similarly, Tim Rood tries to "look beyond Thucydides' reticence at the choices he constantly had to make in shaping his account," and finds that these choices of arrangement, timing, and the impersonal focalization of the narrative are used to interpret and explain the war on a deeper level than could be achieved through statements of Thucydides' personal moral opinions.[116] Like Connor and Rood, my own reading of the *History* argues that the work in its entirety conveys a moral message distinct from the isolated moral opinions of Thucydides that may appear in the course of the narration.

To better understand the main plank of that moral message – the relativity of

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[113] Orwin 1984, p. 485.
[114] Connor 1984, pp. 16-17.
[115] Connor 1984, p. 16.
[116] Rood 1998, p. 19.

values – it helps to return to Nietzsche's description of the Hellenic instinct that is possessed by Thucydides and the sophists, and absent in Plato and his successors. The Hellenic instinct is a "formula for the highest affirmation...a yes-saying without reservation, even to suffering, even to guilt, even to everything that is questionable and strange in existence."[117] It is worth remembering that the Hellenic instinct is an affirmation of the existence of the relativity of values, and likewise merely an affirmation, not an approbation, of the existence of the moral failures that Thucydides records at Corcyra.

Nearly every piece of modern scholarship that has set out to investigate the ethical content of Thucydides' work identifies the *stasis* at Corcyra as the moral heart of the *History*. I am in complete agreement that the interpretive key to understanding the moral stance of the *History* is to be found within these chapters. Much attention has been paid to the term *to euēthes*. "The ancient simplicity" has come to be the accepted translation, but it can also be rendered as "simple-minded" or "guileless".[118] J.L. Creed provides a thorough and even-handed interpretation of Thucydides' use of the word, saying that *to euēthes* here retains "its original and by now perhaps slightly old-fashioned sense of "goodness of character". At the same time there is a full awareness of the contemptuous notion of naivete generally present in the use of the word, combined with an intention of showing that the contempt is misplaced."[119] Thomas and Hornblower both construe the term as Thucydides' lament at the passing of stable, conservative codes of conduct. Recently,

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[117] Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, "Birth of Tragedy" §2.
[118] Liddell and Scott 1940, "*to euēthes*".
[119] Creed 1973, p. 229.

Gregory Crane and Mary Frances Williams have both adopted the phrase "the ancient simplicity" as the heading of their attempts to understand Thucydides' morality.[120] "The ancient simplicity" may very well serve as a useful descriptor for the personal moral opinions of Thucydides the individual, but it has little bearing on the moral truths of relativity and realism communicated by the *History* itself. The interpretive key to the *History* as a moral statement comes one chapter before Thucydides' forlorn invocation of the ancient simplicity. At 3.82.2 we are told that war, the object of Thucydides' relentless and penetrating inquiry, is a *biaios didaskalos* – a harsh teacher. I contend that to understand Thucydides' *History* it is necessary to divorce the personal moral opinions of Thucydides – his views on what actions and standards of conduct would yield the best results for states and individuals in a given situation – from the moral message of the *History* – the disclosure of the moral home truths made apparent by the harsh teacher.

4.3   Separating the *History*'s Morality from Thucydides'

To achieve this separation we must first decide what the personal ethics of Thucydides consist of. Descriptions of Thucydides' traditionalist, conservative morality are not in short supply.[121] On the whole, I agree with many of their conclusions regarding Thucydides' personal temperament, political sympathies, and opinions on correct actions; I disagree that these features constitute the sum total

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[120] Crane 1998, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity*; Williams 1998, *Ethics in Thucydides: The Ancient Simplicity.*
[121] J.R. Grant 1974; Lowell Edmunds 1975; D. Lateiner 1975.

(or even a particularly important aspect) of the moral content of the *History*. In the early 1970s, J.L. Creed and A.W.H. Adkins engaged in a debate on Thucydides' use of terms of ethical valuation. Adkins argued that the strongest terms of moral approbation, *agathos* and *aretē*, were inextricably linked to competitive virtues and individual success,[122] while Creed demonstrated that such terms could be and were applied to "quiet", cooperative virtues, but that Thucydides generally employed terms of moral valuation situationally, when competitive virtues were notably present, or cooperative virtues absent.[123] Adkin's and Creed's comments are a valuable contribution to the study of the development of Greek moral terminology, but do not address the moral viewpoint of this *History* itself.

Peter Pouncey, in his book evaluating Thucydides' pessimism, addresses the surprising scarcity of explicit moral comment in Thucydides' writing. He suggests that Thucydides comes closest to outright moral condemnation at 7.29.4, during his narration of the Thracian massacre of the Mycalessians.[124] The Thracians are a barbarous people, we are told, because confidence in their power makes them bloodthirsty (*to gar genos to tōn Thrakōn homoia tois malista tou barbarikou, en hō an tharsēsēi, phonikōtaton estin*). Despite this outburst, in other instances of murder and massacre Thucydides remains relatively silent, and the question of how Thucydides processes and relates to human suffering is an open one. At no point does Thucydides downplay or overlook the ruinous effects of war, and yet "his insistence on its destructiveness can seem impersonal, and his vantage point on its

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[122] Adkins 1975, p. 210.
[123] Creed 1973, p. 218.
[124] Pouncey 1980, p. 94.

progress at times one of cold and fatalistic distance".[125] Thucydides throughout the

History seems more interested in the effects of the growth and decay of political

power and social bonds than in the effects of personal calamities and the suffering of

individuals; instances of outrageous action prompting authorial moral outbursts are

the exception in the *History*. To my mind, this points to the intended function of the

History, to perceive clearly and to transmit difficult truths about the nature of

morality itself, rather than to convey Thucydides' personal moral reactions to

events.

      Looking at the *History* as a whole, and taking together the types of actions

Thucydides seems to rebuke, the persons and strategies he seems to support, and

the conventions he seems to approve of, some commentators have offered a

complete "Thucydidean morality", distilled into a series of injunctions. Creed

suggests a three-point morality: the state must be loyal to its group, whether

defined as a collection of allied states or Greece as a whole, the terms of treaties

should be observed, and aggression should be avoided, especially if that aggression

threatens the *autonomia* of a state.[126] I think that Paul Woodruff comes closest to

compiling a complete and accurate list of moral requirements that Thucydides, as an

individual, would agree with. In his view, Thucydides supports a six-point

"traditional morality" that, if followed, would lead to the best results for all parties:

"traditional law" (however that term is understood) must be maintained, disputes

should be settled without violence by a duly constituted authority, agreements

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[125] Pouncey 1980, p. 149.
[126] Creed 1973, pp. 224-225.

should be kept even when one party could stand to gain by violating their terms, punishment should only be meted out to the guilty and should take the form of proportional retribution, overreaching and avarice (*pleonexia*) must be resisted, and tyranny (being, in Woodruff's view, the natural result of the overturning of traditional law) must be avoided.[127] If the moral element of the *History* is to be sought with reference only to Thucydides' authorial comment and biographical information, then guidelines such as the ones provided by Creed and Woodruff are the best possible result; W.R. Connor, however, argues in compelling fashion that the *History* conveys its moral message in a very different fashion.

The issue, to Connor, is not only the scarcity of prescriptive moral comment in the *History*, but that moral lessons delivered in this fashion would be relatively weak and easy to dismiss. "A modest statement of the author's own views, an explicitly argued reinterpretation of the war, or a direct assault on widely held attitudes would at the best be met by respectful expressions of interest," Connor argues.[128] The *History* attains its power as a conveyor of moral message through entirely different means, by forcing its readers to "reexperience the war, to live through it again, seeing it fully, without averting their eyes from the most unpleasant or revealing episodes."[129] The narrative of the *History*, precisely by refraining from explicit moral censure, invites and activates a moralizing response from the reader, and the moral lessons drawn in this fashion are more powerful and more lasting because they are the creation of the reader himself. P.J. Rhodes has

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127 Woodruff 1993, xxvii.
128 Connor 1984, p. 16.
129 Connor 1984, p. 16.

correctly highlighted the potential dangers of an interpretation of the *History* that puts such an emphasis on reader-response. It presumes a degree of intentionality on the part of Thucydides that can never be proved with certainty.[130] This paper, in its defense, advocates a more conservative use of reader-response in establishing the moral thrust of the *History* than Connor does. He argued that it was possible, employing a reader-response interpretation, to unlock the "full emotional force" of particular passages and to recognize what was, to Thucydides, "the role of suffering" in his work.[131] This study, however, takes from Connor's reader-response method only the realization that Thucydides lack of moral comment indicates not a disinterest in moral issues, but a decision to leave the establishment of moral meaning in events to the individual reader. It does not claim any special insight into how Thucydides thought things should be; instead, it argues that the moral gift of Thucydides was to present things how they really are. By this reading, we are no longer grappling with a cold, dispassionate general, a chronicler of tragedy and suffering in almost perverse detail, disinterested in the moral ramifications of actions. Instead, we confront the work of a man who deeply perceived and steadfastly presented a world in which essential moral facts, revealed by war, underwrite the course of human events. We must accept, if we are to correctly discern the lessons of the harsh teacher, that "Thucydides has the strange faculty of seeing and telling the plain truth of a matter without trying in any way to bring it into line with the cherished beliefs of men."[132]

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[130] Rhodes 1998, *passim.*
[131] Connor 1984, p. 8.
[132] Perry 1937, p. 427.

4.4   Lessons of the Harsh Teacher

In trying to establish a synoptic picture of the "*History* morality" – the moral truths presented by the *History* itself rather than the moral judgments occasionally offered by Thucydides the indivudal– I find that the best solution may be, like Creed and Woodruff, to make a list. I have grouped the moral truths of the *History*, the lessons taught by the harsh teacher, under four general headings: realism, relativity, contingency, and human nature. I will discuss them in this deliberate order, since, beginning with the acceptance of realism, each truth leads into and informs the next, eventually functioning together to form the moral world-view of the *History*.

4.4.1   Morality has no existence independent of human beings

The essence of Thucydides' realism is the acceptance of the completeness of the apparent, human world. Thucydides' *History* admits no gods, mythological explanations, divine arbitration, or cosmic punishment. He is well aware that this marks a departure – and a potentially discomfiting one – from his predecessors, and cautions his readers in the *Archaeology* that "this history may not be the most delightful to hear, since there is no mythology in it."[133] Anyone who fears self-deception, and wishes to find out the way things really are, must do away with metaphysics and confine one's inquiries to human actions and causal explanations derived from the human condition, which retains its essential nature across generations and geographical boundaries.

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[133] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.22.

Of course, a disavowal of the Olympian gods is not necessarily a rejection of universal standards. Unlike major monotheistic religions, the Greek gods were themselves morally suspect, and did not act as a board of final moral arbitration, or pass judgment on humanity as a whole. In support of my argument that Thucydides rejected the real existence of universal moral standards outright, his disdain for oracles and soothsayers is more instructive. In the Greek world, pan-Hellenic institutions such as the Delphic oracle had a better claim than anyone to statements of universal right and wrong. At 6.26, Thucydides flatly rejects the notion that oracles have some access to objective truth, noting wryly that "for those who think there is some certainty in oracles, here is one case in which an oracle happened to be reliable." In the Melian dialogue, the Athenians urge the Melians to seize the opportunity to save themselves "by human means" (*anthrōpeiōs*), and not put faith into "blind" hopes, such as "divination, oracles, and other things which destroy men".[134] Even Nicias, whom Thucydides famously felt to have least deserved the bitter fate he received in the war, is rebuked for his devotion to metaphysical explanations, "for he was addicted to superstition and observations of that kind excessively".[135] Belief in the existence of objective, universal means of determining truth, right, and wrong are portrayed as being not only mistaken, but often dangerous.

Much as Nietzsche defines Thucydides against the negative image of Plato in "What I Owe to the Ancients", it may be helpful, if we are careful to avoid

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[134] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.103.2.
[135] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 7.50.4.

anachronism, to define Thucydides' concept of moral values as human constructs as a "realism" opposed to the "idealism" formulated by Plato a generation later. Plato's familiar conception of the Forms – of "justice", "the good" and other moral values as possessing real, universal, and timeless existence – provides a helpful counterpoint against which to better understand reality as it appears in Thucydides' *History*. For Thucydides, human beings, their actions, and the products of human minds such as moral values all inhabit the same, sensible world, and all are subject to success and failure, to growth, change, and decay. In the absence of explicit philosophical argumentation of the type practiced by Plato, we can only infer such positions from the narrative of Thucydides' *History*. However, I am hopeful that the coming discussion of Thucydidean relativity will demonstrate that the absence of any concept of permanent, ideal values can be the only tenable interpretation of Thucydides' thought. For now, it is worth remembering that Nietzsche, in no uncertain terms, argued that Thucydides rejected the existence of universal values; "according to the report of Thucydides...there exists neither a natural right nor a natural wrong".[136]

4.4.2   Values are relative and perspectival, and only have real existence when they are recognized by all parties in a relationship

The case for the relativity of values has already been made in relation to the

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[136] Nietzsche, *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, §31.

stasis at Corcyra, but its influence can be felt throughout the *History*. The Mytilenian debate and the Melian dialogue offer important examples of the effects of the relativity of values applied to real-world situations. The final speech of Pericles in Book Two, delivered shortly before he succumbed to the plague, is particularly interesting, then, because it offers an endorsement of the relativity of values on a conceptual level. Pericles asserts the notion that truth is a matter of consensus and consent, and that no one can claim access to any universal, revelatory form of truth. "It is a hard matter," he says, "to speak in due measure when there is no firm consensus about the truth."[137] Depending on the perspective of the hearer, whether they be well-disposed, or ignorant, or hostile, each individual will have their own notion of what is correct and truthful, and consensus must be achieved through rhetorical persuasion. Such a diversity of opinion is presented as an essential feature of the Athenian *polis*, a determining characteristic of their way of life. There is no universal private morality in Athens; citizens are free to conduct their affairs as they see fit, without interference from the laws or even private censure, which is felt to be an oppressive influence.[138] For the sake of the safety of the city, a consensus is achieved on public action and the established laws are respected. Notably, Pericles specifies that the city's "unwritten" laws (*agraphoi*) derive their force by their being consensual, their worth and value agreed upon by all (*homologoumenēn*).[139] Later in his oration, Pericles goes so far as to suggest that Athens' power is directly related

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[137] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.35.2: *chalepon gar to metriōs eipein en hōi molis kai hē dokēsis tēs alētheias bebaioutai.*
[138] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.37.2.
[139] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.37.3.

to the diversity of action and opinion open to its individual citizens, each able to establish values and opinions for himself. Pericles claims that "the power of this city" was obtained by "having this character", the fact that each Athenian "presents himself as a self-sufficient individual, disposed to the widest possible diversity of actions, with every grace and great versatility."[140] In Pericles' view at least, truths and values achieved through the consensus of individual perspectives are not morally suspect because they are neither universal nor objective; instead, Athens has achieved its standing by endorsing the relativity of values.

The dark side of this principle becomes apparent when disputes are not between equal citizens of a civil society, but between opposing agents of unequal power. In such situations, as between the Athenians and the Mytileneans and Melians, the concept of justice, lacking real existence, only has force when there is consensus between differing perspectives. In the Mytilenean debate, Diodotus asserts that there is no need even to speak in terms of justice: "We are not at law with them...we are in council instead, and must decide how the Mytileneans can be put to the best use for us."[141] As will be made even more explicit in the Melian dialogue, the idea here is that justice as a natural concept only exists between actors of equal power. Diodotus seems to suggest, in addition, that the principle of justice can be created artificially, if two parties agree or are compelled to submit their dispute to lawful arbitration. Outside of these means of human resolution, either through a contest of force or a process of human deliberation according to

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[140] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.41.
[141] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.44.4.

established and human-created regulations, justice has no natural meaning or universal existence, and cannot be invoked in this objective sense.

The Melian dialogue brings into even sharper relief some of the most important elements of "*History* morality" discussed already. The Melians appeal to the gods as a source of universal value, but are rebuked by the Athenians, who hold that the real axis of deliberation is not between right and wrong, but only between strong and weak (5.89). In that same chapter, the Athenians give clear expression to their principle that justice as a concept exists only between power-equals, a term that "only has validity in human argument when two sides can bring equal force to bear". It has been suggested that Thucydides' apparent reluctance not only to declare the eventual Athenian massacre of the Melians wrong, but even to explicitly call it an excessive break from moderation, is due to the fact that it is the Melians, for refusing to view the situation pragmatically and to perceive their relationship with the Athenians as it really is, who are the real objects of disapproval. In 1937, B.E. Perry argued that no one could properly appreciate the Melian dialogue if one insists on viewing the dispute as one between right and wrong – rather than correct and incorrect – action. Perry held that in this respect "the folly of the Melians rather than the cruelty of the Athenians is the chief subject of contemplation".[142] It may seem, as Connor suggests, that this episode is meant to activate the "evaluative instinct" in the reader, and to prompt the reader's condemnation of the Athenian actions in the absence of direct censure in the text itself. The fact that the side that

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[142] Perry 1937, p. 427.

committed the most famous atrocities of the Peloponnesian War eventually went on to lose it might be read as a kind of karmic retribution. I do not believe that such a thing exists in Thucydides. Instead, the final books seem to support the notion of the Athenian ambassadors to Melos, that only the powerful, those who have shared the perspective of power, are able to judge the actions of the powerful. Urging on his troops before their destruction in Sicily, Nicias justifies the actions of the Athenian empire, saying that they have not done anything unusual for people in their position. Others have invaded and committed violence on their neighbours in the past, but when defeated their punishment was not excessively severe (7.77). Although Nicias and his expeditionary force were killed, his assessment of the fate of Athens turned out to be accurate. When Athens finally capitulated, the Corinthians, who were jealous of but had never themselves achieved the same power and stature as the Athenians, called for their complete destruction. The Spartans, however, who had equaled Athenian power, and had themselves experienced the same forces of fear and ambition that accompanied the acquisition of an empire, decided to spare the city. Once the Spartans no longer felt themselves to be in danger, they were able to pursue a relatively gentle policy, and we are free to commend them for it. However, throughout his *History*, Thucydides demonstrates that the moral conventions that compel people to moderation and passivity are essentially artificial, conditional measures.

4.4.3 All conventions (of morality, law, justice, etc.) are contingent

The best way to understand Thucydides' view of moral conventions and moderation is to go back to the beginning, to the transition from a primitive, war-like existence to the birth of a civil society. So long as conditions were generally insecure, when "houses were unfenced and traveling was unsafe", everyone went about their business carrying arms at all times, and violence was common (1.6). The Athenians, we are told, were the first among the Greeks to lay down their day-to-day armour and adopt a more civil way of life, but Thucydides does not depict this shift as being the result of any kind of moral development or revelation. It was only increased safety and security, not any new notion of what was right or wrong, that allowed the Athenians to live unarmed, and Thucydides portrays the move as being one towards a more luxurious lifestyle (*trupherōteron*), directly preceding his account of the Athenians' adoption of sumptuous clothing and jewelery. The standards and conventions of civil society, if they are thought of as a luxury, can be cast aside when times are tough.

This is exactly what happens during the plague at Athens. The disease, we are told, was "too severe for human nature" (*tēn anthrōpeian phusin*).[143] The conventions that bound the city together in orderly operation in regular circumstances were torn apart, since their force and validity had always been contingent on the relative security and prosperity of the people who followed them.

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[143] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.50.

With these moderating factors removed, the artificiality and fragility of the laws became apparent, and they were quickly overturned. Burial regulations were violated (2.52.4), property ownership was disrespected (2.53.1), and everyone in all respects was interested only in the immediate fulfillment of their desires (2.53.2). The meanings of the words "good" (*kalon*) and "useful" (*chrēsimon*) were reinterpreted so that they came to refer only to actions that would yield pleasure quickly (2.53.3). Unlike Plato (and unlike, it must be admitted, the morally optimistic Protagoras who appears in Plato's dialogue), Thucydides has a dim view of the possibility of the resilience of moral codes. Neither moral education nor traditional values can be relied upon when stress is placed on an individual or on a society; before long, the codes of moral conduct agreed upon from a perspective of prosperity and security are overturned, and a cycle of moral decay begins, proceeding from avarice to a fatalistic sense of the necessity (*anankē*) of amoral action.[144]

The destructive effect of fear and self-interest on codes of moral conduct is universal in the *History*, affecting the relations between city-states as well as individuals. Thucydides attributes the beginning of the war itself to this process. At the congress at Sparta in Book One, the power of law and convention is steadily diminished. The Athenians, although certainly acting from their own self-interest, ask that their dispute with the Spartans be put to arbitration according to the terms of the Thirty Years Peace (1.73-1.78). Sthenelaidas, the Spartan ephor who pushed

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[144] Woodruff 1993, xxxiii.

for the declaration of war, claimed that it was justified because the Athenians had violated the terms of the peace already (1.86). Thucydides, however, in his analysis of the debate, questions the real effect of convention on the Spartans' decision, suggesting instead that they went to war motivated purely by fear of rising Athenian power (1.88).

In a state of war, the moral conventions that bound *poleis* in peacetime are removed, fear and self-interest direct the course of events, and forces of moderation are progressively weakened and destroyed. This process can occur within a society as well, and Thucydides' *History* is concerned, perhaps even more than inter-state warfare, with *stasis*, the internal war of individual against individual. Entire volumes have been published which exclusively interpret Thucydides' treatment of conflict within states.[145] The essential point to be made for this study is that Thucydides did not view *stasis* as an aberration, or terrible side-effect of war, but as its natural and inevitable counterpart. The *History* shows us that *all* moral conventions are artificial and contingent, not only the obviously and explicitly conditional bonds of inter-state treaty, but also the unwritten moral conventions that – in peacetime – govern the relationships of citizens, neighbours, and kin. *Stasis* stalks the narrative of the Peloponnesian War; as Peter Pouncey has noted, *stasis* at Epidamnus first brought the Athenian and Spartan empires into conflict before the outbreak of war, *stasis* at Plataea led to the violation of the peace treaty that made war inevitable, and the two cities who had been heavily involved with the *stasis* at Epidamnus would both come

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[145] Price 2001, *Thucydides and Internal War* .

to be wracked by internal strife of their own, Corcyra in Book Three, and Athens during the plague and with the oligarchic coup in Book Seven.[146] Both war between states and *stasis* between factions and individuals serve to demonstrate the truth of moral conventions, apparent to Thucydides from the earliest history of the Greeks. They have no independent validity and existence, but are a luxury of peacetime, contingent on security and prosperity; in the absence of the security that allows for morality, fear and self-interest determine everything.

4.4.4   When the conditions of morality are not present, affairs are governed by a human nature that is common to all

As I have argued throughout this paper, the primary ethical component of the *History* is its acknowledgment and presentation of morality as being constructed, contingent, and fragile. Three forms of stress depicted in Thucydides' narrative – plague, *stasis*, and war – all demonstrate how the artificial limitations human beings place on their own actions under the name of morality are removed by the strain of real events. The plague at Athens provides the purest example of this process, as the social ties and restrictions that bound together a previously united society are comprehensively broken by the terrifying bodily insecurity of the disease. Under these conditions, fear and self-interest are seen to exert the greatest forces on human actions. Faced with the prospect of their imminent mortality, people no longer feel the validity of moral conventions of religious, familial, or sexual

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[146] Pouncey 1980, p. 140.

propriety;[147] at the same time, however, self-interest and ambition cannot be extinguished, and the prevailing atmosphere of reversal – in health, status, and fortune – emboldened people to eke out what pleasure and advancement they could in their remaining lives.[148] As a stressor capable of overtaking human morality, plague is particularly instructive in understanding human nature because it is entirely apolitical; unlike in war or *stasis*, there are no external, ideological justifications for human actions. Whereas a person acting in the interests of their *polis* or political faction may be interpreted as violating one moral code in service of another, more partisan set of ethical rules, the Athenians during the plague offer a clear insight into the capabilities and motivations of self-interested individuals under fearful conditions.

As Clifford Orwin noted, while the dissolution brought about by plague is best seen as the depoliticization of a society, *stasis* is the radical politicization of life.[149] During the *stasis* at Corcyra, pervasive sectarian violence led to the same sense of mortal insecurity experienced in plague-struck Athens, but the existence of political factions led, in a perverse fashion, to the survival of a form of social convention. Even though, as Thucydides famously described, the meanings of values were shifted and distorted from their peacetime forms, people could still hope to earn a twisted form of honour and approbation from their peers. Honour, it must be remembered, was identified along with fear and self-interest as one of the three

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[147] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.51-52.
[148] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.53.
[149] Orwin 1988, p. 831.

overarching guides of human action by the Athenian delegates at Sparta.[150] Taking

the evidence of the plague at Athens and the *stasis* at Corcyra together, we learn that

so long as political groups remain intact, the hope for honour still has a role in

determining human conduct. But when even that possibility is removed by the

societal depoliticization of the plague, honour, along with other codes of social and

personal conduct, is revealed to be perishable, and only fear and self-interest remain

as the bedrock features of human nature.

   When compared to the pervasive stresses brought on by plague and *stasis*,

war between the intact societies of distinct *poleis* allows for the maintenance of

many forms of morality. Within a society, religious and civic standards are upheld,

and a degree of disagreement, both within the *ekklēsia* and the *Apella*, could be

withstood while still maintaining an essential social unity. Outside of the

conventions of particular treaties between states, the general ethical principle

endorsed by Thucydides is moderation, the notion that societies should not treat

one another more harshly than is necessary for their own security.[151] In constant

tension with this precept is the law of nature, visible throughout the history of

human affairs, that the strong exert their power on the weak.[152] As a war progresses,

the constant forces of fear and self-interest chip away at a society's ability for

moderation; no level of power is absolute, and as one rival responds to the

increased power of another the sense of fear in both societies increases, and the

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[150] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.75.3: *deos, timē, ōphelia.*
[151] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.76.3: *epaineisthai te axioi hoitines chrēsamenoi tēi anthrōpeiai phusei hōste hetepon archein dikaioteroi ē kata tēn huparchousan dunamin genōntai.*
[152] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.76.2: *aiei kathestōtos ton hēssō hupo tou dunatōterou kateirgesthai.*

level of security required to satisfy the self-interest of either is constantly pushed just out of reach. This heightening of fear leads to the abandonment of moderation (we see this process in action first with the rescinded order at Mytilene, then the slaughter at Melos), and eventually causes atrocities – acts of violence that overrun any strategic need of the moment itself, but felt to be necessary within the continuum of escalating force urged on by the forces of fear and self-interest.

Although the most famous of such atrocities in the *History* are committed by the Athenians, Thucydides' worldview accepts that human nature is the same for all, and all sides in a conflict are affected by the forces of fear and self-interest. While the Athenians massacre the Melians (5.116) and Aeginetan prisoners (4.57), the Spartans executed the surrendered men of Plataea for starkly fearful and self-interested reasons, judging that they were fit to be killed since they had done the Spartans no "good service" in the present conflict, and that they might be a danger to the Spartan side if they were allowed to live (3.86).

In the *Archaeology*, Thucydides goes one step further and demonstrates an opposite but related truth; just as the descent into gratuitous violence is caused by the stresses of war itself, and is not due to moral failings endemic to one particular side, peacefulness and stability are the happy consequences of external conditions, and cannot be traced to any particular moral revelation. We are told that while other parts of Greece experienced warfare and upheaval, Attica enjoyed centuries of relative stability, free from civil wars. Rather than this pointing to any moral strength on the part of the Athenians, Thucydides ties Attica's stability directly to its

relative worthlessness (1.2.5: *tēn goun Attikēn ek tou epi pleiston dia to leptogeōn astasiaston ousan*). *Any* resource or advantage leads to an increase of power, and it is the existence of power itself that sets in motion the cycle of reaction, struggle, and dissolution made inevitable by human nature, the grandest example of this process being the Peloponnesian War.

Although many commentators make an attempt to summarize Thucydides' vision of the process of human affairs, in my opinion Peter Pouncey does the best job of encapsulating the progression by which human nature inevitably leads societies into conflict and dissolution. Conflict, in Thucydides' view, is played out first between rival communities, then factions within a society, then finally between self-interested individuals.

> Fear and self-interest constantly lead people to assert their power and then to secure it. The stronger the power grows, the more easily it absorbs the weak, and the more danger it presents to the weak. There is therefore a tendency for rival power-blocs to grow up polarized against each other, impelled, as always, by fear and self-interest; weaker states have the choice of being absorbed by a stronger one, or of fleeing for protection to another strong power…The fear and self-interest that govern the building up of societies on both sides of a polarity will also ultimately bring them to war against each other - they constitute too great a threat, and their conquest too great a temptation, to each other…the pressures or necessities of war (death, disease, siege, immobility, shortage of food, forced levies, etc.) act to undo the solidarity of a society, first testing its alliances and control of its subjects, and ultimately producing civil conflict (*stasis*) within itself. Fear and self-interest are still the dominant forces, but they are exercised in an ever-narrowing circle; when *stasis* attacks the center, all collective action is seen to be impossible, and the war is of every man for himself, for his personal survival and personal advantage. Human nature is thus finally tracked to its proper ground in the human individual.[153]

Although Pouncey may have given this process its clearest enunciation, he is certainly not the only scholar to recognize it. For J.L. Creed, Thucydides' act of "tearing away the mask of conventional moralization and revealing the truth about

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[153] Pouncey 1980, xi-xii.

human behaviour"[154] raises a pressing moral question. What is the moral import, both for us and for his readers, of Thucydides' revelation? Put another way, is the portrayal of human conflict in the *History* merely the result of Thucydides "recognizing a natural tendency,"[155] as G.E.M. de Ste. Croix put it, or is it, as Creed fears, a permissive, even prescriptive moral statement? I think that on this question, as throughout my investigation of the ethical content of the *History*, it is best to maintain a firm division between the moral realities narrated by the *History* and the personal ethics of Thucydides. The former, Thucydides' commitment to portray humans and their motivations as they really are, forms the overarching ethical goal of the work, while the latter, Thucydides' personal convictions regarding how things ought to be, is reflected only occasionally, and quite often obliquely, in the text. It is best to recognize this division because it allows us to perceive that the *History* is not about the rightness or wrongness of the moral opinions the combatants bring into a war; the *History* is about what war does to morality itself. The strain of war, in time, reveals that all moral values are the constructs of human beings, and that they are contingent on and changeable according to the safety and security of the humans who made them. I therefore disagree strongly with Creed's claim that "the practical inference" derived from the *History* is that "moral issues can be legitimately ignored."[156] Rather, Thucydides shows us that when humans come into conflict and the conditions for man-made morality are destroyed by the stresses of war, moral issues *will* be ignored, and human actions will be guided only by fear, self-interest,

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[154] Creed 1973, p. 226.
[155] de Ste. Croix 1972, p. 36.
[156] Creed 1973, p. 226.

and (when the possibility exists) the hope of honour. If there are prescriptive

lessons for human action in the *History*, they can only be learned once this essential

lesson of the harsh teacher has been accepted.

5   Conclusions

W.R. Connor and Peter Pouncey are, to my mind, the two Thucydidean commentators who come closest to solving the "moral question" of the *History*. This is because they insist on the importance of drawing a division between the personal morality of Thucydides the individual, and the understanding of morality presented by his work. This realization of a separation between personal morality and *History* morality is a crucial step towards interpreting the seemingly insignificant role played by morals in the extraordinary events of the Peloponnesian War, in which morals and moralities were declared, championed, denied, begged for, perverted, and lost by the war's various participants at various stages in their journey away from material and societal security and into the stresses of war.

The question that remains, then, is what are we to do with a sophistic Thucydides, with his message of the fragility of moral values and the deleterious stresses of war? The answer may lie in the multidisciplinary nature of Thucydidean study. The study of Thucydides as a political scientist in modern Europe may have a longer pedigree, and have been conducted with more sustained intensity, than the appreciation of the historian by classical philologists. Throughout that study, the *History* has been prized for its supposed ability to instruct rulers and laymen alike in political conduct. The preface to Valla's 1452 Latin translation speaks of the "usefulness of true history", and Bishop Seyssel's French translation was made for the personal study of Louis XII, who found Thucydides to offer the most useful

lessons of any historian for a ruling monarch.[157] Thomas Hobbes' assessment of

Thucydides as the "most politick historiographer that ever writ," and his related

injunction to read Thucydides not as a mere narrator of events but as an analyst and

interpreter of societies and actions, is alive and well today, and Thucydides retains a

place on the reading list at West Point military academy.[158]

But the *History* of the sophistic Thucydides makes for a poor companion to

Clausewitz. Rather than comprising a Machiavellian handbook of feints and counter-

maneuvers, the narrative of the sophistic Thucydides is a long story of decline and

degradation. Instead of a prescription, the *History* offers an obituary. Self-interest

and fear, the essential driving forces of human behaviour, compel individuals and

societies into conflict, the stresses of conflict destroy the moral constructs that can

help to safeguard self-interest and ward off fear, and we all go down together. If the

sophistic Thucydides does have a prescriptive lesson to offer us in the present, it has

nothing to do with the machinations of *realpolitik*, and everything to do with a

recognition of the fragility of the moral values that can prevent human nature from

running its ruinous course unchecked.

The idea of a sophistic Thucydides as suggested by Nietzsche, of a

Thucydides who has the "courage in the face of reality" to accept and to portray in

his *History* the essential (if disheartening) truths about human morality perceived

by the sophists, offers the best possible solution to understand the role and function

of morality in the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Rather than assiduously

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[157] Schlatter 1945, p. 350.
[158] Harloe and Morley 2012, pp. 8-11.

restraining from moral comment in his writing, Thucydides' *History* becomes one

extended moral comment writ large, not on the rightness or wrongness of any

particular action or individual, but on the destructive and revealing effects of war

and insecurity on the human constructs of "right" and "wrong" themselves.

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