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## ***Piety, Universality, and History: Leo Strauss on Thucydides***

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Having compiled his history of the Peloponnesian War before “the change in thought that was effected by Socrates” occurred, Thucydides occupies no obvious place in Leo Strauss’s unique exposition of the history of political ideas.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Strauss made three substantial statements about Thucydides. The first statement, a published lecture, predictably demotes Thucydides to the subordinate status of a pre-Socratic.<sup>2</sup> But Strauss’s more substantial statement on Thucydides, the concluding essay of *The City and Man*, questions the lecture and indicates that Plato and Thucydides “may supplement one another.”<sup>3</sup> The essay ultimately concludes not only that Thucydides’ work is compatible with Plato’s and Aristotle’s but that “the quest for the ‘common sense’ understanding of political things which led us first to Aristotle’s *Politics* leads us eventually to Thucydides’ *War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*.”<sup>4</sup> Strauss, subverting the conventional pecking order, thus painted Thucydides not as a mere predecessor to Plato

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<sup>1</sup> There is only one oblique reference to Thucydides in Strauss’s early work *Natural Right and History*. (Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954], 120.)

<sup>2</sup> Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, “Thucydides: The Meaning of Political Philosophy,” Thomas Pangle, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 72.

<sup>3</sup> Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 140.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

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and Aristotle but as a political philosopher in his own right whose *History* marked the culmination rather than the origin of classical political thought. In light of this judgment, it is not surprising that Strauss's last published essay, "Preliminary Observations on the Gods in Thucydides' Work," consisted of an enigmatic piece meant simply to "modify some observations in the Thucydides-chapter of *The City and Man*."<sup>5</sup>

Strauss's mounting appreciation for Thucydides rested on his conviction that Thucydides addressed two fundamental problems: the problem of Athens and Jerusalem and the problem of history. Strauss himself is often painted as unfriendly to religion and unambiguously hostile to a historical view of philosophy. But a close reading of Strauss's writings on Thucydides severely complicates this picture. To reach this conclusion, a good deal of work is needed. In regard to Athens and Jerusalem, Strauss's statements appear contradictory on their face. In his lecture Strauss emphasized "the antagonism between Athens and Jerusalem" and concluded that "political history is of Greek, not of Hebrew, origin."<sup>6</sup> But Strauss enigmatically ended his long essay on the *Greek* historian as follows: "only by beginning at this point will we be open to the full impact of the all-important question which is coeval with philosophy although the philosophers do not frequently pronounce it—the question *quid sit deus*." Strauss is somewhat more explicit though still maddeningly vague about Thucydides' relevance to the problem of history. Strauss looks back to Thucydides to find a pre-modern historical approach that can help navigate around the problems that the new history, or historicism, has created. According to Strauss, since "history has become a problem for us," we must try to understand "what is the precise character of that Greek wisdom which issues in political history."<sup>7</sup>

*Strauss's  
reputed  
hostility to  
historical view  
of philosophy  
overblown.*

By explicating Strauss's original though imperfect reading of Thucydides, according to which the *History* should be read as a paean to the radically distinct forms of moderation that manifested themselves in Athens and Sparta, the essay will show how

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<sup>5</sup> Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, "Preliminary Observations on the Gods in Thucydides' Work," Thomas Pangle, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 89.

<sup>6</sup> Strauss "Thucydides," 73.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

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Strauss brought Thucydides into a larger discourse about both history and religion. In doing so it will attempt to reconcile the lecture and the essay while also incorporating into the analysis the article on the gods in Thucydides. The essay will suggest that Strauss's reading of Thucydides fits neatly into the *City and Man*, which unveils a uniform classical tradition of political philosophy at the heart of which is a sober recognition of the limits of politics and at the height of which is Thucydides. This Thucydides-centered interpretation of the *City and Man*, moreover, undermines Strauss's image as an uncompromising natural rights advocate. Using the startling Preface to the *City and Man* as a guidepost, the essay will hypothesize instead that, following Plato, Strauss conscientiously employed "political speech" to advance principles he considered prudent, principles such as the power of ideas in the political arena and the existence of just gods. At the same time, however, following Thucydides, Strauss conveyed deep-seated skepticism of the power of ideas in the political arena as well as the existence of the gods outside of the political arena.

### ***The Philosophic Historian***

*Thucydides' history dealt with universal truths.*

Thucydides' project, according to Strauss, only resembled the modern historian's project. While Thucydides may have subjected his report to "the most severe and detailed test possible," he also "inserts speeches, composed by him," into his narrative, which "say what was demanded of them."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, contrary to the modern historian, whose goal is to give an accurate answer to a particular historical question, Thucydides conceived of his work as "a possession for all time."<sup>9</sup> In Strauss's view, Thucydides therefore cannot be understood as a historian alone, because his history does not deal only with particulars. Aristotle claimed that "poetry is more philosophic and more serious than history, for poetry states the universals."<sup>10</sup> But Strauss's Thucydides was a different type of historian. Since the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides' subject, was so great, it could be, in Thucydides' judgment, the source of universal truths.<sup>11</sup>

Strauss's agreement with the generally held view that

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<sup>8</sup> Thucydides, I.22; Strauss, *City and Man*, 142.

<sup>9</sup> Thucydides, I.22.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451a36-b11.

<sup>11</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 155.

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Thucydides was both a historian and a political philosopher is at the core of his understanding of Thucydides. Strauss makes a striking comparison between Thucydides and Plato: “Plato too can be said to have discovered in a singular event—in the singular life of Socrates—the universal and thus to have become able to present the universal through presenting the particular.”<sup>12</sup> The comparison, however, goes further. In regard to Plato’s *Republic*, Strauss argues that “one cannot separate the understanding of Plato’s teaching from an understanding of the form in which it is presented.”<sup>13</sup> Plato’s position for Strauss lies between the lines of the narrative because the narrative is a drama. Following Hobbes, who asserted that “in a good history ‘the narrative doth secretly instruct the reader, and more effectually than can ever be done by precept,’” Strauss thus argues that Thucydides’ own world-view, which is necessarily separate from the specific views articulated in the political speeches, can be extracted by the careful reader.<sup>14</sup> “Power politics, therefore,” despite its clear importance in the speeches, is only one aspect of Thucydides’ vision, while “what one may call human or the humane” constitutes an equally important aspect.<sup>15</sup> The relation between these two forces, however, can only be divined once one understands Thucydides’ independent teaching. In order to tease out that teaching, Strauss starts by analyzing Thucydides’ stated opinions.

*Universal  
presented  
through the  
particular.*

Strauss’s approach first leads to the conclusion that Thucydides admired Sparta. In the archeology, Thucydides observed that Sparta “at a very early period obtained good laws, and enjoyed a freedom from tyrants which was unbroken; it has possessed the same form of government for more than four hundred years.”<sup>16</sup> Thucydides was enamored of Sparta’s moderation. In his praise for Chios, Thucydides stated that, “after the Spartans, the Chians are the only people that I have known who knew how to be wise

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>13</sup> Strauss, “Thucydides,” 52.

<sup>14</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 144. On this basis Strauss elsewhere dismisses Weber’s reading of Thucydides according to which the Athenian envoys at Melos simply state Thucydides’ view. According to Strauss, “Weber did not pause to wonder how Thucydides himself conceived of the dialogue.” Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 58.

<sup>15</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 144.

<sup>16</sup> Thucydides, I.18.

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in prosperity.”<sup>17</sup> Spartan moderation, according to Strauss’s reading, is inseparable from Spartan piety. The Spartans even stopped military campaigns because of bad sacrifices.<sup>18</sup> During the civil war at Corcyra, which represented the height of immoderation for Thucydides, “religion was in honor with neither party,” and it is obvious to Strauss that “Thucydides disapproves of breaches of the divine law.”<sup>19</sup> Such breaches go hand in hand with civic decline, as is evidenced by the plague in Athens, when “burial rights were entirely upset” and “fear of gods or law of man there was none.”<sup>20</sup>

Staying with the explicit judgment approach, Strauss points to perhaps the most enigmatic comment in the *History*, namely Thucydides’ eulogy for Nicias: “This or the like was the cause of the death of a man who, of all the Hellenes in my time, least deserved such a fate, seeing that the whole course of his life had been regulated with strict attention to virtue.”<sup>21</sup> At this point, Strauss accepts Thucydides at his word and concludes that, for Thucydides, “the connection between dedication, guided by law and surely also by divine law, to virtue, between desert and fate, points to the rule of just gods.”<sup>22</sup> Once Strauss attributes this view to Thucydides, he can draw far-reaching conclusions about other passages in the *History*. He can assert confidently that a tacit but unmistakable connection exists between Pericles’ funeral oration, which, “though pronounced in obedience to a law, opens with a blame of that very law,” and the plague that ravaged Athens.<sup>23</sup> Although Pericles is praised highly by Thucydides, that is only because Pericles “saved democracy from itself.”<sup>24</sup> In fact, Thucydides explicitly denied that Pericles’ regime was the best that Athens could achieve when he praised the rule of the 5000 during the twenty-first year of the war.<sup>25</sup> Strauss argues further that a connection exists between the immoderate and impious Athenian position at Melos and the disastrous Sicilian Expedition. For

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII.24.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, V.55, V.116.

<sup>19</sup> Strauss, “The Gods,” 96.

<sup>20</sup> Thucydides, II.52-3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, VII.86.

<sup>22</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 150.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>25</sup> Thucydides, VIII.97.

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Strauss's first Thucydides, "a sound regime is a moderate regime dedicated to moderation."<sup>26</sup> But that is not all. Piety demands that "the city must transcend itself."<sup>27</sup> That, according to Strauss, "would seem to be the most comprehensive instruction which Thucydides silently conveys, the silent character of the conveyance being required by the chaste character of his piety."<sup>28</sup> If this is the case, the reason for Thucydides' neglect of economic and cultural matters is clear—that they were irrelevant to a pious man. Strauss's preliminary judgment is that, because of his devotion to piety and moderation, Thucydides favored Sparta over Athens.

But Strauss backs away from that preliminary conclusion, because the very first explicit judgments in Thucydides' narrative contradict it. Thucydides declares that the Peloponnesian War was "the greatest movement" and expresses his conviction regarding the "weakness of ancient times."<sup>29</sup> These premises are essential for his claim that it was "*the war, war writ large,*" a war which will "enable one to understand not only all past and future wars but the past and future things simply."<sup>30</sup> Strauss explores two dichotomies in the *History*: motion versus rest and Greekness versus barbarism. According to Strauss, Thucydides views the Peloponnesian War as the motion that succeeds the greatest rest and thus the peak of Greekness. "In studying that war, one sees the Greeks at their peak in motion; one begins to see the descent. The peak of Greekness is the peak of humanity."<sup>31</sup>

Strauss develops this point at great length because it is irreconcilable with a black-and-white preference for the Spartan manner. In fact, it is no different from the view of the Athenian statesman Pericles. In the funeral oration, Pericles proclaims that, "if our remote ancestors deserve praise, much more do our fathers."<sup>32</sup> Pericles goes on to praise his own generation in the highest terms. Thucydides shared Pericles' view, and therefore his praise of the Spartans' veneration for their ancestors, which is a key part of their moderate temperament, must, according to Strauss, be recon-

*Thucydides' surface teaching contradictory.*

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<sup>26</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 153.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Thucydides, I.1, I.3.

<sup>30</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 155-6.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, I.57.

<sup>32</sup> Thucydides, II.36.

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sidered. Thucydides had disdain for “the most ancient antiquity.” As such, “Thucydides’ argument in favor of Sparta, of moderation, of the divine law—important as it is—is only part of his teaching.”<sup>33</sup> Strauss’s explicit-judgment approach fails to yield a conclusion because Thucydides’ surface teaching is contradictory.

In the first sections of his essay, Strauss does not deal with Thucydides’ explicit comments about the gods. Yet these comments only strengthen Strauss’s argument against reading Thucydides as a knee-jerk supporter of Sparta. Thucydides, as we know, admired the Spartans’ piety. Yet he himself proves remarkably impious. Regarding a dispute about the meaning of an oracle foretelling the plague, Thucydides asserted that “the people made their recollection fit in with their suffering.”<sup>34</sup> Thucydides dismissed the Athenians’ faith in oracles flippantly: “with this oracle events were supposed to tally.”<sup>35</sup> Thucydides also dismissed the Spartan demand that the Athenians cleanse themselves from the pollution of Cylon as a “pretext,” as if no one else could have held pious views because he did not. Strauss writes: “The Spartan demand is no doubt ridiculous in the eyes of Thucydides.”<sup>36</sup> Thucydides did not share the piety of a Spartan even though he respected Sparta.

### ***The Speeches: Right versus Compulsion***

Since Thucydides’ explicit judgments do not convey a complete or consistent argument, Strauss pushes his analysis further. The speeches in Thucydides’ *History* offer many judgments. Yet the speeches, according to Strauss, must be taken at least somewhat seriously as historical documents. There is endless scholarly debate about the historicity of the speeches, most of which revolves around Thucydides I.22.1.<sup>37</sup> At least at the outset, Strauss adopts a

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Thucydides, II.54.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 180.

<sup>37</sup> According to the Crawley translation, I.22.1 reads as follows: “With reference to the speeches in this history, some were delivered before the war began, others while it was going on; some I heard myself, others I got from various quarters; it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word in one’s memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what was really said.”

Emphasizing Thucydides’ vague qualification, Werner Jaeger describes the

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relatively trusting position, asserting that Thucydides “decided to write the speeches himself, keeping as close as possible to the gist of what the speakers had said.”<sup>38</sup> Yet “the wording of the speeches is Thucydides’ own work.”<sup>39</sup> The speeches, in Strauss’s judgment, are a particularly useful tool because they precede and succeed actions, and can therefore be measured based on their accuracy concerning previous deeds and their insight about future deeds. By quoting the speeches, moreover, Thucydides established a clear separation between his speech and the political speeches. “By integrating the political speeches into the true and comprehensive speech,” Strauss contends, “he makes visible the fundamental difference between the political speech and the true speech.”<sup>40</sup> The speeches represent definite points of view that were appropriate to political situations. Thucydides’ speech, on the other hand, was, in Strauss’s view, impartial and comprehensive.

*Points of view  
juxtaposed  
against  
comprehensive  
judgments.*

Strauss thus identified an approach to understanding Thucydides that goes beyond just studying his explicit judgments. The speeches and the explicit judgments must be viewed together. Strauss begins to implement his new approach by pointing to the relationship between the very first speeches in the *History*. The first speech, given by the Corcyreans in the hope of convincing the Athenians to intervene in Epidamnus on their behalf, begins with the word “justice.” The opposing speech, given by the Corinthians in the hope of dissuading the Athenians from supporting Corcyra, begins with the word “necessity.” According to Strauss, “these two opening words indicate the point of view from which Thucydides looks at the Peloponnesian War.”<sup>41</sup>

So what is the relationship between compulsion and right for Thucydides? Strauss turns to Thucydides’ famous judgment that “the growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this in-

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speeches as “the medium through which Thucydides expresses his political ideas.” (Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, trans. Gilbert Highet, vol.2 [Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1954], 391.) Donald Kagan, on the other hand, stressing the second part of Thucydides I.22.1, concludes that “we are obliged to accept the essential authenticity of the speeches reported.” (Donald Kagan, “The Speeches in Thucydides and the Mytilene Debate,” *Yale Classical Studies* vol. 24 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975], 78.).

<sup>38</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 164.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.



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spired in Sparta, made war inevitable.”<sup>42</sup> The Athenians, in other words, compelled the Spartans to fight. Were the Spartans compelled to violate right, however? To answer this question Strauss must isolate Thucydides’ judgment of who broke the Thirty Years Peace. At first glance, it seems clear that Athens did, because the oracle promises support for the Spartan cause. But Thucydides was not a believer in oracles, and, moreover, even the Spartans themselves soon doubted the oracle, fearing that she had been bribed. When they appeal to Athens to make peace after the disaster at Pylos, the Spartans admit that no one knows who broke the peace. Thucydides then states unambiguously that the war began with the Spartan invasion of Attica. Finally, the Spartans themselves come to believe that they had originally broken the treaty, “both on account of the attack of the Thebans on Plataea in time of peace, and also of their refusal to listen to the Athenian offer of arbitration . . . for this reason they thought they deserved their misfortunes.”<sup>43</sup> Despite their initial confidence, the Spartans for Strauss’s Thucydides were thus compelled to violate right.

No discussion of necessity in Thucydides would be complete, however, without a consideration of what Strauss first called “the Athenian thesis.”<sup>44</sup> That thesis states that the powerful by necessity expand their empire to the farthest extent possible. In the words of the Athenians, the strong “by a necessary law of their nature rule wherever they can.”<sup>45</sup> The thesis is stated in different forms throughout the *History*, and it is unclear how Thucydides judges that thesis. According to Strauss, however, “the issue is decided in the dialogue between the Athenians and the Melians.”<sup>46</sup> The unparalleled significance that Strauss attaches to the Melian Dialogue is obvious because Strauss paraphrases the dialogue in its entirety. For Strauss, Thucydides conveys an implicit judgment in the dialogue against the Melians: “There is no debate in Thucydides’ work in which the Spartan or the Melian view defeats the Athenian view.”<sup>47</sup> Even the Spartans will favor political expedience over right when necessary, as evidenced by their behavior at

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<sup>42</sup> Thucydides, I.23.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, VII.18.

<sup>44</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 183.

<sup>45</sup> Thucydides, V.104.

<sup>46</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 184.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

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Plataea. Why then are the Spartans moderate? Strauss answers that for Thucydides the Athenian thesis “is not refuted by the facts of Spartan moderation.”—“Sparta was moderate because she had grave troubles with her Helots.”<sup>48</sup> Strauss’s Thucydides thus reveals an unmistakably Athenian world-view even if he disapproves of Athens.

### ***The Melian Dialogue and the Sicilian Expedition***

If Thucydides does not share the Melian view of the gods, which is that the gods reward the just and punish the unjust, what is the connection between the Melian Dialogue and the Sicilian Expedition? Much has been made of that relationship, because the juxtaposition of the dialogue, which shows Athens at the height of her power, and the expedition, which ends with the Athenian general Nicias virtually repeating the Melian view, is clearly deliberate.<sup>49</sup> Strauss insists that the connection between the dialogue and the expedition must be seen in light of Thucydides’ explicit explanation of the expedition’s failure—“the emancipation of private interest in post-Periclean Athens.”<sup>50</sup> Yet the dialogue is about public interest of the most extreme kind, namely the desire for empire. In fact, it mirrors Pericles’ last speech, in which he admits that “the empire is a tyranny” while defending the empire on the basis of “the glory of the future.”<sup>51</sup> Strauss must somehow link Thucydides’ judgment about private interest ruining the Sicilian Expedition with the fiercely public-minded strain of thought that runs through Pericles’ last speech and the dialogue. He argues:

Those who contend that there is a connection between the Melian Dialogue and the Sicilian disaster must have in mind a connection between the two events which Thucydides intimates rather than sets forth explicitly by speaking of the emancipation of private interest in post-Periclean Athens. The Melian Dialogue shows nothing of such an emancipation. But it contains the most unabashed denial occurring in Thucydides’ work of a divine law which must be respected by the city or which moderates the city’s desire for “having more.” The Athenians on Melos, in contradis-

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>49</sup> For a discussion of various interpretations of the relation between the dialogue and the expedition, see Antony Andrewes, “The Melian Dialogue and Pericles’ Last Speech,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 6 [1960].

<sup>50</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 193.

<sup>51</sup> Thucydides, II.64.

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*Tyranny in  
public sphere  
influences  
private  
behavior.*

inction to Callicles or Thrasymachus, limit themselves indeed to asserting the natural right of the stronger with regard to the cities; but are Callicles and Thrasymachus not more consistent than they? Can one encourage, as even Pericles and precisely Pericles does, the city's desire for "having more" than other cities without in the long run encouraging the individual's desire for "having more" than his fellow citizens?<sup>52</sup>

Strauss has thus established a direct relationship between the arguments presented by the envoys to Melos and the Athenian failure at Sicily and even the eventual civil war. As Clifford Orwin puts it, "the introduction of the 'Athenian thesis' into domestic affairs proves disastrous."<sup>53</sup> The justification for tyranny cannot be bracketed and applied only in the public sphere, according to Strauss, and the Athenians at Melos defend tyranny in strong language. During the Archidamian War, Pericles was able to subvert Athenian democracy and maintain order, but after Pericles' death, the position articulated in the dialogue leads inevitably to the domestic strife that undermines the expedition. The "Athenian thesis" as expressed at Melos is self-mutilating.

But Strauss's Thucydides cannot simply embrace Spartan moderation as the alternative to Athenian daring, because he shares the Athenian view that fear compels cities to exert their power, and he shows us that Spartan moderation itself is the result of compulsion. Moreover, Thucydides mocks Spartan piety. Does that mean that the self-defeating character of the Athenian thesis must simply be endured? Strauss responds to this problem by exposing a second connection between the Dialogue and the Expedition through an analysis of the statesman Nicias, the "the Athenian who came closest to holding the 'Spartan' or 'Melian' view."<sup>54</sup> Thucydides, according to Strauss, exhibits the connection between Nicias and the Spartans by describing many of Nicias's deeds before recounting a single speech. Nicias, like his Spartan counterparts, lacked the ingenuity of Athenians like Cleon and Alcibiades, and when he did speak, he favored a moderate policy aimed at restoring peace with Sparta. Like a Spartan, Nicias cannot persuade his audience with words, and is ultimately left in sole command of the expedition he opposed. As the tide turns against Ath-

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<sup>52</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 193.

<sup>53</sup> Clifford Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 195

<sup>54</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 200.

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ens, Nicias begins to resemble the Melian opponents of Athens: “He is hopeful for the future because he has led a virtuous life.”<sup>55</sup> He tells his soldiers that “if any of the gods was offended at our expedition, we have already been amply punished,” thus directly contradicting the theology expressed by the Athenian envoys at Melos. Nicias is tortured to death and his army is treated like animals by the vengeful Syracusans. Melian faith leads to disaster for Nicias and Athens.

Why then does Thucydides call Nicias “a man who, of all the Hellenes of my time, least deserved such a fate, seeing that the whole course of his life had been regulated with strict attention to virtue”?<sup>56</sup> Strauss explains this notoriously tricky passage as follows:

Thucydides’ judgment on Nicias is imprecise, as precise as his judgment on the Spartans according to which the Spartans above all others succeeded in being moderate while prospering: both judgments are made from the point of view of those on whom he passes judgment. They are precise by being incomplete. His judgment of the Spartans does not reveal the cause of Spartan moderation and hence its true character. His judgment on Nicias does not reveal the true character of the connection between the fate of men and their morality. Nicias like the Spartans believed that the fate of men or cities corresponds to their justice and piety, to the practice of virtue as understood by old established custom. But this correspondence rests entirely on hope, on unfounded or vain hope.<sup>57</sup>

Strauss thus contends that Thucydides’ judgment of Nicias is the judgment of the man who is being judged, and when it is taken in context, it is hopelessly incomplete. Nicias perishes because he has hope in gods that will not help him. Therefore, “the view set forth by the Athenians on Melos is true.”<sup>58</sup> The link between the Melian view and Nicias’s view is the basis for a second connection between the dialogue and the expedition—“not indeed the gods, but the human concern with the gods without which there cannot be a free city, took terrible revenge on the Athenians.”<sup>59</sup> The Melian thesis, as such, which is repeated by the Athenian Nicias, is as self-destructive as the Athenian thesis. The human concern with the

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>56</sup> Thucydides., VII.86.

<sup>57</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 208-9.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

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*Athens and  
Sparta at their  
extremes both  
flawed.*

divine in Athens, which manifested itself most strongly after the affair of the hermae, led the Athenians to choose the pious leader Nicias to lead a campaign that only the impious Alcibiades could win. Men with blind faith chose a leader with blind faith who led the Athenians to become Melians. Ultimately, the two connections between the Melian Dialogue and the Sicilian Expedition succeed in undermining both the Athenian view and the Melian view as they are expressed in the Dialogue. Strauss has reached the same conclusion that he reached on the basis of explicit judgments alone—Athens and Sparta at their extremes are both flawed. Yet as we will see, while the first method yields only a contradiction, the new approach will yield a specific conclusion.

Before proceeding with Strauss's argument, it is worth pointing out a weakness in his method. Without the argument that Thucydides adopts various perspectives to convey the thoughts of actors, Strauss cannot reach the definite conclusions he does about Thucydides. His argument about the eulogy is therefore of great pragmatic value, but it is difficult to maintain consistently. Thucydides' eulogy for Nicias does require an explanation, since it differs drastically from Thucydides' other judgments about piety; nevertheless, how can Strauss choose which comments reflect Thucydides' true beliefs and which comments reflect the beliefs of his characters? In most cases, Strauss takes Thucydides' explicit judgments, such as his judgment concerning "the weakness of the ancients," at face value. The method by which he chooses exceptions is highly selective, and it is based exclusively on the principle that Thucydides, like the Hebrew bible in the minds of rabbis, cannot ultimately contradict himself. Other scholars have addressed the contradictions by raising the "Thucydidesfrage," or the question of composition. Thucydides scholars have devoted themselves to judging when Thucydides wrote each section of the *History* and explaining vastly different conclusions on that basis. Clifford Orwin dismisses these scholars by noting that "there was never any consensus as to which passages to assign to each epoch." Following R. W. Connor as well as Strauss, Orwin contends that "these supposed blemishes are aspects of the work's perfection."<sup>60</sup> Strauss himself does not comment on the composition question as a whole. In his last essay, however, Strauss does com-

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<sup>60</sup> Orwin, *Humanity*, 6.

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ment on the contention that “the peculiarity of Book VIII is due to its incompleteness.”<sup>61</sup> Strauss answers: “This is no more than a plausible hypothesis. The peculiarity of Book VIII must be understood in the light of the peculiarity or peculiarities of the bulk of the work.”<sup>62</sup> Strauss at least admits that the composition question should be taken seriously, and that his own approach can be challenged with “a plausible hypothesis.” In some sense, Strauss, in marked contrast to Thucydides’ own approach, chooses to “understand the low in light of the high”<sup>63</sup> as he reads Thucydides, for he refuses to believe that circumstance or chance determined what Thucydides wrote. The argument of Strauss’s essay depends on the assumption that the “Thukydidessfrage” can be ignored because all inconsistencies in Thucydides result from the historian’s artistry. Strauss’s reinterpretations of explicit statements are certainly ingenious, but we should note that they are based on an interpretive choice that is partly made on the basis of hope.

*Strauss’s  
method partly  
based on hope.*

### ***The Nobility of Athens and Sparta***

The Sicilian Expedition exposes the bankruptcy of both the Athenian and the Melian world-views. Power cannot save the city from itself and piety cannot save the city from its enemies. Does Thucydides, then, disapprove of both Athens and Sparta? Strauss acknowledges that he has yet to “do justice to the truth intended by the ‘Spartan’ praise of moderation and the divine law,” and admits that “there are different kinds of compulsion” that are relevant in the analysis of Athenian behavior.<sup>64</sup> On the Athenian side, Strauss contends that “what compelled and compels her is not merely fear and profit, but also something noble, honor; accordingly, she exercises her imperial rule in a juster, more restrained, less greedy manner than her power would permit her to do.”<sup>65</sup> Pericles’ funeral speech, above all else, celebrates Athenian liberality even while praising the empire. “It is only the Athenians who fearless of consequences, confer their benefits not from calculation

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<sup>61</sup> Strauss, “The Gods,” 101.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, “Preface to Spinoza’s *Critique of Religion*” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 225.

<sup>64</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 209-10.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

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of expediency, but in the confidence of liberality.”<sup>66</sup> Thucydides, according to Strauss, agrees with Pericles on this point, as evidenced by the contrast he sets up between the Athenian treatment of the Mytilenians and the Spartan treatment of the Plataeans. The Athenians are ultimately persuaded not to kill the Mytilenians by an argument forwarded by an Athenian, namely Diodotus. That argument is only about expediency because “the Athenians in contradistinction to the Spartans assume that killing must serve a purpose other than the satisfaction of the desire for revenge.”<sup>67</sup> Spartan piety, on the other hand, does not lead to liberality. The Spartans butchered the Plataeans despite the Plataean appeals to justice simply because they could. No oracle or oath prevented them from their horrific actions. Piety, as Thucydides shows, can certainly lead to moderation, as evidenced by the Spartan restraint against the helots at Ithome, who were supposedly protected by an oracle. But Spartan piety, in contrast to Athenian liberality, is rigid. The nobility of Athens, according to Strauss’s reading, lies in her ability to be moderate within the confines of compulsion.

The need for honor, moreover, motivates Athens in a way that it never motivates Sparta, and that honor even comes forth in the context of the Sicilian expedition. “The Sicilian expedition,” Strauss argues, “undertaken against the will of Nicias, originated in the nobility of her daring—of her willingness to risk everything for the sake of everlasting glory.” The enemies of Athens “have to become in a manner Athenians in order to defeat her.”<sup>68</sup> They have to devote themselves completely to their city just as Athenians do.

But Thucydides will not simply take one side in the conflict between Athens and Sparta. Athenian moderation results from liberality, and liberality disappears under duress. Honor is tenuous as compared to fear and interest, and the Athenian treatment of the Melians is not honorable. Spartan piety may be rigid, but at least it is predictable. Moreover, Spartan piety and the moderate life that proceeds from it thwart civil strife. “There is surely a kind of Athenian atrocity which has no parallel in Sparta: the Athenians’ savage rage against each other after the mutilation of the Hermae and the profanation of the mysteries.”<sup>69</sup> Strauss expresses

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<sup>66</sup> Thucydides, II.40.

<sup>67</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 215.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>69</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 217.

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Thucydides' final view as follows: "Sparta and Athens were worthy antagonists not only because they were the most powerful Greek cities but because each was in its own way of outstanding nobility."<sup>70</sup> Despite the severe limitations placed on them by fear and the civil strife that results from that fear, the Athenians are noble because they crave honor and that craving leads to rare gestures of humanity that would be inconceivable to a Spartan. Moreover, that desire for honor leads them to show supreme daring that could only be defeated with similar daring on the part of men like Lysander. The Spartans, on the other hand, are noble because they maintain a moderate but powerful regime, even if that regime can be exceedingly brutal.

***Thucydides: Political Philosopher***

Thucydides is thus both a critic and an admirer of Athens and also Sparta for Strauss, and Strauss isolates Thucydides' political philosophy by combining those aspects of Athens and Sparta that Thucydides admires. In typically mind-boggling language, Strauss concludes: "It is hard but not altogether misleading to say that for Thucydides the pious understanding or judgment is true for the wrong reasons; not the gods but nature sets limits to what the city can reasonably attempt. Moderation is conduct in accordance with the nature of human things."<sup>71</sup> Strauss's Thucydides, as such, believes in Spartan moderation for Athenian reasons. He sees moderation as the highest political end not because of divine law but because of the natural consequences of immoderate behavior, namely civil strife and decline. Wisdom supports moderation. As Strauss states: "The virtue which can and must control political life is moderation. In most cases moderation is produced by fear of the gods and of divine law. But it is also produced by true wisdom. In fact, the ultimate justification for moderation is exclusively true wisdom."<sup>72</sup> Thucydidean wisdom, which arises from observation of "the greatest motion," leads to the conclusion that Spartan moderation is admirable but Spartan piety is misguided. Moreover, Athenian honor, during the rare moments when it results in moderation, is also admirable, but Athenian recklessness

*Moderation supported on prudential grounds.*

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 228-9.

<sup>72</sup> Strauss, "Thucydides," 90.



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is not. Thucydides' guarded praise of the regime of the 5000 is perfectly understandable in this light: mixed government, because of the balance it achieves between the different forces in the city, is moderate.

Thucydides' conclusion about the ideal political regime, however, must be grounded in Thucydides' broader narrative. The regime of the 5000 resulted from a rare and short-lived confluence of many factors including chance. Likewise, the Spartan moderate regime rested on the unique strain of ruling over the Helots. In other words, as we already know, Thucydides recognized the predominance of compulsion and chance in political life. As such, Thucydidean wisdom is not practical wisdom. His admiration for moderation is tempered by an acknowledgment that all political ideals are fragile. In fact, perhaps one aspect of Thucydides' respect for moderation was that moderate policies seem to admit that choice in politics is severely limited. Strauss realizes that Thucydides is not a political idealist. According to Strauss, "one is led toward the deepest stratum in Thucydides' thought when one considers the tension between his explicit praise of Sparta—of Spartan moderation—which is not matched by a praise of Athens on the one hand, and on the other, the thesis of the archeology as a whole—a thesis which implies the certainty of progress and therewith the praise of innovating Athens."<sup>73</sup>

Thucydides admired the Spartan regime, but that is only one part of his world-view. Thucydides still admired Athens even though he sees the Athenian political project as doomed. Strauss explains his dualist position by assessing the legacy of Periclean Athens. Periclean Athens hoped to achieve the glory through empire, but that hope was never accomplished. But Periclean Athens still achieved a form of universality through the work of Thucydides, namely universality of wisdom. Thucydides' work, which is meant to be "a possession for all time," tells us the truth about the human condition in a way that can only be done by a daring Athenian. "Through understanding *him* we see that his wisdom was made possible by 'the sun' and by Athens—by her power and wealth, by her defective polity, by her spirit of daring innovation, by her active doubt of the divine law."<sup>74</sup> Thucydides begins his

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<sup>73</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 231.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

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work by calling himself an Athenian, because his work is made possible by his fundamental agreement with the Athenian manner. As Strauss puts it in the lecture, “by understanding Thucydides’ history we see that Athens was the home of wisdom.”<sup>75</sup> In an important way, Thucydides thus identified himself with Athens alone even as he embraced Sparta.

Strauss takes this point further, suggesting that Thucydides’ project precludes intellectual history as a serious pursuit. “Wisdom cannot be presented as a spectacle, in the way in which battles and the like can be presented. Wisdom cannot be ‘said.’ It can only be ‘done.’”<sup>76</sup> In what seems to be a rare show of humor, Strauss states this point in the lecture as follows: “If someone were to draw the conclusion that intellectual history is, strictly speaking, impossible, that intellectual history is an absurd attempt to present descriptively what is by its nature incapable of being described, I would be forced to agree with that man. Fortunately for us students of intellectual history, there is no such man.”<sup>77</sup> But Strauss, adding an ironic twist to his essay, ascribes that exact thought to Thucydides.

*“Wisdom cannot be ‘said.’ It can only be ‘done.’”*

Thucydides is thus the prototypical Athenian whose work redeems Athens, and Thucydidean wisdom seems exclusively Athenian. Yet Strauss ultimately contests this conclusion, for he shows that all wisdom is “Spartan” in the sense that Spartans do not dare to rely on hope.

There is indeed a primary opposition between those (the Spartans, Nicias, the Melians) who merely wish to preserve the present or available things and those (the Athenians) who are haunted by the hope for immanent future things. But on closer inspection the former too prove to depend on such hope. In a language which is not that of Thucydides, there is something reminding of religion in Athenian imperialism.<sup>78</sup>

All politics for Thucydides is fundamentally limited because it is based on hope. The Spartans have to hope that the Helots will remain in their places. The Athenians have to hope that fortune will favor them as they conquer foreign lands. Events like the plague make clear that countless factors can obscure and destroy the best

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<sup>75</sup> Strauss, “Thucydides,” 91.

<sup>76</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 231.

<sup>77</sup> Strauss, “Thucydides,” 91.

<sup>78</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 229.

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plans. Thucydides' wisdom, like Spartan political moderation in its ideal form, transcends hope and allows for certainty. Thucydides' wisdom, therefore, though based on Athenian daring, embraces the Spartan drive towards the absolute. Ultimately, for Strauss, Thucydides' wisdom, while exposing the Athenian-Spartan polarity, moves beyond that polarity. In political affairs, Thucydides favors Spartan moderation based on Athenian wisdom, despite the fact that such a combination is probably impossible in the real world. Thucydides' wisdom, however, aims at uncovering universal truths, not merely practical possibilities, and that wisdom itself is both profoundly Athenian in its daring and profoundly Spartan in its desire for absolutes.

The thrust of Thucydides' argument, then, in Strauss's judgment, is that politics has definite limits. Moderation is the highest political virtue, but as we know from the case of Sparta, as well as the case of the 5000, moderation only emerges amidst the right combination of circumstances. But Strauss does not only claim that Thucydides considered moderation to be the highest political end; rather, Strauss calls moderation "conduct in accordance with the nature of human things."<sup>79</sup> Strauss therefore must prove that Thucydides believes in human nature. He does this with Diodotus' famous speech opposing the annihilation of the Mytilenians. By arguing for a moderate policy on the basis of expediency, Diodotus explicates a view that coheres remarkably with the view that Strauss has attributed to Thucydides. Diodotus argues that capital punishment will not deter future rebels because, as Strauss puts it, "*nomos* is powerless against *physis*."<sup>80</sup> According to Diodotus, "it is impossible to prevent human nature from doing what it has once set its mind upon, by force of law or by any other deterrent whatsoever."<sup>81</sup> Rebels, once they see a glimmer of hope, will rebel because they believe they can succeed. Diodotus clearly believes in human nature. Strauss links Diodotus's view to Thucydides by pointing to Thucydides' description of the Athenian purification of Delos. According to Strauss, Thucydides believes that, since the Athenians purified the same island as Pisistratus did and reestablished an Ionian athletic festival that had existed during Homer's time on the island, hu-

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>81</sup> Thucydides, III.45.

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mans will consistently react to similar situations in the same way. That consistency results from human nature.

Despite its important role in Strauss's argument, Strauss's use of Diodotus's speech, as well as his discussion about human nature as a whole, constitutes the least convincing part of the essay. First, Strauss provides no clear basis for his argument that Thucydides considers Diodotus's speech "an act of humanity which is compatible with the survival of Athens and even of her empire."<sup>82</sup> Surely Strauss cannot be arguing that, just because Thucydides despised Cleon, he necessarily admired his opponent. Second, Strauss uses an indirect proof to show that Thucydides believed in human nature while a direct proof would have been quite simple. Thucydides refers to human nature throughout the *History*. Yet Strauss privileges Diodotus' speech because it alone fuses a belief in human nature and an argument for moderation. Yet even that speech insists that it is in man's nature to rebel against all odds, which is totally immoderate. Nature in Thucydides, contrary to Strauss's argument, sanctions immoderate action. The Athenians, for example, justify their daring exploits by referring to "the law that the weaker should be subject to the stronger."<sup>83</sup> For Thucydides and for some of his speakers, nature is problematic, because it compels men to do what they can without regard to reason or justice. Strauss, by equating nature and moderation, uses nature in a fundamentally un-Thucydidean way. Strauss's argument only remains compatible with Thucydides' text if moderation is defined as the highest political end, or the result of the wisdom of the philosophic historian. Strauss equates the natural with the ideal, or with man at the peak of rationality. On the basis of that definition, moderation can remain the crux of Thucydides' teaching. Nevertheless, Strauss's failure to expound upon the difference between his definition and Thucydides' remains a shortcoming of his essay.

*Human nature viewed from different perspectives.*

### ***Thucydides versus Plato***

After concluding that Thucydides viewed moderation as the natural political end, Strauss compares Thucydides with Plato. Strauss, as we saw, ended his lecture by establishing a deep dis-

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<sup>82</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 232.

<sup>83</sup> Thucydides, I.76.

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inction between the two Greek thinkers. The tentative difference between Plato and Thucydides is exemplified by Plato's explanation of the rise of Athenian democracy in the *Laws*. Plato "traces this profound change to the willful disregard of the ancestral laws regarding music and theater," and he thus "deliberately falsifies history."<sup>84</sup> He ignores the rise of the navy, which constitutes the real reason for the democratization of Athens, because "the true account would show that the margin of choice in regard to regimes is extremely limited."<sup>85</sup> According to Strauss's lecture, Plato, in marked contrast to Thucydides, insisted on rejecting "the absolute preponderance of fatality over choice." Plato "puts the emphasis on human choice" and Thucydides "puts the emphasis on fatality."<sup>86</sup> This minor difference in emphasis has crucial ramifications, however. While "the question of how to live is a grave practical problem" for Plato's city, its answer is pre-determined for Thucydides. According to Strauss's Thucydides, "while the thinker can fully understand political life, he cannot guide political life." "For Plato," on the other hand, "all human life, even on the lowest level, is directed toward philosophy, toward the highest . . . —the higher is stronger than the lower."<sup>87</sup> How does Strauss account for this difference? While Plato believes that rest is primary and unrest is derivative, thus allowing the maximum space for choice, Thucydides sees Greekness, or rest, as derivative from barbarism, or unrest, and therefore as extremely fragile. After the Socratic revolution, which displaced Thucydides and other pre-Socratics, political history became ancillary to philosophy. Xenophon, in Strauss's judgment, who in some sense succeeded both Socrates and Thucydides, could not take Thucydides' political history seriously because of his reverence for "Socratic serenity."<sup>88</sup>

Strauss's preliminary distinction between Thucydides and Plato in the lecture can be placed in the context of Strauss's overarching project. In the "Preface to Spinoza's *Critique of Religion*," Strauss makes the following claim: "It is safer to understand the low in the light of the high than the high in the light of the low."<sup>89</sup> Strauss, showing conscious disdain for conventional inter-

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Strauss, "Thucydides," 98.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 99-100.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>89</sup> Strauss, "Preface to Spinoza," 225.

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pretations of the rise of Nazism, proceeds to offer an explanation for that rise which emphasizes the power of ideas. Strauss blames “the radicalization and deepening of Rousseau’s thought by German philosophy” for the German bias against liberal democracy. Elsewhere, he asserts that Nietzsche “prepared a regime which, as long as it lasted, made discredited democracy look again like the golden age.”<sup>90</sup> Like Plato, Strauss distorts history in order to elevate intellectual choices to the highest level of relevance. Strauss dismisses strong economic arguments for the rise of Nazism as “half-Marxist” just as Plato dismisses the relationship between the rise of the navy and the democratization of Athens as base.<sup>91</sup>

But Strauss abandons the preliminary distinction between Thucydides and Plato in the essay.

It could appear that Plato in contradistinction to Thucydides makes too little allowance for fatality as distinguished from choice. In fact there is no fundamental difference in this respect between the two thinkers. In the very context just referred to, Plato says that it is chance rather than man or human wisdom or folly that establishes regimes or which legislates.<sup>92</sup>

Plato, in Strauss’s judgment, despite his falsification of history in *The Laws*, is fully cognizant of the fragility of the high as compared to the low. In the lecture, Strauss already acknowledges that Plato “admits implicitly, and later on explicitly, that Thucydides’ estimate of the situation is correct.”<sup>93</sup> Strauss’s essay on the *Republic* offers Strauss’s full interpretation of Plato’s political thought, and

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<sup>90</sup> Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 55.

<sup>91</sup> In that regard, it is worth comparing Strauss’s cerebral explanation of the rise of Nazism with Martin Heidegger’s statements in the Rectoral Address. Heidegger quotes Aeschylus’ character Prometheus: “knowing is far weaker than necessity.” (Günther Neske and Emil Kettering, *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism: Questions and Answers*, “The self-assertion of the German University,” intr. Karsten Harries, trans. Lisa Harries [New York: Paragon House, 1983], 121.) According to Heidegger, “all knowing about things has always already been surrendered to the predominance of destiny and fails before it” (*Ibid.*). For Heidegger the rise of Nazism was not a matter of choice. “The young and the youngest strength of the people,” Heidegger states, “which is already reaching beyond us, has already decided the matter” (*Ibid.*, 124). Just as Plato apparently resists Thucydides’ explanation of the most consequential change in Athenian history because it views the high in light of the low, Strauss resists Heidegger’s explanation of the fall of Weimar.

<sup>92</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 238.

<sup>93</sup> Strauss, “Thucydides,” 98.

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*Political  
action subject  
to “essential  
limits.”*

there is no space here for a full explication of Strauss’s argument. His ultimate insight is that the *Republic*, despite its external appearance, ultimately champions the limits of politics. According to Strauss, “the *Republic* conveys the broadest and deepest analysis of political idealism ever made.”<sup>94</sup> It appears then that the initial opposition between Thucydides and Plato does not hold up to scrutiny, because Plato agreed with Thucydides’ broad-based conclusion that the city has “essential limits.”

The compromise between the two thinkers is not one-sided, however. Just as Plato cedes to Thucydides that the low dominates the high, Thucydides cedes to Plato that the high is reachable, at least in the form of wisdom. Thucydides admits that philosophy is a worthwhile pursuit. “Plato adds indeed that within very narrow limits men have a choice between different regimes,” Strauss argues, “but this is not denied by Thucydides.”<sup>95</sup> Although Thucydides never explicitly raises the question of what regime is best “in itself,” he does comment on the best regime of his time in Athens—namely the regime of the 5000. Moreover, as we have seen, he may offer subtle clues about the greater question of the best regime “in itself.” According to Strauss, “he prefers a mixture of oligarchy and democracy to either of the pure forms but it is not clear whether he would unqualifiedly prefer that mixture to an intelligent and virtuous tyranny.”<sup>96</sup>

Strauss thus brings Thucydides and Plato into the same tradition of political philosophy. Plato shows us that choice is limited in works that deal with how to make the greatest choice, namely the choice between regimes. Thucydides, on the other hand, deals with the question of the best regime in a history that exhibits, above all else, the power of compulsion and chance. In contrast to Strauss’s initial argument, the two men both concluded that philosophy is fragile and that idealism is dangerous.

In *The City and Man*, Strauss has therefore gradually led us to “the pre-modern thought of our western tradition,” from which “liberal democracy, in contradistinction to communism and fascism, derives powerful support.”<sup>97</sup> Ultimately, Thucydides and

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<sup>94</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 127.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Political Philosophy: Six Essays by Leo Strauss*, “The Three Waves of Modernity,” ed. Hilail Gildin (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs Merrill/Pegasus, 1975), 98.

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Plato are part of the same tradition—a tradition that questions idealism and idealizes moderation. In the introduction to the *City and Man*, Strauss laments the “decay of political philosophy into ideology.”<sup>98</sup> He expresses deep concern about a civilization so vulnerable to the attacks of fascism and communism, and concludes that the modern liberal democratic project requires classical support. When *The City and Man* is viewed in its entirety, a classical tradition emerges, and that tradition, which evinces a deep belief in moderation and the natural limits of politics, pre-judges fascism and communism.

Why then does Strauss’s lecture on Thucydides stop short of articulating the unified conception of the classics that emerges in *The City and Man*? One answer is that Strauss’s two statements are simply inconsistent, and that might very well be true. But a reading that grounds Strauss’s own surface contradictions in the very surface contradictions of the ancient political tradition that Strauss himself isolated is more convincing. Early in the lecture Strauss asserts that he is following Euripides’ maxim: “I want what the city needs.”<sup>99</sup> As we learn from the “Preface to Spinoza,” Strauss believes that the modern regime still needs the preliminary if misguided distinction between Thucydides and Plato. Citizens need to believe that the low can be understood in terms of the high if they are to shun the low. Strauss was convinced that the students who listened to Heidegger attribute the rise of Nazism to destiny were less likely to resist it. The celebration of choice in Plato is important, because it empowers people, allowing them to believe that “ideas have consequences” and that “individuals can make a difference.” In the lecture, Strauss distinguishes between political speech, which is “radically partial” in its pursuit of what “the city needs,” and Thucydidean speech, which describes “the whole” without regard for real politics, and concludes with a rousing celebration of Socrates because of his faith in reason.<sup>100</sup> The lecture itself is therefore a “political speech.” But in an essay meant to uncover the lessons that “Thucydides does not draw out,” Strauss rebuts the “radically partial” distinction between Thucydides and Plato and reveals a unified classical tradition.<sup>101</sup> The essay, in con-

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<sup>98</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 7.

<sup>99</sup> Strauss, “Thucydides,” 73.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>101</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 144. Strauss, “Thucydides,” 95.



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trast to the lecture, is Thucydidean. Ultimately, it is only “safer” to view the low in light of the high, but it is not necessarily wiser. Strauss consciously reaches different conclusions in statements with different purposes. In the lecture he is a speaker in Thucydides’ *History*. In the essay he imitates Thucydides himself.

***History and Religion in Thucydides’ Moderate Regime***

Strauss’s  
“historicist”  
sees only  
particulars.

We can finally assess Thucydides’ contribution to our understanding of the problem of history and the quarrel between Athens and Jerusalem. According to Strauss, Plato and Thucydides each compromised on crucial points. Plato admitted that the philosopher’s existence in the city is usually futile at best and dangerous at worst. Thucydides, conversely, admitted that despite the limitations on philosophy, there is a modicum of choice in human affairs, as evidenced by the Athenian decision to spare the Mytilenians. Under rare circumstances, the choice between different regimes can be informed by philosophers.

But the philosopher does not have to be useful. Thucydides’ *History* represents “a possession for all time” because it rises to the highest plain of wisdom, not because it informs statesmen about matters of state. Strauss’s Thucydides teaches about universals by recounting particulars. He is a philosopher and a historian at the same time, and that is why he speaks so powerfully to the “problem of history” as Strauss perceives it. Thucydides’ *History* represents the antithesis of Strauss’s historicism. While the historicist—albeit Strauss’s caricatured “historicist”—claims that there are only particulars and that history engulfs philosophy,<sup>102</sup> Thucydides claims that the universals become visible precisely through the particulars. Strauss’s quarrel is therefore not with the modern historian, who seeks to examine and recount particulars, but with the “historicist,” who denies the existence of universals. By pointing to Thucydides, Strauss shows that the first historian did not deny the possibility of philosophy.

Thucydides, in contrast to Strauss’s modern “historicist,” thus believed that philosophy is possible. Yet he also believed that phi-

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<sup>102</sup> Historicism is for Strauss a denial of the universal. He does not recognize the possibility of an historicism that does acknowledge universality and sees the particular as potentially manifesting the universal. The latter philosophical position—which, ironically, has much in common with the position that Strauss approvingly attributes to Thucydides—has been called “Value-Centered Historicism.”

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losophy is fragile and that the wisdom which leads to moderation only arises amidst the most immoderate activity. The city is usually impervious to philosophy, so philosophy cannot save it. Moderation must result from compulsion or chance. Thucydides, however, expressed a basic agreement with the Athenians that fear, interest, and honor naturally lead cities to be daring rather than moderate. The only force in the *History* that led statesmen to make moderate choices was piety. The relevant characteristic of piety for Thucydides is that it is a form of compulsion. Thucydides, as we know, did not sympathize with extreme piety of the sort expressed by the Melians. But Thucydides recognized the instrumental relationship between piety and civil society. He observed that when “religion was in honor with neither party,” then “the moderate part of the citizens perished between the two.”<sup>103</sup> In a pious city, “fear of gods” necessarily “restrains” men, but in a plague-ridden city, men “become utterly careless of everything.”<sup>104</sup> Athens must be forced by Jerusalem to practice moderation.

Strauss’s last essay, meanwhile, deals exclusively with the theme of piety, and Strauss reaches the following conclusion: “Thucydides’ theology—if it is permitted to use this expression—is located in the mean (in the Aristotelian sense) between that of Nicias and that of the Athenian ambassadors on Melos.”<sup>105</sup> Nicias’s theology leads to extreme folly and the Athenian ambassadors’ theology leads to civil war. Thucydides’ theology, namely his understanding of the type of theology the city needs, is a restraining force but not a crippling force. Against this backdrop, the abstruse ending of *The City and Man* becomes clearer. Strauss praises Thucydides because the theme of the divine “is brought out more clearly by Thucydides than by the philosophers.”<sup>106</sup> The fictional natural city of the philosophers, for all its glory, is untenable no matter how beautiful it may seem. The regime as it really exists requires religion to achieve moderation; indeed, as we noticed above, it is perhaps the only moderating force that is not utterly susceptible to chance and contingency.

Strauss thus brings Thucydides into the larger discourse about historicism and about Athens and Jerusalem. But why does

*Political societies need religion.*

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<sup>103</sup> Thucydides, III.82.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, II.52-53.

<sup>105</sup> Strauss, “The Gods,” 101.

<sup>106</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 240.

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Strauss believe that “classical political philosophy presupposes the articulation of this beginning of political understanding but it does not exhibit it as Thucydides does in an unsurpassable, nay, unrivaled manner”?<sup>107</sup> Thucydides’ work marks the culmination rather than the beginning of the classical tradition because it elucidates the “common sense understanding of politics” without ignoring the particulars from which that understanding arises. For Strauss’s modern relativist, those particulars are important because there are no universals. Strauss, however, knows that circumstance usually prevails, but shows that only Thucydides among the ancients succeeded at describing particular circumstances while also taking up the search for universals, thus challenging the “historicist” thesis that universals do not exist. Thucydides alone among the Greek philosophers can speak powerfully to the modern problem of history because Thucydides, like Strauss’s modern “historicist,” “regards the higher of the opposites, not as Socrates did, as stronger but as more vulnerable, more delicate than the lower.”<sup>108</sup> Thucydides spoke what for Strauss is the modern “historicist’s” language.

*Tension  
between  
Athens and  
Jerusalem  
source of  
Western  
vitality.*

Thucydides’ unique treatment of religion is possibly even more important for Strauss. “Thucydides tells us about oracles earthquakes, and eclipses . . . —in brief, all these things for which the modern scientific historian has no use or which annoy him, and to which classical political philosophy barely alludes because for it the concern with the divine has become identical with philosophy.”<sup>109</sup> Strauss himself, as evidenced from “Progress and Return” as well as *Philosophy and Law*, was deeply concerned with the fate of a society without religious conviction. Strauss believed that Western Civilization derives its power from the tension between reason and revelation—“it seems to me that this unresolved conflict is the secret of the vitality of Western Civilization.”<sup>110</sup> Thucydides also believed in both philosophy and theology. His own wisdom arose from his “Athenian” agnosticism, which allowed him to look at the “the greatest motion” from outside of the confines of piety. Yet he also recognized that when all men are like him,

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>108</sup> Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?*, “Kurt Riezler,” 260.

<sup>109</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 240.

<sup>110</sup> Strauss, *Rebirth*, “Progress or Return,” 270.

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Corcyra emerges. Strauss's essay "Progress and Return" expresses much the same idea. "The philosopher lives in a state above fear as well as above hope, and the beginning of his wisdom is not, as in the Bible, the fear of God, but rather the sense of wonder; Biblical man lives in fear and trembling as well as in hope."<sup>111</sup> The philosopher's sense of wonder, before it reaches the high plane of Thucydidean wisdom, leads to the Sicilian expedition. Fear and trembling, on the other hand, lead to upholding treaties.

In the final analysis, Strauss isolates Thucydides as *the* Greek political thinker in *The City and Man* because the book serves a greater purpose within Strauss's overall project. Strauss has claimed that a uniform classical tradition supports liberal democracy and that the fact-value distinction and its "historicist" corollary prove bankrupt when their classical roots are examined. *The City and Man* as a whole exposes the unity of the classical tradition of political thought. The central theme of that tradition is moderation and the natural limits of politics. But only Thucydides deals head on with the relation between history and philosophy as well as the tension between Athens and Jerusalem, which are the two issues Strauss considers seminal. When Thucydides' understated but crucial role in Strauss's thought is fully exposed, Strauss's philosophy as a whole starts to appear differently. Strauss falsified history like Plato in order to undermine what he and Thucydides believed to be true, namely that the high is fragile compared to the low and religion is perhaps the only way to restrain the low. Like Thucydides, however, Strauss was a historian who bridged the gap between history and philosophy by extracting the universal from the particular.

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.