Between anarchy and tyranny: excellence and the pursuit of power and peace in ancient Greece

NANCY KOKAZ*

Ancient Greece is not unfamiliar to International Relations scholars. Thucydides’ History of the Peloponnesian War has been especially influential in shaping our understanding of the ancient Greek international system, not only because it is the best historical source available, but also in light of the status it has achieved as the foremost classic of International Relations. Of particular interest to International Relations have been questions concerning the character of the system and the units within it, and how these have affected the dynamics of conflict and co-operation in the international arena. Many find the antecedents of the modern European states-system in the pattern of relations that emerged between the independent city-states of Hellas roughly between the eighth and fourth centuries BC. Like our contemporary international system, the ancient Greek international system was anarchic in the sense that it lacked an overarching common government. The primary unit of the system was the polis, or independent city-state. The polis bore some resemblance to the sovereign state of today in the sense that each polis constituted a political authority that recognized no superior, and demanded and accorded recognition internationally on that basis. As Wight puts it, such reciprocity is the defining feature of a states-system: ‘not only must each [state] claim independence of any political superior for itself, but each must recognize the validity of the same claim by all the others’. This conception of the units and the system relies heavily on the dominant contemporary formulation of sovereignty as ‘the idea that there is a final and absolute authority in the political community’ and its international corollary

* I wish to thank Tim Dunne for valuable comments on an earlier draft, and Stanley Hoffmann and Jill Frank for encouragement in the initial stages of writing. Stanley Hoffmann also deserves special mention for being an excellent mentor and a source of endless inspiration at all times.

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


2 Martin Wight, Power Politics (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1978), p. 105. For Wight, as for most International Relations scholars, anarchy refers not to a chaotic lack of order, but rather to the absence of a common government at the global level.

‘that no final and absolute authority exists elsewhere than in the community’. Despite these initial similarities, however, the unity of the *polis* in ancient Greece was based on radically different moral foundations. It shall be my central claim that these differences, more so than the similarities, are crucial for grasping the dynamics of the exercise of power in ancient Greece in domestic and international politics alike.

The ancient Greek international system is typically treated as a clear example of the international (or independent) states-system, because of the type of systematic relationships its constituent units found themselves in—namely that of independence and sovereign equality *vis à vis* each other. By contrast, in a suzerain states-system, one unit asserts supremacy over the others, as in the cases of the Roman Empire or the Abbasid Caliphate. While it is true that the initial centuries of the ancient Greek international system probably constituted a clear case of an international states-system composed of independent sovereign units, by the time of the Peloponnesian War, the system was suffused by formal and informal relations of supremacy and subjugation, as well. In that connection, Thucydides’ *History* covers a very interesting period where hegemonic and imperial ties had profusely permeated what used to be an independent states-system. In light of these complex relationships, I suggest that the question of classification is peripheral, even though it has aroused a significant degree of interest in International Relations. Much more productive is the investigation of the main dynamics of conflict and co-operation in the system, without too much regard for how the system is classified. Doyle’s work is groundbreaking in this respect in its exploration of the sources of different forms of power in ancient Greece. His analysis emphasizes the explanatory role of political unity in determining whether a *polis* was able and willing to exercise imperial power, ended up being subjugated in the periphery, or managed to attain independent resister status in transnational society. Lebow’s distinction between hegemony and empire in terms of the legitimacy of the exercise of power is also very helpful here. Lebow shows how fifth century BC Greek understandings of hegemonic and imperial power framed the message of the *History*. Hegemony was associated with honour, while empire signified sheer control. Based on this difference, Lebow

5 Thus, Wight writes that ‘if we were to define the kind of states-system we are concerned with by enumeration, we have perhaps three clear examples: the Western, the Hellenic-Hellenistic or Graeco-Roman, and the Chinese between the collapse of the Chou empire in 771 BC and the establishment of the Ts'in Empire in 221 AD’. Wight, *Systems of States*, p. 21.
6 Ibid., p. 22.
7 My concern echoes and takes further worries that have been expressed about the use of rigid classificatory schemes. As Watson puts it: ‘I have become increasingly doubtful about sharp distinctions between systems of independent states, suzerain systems and empires. I now prefer to define the wider subject by saying that, when a number of diverse communities of people, or political entities, are sufficiently involved with one another for us to describe them as forming a system of some kind (whether independent, suzerain, imperial or whatever), the organization of the system will fall somewhere along a notional spectrum between absolute independence and absolute empire.’ Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 13. I take Watson’s claim further and suggest that even classification along a spectrum obscures more than it reveals, as it does not address the fundamental dynamics of interaction that remain constant no matter where the system may be on the classificatory scheme. This is especially true given that multiple types of relationships often coexist at the same time in the same system.
maintains that empire without hegemony, or sheer power without legitimacy, is not sustainable in Thucydides’ narrative.\textsuperscript{10} Taken together, Doyle and Lebow’s findings reveal the causal significance of legitimately constituted political unity in ancient Greece. I take these observations a step further and suggest that the issues of political unity and the legitimate exercise of power can only be understood in light of the moral ideals upon which political institutions rested.

In a nutshell, I argue that it is crucial to place Thucydides’ discussion of power and institutions in the broader context of meaning that pervaded the ancient Greek international system to fully understand the operation of that system. This leads to a rediscovery of the links between the practice of excellence and the quest for political unity—a link which sheds light on the pursuit of power in domestic and international politics. Most importantly, it focuses our attention on political unity as the main source of power and highlights the significance of the connection between the institutional sources and moral foundations of such unity, with significant repercussions for contemporary theorizing in International Relations concerning international systems. At the very least, if power and institutions are closely tied to excellence in securing a form of political unity conducive to the good life, then available treatments of the ancient Greek international system remain incomplete. As a remedy, I attempt to develop a more comprehensive account of the moral foundations of conflict and co-operation in Thucydides’ work. The development of such an account is especially important in light of the contemporary tendency to derive lessons concerning the eternal wisdom of Realism in international affairs from the \textit{History}. To illustrate, it is to timeless lessons about the centrality of power that Gilpin points to when he argues for the contemporary relevance of Thucydides. ‘Ultimately’, Gilpin writes, ‘international politics can still be characterized as it was by Thucydides’.\textsuperscript{11} I wholeheartedly agree, but for very different reasons. The careful study of the ancient Greek international system, and especially Thucydides, offers valuable insights into the workings of international systems in general and remains highly relevant to understanding international politics today. The only way to attain these insights, however, is through a thorough analysis of the broader cultural and political challenges that marked the era under investigation and determined how power was to be pursued and used. The same is true of institutions and practices that facilitated co-operation in the system. Thucydides has a lot to say on both questions and strives to reach lasting scientific generalizations, but his aspiration to build a science of international relations can only be realized by placing these law-like generalizations in the context of meaning that informed them in the first place. In the absence of such contextualization, contemporary appropriations can only yield partial and misleading accounts.

\textbf{Ancient Greece and International Relations: Realists and their critics}

A theme which has proved to be of lasting interest to International Relations scholars concerns whether the ancient Greek international system is best understood as a

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., p. 13.

state of war. ‘For Thucydides, war—’ writes Russett, ‘or at best the condition we moderns would call deterrence—was the necessary consequence of such competitive relations in an anarchic interstate system without superordinate authority to impose some kind of peace and order’.

To make matters worse, Russett adds, this state of war was not mitigated by common institutions and practices as ‘[t]he world of Thucydides had no effective interstate organization that encompassed Greek civilization’. Similarly, Doyle, who otherwise provides a much more nuanced picture of the historian’s Realism, suggests that ‘Thucydides is essentially a Realist, who believed that none of the traditional moral norms linking individuals across state boundaries have reliable effect’. ‘Interstate relations in his view exist in a condition where war is always possible’, Doyle continues, since ‘international anarchy precludes the effective escape from the dreary history of war and conflict that are the consequences of competition under anarchy’. Not surprisingly, these theoretical presuppositions about the consequences of anarchy have led to an almost single-minded effort to understand the causes of war in ancient Greece, with very limited attention being devoted to understanding the moral and institutional underpinnings of peace.

The assumption of a state of war is so common that even a study of fairness and kindness in Thucydides begins by noting the irony involved in exploring such a theme, based on the initial belief that ‘[t]he world and the war which Thucydides describes are commanded by force and violence. The Athenian

---


13 Ibid., p. 50.

14 Michael Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism, and Socialism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), p. 51. To support the view that moral norms are ineffective (and even irrelevant) in international relations, most Realists rely on the infamous Melian dialogue, where the stronger Athenians demand that the weaker Melians join their empire and reject the Melians’ objection concerning the unfairness of this demand, stressing, instead, expediency based on a comparative analysis of power in their response: ‘Instead we recommend that you try to get what it is possible for you to get, taking into consideration what we both really do think; since you know as well as we do that when these matters are discussed by practical people, the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept’. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin, 1972), V.89. This is a notoriously complex passage, however, and its message is heavily contested. While the Melian dialogue clearly points to the importance of power in politics, it is far from clear that it asserts the irrelevance of justice and fairness. I will not discuss this issue any further here.

15 Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace*, p. 51. For Doyle, the central strand that unifies all realists despite their other differences is ‘a distinctive view of what constitutes international politics (their “dependent variable”). They are theorists of the “state of war”. They discount any claims to system-wide international order other than that based ultimately on power or force, finding instead that among independent states, or other international actors, international society is best described as a condition of international anarchy. This is a condition that places all states in a warlike situation of reciprocal insecurity in which every alliance is temporary and every other state is a possible enemy, which makes, Hobbes argued, the possibility of war continuous.’ Ibid., p. 43.

16 As Reus-Smit astutely observes: ‘International Relations scholars have focused almost exclusively on the nature and causes of conflict between the city-states, with most energies devoted to explaining the Peloponnesian War. While this is a worthy focus, patterns of cooperation between the city-states have received very little attention. In fact, one could easily conclude from the existing literature that the city-states of ancient Greece existed in a constant state of war, that cooperation was negligible or nonexistent, or that the city-states created little in the way of institutions to facilitate coexistence.’ Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 40.
empire is founded on fear and gathers only hatred.'17 Thus, it comes as a surprise to de Romilly that one can also find hints of the political importance of goodwill based on fairness and kindness in the text.

The depiction of the ancient Greek international system as a state of war is largely misleading. If by the state of war is meant simply the possibility for war to break out at any moment because of the lack of a single political authority common to all of Hellas, then the ancient Greek international system was indeed a state of war. But that does not tell us anything about the dynamics of ancient Greek international politics as it amounts no more than a reassertion of the formal definition of anarchy.18 If, however, the function of the image of the state of war is to invoke the idea of a world constantly at war—where force and violence reign supreme, where no norms or institutions exist to provide effective restraints, where self-help is the only way to attain security—as is more often the case than not with Realist accounts, then it yields an inaccurate description of the ancient Greek international system, which also embodied various normative institutions and practices to regulate the pursuit of power. Wight’s work does an excellent job of documenting the existence of rudimentary forms of diplomacy and international law in ancient Greece alongside various pan-Hellenic institutions as well as what can be termed Hellenic public opinion.19 Inter-polis communications were carried out by travelling ambassadors and resident proxenos—citizens of one polis who represented the interests of another polis towards which they were known to have a friendly disposition. International obligations based on inter-polis treaties, sworn alliance commitments, or various customary practices of proper behaviour were largely upheld. With regard to international law, I take issue with Wight’s claim that ‘the Hellenic system had no notion of international law’.20 The History is full of observations that prove otherwise, such as the tremendous importance accorded to international treaties, the observance of certain rules of warfare for the most part, and the complex judicial system through which the Athenians governed their empire, to give just a few examples.21 I suspect Wight’s view resulted from his equation of international law with formally enacted rules, of which the ancient Greeks did not

---

17 Jacqueline de Romilly, ‘Fairness and Kindness in Thucydides’, *Phoenix*, XXVIII:1 (Spring 1974), p. 95. The claim that the Athenian empire was based on fear and gathered only hatred is not uncontroversial. The Athenians themselves believed that they were worthy of their power because of the superiority of their institutions. Thus, when Pericles declares Athens ‘an education to Greece’, he appeals to the power Athens possesses abroad which has been won by the superior virtue of the Athenians in order to substantiate his view. Pericles adds that in the case of Athens and Athens alone, ‘no invading enemy is ashamed at being defeated, and no subject can complain of being governed by people unfit for their responsibilities’. Thucydides, II.41. The Athenians in Sparta at the outbreak of the war also emphasize the excellence of the legal institutions through which they exercise their imperial power. Thucydides, I.77. Furthermore, many in the empire welcomed the opportunity to row in the Athenian navy, to employ Athenian currency, and to make use of the Athenian legal system. For a helpful discussion of the popularity of the Athenian empire, see Adda Bozeman, *Politics and Culture in International History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960).

18 Against one of the founding theoretical presuppositions of International Relations, one could also add here that the presence of a single political authority is never in itself a guarantee against the eruption of a state of war, but that is a different matter.

19 Wight, *Systems of States*, ch. 2.

20 Ibid., p. 50.

have very many, and his general frustration with the lack of guarantees for the 
enforcement of the informal rules that did exist, which is a problem that is not 
unique to ancient Greece but plagues international law in general.

Pan-Hellenic institutions and practices—and some add, a common Greek identity—also shaped the complex web of meaning within which co-operation took place in inter-*polis* relations in ancient Greece.²² The two most important pan-Hellenic institutions, the Olympic games and the Oracle at Delphi, both of religious origin, injected a certain degree of order into international interactions and came close to constituting an early variant of international public opinion. Interstate procedures for peaceful conflict resolution, such as third party arbitration, were commonly resorted to, and on the whole, proved to be very effective.²³ Perhaps most effective of all in regulating wartime conduct were the informal and ‘unwritten conventions governing inter-state conflict’ deriving from common practice. These unwritten conventions were a varied bunch, ranging ‘from what might be called neoformal rules to practices conditioned largely by practicality’.²⁴ Drawing on a wide array of sources, Ober summarizes the most important ancient Greek rules of warfare as follows:

1. The state of war should be officially declared before commencing hostilities against an appropriate foe; sworn treaties and alliances should be regarded as binding.
2. Hostilities are sometimes inappropriate: sacred truces, especially those declared for the celebration of the Olympic games, should be observed.
3. Hostilities against certain persons and in certain places are inappropriate: the inviolability of sacred places and persons under protection of the gods, especially heralds and suppliants, should be respected.
4. Erecting a battlefield trophy indicates victory; such trophies should be respected.
5. After a battle, it is right to return enemy dead when asked; to request the return of one’s dead is tantamount to admitting defeat.
6. A battle is properly prefaced by a ritual challenge and acceptance of the challenge.
7. Prisoners of war should be offered for ransom, not summarily executed or mutilated.
8. Punishment of surrendered opponents should be restrained.
9. War is an affair of warriors, thus noncombatants should not be primary targets of attack.
10. Battles should be fought during the usual (summer) campaigning season.
11. Use of nonhoplite arms should be limited.
12. Pursuit of defeated and retreating opponents should be limited.²⁵

²⁵ Ibid.
Ober goes on to suggest that ‘most of these informal rules were followed most of the time, in intra-Greek warfare of about 700 to 450 BC’. I want to add the additional claim that these rules defined what the practice of war was and how it was understood in the ancient Greek context. As such, the state of war that characterized the system, if there was such a state, cannot be understood without reference to them. Violations of these rules have to be read as just another illustration of the tragic descent of Greece below the confines of civilized behaviour.

A further area of interest to International Relations scholars has concerned the structure of the ancient Greek international system and its causal role in determining (or influencing) the direction of events. For Realists, the particular distribution of power in the system and the consequences of changes in that distribution are deemed to be crucial for understanding the causes of the Peloponnesian War. This focus on the structural distribution of power can take two forms, each emphasizing a slightly different aspect of power relations. The first is manifested in an interest in studying the polarity of the system and its implications for international stability. ‘The World of Thucydides was bipolar’, maintains Russett, ‘with two great states arrayed against each other, each leading a vast alliance of roughly equal power. That bipolarity seemed to make inevitable each side’s fear of any increment to the power of the other, resulting in whatever protective military action each side thought necessary’. The second emphasizes the important role of variations in the distribution of power in bringing about instability and war. A Thucydidean observation that is dear to the hearts of many Realists in this regard concerns the historian’s location of the main cause of the Peloponnesian war in power shifts in the structure of the system. ‘What made war inevitable’ writes Thucydides, ‘was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta’. Gilpin draws on this observation in support of his power transition theory, whereby the uneven growth of power and the mutual fears and clashes of interest it engenders produces a situation ripe for conflict, where the resulting systemic disequilibrium is likely to be resolved by war. Both of these positions have been challenged. To give some examples, Connor shows that Thucydides subverts the notion of bipolarity by underscoring how Corcyra, Thebes, and the Greek city-states of Sicily—all potentially critical players in the Peloponnesian war—held back from committing themselves to either side so as to try to further their own interests. Kauppi suggests that the system was multipolar in light of the critical role played by Persia in the last stages of the war. He adds that changes in the distribution of power need not lead to war and have not done so historically. Lebow highlights the domestic factors and the leadership blunders that played a crucial part in bringing about the war.

26 Ibid.
27 In a similar vein, Lebow also stresses the importance of conventions for the preservation of civilization and the sense of tragedy that pervades the History upon the violation of such conventions. Lebow, ‘Thucydides the Constructivist’, pp. 551–3.
29 Thucydides, I.23.
30 Gilpin, War and Change in World Politics.
demonstrates that Athens’ power was not rising in the years that preceded the outbreak of the war.34 These criticisms, taken together, reveal the inadequacy of a simplistic systemic explanation of the Peloponnesian war that focuses on bipolar distributions and power transitions at the expense of other causal variables.

The debate about ancient Greece in International Relations has largely taken place between Realists and their critics. Structural Realist readings, with their emphasis on polarity, power transitions, and the systemic causes of the war, are important, not only because they set the terms for subsequent discussions in the field, but also Because they point to the central importance of power in politics, domestic and international. Critical scholarship is equally valuable for providing a more nuanced and accurate understanding of the realities of ancient Greek politics, through the extension of causal analysis, beyond the system to uncover factors that operated at various levels of analysis and the study of the institutions and practices that constrained power politics and made co-operation possible. I want to go a step further to explore the moral underpinnings of conflict and co-operation in ancient Greece, by probing the context of meaning that shaped the pursuit of power, as well as the operation of basic co-operative institutions and practices. I argue that it is important to try to decipher how Thucydides conceptualized power and institutions against the background of the most important political challenges that marked the ancient Greek international system, as they were perceived at the time he wrote his History. Such an investigation indicates that the primary driving mechanism of ancient Greek politics was the quest for political unity, an enterprise that, in its turn, was closely tied to an ideal of the good life. Not any form of unity was welcomed; tyranny was held in as much contempt as anarchy. Avoiding these two extremes necessitated the proper use of power within proper institutional frameworks in a way that furthered the practice of excellence. It is only in light of these links between political unity and the good life that a robust understanding of the dynamics of the ancient Greek international system can be attained.

Bringing the quest for political unity back into the centre of political analysis offers an invitation to explore the continuities between domestic and international politics. Unity is a source of power in domestic and international politics alike. Furthermore, the principal question of securing political unity turns domestic and international politics into two sides of the same coin. The struggle for power is pervasive in all politics; it has the potential to promote or undermine political unity whether it takes place in a domestic or international forum. Similarly, the institutions and practices upon which political unity rests operate inside as well as outside, even if they do so in slightly different ways. In light of these important continuities, I try to weave the lessons from domestic and international episodes in Thucydides’ work into a single narrative in my investigation of the sources of unity. The continuity thesis has a certain degree of affinity with critical arguments that have urged the importance of integrating insights from multiple levels of analysis for understanding the determinants of international interactions. I want to stress, however, that this is not an attempt to label Thucydides, as it cuts across the divide between Realists and their critics. Early Realists were well attuned to the continuities between domestic and international politics, while many critics of Realism uphold the opposition between

the two realms. Labelling tends to be a deceptive exercise in the first place as it obscures more than it reveals about the thinker or period under scrutiny. My goal here is not to take sides in the debate between Realists and their critics, but rather to attend to a dimension of ancient Greek politics that has been neglected in this debate, in the hope that the analysis will move the discussion further.

The fundamental challenge: securing political unity

The main unit in the ancient Greek international system was the polis and the most pressing political challenge was the preservation of its independence. Political unity was critical for achieving and safeguarding the independence of the polis. The type of unity that was called for varied according to particular circumstances. Internal unity was the most important requirement of independence. It was only after its internal unity was compromised that Melos submitted to Athens, despite the initial inequalities of power that the Melian dialogue emphasizes. Incidentally, neutral Melos had been able to successfully resist a previous Athenian siege that took place in 426 BC, 10 years before its final conquest by Athens. When the Athenians decided to try again in 416 BC, ‘there was some treachery from inside, [and] the Melians surrendered unconditionally to the Athenians’, Thucydides tells us. As important as internal unity was, however, some occasions required external unity as well for successful resistance to an external threat to independence. Thus, Hermocrates appeals to Sicilian unity to end the war between the Greek city-states of Sicily in the face of an impending Athenian intervention:

[T]aken all together, we are all of us neighbours, living together in the same country in the midst of the sea, all called by the same name of Sicilians. There will be occasions, no doubt, when we shall go to war again and also when we shall meet together among ourselves and make peace again. But when we are faced with a foreign invasion, we shall always, if we are wise, unite to resist it, since here the injury of any one state endangers all the rest of us.


Reus-Smit’s work is a noteworthy exception. Reus-Smit argues that conceptions of the moral purpose of the state exert a significant influence on the choice of international institutions because such conceptions make part of the constitutional structure of international society that defines the social identity of the state and shape the nature of international co-operation. See Reus-Smit, The Moral Purpose of the State. While I have my doubts about the ‘social identity’ part, I am on the whole persuaded by this argument. I am concerned about the social identity thesis because it is not clear to me that the moral purpose of the state defined its social identity, and that the identity of the state in turn shaped the nature of international co-operation in ancient Greece. It seems to me that the identity of the state was determined not by a common conception of the moral purpose of the state, but rather by its internal organization, and this led not to co-operation but to constant interventions in other city-states to bring like-minded governments to power. Thus oligarchic Sparta intervened to assist oligarchs and democratic Athens intervened to assist democrats throughout Hellas. Furthermore, there was no clear preference for one form of government over the other, as Plato and Aristotle’s discussions illustrate well. What is right on, however, is Reus-Smit’s emphasis on the moral purpose of the state. The link between the state and the good life shaped the conception of all institutions and conventions, and hence affected the nature of international co-operation dramatically.

Doyle, Empires, ch. 3, 6.

Thucydides, V.116.

Ibid., IV.64.
Earlier in the same speech, Hermocrates applies the model of unity to Sicily as a whole when he warns that ‘internal strife is the main reason for the decline of cities, and will be so for Sicily, too, if we the inhabitants, who are all threatened together, will stand apart from each other, city against city’. As these passages make obvious, political unity was seen as the best remedy for external encroachments on independence. It is important to remember here that the independence of the polis could be undermined both internally and externally. Internal disintegration was a great danger; the anarchy that civil war brought about set the stage for many calamities. But if anarchy was to be avoided, so was tyranny, whether it was internally or externally imposed. In fact, very often, the two threats reinforced each other, with anarchy facilitating tyrannical rule and tyranny generating internal disorder. How, then, could the vicious cycle of anarchy and tyranny be broken? Through the establishment of a well-ordered polis whose stability was supported by the right institutions. As such, the question of which institutions were best suited to securing the unity of the polis, and under what conditions, emerged as the fundamental question, one that coloured every aspect of ancient Greek international interactions.

It is in this light that Thucydides’ emphasis on power should be understood. Power and political unity, both crucial for the independence of the polis, went hand in hand for the historian. Political unity was an important—if not the most important—source of power, and power, in its turn, made political unity sustainable over time. Thus, in the examples of Melos and Sicily discussed above, it was the power that stemmed from unity that made the Melian and Sicilian resistance to Athens successful. Similarly, in the Athenian case, Thucydides notes that Athens remained strong as long as she was united, even in the face of all the misfortunes that befell her. As Thucydides puts it, despite all the difficulties they encountered in the last stages of the war, the Athenians ‘none the less held out for eight years against their original enemies, who were now reinforced by the Sicilians, against their own allies, most of which had revolted, and against Cyrus, son of the King of Persia, who later joined the other side and provided the Peloponnesians with money for their fleet. And in the end it was only because they had destroyed themselves by their own internal strife that finally they were forced to surrender’. It was neither the Sicilian disaster nor the abandonment of her allies nor the Persian support of Sparta that finally brought Athens down, but her loss of political unity. The causal link between power and unity is relatively uncontroversial here.

Perhaps even more importantly, both power and unity were also closely connected to an ideal of the good life in the ancient Greek context—a connection that was crucial for comprehending the causal link between unity and power itself. The connection is distinctly present in the works of the philosophers. Aristotle expresses it most forcefully in stating that ‘the state comes into existence, originating in the

40 Ibid., IV.61.
41 Thucydides’ account of the civil war in Corcyra is the ultimate illustration of the utter devastation internal disintegration entails. It is very likely that Thucydides’ description of Corcyra informed Hobbes’ conception of the state of nature as a condition of total warfare where life was nasty, brutish, and short. Hobbes was an attentive student and great admirer of Thucydides, who also produced an eloquent translation of the History. See David Grene (ed.), The Peloponnesian War: The Complete Hobbes Translation (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1958).
42 Thucydides, II.65.
bare needs of life, and continuing in existence for the sake of the good life.\textsuperscript{43} The good life entails the practice of excellence in the lives of individuals as well as political communities. Thus, not only the power and unity of the polis, but also the very goal of political independence, is irrevocably tied to the practice of excellence. It is only when this link is brought to the fore that a meaningful understanding of the foundations of political power and unity can be attained. Tying unity and power to a moral ideal of living well was not merely a philosopher’s dream, either. A similar, if less systematic, connection between politics and the good life can be discerned in work of Thucydides.\textsuperscript{44} In that respect, Thucydides and Aristotle have a lot in common. Contrary to received wisdom, I argue that it is more accurate to read Thucydides as a forerunner of Aristotle rather than a follower of the sophists for a full appreciation of the subtlety of his thought.\textsuperscript{45} Such a repositioning places the notion of proper use in the practice of excellence at the centre of the historian’s analysis of political unity, with significant ramifications for his treatment of power and institutions in international affairs.

As already stated, a central aim of my exploration is to enrich the analysis of conflict and co-operation by paying close attention to the context of meaning within which the pursuit of power and peace takes place. Such attention reveals that a sound understanding of the dynamics of the ancient Greek international system can only be attained in light of the links between power, political unity, and the practice of excellence that predominantly shaped its context of meaning. Accordingly, not all forms of political unity are conducive to human flourishing. As pernicious as anarchy may be, its exact opposite, tyranny, is equally dangerous. Both threaten the good life, and the good life is what the polis seeks to bring about. As Aristotle puts it in the opening passage of the \textit{Politics}:

\begin{quote}
Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for everyone always acts in order to obtain that which they think good. But, if all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

This passage makes it very clear that political unity is valuable in light of its connection to the good life. It is for this reason that Aristotle thinks of political science as the ruling science. Political science has this character because it aims at knowledge of the highest good. In other words, political science, which aims to discover the good of the polis, has a controlling position over all other sciences, even those aiming at the good of the individual, because ‘though admittedly the good is the same for a city as for an individual, still the good of the city is apparently a greater and more complete good to acquire and preserve. For while it is satisfactory to acquire and preserve the good even for an individual, it is finer and more divine to acquire and


\textsuperscript{44} Aristotle’s method would rule out such dreaming in the first place, as he believed in the importance of starting from received wisdom and existing conventions in his search for the elements of the good life.

\textsuperscript{45} For instance, there are striking similarities between the Thucydidean and Aristotelian conceptions of the nature-convention distinction. I have explored in more detail the similarities in the two thinkers’ treatments of nature and power as well as their implications for our understanding of International Relations elsewhere. Nancy Kokaz, ‘Moderating Power: A Thucydidean Perspective’, \textit{Review of International Studies} (27:1, 2001).

\textsuperscript{46} Aristotle, \textit{Politics}, 1252a1.
preserve it for a people and for cities.\textsuperscript{47} Since the good life for humans is understood in terms of activity expressing excellence, the acquisition and preservation of the good of the political community must also be understood in terms of the practice of excellence.\textsuperscript{48} These links should be taken to heart in exploring the dynamics of the ancient Greek international system, as they capture crucial features of the context of meaning that shaped how political analysis was undertaken at the time.

Once the connection between politics and excellence is recognized, the question of how to think about the moral foundations of political unity acquires a special urgency. Proper use emerges as a central category in the practice of excellence. As neither anarchy nor tyranny contribute to the good life, the challenge becomes articulating a form (or various forms) of political unity that make(s) the proper use of political power possible. What, then, can the basis of such unity be? The distinction between nature and convention is highly relevant here since it played a prominent role in ancient Greek discussions of excellence and the good.\textsuperscript{49} This had ramifications for political analysis, as the question of whether political unity was grounded in nature or convention was highly contested. Complex articulations of the respective roles of nature and convention can be found in the thought of individual thinkers. Aristotle, for example, famously asserted that ‘it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal’.\textsuperscript{50} And yet, at the same time, Aristotle recognized the possibility of multiple routes to political unity, as given by the constitutions of different well-ordered states, and these constitutions were in place by convention. The basis of unity could change, as the conventions changed. ‘For since the state is a partnership, and is a partnership of citizens in a constitution, when the form of the government changes and becomes different, then it may be supposed that the state is no longer the same’, Aristotle wrote.\textsuperscript{51} These passages suggest that the links between nature, convention, and excellence were complex, and that both nature and convention had a role to play in establishing forms of political unity conducive to the good life.

I examine the convention part of the picture here. More broadly, I am interested in investigating how political unity was understood in the ancient Greek context in light of its vital connection to the good life. I address this question by offering a close reading of how Thucydides conceived of the role of convention in the practice of excellence. My goal is to explore the types of conventions upon which political unity could be based in ancient Greece to avoid the twin pitfalls of anarchy and tyranny. Could divine law offer a stable solution? If the laws of the city were tied to the divine, could there be any place for human law? If, by contrast, the laws of the city were not tied to the divine, what were the foundations upon which human law rested? What role did unwritten laws and cultural practices, such as friendship, have to play? Did Thucydides have a clear preference among the multiplicity of conventional possibilities that the ancient Greek context of meaning made available? Did he unequivocally reject or endorse a particular source of unity? What does that

\textsuperscript{47} Aristotle, \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1985), 1094b5–1094b10. \\
\textsuperscript{48} In Aristotle’s words, ‘the human good turns out to be the soul’s activity that expresses virtue’. Ibid., 1089a20. \\
\textsuperscript{49} The nature-convention distinction was first articulated by the sophists in terms of a stark opposition. Subsequent thinkers tried to bring the two sides of the opposition together in more complex ways. \\
\textsuperscript{50} Aristotle, \textit{Politics}, 1253a1. \\
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 1276b1.
imply for how he conceptualized the relationship between political unity and the good life? It is crucial to try to answer these questions in order to grasp the full significance of Thucydides' analysis of the pursuit of power and peace and develop a richer understanding of the structure and dynamics of the ancient Greek international system. My analysis reveals that, for Thucydides, political unity could rest on a wide range of conventional foundations as long as these were properly used to promote the practice of excellence. Thus, institutions and practices of cooperation had to be evaluated not only in terms of the constraints they placed on the exercise of power, but also in light of how they were used. Finally, excellent conventional foundations that were conducive to the good life were also a source of power in international affairs.

Embarking on the quest for unity: the role of divine law

‘We must assume that a states-system will not come into being’, writes Wight, ‘without a degree of cultural unity among its members. The three states-systems that we have taken as paradigms, the Greek, the Western, and the early Chinese, each arose within a single culture.’

Religious institutions and practices were a fundamental source of cultural unity in ancient Greece, not only in the system but also for the polis. Just as the religiously based institutions and practices common to all Hellas that have already been discussed provided the means of cultural unity in the system, the religious institutions and practices specific to each city-state had the potential for being the fountain of unity for the polis. Impiety was considered to be a direct threat to internal political unity, as the trial and execution of Socrates amply illustrate. Religious conventions often guided political behaviour as well, both in internal and external affairs. Finally, ideas about divine justice were invoked to explain the eventual downfall of Athens. The question, then, becomes whether such religious conventions can form the basis for the right kind of political unity—a kind of unity conducive to the good life—and what sorts of beliefs about divine intervention in human affairs such unity requires. I suggest that Thucydides' treatment of the divine shows that religiosity did have a part to play in the practice of excellence when properly used, without necessitating a belief in divine justice.

Divine law occupies a peculiar place between nature and convention. Although my focus is on the conventional sources of unity here, this does not mean that nature is irrelevant to the discussion. The interrelationships between nature, convention, and excellence are complex, and this is nowhere more evident than in the analysis of the religious foundations of political unity. If divine law constituted a plausible basis for political unity, was that by nature or by convention? On the one hand, divine law was tied to the conventions of each polis. Ancient Greek religion was not a religion of salvation but was oriented toward civic rituals, with different cities having their own Gods and exclusive festivals. Yet, the divine was also invoked in the name of natural justice, as when Antigone appealed to something higher than the laws of the

52 Wight, Systems of States, p. 33.
It is not possible to uncover a consensus as to whether divine law was given by nature or by convention. This, however, is not the question that I am interested in pursuing here. Instead, I emphasize how religion was used as a conventional foundation for political unity, whether the divine is ultimately understood to originate in nature or convention. Thucydides’ analysis is instructive here, as it brackets questions about the nature and origins of the divine, and focuses instead on its political functions. Accordingly, the historian offers neither an outright rejection nor an uncritical endorsement of divine law, but instead emphasizes the importance of its proper use in the practice of excellence.

At first glance, it is easy to read Thucydides as a harsh critic of religion, to suppose that ‘his History unfolds without gods or oracles or omens’. There are numerous instances in the History where Thucydides finds fault with religiosity, divine prophecies, and oracles, and favours rational scientific explanations of the causes of events. To give a few well-known examples, Thucydides is quite critical of how people adapted ‘their memories to fit their sufferings’ in their interpretation of oracles during the plague. He cynically asserts that there was one, and only one instance of an oracle being proved accurate, the prediction that ‘the war would last for thrice nine years’. He implies that the Melian trust in divine assistance, prophecies, and oracles in the face of overwhelming power was foolish, as signalled by the remarks of the Athenian envoys and the eventual fate of Melos. He condemns the religious frenzy that surrounded the disfiguration of the Hermæ leading to savagery in Athens and the eventual recall of Alcibiades. He gives a moving description of how the Athenian expedition to Sicily, the greatest action ever to be undertaken in Hellenic history, ended with ‘the most calamitous of defeats’ because the general Nicias delayed withdrawal due to an eclipse of the moon, an unfavourable omen. Based on these remarks and many more, it might seem reasonable to conclude that Thucydides had no taste for religion.

As important as the above references are, however, they reveal only one side of the story. Alongside the disdain of religious injunctions, oracles, and omens can be found the horrific accounts of the plague and civil war in Corcyra. During the plague at Athens, Thucydides tells us, people ‘became indifferent to every rule of religion and omens’.

54 Antigone defied the laws of the city to bury her brother in accordance with divine law, which she understood to be natural and eternal. She proudly declared that the lawmaker’s orders have to give way before divine law in her response to Creon: ‘Nor did I think that your orders were so strong that you, a mortal man, could over-run the gods’ unwritten and unfailing laws. Not now, nor yesterday’s, they always live, and no one knows their origin in time.’ Sophocles, ‘Antigone’ in David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (eds.), Sophocles I (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1954), p. 174.


56 Thucydides, II.54.

57 Ibid., V.26.

58 Ibid., V.103. Melos refused the Athenian injunction to join the Athenian empire, and was conquered as a result, upon which the Athenians ‘put to death all the men of military age whom they took, and sold the women and children as slaves’. Ibid., V. 116. I will not discuss the case of Melos any further here, as I do not think that it is necessary to judge the question concerning divine justice to see what the political functions of religion could be. Let me just note in passing that I find the theme of misuse of tendencies in nature (i.e. the misuse of hope on behalf of the Melians and the misuse of power on behalf of the Athenians) more intriguing and more important than the matter of divine intervention for understanding the message of the Melian dialogue.

59 Ibid., VI.27–VI.29 and VI.60–VI.61.

60 Ibid., VII.50 and VII.87.
law'.61 Traditional burial ceremonies were disrupted, the usual laments for the dead were given up, a ‘state of unprecedented lawlessness’ ensued as ‘[n]o fear of god or law of man had a restraining influence’.62 Similarly, in Corcyra, the sanctity of sacred places was violated as suppliants from the temple of Hera who agreed to a trial were condemned to death, the remaining suppliants committed suicide in the temple, and ‘men were dragged from the temples or butchered on the very altars’.63 In both situations, the dissolution of religious restraints led to tremendous human suffering. Indeed, after witnessing the horrors of the collapse of religion, it is difficult not to agree with Marinatos that ‘Thucydides supported religion because he saw that it helped preserve the norms and morals of society’.64 Similarly, religion provided important restraints in international affairs. As already noted, religious rites about the exchange of the dead were strictly followed in the conduct of war; sacred truces were generally observed; and the inviolability of sacred places was ordinarily upheld. There was one significant exception, when the Athenian fortification of the temple of Apollo at Delium was reciprocated by a Boeotian refusal to return the Athenian dead. The Athenians defended the fortification of the temple and violation of the sacred water on grounds of necessity. Yet, the Athenian argument that ‘even the god would look indulgently on any action done under the stress of war and danger’ was not very convincing to the Boeotians.65 The matter was finally resolved when the defeated Athenians withdrew from the temple, upon which the Boeotians returned the Athenian dead.66 The Delium incident is no doubt a case of religious offence, but even so, it simultaneously demonstrates the power of religiosity for introducing a modicum of restraint and order to warfare.

Not surprisingly, what ties the praise and criticism of religion together for Thucydides is its use. As Marinatos notes, the Athenian position at Delium represented a misuse of religion.67 She goes on to suggest that Thucydides was very upset by the ‘demagoguery of the seers and oracle-mongers’68 and the superstitious acceptance of such demagoguery by the public that generally resulted in destructive courses of policy. ‘For Thucydides,’ writes Marinatos, ‘superstition is not erroneous belief only, but misuse of religion’.69 The problem is not with oracles, then, which are generally ambiguous and indicate the truth for those who can understand it, but with those who exploit religiosity for their own purposes, such as the chresmologues. Also to blame are the public and the individuals who are gullible enough to believe the chresmologues or who do not succeed in interpreting genuine Delphic oracles correctly.70 Oost also emphasizes how Thucydides was not necessarily critical of oracles per se, but of their reception, and especially of the ‘too ready credulity of people in general’.71 What really disturbed Thucydides, Marinatos suggests, and I

---

61 Ibid., II.52.
62 Ibid., II.51–II.53.
63 Ibid., III.81.
65 Thucydides, IV.98.
66 Ibid., IV.97–IV.101.
68 Ibid., p. 63.
69 Ibid., p. 62.
believe she is correct, was that the misuse of religion very often resulted in social
disaster, whether it be in the form of savage disorder or erroneous policy decisions.\textsuperscript{72} The recall of Alcibiades was once such instance of the misuse of religiosity, since
Alcibiades had conducted himself perfectly in his public capacity whatever his
personal faults may have been.\textsuperscript{73} The case of Nicias and the eclipse of the moon
which delayed the Athenian withdrawal from Sicily and ended in the utter
destruction of the expedition is another instance. Thucydides notes that Nicias was
‘rather over-inclined to divination and such things’.\textsuperscript{74} As Oost points out, Thucydides
here criticizes the excessive devotion of Nicias to religion, which implies that the
historian ‘had a conception of a degree of religiosity which is \textit{not} excessive’.\textsuperscript{75}

In a nutshell, proper use is vital for religion to assume a positive function in the
quest for political unity. If Nicias and the chresmologues represent the drawbacks of
excess religiosity, the plague and Corcyra warn about the dangers of deficiency.
Strauss is right on target, when he notes that ‘Thucydides’ theology—if it is
permitted to use this expression—is located in the mean (in the Aristotelian sense)
between excess and deficiency.\textsuperscript{76} Proper use requires moderation. Proper use also
requires practical wisdom in determining what moderation demands, as evidenced
by the emphasis on correct interpretations that avoid excess. As Oost notes,
Thucydides constantly submits religiosity to rational testing in trying to determine
its proper use.\textsuperscript{77} Moderation and practical wisdom go together in the proper use of
religion in the practice of excellence. Acknowledging the importance of the proper
use of religion in terms of its contribution to the practice of excellence does not
require one to be pious or to believe in divine retribution, even though that may
help. Hence, a central question that has puzzled many analysts of the role of the
divine in the \textit{History}—that of whether Thucydides provides evidence for divine
justice when he recounts the disaster that befell the Athenians in the Sicilian
expedition after their misdemeanour in Melos—does not need to be settled. One
does not need to hold, with Marinatos, that ‘the pattern of Athens’ downfall illustrates divine justice’\textsuperscript{78} on my account of the role of religion in Thucydides’
work. All it takes to accord religion its proper place in the practice of excellence is to
recognize the importance of its proper use in human terms.

\textbf{Grounding human law: consent, coercion, and respect}

Human law, written and unwritten, plays a similar function for grounding political
unity in the practice of excellence. The already cited passages from Corcyra and the
plague highlight the crucial importance of not only divine, but also human law. Just
like religion, human law has a vital role to play in injecting moderation and practical

\textsuperscript{72} Marinatos, \textit{Thucydides and Religion}, pp. 62–3.
\textsuperscript{73} Thucydides, VI.15.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., VII.50.
\textsuperscript{75} Oost, ‘Thucydides and the Irrational’, p. 192.
\textsuperscript{77} Oost, ‘Thucydides and the Irrational’, p. 195.
\textsuperscript{78} Marinatos, \textit{Thucydides and Religion}, p. 58.
wisdom into domestic and international politics, and it is upon these foundations that co-operative practices regulated by law must rest. The final part of the Athenian dictum at Melos, that of treating the weak, the suffering, the oppressed, or more generally those in an inferior position, with moderation, presupposes the special significance of the proper use of law in this respect. Textual evidence for this claim is abundant. In his discussion of Corcyra, Thucydides notes with regret the disastrous consequences of the repeal of ‘those general laws of humanity which are there to give a hope of salvation to all who are in distress’.79 Pericles underscores the importance of obedience to the laws, ‘especially those which are for the protection of the oppressed, and those unwritten laws which it is an acknowledged shame to break’.80 The Melians reiterate the importance of laws and principles which tend ‘to the general good of all men: namely, that in the case of all who fall into danger there should be such a thing as fair play and just dealing’.81 Contra Saxonhouse’s suspicious remarks, it is no coincidence that ‘the speeches, especially those of men who speak from positions of weakness, are replete with reference to the laws of the Hellenes’.82 It is natural for a writer who was as concerned with human suffering as Thucydides that laws should play a part in alleviating those sufferings by offering protection and hope to the downtrodden.

How were the laws to perform that function? A simple answer would look at consent or coercion or a combination thereof.83 Surely, agreement and consent did have an important role in generating moderation. The best example from international affairs is the observance of international treaties. In fact, before the outbreak of war, both sides take extreme care not to violate the agreement of the peace treaty that concluded the first Peloponnesian War. Corcyra appeals in part to the treaty to legitimize its alliance request from Athens after the controversy with Corinth over Epidamnus. Thus, the Corcyraean representatives tell the Athenians: ‘It is not a breach of your treaty with Sparta if you receive us into your alliance. We are neutrals, and it is expressly written down in your treaty that any Hellenic state which is in this condition is free to ally itself with whichever side it chooses’.84 The Athenians decide to make a limited defensive alliance with Corcyra as opposed to a full alliance in recognition of the fact that a full alliance which could require them to join in an attack on Corinth ‘would constitute a breach of their treaty with the Peloponnesian’.85 Finally, the Spartan declaration of war is based on a vote that concludes that the Athenians had broken the treaty.86 Furthermore, treaties with arbitration clauses for the peaceful resolution of disputes were quite effective in the avoidance of hostilities when they were observed. Clearly, agreement, as enshrined in international law based on treaty, was crucial for the promotion of moderation in international politics.

79 Thucydides, III.84.
80 Ibid., II.37.
81 Ibid., V.90.
83 Consent and coercion represent typical justifications for the authority of the political community in ‘domestic’ political theory. In defiance of the distinction between domestic and international politics, Thucydides offers examples from both realms in his discussion of the proper use of institutions.
84 Thucydides, I.35.
85 Ibid., I.44.
86 Ibid., I.87–I.88.
Unfortunately, agreement, as such, is not enough. For Thucydides, equally important was how agreement was used. The most striking illustration of the abuse of agreement in international affairs comes in the actions of the Athenian general Paches in Notium in his interactions with the rival general Hippias at the time of the Athenian intervention on behalf of the Colophonian side during party strife there:

Paches invited Hippias, the general of the Arcadian mercenaries, inside the fortification for a discussion, promising that, if no agreement was reached, he would see that he got back again safe and sound to the fortification. Hippias therefore came out to meet Paches who put him under arrest, though not in chains. He then made a sudden attack and took the fortification by surprise. He put to death all the Arcadian and foreign troops who were inside, and later, as he had promised, he brought Hippias back there, and as soon as he was inside, he had him seized and shot down with arrows.87

Paches kept his promise: as he had agreed, he returned Hippias to the Arcadian fortification safe and sound. However, the particular use of agreement in this instance is absolutely outrageous and does not contribute one inch to the practice of excellence. The example shows how agreement, misused, can be utterly destructive for moderation and practical wisdom. Practical wisdom here is to be distinguished from what Aristotle called cleverness or what we call prudence or instrumental rationality today. ‘There is a capacity, called cleverness, which is such as to be able to do the actions that tend to promote whatever goal is assumed and to achieve it’ wrote Aristotle. Practical wisdom ‘is not the same as this capacity [of cleverness], though it requires it’.88 Practical wisdom cannot be the same as sheer calculativeness (cleverness), because practical wisdom is understood in terms of the goals that are chosen as well as the actions undertaken to achieve them. Instrumental rationality is only a part of this account, it needs to be accompanied by the right ends in order to make a positive contribution to the practice of excellence.

A more familiar problem lies in the hazards of disregarding agreements. This is a problem that has forever haunted proponents of international law: a treaty may be agreed upon, but in the absence of enforcement power, how can it be ensured that it will be abided by? In the example just discussed, Paches could have easily broken his word as opposed to keeping it in a perverse way as he did. A more typical example comes during the Peace of Nicias. As Thucydides notes, this peace was no peace in reality:

[I]t would certainly be an error of judgement to consider the interval of the agreement as anything else except a period of war. One has only to look at the facts to see that it is hardly possible to use the word ‘peace’ of a situation in which neither side gave back or received what had been promised; and apart from this there were breaches of the treaty on both sides.89

Agreements are great, but if they are not upheld, they don’t amount to much. It is only in their proper use, that is in their observation in accordance with the spirit of the agreement in a way that is conducive to moderation, that agreements can promote the practice of excellence.

Is it through coercion, then, that human law operates in the practice of excellence? Fear of punishment is cited as an important factor in producing obedience to the law

---

87 Ibid., III.34.
89 Thucydides, I.26.
in various instances in the *History*. Most notably, with respect to the lawlessness of the revolution in Corcyra, Thucydides refers to erosion of the fear of law. 'As for the offences against human law,' he writes, 'no one expected to live long enough to be brought to trial and punished'. As a result, '[n]o fear of god or law had a restraining influence'.90 Similarly, in the debate about the proper punishment to be accorded to Mytilene after her unsuccessful revolt, both speakers concentrate on the power to coerce. Cleon reminds the Athenians that their ‘leadership depends on superior strength and not on any goodwill’ of the allies,91 while Diodotus cynically ties obedience to the law to the fear of punishment:

Cities and individuals alike, all are by nature disposed to do wrong, and there is no law that will prevent it, as is shown by the fact that men have tried every kind of punishment, constantly adding to the list, in the attempt to find greater security from criminals. It is likely that in early times the punishments even for the greatest crimes were not as severe as they are now, but the laws were still broken, and in the course of time, the death penalty became generally introduced. Yet even with this, the laws are still broken. Either, therefore, we must discover some fear more potent than the fear of death, or we must admit that here certainly we have not got an adequate deterrent. . . . In a word, it is impossible (and only the most simple-minded will deny this) for human nature, when once seriously set upon a certain course, to be prevented from following that course by the force of law or by any other means of intimidation whatever.92

Compliance with the law originates from intimidation on this line of reasoning, as obedience is procured by deterring potential violators from crime through the utilization of the fear of punishment.

Does Diodotus give us an adequate account of the role of law in the practice of excellence? I would suggest not. Aristotle expressed the crux of my disagreement when he distinguished between the just person and just actions. For Aristotle, ‘the just and temperate person is not the one who [merely] does these actions, but the one who also does them in the way in which just and temperate people do them’.93 In order to be excellent, the agent must first ‘know [that he is doing virtuous actions]; second, he must decide on them, and decide on them for themselves; and third, he must also do them from a firm and unchanging state’.94 The last two conditions are ‘all-important’ and can be ‘achieved by the frequent doing of just and temperate actions’.95 In that sense, fear of punishment may be an important tool in providing the proper habituation which Aristotle greatly cared about, but it cannot in any way be a replacement for the practice of excellence itself—namely, for the doing of right actions for the right reasons. A person who does excellent actions because of nothing else but fear cannot be excellent. Thucydides would have agreed, as evidenced by his juxtaposition of Diodotus’ account of law with the loftier Periclean vision. ‘[W]e keep to the law’ Pericles tells the Athenians, ‘[t]his is because it commands our deep respect’.96 Obedience here rests not on fear but on respect, respect based on the greatness and excellence of Athens. The importance of the

90 Ibid., III.53.
91 Ibid., III.37.
92 Ibid., III.45.
94 Ibid., 1105a30.
95 Ibid., 1105b1.
96 Thucydides, II.37.
Athenian constitution and laws for her excellence are duly recognized. The principle of fear whose role in domestic and international affairs is expounded by Cleon and Diodotus cannot be for people who care about the practice of excellence, it is fit only for tyrants or criminals. No wonder then, that Cleon calls the Athenian empire a tyranny, or that Diodotus equates human nature with the propensity to criminality. I am tempted to suggest that Thucydides agreed with Diodotus’ conclusion that punishment ought to be employed with moderation and put to proper use, understood as the advantage of Athens in this particular instance, while he disagreed with Diodotus’ analysis.

If it cannot be maintained that law based on pure fear and coercion contributes to the practice of excellence, can it at least be held that it serves the cause of a less noble, but maybe more immediately urgent cause, that of stability? Sometimes, but not always. A law which does not command the goodwill and respect of those to whom it applies, whether it be in domestic or international politics, cannot be very stable. Even Pericles recognized that coercive power cannot last forever. In domestic affairs, as soon as the coercive capacity of the law is weakened, the result would be complete anarchy. Thucydides discusses the drastic consequences of the dissolution of goodwill, friendship, and trust among the citizens in Corcyra at some length for good reason. In noting the important links between friendship and civil peace and unity, the historian comes close to Aristotle who also emphasized that since ‘friendship would seem to hold cities together’ it was a matter of great concern to legislators. ‘For concord would seem to be similar to friendship’ wrote Aristotle, and legislators ‘aim at concord above all, while they try above all to expel civil conflict, which is enmity’. Aristotle could have easily been writing about Corecyra! Similarly, in foreign affairs, associations built on fear and force as opposed to goodwill cannot in any way be lasting, as the examples of Corecyra–Corinth and Mytilene–Athens amply illustrate. In explaining their grievances about Corinth to the Athenians in their request for alliance, the Corecyraeans assert that even colonial relations based on force cannot be lasting since ‘every colony, if it is treated properly, honours its mother city, and only becomes estranged if it has been treated badly. Colonists are not sent abroad to be the slaves of those who remain behind, but to be their equals’. It should be understandable, then, that Corecyra, as a maltreated colony, turns elsewhere for assistance. Similarly, in trying to secure Spartan help for their rebellion from Athens, the Mytilenians emphasize that their rebellion should not be condemned as a betrayal since their alliance with Athens was based on fear, and alliances based on fear are not long-lived:

In most cases goodwill is the basis of loyalty, but in our case, fear was the bond, and it was more through terror than through friendship that we were held together in alliance. And the alliance was certain to be broken at any moment by the first side that felt confident that this would be a safe move to make.

Fear and terror cannot be the basis of lasting communities and stable laws, domestic or international, since the bonds forged by fear are dissolved as soon as the balance

97 Ibid., II.36.
98 Ibid., III.37.
100 Ibid., 1155a25.
101 Thucydides, I.34.
of forces changes. Something more than fear, namely, goodwill, friendship, and trust are also required if we are to obey the laws because of the deep respect they command.

**Unwritten law: the place of friendship and expediency**

All the examples discussed so far in the exploration of the proper conventional sources of political unity point to the importance of goodwill, friendship, and trust in making law in general, and human law in particular, an effective part of the practice of excellence. Goodwill, friendship, and trust are not enacted into law in the same way that treaties, constitutions, or legal decrees are; yet they perform a vital function in politics nevertheless. This is precisely what Pericles must have had in mind when he referred to the importance of obeying ‘those unwritten laws which it is an acknowledged shame to break’.102 Contra Connor, it is neither surprising nor a mere rhetorical device, that the Spartan peace offer that came after the defeat at Pylos was couched in the language of friendship: ‘Sparta calls upon you to make a treaty and to end the war. She offers you peace, alliance, friendly and neighbourly relations’.103 Friendly relations and lasting peace were closely tied to moderation in the Spartan proposal:

[N]o lasting settlement can be made in a spirit of revenge, when one side gets the better of things in war and forces its opponent to swear to carry out the terms of an unequal treaty; what will make the settlement lasting is when the party that has it in his power to act like this takes instead a more reasonable point of view, overcomes his adversary in generosity, and makes peace on more moderate terms than his enemy expected.104

A peace concluded in the spirit of friendship requires the exercise of moderation. Similarly, as Pearson notes, Thucydides relays the pre-war diplomacy between Corcyra, Corinth, and Athens ‘as though it were a matter of meeting obligations’ of friendship and justice. ‘It is significant that Thucydides should present the story in this manner,’ Pearson concludes, ‘because it shows his belief that Greece still thought of international relations in terms of justice and friendship, not exclusively in terms of self-interest’.105 Clearly, friendship is linked to justice and moderation in this account.

What exactly does the ideal of friendship entail? The traditional definition of friendship in popular ethics in ancient Greece is ‘helping one’s friends and harming one’s enemies’ Pearson suggests, based on a review of the literary and philosophical sources of the period.106 This definition provides the justification for certain uses of force in intercity politics. Based on the traditional definition, offensive attacks can be

---

102 Ibid., II.37.
103 Ibid., IV.19.
104 Ibid., IV.19.
defended on the grounds that they are ‘taken in return for an injury or in gratitude for some favour from another source. If no such explanation can be given, the aggressor is guilty of a blatant act of hybris’.  

The multiple appeals in the History to gratitude—gratitude for favours received in the past, or gratitude for requested benefits in return for which favours can be offered in the future—become intelligible in light of this conventional definition. Friendship, understood as such, interjects some degree of moderation into international politics since ‘[u]nprovoked attack, according to the conventional view, is the clearest type of injustice’. To illustrate, the traditional definition of friendship deems the unprovoked Athenian attack on Melos to be an outrageous act of injustice. The traditional code thus condemns unprovoked aggression in international affairs, and effectively promotes moderation. Furthermore, as Pericles observes, the bestowing of favours in relationships of friendship involves ‘free liberality’ which is another dimension of the practice of excellence, even if Thucydides does not emphasize this dimension as much as Aristotle does.

Unfortunately, as important as the popular definition of friendship may be in some instances, it is not always conducive to the practice of excellence if not properly used. The most striking example, as Pearson points out, comes in the case of Plataea. The Thebans and Spartans lay siege to the city of Plataea after the Plataeans refuse the Spartan offer of neutrality because of their loyalty to Athens. The city voluntarily comes over when defeat is imminent on the promise of a fair trial by the Spartans. The Spartan judges ask the Plataeans one question: ‘Have you done anything to help the Spartans and their allies in the present war?’ Even though this may not seem like a fair question to us (after all, how could an Athenian ally be reasonably expected to help the Spartan side in the war?!), Pearson notes how the Spartan action can be technically justified in terms of pre-existing bonds of friendship between Sparta and Plataea that the Plataeans themselves appealed to in their supplication for mercy. On this line of reasoning, the Plataeans can be held accountable for not having done anything to help their friends—i.e. the Spartans—in the war, and ‘they are treated accordingly not as brave and stubborn enemies, but as false friends who fail in an important obligation’. Furthermore, the Spartans had obligations of friendship towards their allies, the Thebans, who were the bitterest enemies of the Plataeans. ‘It was largely, or entirely, because of Thebes that the Spartans acted so mercilessly towards the Plataeans’, Thucydides tells us. What does the historian think of this usage of the traditional code? As Pearson notes, ‘Thucydides withholds comment. It is left for the reader to consider if the old code of behaviour is a sound guide when it leads to this brutal treatment of a defeated enemy’.

The general direction of the History is such that Thucydides could not have approved of such brutal treatment, I would suggest. The appropriate analogy here is with the case of Mytilene, whose account directly precedes the narrative of the end

---

107 Ibid., p. 142.
108 Ibid.
109 Thucydides, II.40.
110 Ibid., III.52.
112 Thucydides, III.68.
of Plataea in the structure of the work. In a way, Cleon’s demand for inflicting the
death penalty on Mytilene can be justified in terms of the traditional code of
friendship as it relates to punitive justice. As Cleon forcefully asserts, Mytilene
injures Athens by rebelling, and as such deserves punishment as retribution for the
harm she inflicts. The injury is especially grave because of the supposed bonds of
friendship between Athens and Mytilene as represented by Mytilene’s privileged
status in the empire, and the voluntary and calculated nature of her rebellion which
counts as a terrible breach of that friendship. The guilt of Mytilene is never in
question in the Mytilenian debate. Yet, Thucydides is shocked by the severity of the
chosen penalty, even if it is deserved. He welcomes the reversal of the decision in
favour of adopting a more moderate form of punishment and he celebrates the
narrow escape of Mytilene from massacre. The use of the traditional code of
friendship in a way that would create uncalled-for suffering cannot contribute to the
practice of excellence. In that sense, an Aristotelian conception of friendship
probably comes closer to Thucydides’ understanding of how friendship is to be used
in politics.

An Aristotelian conception of friendship is superior to the traditional code for
three reasons. First, Aristotle defines friendship as ‘reciprocated goodwill’ that is
undertaken willingly, for ‘we should never make a friend of someone who is un-
willing’. This precludes the possibility of calling relationships based on sheer force
by the name of friendship, and expecting what is proper among friends to hold in such
situations. Second, Aristotle distinguishes between different kinds of friendship and
insists that justice in different friendships ‘is not the same in each case but corresponds
to worth; for so does the friendship’. Hence, we are not expected to return favours
to friends in the same way in every case, as friendship is directly connected to worth
understood in terms of excellence. Third, Aristotle recognizes that ‘generally speaking,
we should return what we owe’. However, if in the particular circumstances that we
face, not returning what we owe is more excellent, we should choose this option,
because ‘sometimes even the return of a previous favour is not fair [but an excessive
demand.]’ Instead, ‘we should accord to each what is proper and suitable’. The
Plataean response to the Spartan accusation of false friendship becomes intelligible in
these terms. As paraphrased by Pearson, the Plataeans claim that ‘[n]ot only are the
Spartans asking too much in expecting to be valued above the Athenians as friends,
but they are themselves in the wrong for valuing Theban friendship above friendship
with the Plataeans’. Thucydides, too, seems to be suggesting that friendship
corresponds to worth here, and consequently that it may not always be proper to
return favours, depending on the situation. In that sense, the traditional code is
appropriate in so far as it contributes to the practice of excellence, this is what
constitutes its proper use. Thucydides would have agreed, I think, as his quiet
disapproval of the use of the code in Plataea and Mytilene suggests.

114 Thucydides, III.39–III.40.
115 Ibid., III.49.
117 Ibid., 1161a20.
118 Ibid., 1165a1.
119 Ibid., 1165a5.
120 Ibid., 1165a15.
The case of Mytilene is also interesting in another respect, as it points to how even arguments from expediency have a contribution to make to the practice of excellence when properly used. Diodotus is able to convince the Athenians to reverse the original decision of putting to death the entire male population and enslaving the women and children of Mytilene on the grounds that it is more useful for Athens to inflict a more moderate punishment.\(^\text{122}\) Diodotus is explicitly hostile to ‘being swayed too much by pity or by ordinary decent feelings’ and asks Athenians to be guided strictly by their self-interest.\(^\text{123}\) Of course, it might be that Diodotus felt the need to lie in order for his advice to be heeded, a quandary which he himself identified to be a problem for democratic deliberation in his speech. It is a sad predicament of democratic assemblies, Diodotus maintains, that ‘just as the speaker who advocates some monstrous measure has to win over the people by deceiving them, so also a man with good advice to give has to tell lies if he expects to be believed’.\(^\text{124}\) Putting aside the issue of whether Diodotus was lying or not when he invited the Athenians to consider solely their own self-interest, Thucydides does not seem to be too disturbed by the use of the argument from self-interest and expediency here even if Diodotus was not lying. The narrative makes it clear that he considered Diodotus to be the speaker with the good advice. In that sense, expediency and moderation may come together in the practice of excellence.\(^\text{125}\)

However, just like laws based on pure coercive power, rule based on sheer expediency at all times is for tyrants. It is not surprising then, that Euphemus equates expediency with tyranny in the debate at Camarina in his efforts to explain to the Sicilian Greeks why it is in the Athenian self-interest that they be free and strong while their kinsmen in Greece are enslaved. ‘When a man or a city exercises absolute power the logical course is the course of self-interest’, Euphemus claims.\(^\text{126}\) Absolute power is exercised as such here and not necessarily in accordance with excellence, as perhaps better rendered in the Hobbes translation, which uses the word ‘tyrant’ to describe the man who exercises absolute power.\(^\text{127}\) Similarly, the Athenian actions in Melos, as opposed to the Athenian words, represent a tyrannical exercise of power. It is precisely this transformation into tyranny that leads Connor to conclude that ‘[w]hatever our reactions to what happens to the Melians, it is hard to escape a feeling of horror at what is happening to the Athenians’.\(^\text{128}\) Furthermore, not only is the principle of pure expediency in opposition to virtue, but just like the principle of fear, it can be self-defeating. The Athenians claimed that subduing Melos was in their self-interest, and Athens surely prevailed in the short run. However, as de Romilly notes, it is not so clear that the Melian decision was in the

\(^{122}\) Thucydides, III.46–47.

\(^{123}\) Ibid., III.48.

\(^{124}\) Ibid., III.43.


\(^{126}\) Thucydides, VI.85.

\(^{127}\) Thucydides, VI.85 in Grene (ed.), *The Complete Hobbes Translation*.

Athenian self-interest in the long run as it promoted a general atmosphere of ill-feeling which encouraged her imperial allies to rebel.¹²⁹ The ambiguity should not come as a surprise in the work of someone as attentive as Thucydides was to the role of the unpredictable in an uncertain future. Thus, expediency becomes an appropriate guide to conduct only in its proper use.

Excellence and the foundations of power and peace

What emerges from the above discussion is that when properly used, religiosity, consent, coercion, friendship, and even expediency have an important role to play in establishing how laws operate in the practice of excellence. Reminiscent of Aristotle, the right institutions become a crucial part of this account for Thucydides in nurturing the right habits for excellence. But what does the practice of excellence entail for politics? How can we judge whether conventions are put to proper use? The probe into the moral foundations of political unity reveals that Thucydides seemed to understand the practice of excellence specifically as the promotion of moderation and practical wisdom in politics. Thus, I agree with Strauss, that for Thucydides, ‘a sound regime is a moderate regime dedicated to moderation’.¹³⁰ Thucydides’ dislike of the extreme uses of conventions comes in every shape and form. From contempt for the excessive religiosity of Nicias to disdain for the excessive enthusiasm for the Sicilian expedition fuelled by the chresmologues, from regret about the deficiency of conventional values experienced in the plague in Athens and civil war in Corcyra to disapproval of the newly minted excesses of these events, the language of multiple passages clearly reveals where the historian’s sympathies lie. ‘And as usually happens in such situations’, Thucydides sadly notes in his account of Corcyra, ‘people went to every extreme and beyond it’.¹³¹ In the terrible course of events, party membership surmounted family relations and religious fellowships, ‘since party members were more ready to go to any extreme for any reason whatever’. Even though both parties ‘had programmes which appeared admirable—on one side political equality for the masses, on the other the safe and sound government of the aristocracy’, these programmes were professed with ‘violent fanaticism’ in practice. ‘As for the citizens who held moderate views, they were destroyed by both the extreme parties, either for not taking part in the struggle or in envy at the possibility that they might survive’.¹³² Corcyra is the ultimate case of the collapse of moderation as it illustrates the consequences of both deficiency in old established conventions and excess in new ways. Once again, Thucydides’ language is very suggestive of Aristotle, who defined excellence as ‘a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency’.¹³³

The discussion of the sources of political unity also makes clear that moderation is closely tied to practical wisdom in the History. Extremes are avoided by the proper

¹²⁹ de Romilly, ‘Fairness and Kindness in Thucydides’, p. 99. For textual references, see also Thucydides, IV.81.
¹³¹ Thucydides, III.81.
¹³² Ibid., III.82.
¹³³ Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1107a1.
use of conventions in particular situations, and this requires practical wisdom. A good example comes in the context of the emphasis placed on the proper interpretation of oracles, but the same holds true of all forms of conventions. Proper use entails both moderation and practical wisdom. Hence moderation and practical wisdom are intimately connected in the practice of excellence for Thucydides. Aristotle would have wholeheartedly agreed. Practical wisdom, for Aristotle, is not ‘about universals only. It must also come to know particulars, since it is concerned with action and action is about particulars.’134 As MacIntyre brilliantly discusses, Aristotle also recognized that practical wisdom and moderation were intimately connected.135 Accordingly, moderation preserves practical wisdom and practical wisdom is that which is preserved by moderation.136 Furthermore, moderation requires practical wisdom, because excellence expresses correct reason, and ‘correct reason is reason that expresses intelligence’; it follows that all excellence requires practical wisdom.137 Thus, practical wisdom and moderation are inseparably bound together for Aristotle, and maybe not as systematically, but nevertheless still obviously, for Thucydides, as well.

The implications of this account of political excellence for conceptualizing political unity are significant. First, the conventional foundations of political unity have a proper use in the practice of excellence, understood above all as moderation and practical wisdom by Thucydides. It is only through the linking of conventions to excellence in light of an ideal of the good life that forms of political unity that lie between anarchy and tyranny can become possible. In this account, no single source of unity is rejected outright, or endorsed uncritically. Instead, all depends on the proper use of institutions and practices of co-operation. Second, the right sort of political unity is a fundamental source of power, at home as well as abroad. Doyle documents this empirical link well when he puts forward legitimately constituted political unity as a crucial variable in his historical sociology of empires.138 Doyle’s argument is that such political unity is a major determinant of why some city-states became imperial metropoles, while others succumbed to imperial rule and were turned into subordinate peripheries, and still others were successfully able to resist imperial encroachment. The hypothesis holds up well in the context of ancient Greek imperial interactions, with the lack of political unity being the main factor that differentiated subordinate peripheries from both imperial metropoles and independent resisters. To support his view, Doyle invokes the examples of Melos, Syracuse, and Athens.139 As already discussed, Melos was only finally conquered after some internal treachery undermined its unity, Syracuse was successfully able to stage and lead a resistance to the Athenian expedition by uniting the city-states of Sicily, and Athens ultimately lost its empire and the war primarily as a result of internal strife. It seems that political unity was a tremendous power resource in

---

134 Ibid., 1141b15.
136 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1140b10–1140b20.
137 Ibid., 1144b15–1144b35.
138 Doyle, Empires, ch. 6.
139 Ibid., ch. 3. It was neither the Sicilian disaster nor the Persian support of Sparta nor the abandonment of its allies that finally brought Athens down, but its loss of political unity.
domestic and international politics alike. What my discussion adds to Doyle's empirical findings is that the political unity in question had to be of the right kind. In other words, in light of the connections between politics and the good life, unity had to be grounded in conventions that were properly used and such unity was seen to be the source of both power and excellence.

Thucydides saw the matter similarly. Political unity, when founded upon the right institutions, was a source of greatness for Athens as well as Sparta. Both were considered to have achieved political excellence in their forms of government, albeit in different ways. Hence, Pericles declares that the Athenian constitution and way of life is what makes Athens great in excellence and power.140 'And to show that this is no empty boasting for the present occasion, but real tangible fact,' Pericles continues, 'you have only to consider the power which our city possesses and which has been won by those very qualities which I have mentioned'.141 Furthermore, the Athenian envoys in Sparta claim that institutions like the rule of law and the impartial administration of justice provided the grounds for moderate Athenian imperialism in accordance with the practice of excellence, at least in the initial stages of imperial expansion before the empire was transformed into a tyranny that rested solely on fear.142 Finally, Thucydides himself highly praises the new constitution drawn up by the Five Thousand in Athens:

Indeed, during the first period of this new regime the Athenians appear to have had a better government than ever before, at least in my time. There was a reasonable and moderate blending of the few and the many, and it was this, in the first place, that made it possible for the city to recover from the bad state into which her affairs had fallen.143

Here again, a good constitution was the source not only of moderate politics, but also of power, as illustrated by the victory at Cynosemma that immediately followed the establishment of the Five Thousand.

In like manner, Thucydides records how the Spartan constitution has been a source of greatness. 'For rather more than 400 years, dating from the very end of the late war,' the historian writes, 'they have had the same system of government and this has been not only a source of internal strength, but has enabled them to intervene in the affairs of other states'.144 The external interventions Thucydides has in mind here are laudable; as discussed in the same passage, the Spartans helped ‘put down tyranny in the rest of Greece’ and undertook the initial leadership of the common effort to repel the Persian invasion. The Corinthian representatives in Sparta, in their desire to ignite Spartan fervour for war in light of traditional Spartan slowness, confirm this evaluation. ‘Spartans, what makes you somewhat reluctant to listen to us and others, if we have ideas to put forward, is the great trust and confidence which you have in your own constitution and in your own way of life. This is a quality which certainly makes you moderate in your judgements’; the Corinthians snap.145 King Archidamus, described by Thucydides as ‘a man who had a reputation for both intelligence and moderation’, further confirms the Corinthian

---

140 Thucydides, II.36.
141 Ibid., II.41.
142 Ibid., I.76–I.77.
143 Ibid., VIII.97.
144 Ibid., I.18.
145 Ibid., I.68.
analysis in noting how the Spartan laws, customs, and ‘well-ordered life’ are a source of courage, self-restraint, and wisdom, as well as power. Evidently, the historian sees proper institutions as conducive to both power and excellence, in domestic as well as international affairs.

Thucydides wrote his History as a possession for all times. In his own words, his subject matter ‘was the greatest disturbance in the history of the Hellenes, affecting also a large part of the non-Hellenic world, and indeed I might almost say, the whole of mankind’. Interested in unearthing the truth about the human condition, he strove to attain the utmost accuracy in his narrative. From his knowledge of particular episodes in the war, he aspired to derive general principles that could be of use to future generations. ‘My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public,’ he wrote, ‘but was done to last forever’. Time has proven him correct. The History is not only an excellent resource on ancient Greek politics, history, and culture, but also a unique source of brilliant insights on fundamental political questions that we still grapple with today. It is this eternal character of the History that structural Realists appeal to in rallying Thucydides for their cause. I have argued that the structural Realist appropriation, which focuses on the centrality of the struggle for power in politics, does not do justice to the complexity of Thucydides’ thought since it fails to place key Thucydidean observations in the context of meaning that defined their main message. Critics of the structural Realist reading offer very good descriptions of the institutions and practices of co-operation that ordered the pursuit of power in the ancient Greek international system. While these critical accounts are extremely valuable for providing a more nuanced picture of the complex realities of ancient Greek politics, I have suggested that they do not go far enough, either. This is because most such accounts stop short of recognizing the critical links between co-operative practices and institutions and their moral foundations. These links were articulated in the effort to respond to the fundamental problem of securing political unity—a problem that dominated ancient Greek politics at the time Thucydides wrote. Re-reading the History in the light of these links reveals the historian’s preoccupation with enunciating the political prerequisites of the good life. Deeply troubled by the ever-lurking possibility of degeneration into the equally menacing extremes of anarchy and tyranny, Thucydides set himself the task of identifying the foundations of lasting political unity, neither espousing nor rejecting any one source outright in his quest, but critically endorsing the proper use of a multiplicity of conventional possibilities. To that end, he placed his hopes in tying the pursuit of power and peace to the practice of excellence, so as to promote moderation and practical wisdom in politics, domestic and international. This, if anything, is the timeless wisdom of Thucydides.

146 Ibid., I.79, I.84.
147 Ibid., I.1.
148 Ibid., I.22.