5. Thucydides

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5. Thucydides

Thucydides is generally considered the paragon of an amoral historiographer. Even if most scholars (classicsists, at least, if not historians) nowadays agree that his History is not an ideal, objective account of events ‘just as they happened’, few are happy to talk about ‘moralising’ or even moral didacticism in the work.\(^1\) Rather than moralising, it is common to look for Thucydides’ political views, psychological insights, political theory or personal opinions, which are assumed to be more or less hidden in the text.\(^2\) I would argue that, like other Greek historiographers before and after him, Thucydides did not distinguish between moral and political opinions, or between moral and practical didacticism. In this chapter, we shall search Thucydides’ History, first for the types of moralising we have seen in Polybius and Diodorus, then for other ways of teaching moral lessons, and finally we shall ask what those moral lessons might be. At the end, I hope it will be clear that Thucydides is not a lone non-moralising historiographer, but that there are features of his moral didacticism that set him apart from his predecessor and successors.

\(^1\) The notable exception is Cornford (1907), who, breaking with the positivist conception of Thucydides, suggested that his History was a prose tragedy, the main character of which was Athens, and the theme of which was divine punishment of hybris provoked by unexpected good fortune. Another exception is Moles, who in his brilliant 1993 article states that ‘Thucydides would have been astonished by modern claims that he was not a moralist’ (1993: 114). Rutherford (1994) argues that Thucydides’ work is didactic, but intellectually, not morally. Hornblower (1987: 133) argues that Thucydides was almost alone among ancient historians in that he did not moralise. However, Hornblower later qualifies this view (1987: 184–92) and argues that Thucydides is not a morally neutral, or amoral, writer, but simply generally hides his own point of view from his readers.

The introduction to Thucydides’ History is deliberately structured on the same framework as the introduction to Herodotus’ Histories: a brief proem presenting the author and his work (1.1) followed by a quick overview of ancient/mythological history (the Archaeologia, 1.2–19), followed by a second first-person statement setting out part of his methodology (1.21–2).³

An important purpose of the proem is to distinguish his work from that of Herodotus, without ever mentioning the latter’s name: the war (not even the account of it, but the actual war) is ‘written’ (συνέγραψε: 1.1.1) rather than ‘a presentation’ (ἀπόδεξις), and the fact that the author himself lived through the war and experienced it is emphasised, whereas Thucydides insists that it is ‘impossible’ (ἀδύνατα: 1.1.3) to find reliable information to do what Herodotus did, namely write about earlier time periods.⁴ Moreover, Thucydides’ topic is the ‘greatest disturbance there has ever been for the Greeks and a part of the barbarians’ (τοῖς Ἕλλησιν καὶ μέρει τῶν βαρβάρων: 1.1.2), these latter surely being mentioned exclusively for the benefit of readers who might think that Herodotus’ topic was greater in geographical scope, at least, if not in importance.⁵ We shall soon see that Thucydides and Herodotus have more in common than Thucydides is letting on.

In the methodology chapters, this superiority to Herodotus, and others, is reiterated: the account offered in the Archaeologia is more reliable than the accounts of the poets, who exaggerate, and of the prose writers, who are more interested in entertainment than in truth, whose sources cannot be checked, and who deal with a time that is more or less mythological (1.21.1).⁶ Then the greatness of the topic is repeated (1.21.2), before Thucydides offers some notoriously ambiguous information about his practice of reporting speeches (1.22.1). Returning to the difference between his approach and Herodotus’, Thucydides then claims not to have written down simply what he heard from ‘any random passer-by’ (ἐκ τοῦ

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³ The similarity to the structure of Herodotus’ prefaces has also been discussed by Woodman (1988: 6–7), Moles (1993) and Stadter (2012). Thucydides’ ‘second preface’ at 5.26–7, where he explains his decision to continue the work after the Peace of Nicias, is not concerned with the purpose of the History.

⁴ τὰ γάρ πρὸ αὐτῶν καὶ τὰ ἐπὶ παλαιότερα σαφῶς μὲ πάντας εὑρέθην διὰ τὴν χρόνου πλήθος ἀδύνατα ἦν, ἐκ δὲ τεκμηρίων ἄν πεἰ μικρότατον σκοπούντι μοι πιστεύει ξυμβαίνει οὐ μεγάλα νομίζω γενέσθαι όστις κατά τοὺς πολέμους οὔτε ἐς τὰ ἄλλα: 1.1.3.

⁵ There is much scholarship on the relationship between Thucydides and Herodotus; see, for instance, the papers in Foster and Lateiner (2012). For an exploration of links between their prefaces see Moles (1993).

⁶ οὔτε ὡς λογογράφοι ξυνεθεῖσαν ἐπὶ τὸ προσαγωγότερον τῇ ἄκρᾳ ή ἀληθέστερον, ὅντα ἀνεξέλεγκτα καὶ τὰ πολλὰ ὑπὸ χρόνου αὐτῶν ἀπίστως ἐπὶ τὸ νυμβὸς ἐκνενικηκότα: 1.21.1.
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παρατυχόντος πυνθανόμενος: 1.22.2) or however he himself thought it had happened (ὡς ἐμοὶ ἐδόκει: 1.22.2), but to have constructed his account on the basis of a comparison of eyewitness accounts (1.22.3). Next, Thucydides offers a statement about the purpose of his work:

ὁσοὶ δὲ βουλήσονται τῶν τε γενομένων τὸ σαφὲς σκοπεῖν καὶ τῶν μελλόντων ποτὲ αὐθίς κατὰ τὸ ἀνθρώπινον τοιούτων καὶ παραπλησίων ἔσεσθαι, ὁφέλιμα κρίνειν αὐτὰ ἢρκοῦντος ἐξει. κτῆμα τε ἐς αἰεὶ μᾶλλον ἢ ἀγώνισμα ἐς τὸ παραχρῆμα ἔρχεται.

It will be enough for me if it [my work] will be judged useful by those who will want to examine with perfect clarity both the events of the past and those of the same and similar kinds which will happen again at some point in the future according to the human condition. It exists as a valuable object for all time rather than as a competition piece for immediate consumption. (Thuc. 1.22.4)

Here, for the first time in extant Western historiography, the purposes of memorial and didacticism are explicitly connected: the History is going to be useful for those who want to understand both the past (memorial) and the future, that is, their own present (didacticism). This is what will give the work its value and make it last forevermore. It is impossible to see exactly how Thucydides expected events of the past to repeat themselves, but there can be no doubt that a certain level of similarity is the premise on which his didacticism (like any historical didacticism) is based. More importantly for our purposes, it is not clear that Thucydides is talking about moral didacticism, or, indeed, didacticism with any other purpose than a purely intellectual one. To find out in what exact way he intended his work to be useful we must wait until we have followed his narrative further.

**MORALISING TECHNIQUES**

Despite Thucydides’ reputation as a non-moralising historiographer, many of the types of moralising encountered in Polybius and Diodorus can also be found in his History. The one he most commonly uses is even the most explicit type, namely digressive moralising. Some of his moralising digressions are well known, but are usually discussed under different names; for instance, 2.65, the obituary of Pericles, which is a key passage for anyone

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7 This is an issue that has caused intense scholarly debate and many creative interpretations of Thucydides’ words by historians uncomfortable with the idea that history can ever repeat itself or that their great predecessor might have believed that it did. See e.g. Gomme (1945: ad loc.). See Hornblower (1991: ad loc.) for references to scholars who accept the idea of repetition.
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analysing Thucydides’ political views or attitude to Athens. The passage does, however, carry a moral message, along with a practical/political one: good leaders are authoritative, intelligent and incorruptible (τῷ τε ἀξιώματι καὶ τῇ γνώμῃ χρημάτων τε διαφανῶς ἀδωρότατος γενόμενος: 2.65.8) and do not abuse their power (μὴ κτώμενος ἐξ οὐ προσηκόντων τὴν δύναμιν πρὸς ἡδονήν τί: 2.65.8). They lead the state moderately and safely (μετρίως καὶ ἀσφαλῶς: 2.65.5) with a strong hand (2.65.10). Bad leaders, on the other hand, want power for selfish reasons and care more about their own interests than about those of their city (2.65.10–12). This message is little different from Polybius’ moral-didactic messages about good leadership. We shall return to this comparison below; for now it is enough to note that the Thucydidean passage is, in fact, moralising. Other moralising digressions in the History are 3.82.1–2, on how war as a ‘brutal teacher’ (βίαιος διδάσκαλος: 3.82.2) de-civilises human beings (see below, p. 212); 4.65.4, which establishes Athenian success-induced overconfidence as the cause of their actions; 6.54.2–7, arguing that Pisistratid tyranny was not an evil; 8.24.4–5, which takes Chios as an exception to the rule that most people(s) become overconfident in their good fortune; and 8.89.3, on how self-seeking and individual lust for power are the weakness of every oligarchy. These digressions can, indeed, be used to analyse Thucydides’ political views or ‘own opinion’ about various matters, but they can also be read as morally instructive.

Thucydides also employs most of the other types of Hellenistic moralising, if only occasionally. His brief obituary of Nicias (7.86.5; see below, p. 212) is a clear example of a moralising conclusion; most of the narrative of the civil war in Corcyra is an instance of evaluative phrasing (3.82.3–83);⁸ the attribution of Heraclea in Trachis’ lack of success to the harshness of its Spartan governors (3.93.2) shows correlation between conduct and result; and the vivid description of Athenian despair as they retreat from Syracuse (7.75.7) can be read as moralising through pathos, with the added finesse of punishment that mirrors the crime (see below, p. 203).

One type of moralising employed sparingly by Polybius and Diodorus is used much more extensively by Thucydides, namely speeches. Interpreting speeches in Thucydides, however, is trickier than in Polybius and Diodorus.⁹ No speech is ever endorsed by the narrator, no speaking character except for Pericles is set up as a straightforward moral authority (see below, p. 213), and no speech completely echoes explicit narratorial moralising. The task is not impossible, however. By comparing a speech with the

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⁸ 3.84 is probably spurious; see Hornblower (1991: ad loc.).

⁹ How to interpret Thucydides’ speeches has been one of the burning questions of scholarship on this author for more than a century. For good discussions with references to previous scholarship see ‘Speeches’ in Hornblower (1987), Garrity (1998) and Pelling (2009).
narrative surrounding it in order to judge its view of past events and predictions of future events against the narratorial presentation of both, the reader can usually get an idea of how to respond to the speech. Sometimes additional guidance is given in the shape of evaluative epithets attached to the speaker (Cleon: 3.36.6)\(^\text{10}\) or to the issues discussed (πράγμα ἄλλοκτον: 3.49.4), or the response to the speech (6.24), or by the speech being left unopposed (4.17–20, 4.59–64). We shall discuss one of the last type in more detail below.

Many speeches and speech-pairs are, however, left without a moral steer from the narrator. These instances often function as presentations of moral dilemmas. An example is the pair of speeches delivered by the Corcyraeans and Corinthians in Athens before the outbreak of the war. The Corcyraean speech argues that the Athenians should form an alliance with them despite the fact that they have no grounds for gratitude or friendship, on the grounds that they will help Athens in the future (1.32–6). The Corinthians argue that the Athenians should support them because the Corcyraeans have broken the traditional bonds of obligation towards their mother-city out of arrogance induced by their great wealth, because a treaty of non-interference exists between Corinth and Athens, and because the Athenians owe the Corinthians a favour (1.37–43). It is for the reader to make up his mind about the situation: should the Athenians honour reciprocity and traditional ties, or secure allies for the war they think will come? Thucydides provides the problem, not the solution, and he does not add any words of evaluation to the Athenian decision, on the grounds of self-interest, to back Corcyra (1.44.2). Such a technique is not usually labelled ‘moralising’, but it is an effective way of presenting a moral dilemma to readers, who are encouraged to make up their own minds, perhaps influenced by the subsequent narrative of how the Athenians’ siding with Corcyra becomes a catalyst for the Peloponnesian War. In this way the technique is didactic. Thucydides could have told the story without the two speeches, and without telling the reader the reason for the Athenians’ decision; the fact that he includes this information forces the reader to consider the basis for Athenian decision-making and, by extension, political and personal decision-making more generally, and its possible implications. This technique contrasts sharply with Polybius and Diodorus’ general practice of telling the reader exactly how to evaluate most actions and events, although Polybius’ juxtaposition of the four different Greek views on the destruction of Carthage is similar (Polyb. 36.9;
see above, p. 37). It is not uniquely Thucydidean, as we shall see in our discussion of Xenophon in Chapter 6. A more extreme version of letting the reader draw his own conclusions from a presentation of a moral dilemma is the Melian Dialogue. This passage is unique in Greek historiography for being a dramatic dialogue written out in lines as if for delivery, and without the scene-setting and visual details that would make it into a vignette. We shall return to the function of this dialogue below.

This implicit way of getting the reader to think about moral questions is symptomatic of most of Thucydides’ moral didacticism. A favourite method, not used by Polybius or Diodorus, is juxtaposition of information, as in the narratorial conclusion to the Spartan destruction of Plataea:

καὶ τὰ μὲν κατὰ Πλάταιαν ἔτει τρίτῳ καὶ ἔνενηκοστῷ ἐπειδή Αθηναίων ἐξήκομεν ἐγένοντο σκόπος τοῦτος ἐπελεύσθησαν.

And so Plataea perished in this way in the ninety-third year after she became the ally of Athens. (Thuc. 3.68.5)

The information about the length of the Plataea–Athens alliance is not there for chronographic reasons; Thucydides has already introduced his system of counting years from the beginning of the war and uses this to help the reader keep track of the timeframe. The information about the ninety-three years is there to alert the reader to the enormous failings of Athens as an ally, in that they did not come to the help of the Plataeans at any point during their ordeal and in the end let them be annihilated by their common enemy. It makes the reader think about the obligations of allies and the destructive force of ruthless self-centredness. Likewise these two narratorial remarks which frame the narrative of the savage civil war in Corcyra:

ἡμέρας τε ἑπτά, ἃς ἀφικόμενος ὁ Εὐρυμέδων ταῖς ἑξήκοντα ναυσὶ παρέμεινε, Κερκυραῖοι σφῶν αὐτῶν τοὺς ἑκτορὶς ἐκδοκοῦντας εἶναι ἐφόνευον.

During the seven days that Eurymedon stayed there after arriving with his sixty ships, the Corcyraeans continued to massacre those of their own citizens whom they considered to be their enemies. (Thuc. 3.81.4; translation modified from Warner)

οἱ μὲν οὖν κατὰ τὴν πόλιν Κερκυραίοι τοιαύταις ὀργαῖς ταῖς πρῶταις ἐς ἄλληλους ἑρήμασαν, καὶ ὁ Εὐρυμέδων καὶ οἱ Αθηναίοι ἀπέπλευσαν ταῖς ναυσίν.

And so, throughout the city the Corcyraeans used such violent passion against each other for the first time, and Eurymedon and the Athenians sailed away with their ships. (Thuc. 3.85.1)
The juxtaposition of the information about the Athenian general Eurymedon and his sixty ships with references to the savageness of the civil war is as good as a moralising conclusion saying ‘the Athenians had the power to stop the Corcyraeans massacring each other, and yet they did nothing’. The difference between Thucydidean narratorial conclusions and those encountered in Polybius and Diodorus is that the former lets the reader draw that inference for himself. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers like this. We dislike being told what to think and prefer to feel that we have detected the author’s hidden meaning in the text. In fact, however, the meaning is not very well hidden: Thucydides meant the reader to get it. Throughout his *History* he repeatedly and deliberately juxtaposes bits of information to make the reader think about the moral implications of what he is reading. This may not be moralising in the traditional sense of that word, but when read in the light of Thucydides’ claim for the eternal usefulness of his text, as ‘similar kinds [of events] will happen again at some point in the future according to the human condition’ (1.22.4, quoted above), it is moral didacticism.

A type of moralising unique to Thucydides is the abstract, or generalised, summary of events. An abstract summary is a narrative that narrates not individual events, but rather types of events or general trends. The two extended examples in the *History* are the narrative of the effects on Athenian society of the plague (2.51.4–53) and the narrative of the effect on general behaviour and linguistic usage of the civil war in Corcyra (3.82.3–83 [84 is probably spurious]). These abstract summaries do not just use evaluative phrasing, but actually have moral issues as their main focus: the chapters of the plague narrative discuss the problem of people not daring to care for the sick for fear of contagion (2.51.4), the disregard of law and customs (2.52) and the complete breakdown of society (2.53); the Corcyra chapters focus on how morality and semantics alike change under the stress of civil war. This is not so much historiographical moralising as pure moral history: morality is the prime focus, and the author’s interest is in the history of morality, and not from a neutral standpoint: when reading these chapters there can be no doubt that Thucydides deplores the erosion of traditional morality to be replaced by this dog-eats-dog mentality. We shall return to this below.

Arching above all of these instances of micro-level moralising, Thucydides also imparts a moral message by means of the macro-level structure of his work. If one turns to Thucydides’ *History* immediately after reading Herodotus’ *Histories*, the narrative from book 1 to book 7 seems

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11 See particularly 3.83.1. This passage is the point of departure for the insightful discussion of Crane (1998).
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to follow the Herodotean pattern of success–overconfidence–disaster: The Athenians, whose rise to power and success is detailed early on in the *Pentecontaëtia* (1.89–117), become increasingly arrogant and overconfident throughout the narrative and ultimately suffer complete disaster in Sicily.\(^\text{12}\)

We do not have the space here to trace every step of the Athenians from successful and confident to monstrously arrogant and overconfident, but key moments are: the first speech of any Athenian in the work (1.73–8), in which they are confident, but still try to dissuade the Spartans from war; the Mytilene Debate (3.36–50), which is our first extended encounter with their nasty side; their refusal of the Spartan peace offer after their initial successes in Pylos (4.17–21), which is generally recognised as a turning point in the narrative; their exiling of the generals who did not conquer all of Sicily on the first expedition there (4.65.4), a decision which the narrator in his own voice puts down to overconfidence induced by success;\(^\text{13}\) the Melian Dialogue (5.84–111; see below); and finally the extravagant and overconfident send-off of the fatal expedition to Sicily (6.31–2). The disaster follows in book 7. Book 8 seems to constitute a new beginning, but it is impossible to know where Thucydides would have taken it, had he completed the work.\(^\text{14}\)

This is moralising by means of the repetition of a recognised pattern, but the Thucydidean manifestation of the pattern is intertextual: it is based on a template found in Herodotus’ *Histories*. The intertextuality works because Thucydides references Herodotus repeatedly, although implicitly, in his prefaces, as we have seen above, and because he shows, by including the *Pentecontaëtia* to bridge the chronological gap, that he considers his work a continuation of, as well as an improvement on, Herodotus’. Even a fifth-century reader not au fait with Herodotus would, however, have been likely to pick up the message: as Cornford demonstrated long ago, the Athenian trajectory follows a pattern recognisable from fifth-century tragedy, which also had a strong presence in lyric poetry.\(^\text{15}\)

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12 The *History* has often been read as a story of the deserved fall of Athens; see e.g. Cornford (1907), de Romilly (1963) (who ascribes the downfall to imperialistic ambition and *hybris*), Hunter (1973: *passim*, but esp. 134–5 n. 13), Rawlings (1981), Macleod (1983a), Connor (1984), Hornblower (1987: 172–3) (focusing on *pleonexia*, not overconfidence), Rood (1998) and Kallet (2001). None of these scholars, however, talk of the theme as moral-didactic in nature.

13 αἰτία δ᾽ ἦν ἡ παρὰ λόγον τῶν πλεόνων εὐπραγία αὐτοῖς ὑποτιθεῖσα ἰσχύν τῆς ἐλπίδος: Thuc. 4.65.4.

14 I am, however, extremely tempted by the brilliant hypothesis of Rawlings (1981) that the *History* was meant to end with an ‘Athenian Dialogue’ mirroring the Melian Dialogue.

15 Cornford (1907). The theme of the inconstancy of human fortune and the dangers of becoming complacent when successful has been explored briefly across ancient Greek genres by Cairns (2014).
of Athenian overconfidence by the Spartan speaker at 4.17–20 and again by the narrator in 4.65.4 would have set alarm bells ringing in the mind of any ancient Greek.

MORAL LESSONS

The moral lessons of Thucydides are as complex as those of Herodotus. In the following, we shall try to unpick what he may have intended a reader to learn from his History.

How the World Works: Uncertainty and Misinterpretations

One overall lesson of the History, as we have already seen, is that success tends to lead to overconfidence, which leads to disaster. The first stage, that success leads to overconfidence, is expressed as a general truth in a digression at 8.24.4–5, which begins with the statement that ‘the Chians are the only people apart from the Spartans of whom I know who have been successful and moderate at the same time’ (Χῖοι γὰρ μόνοι μετὰ Λακεδαιμονίως ὃν ἔγος ἠσθόμην νηδαιμόνησαν τε ἅμα καὶ ἑσωφρόνησαν). However, the whole chain reaction is most clearly expressed by the Spartan ambassadors to Athens in their speech for peace (4.17–20). The main theme of the speech is the uncertainty of human life and the fickleness of fortune. The Spartans argue that by making peace now, the Athenians would ‘handle their good fortune well’ (εὐτυχίαν τὴν παροῦσα καλῶς θέσθαι) and avoid ‘what usually happens to people who are unexpectedly successful’ (οἱ ἀήθως τι ἀγαθὸν λαμβάνοντες), namely that they ‘always hopefully reach for more because their present good fortune was unforeseen’ (ἀεὶ γὰρ τοῦ πλέονος ἐλπίδι ὁρέγονται διὰ τὸ καὶ τὰ παρόντα ἀδοκήτως εὐτηχῆσαι: 4.17.4). The speaker proceeds to exemplify the changeability of fortune by Sparta’s recent defeat by Athens. Then he states that war is governed by fortune (αἱ τύχαι) and that good and moderate people (σωφρόνων ἀνδρῶν) are able to stay moderate in both good and bad times because they know that their fortunes may change at any moment (4.18.4). He proceeds to apply the theory to Athens (4.18.5): they are now at the height of their good fortune and should conclude peace. If they do not, and then later are defeated (which could easily happen due to the changeability of fortune), they will be thought to have been successful only because of τυχή (presumably because they will have shown that they do not possess wisdom).

After the end of the speech, several features point to its endorsement by the narrator. First of all, in contrast with the many speech-pairs in the work, it is a single speech with no counter-speech, leaving the Spartans’ argu-
ments for peace unopposed. Secondly, the negative Athenian response to the speech is led by Cleon, who has earlier been stamped as the opposite of a moral authority by the epithet ‘most aggressive’ (βιαιότατος: 3.36.3). Thirdly, the narrator gives two reasons for the Athenians’ rejection of the peace offer: they have the captives on Sphacteria and so believe that it is up to them to make peace whenever they want – that is, overconfidence induced by success – and they ‘want more’ (τοῦ δὲ πλέονος ώρέγοντο) – that is, they lust for power. This narratorial interpretation confirms what the Spartan speaker has just said, and the latter expression echoes the speech (4.17.4, quoted above). It is repeated by the narrator as an Athenian motivation for rejecting further Spartan overtures a few chapters later (οἱ δὲ μειζόνων τε ὠρέγοντο καὶ πολλάκις φοιτώντων αὐτοὺς ἀπράκτους ἀπέπεμπον: 4.41.4).

The speaker’s claim that such success-induced overconfidence brings disaster on the overconfident is confirmed gradually in the subsequent narrative, first when the Athenians are made despondent by difficulties at Sphacteria (4.27) and regret that they did not accept the offer of peace (4.27.2); again after the loss of Amphipolis, when they for a second time regret turning the offer down (5.14.1–2 and 15.2); and ultimately when the Sicilian Expedition suffers annihilation. At this point, Thucydides’ style becomes more vivid and laden with pathos than in any other part of the work. As the Athenians retreat from Syracuse, without provisions for the march, forced to leave behind the sick and wounded, and crying as they do so, the reader feels pity for them; but then comes the sting in the tail:

μέγιστον γὰρ δὴ τὸ διάφορον τοῦτο [τῷ] Ἑλληνικῷ στρατεύματι ἐγένετο, οἷς ἀντὶ μὲν τοῦ ἄλλου δουλωσομένους ἥκειν αὐτοὺς τοῦτο μᾶλλον δεδιότας μὴ πάθοσα ἐξειδεύειν, ἀντὶ δὲ εὐχῆς τε καὶ παιάνων, μεθ᾽ ὧν ἐξέπλεον πάλιν τοῖς ἐναντίοις ἐπιφημίσασιν ἀφορμᾶσθαι, πεζοὺς τε ἀντὶ ναυβατῶν πορευομένους καὶ ὀπλιτικῷ προσέχοντας μᾶλλον ἢ ναυτικῷ.

For indeed this was the biggest change in circumstance for a Greek army. It happened that they, who had come to enslave others, instead went away fearing to suffer this fate themselves, and that, instead of the prayers and paens with which they had sailed out, they started on their way back with words of ill omen, travelling as footsoldiers rather than marines, trusting to infantry rather than navy. (Thuc. 7.75.7)

In this brilliant piece of antithetical writing, the Athenian suffering is compared both with their previous good fortune and with their crimes, namely their evil plans for Syracuse. The great emphasis on changed circumstances

16 This is de Romilly’s (1963: 173) main reason for taking it to reveal Thucydides’ own opinion. Contra Rood (1998: 42–3).
in the Greek is hard to convey in English, but I have underlined the six words in Greek which focus on this aspect of the Athenians’ situation. The mirroring of crime and punishment and of previous good fortune and high hopes with present suffering are characteristic features of both Herodotean and Hellenistic moralising, as we have seen. Thucydid’s way of doing it is more subtle than the one seen in Hellenistic historiography; here the, relatively brief, antithesis has the effect of drawing the reader’s attention to the previous success, the premature and cruel plans, and the present disaster at the same time without ever making the moral explicit. It is this absence of explicit narratorial evaluation that makes the passage moving to a twentieth- and twenty-first-century audience, but the moral is nonetheless there, in the Athenian story arc, and in this specific passage: you should strive to avoid becoming overconfident in your success, because overconfidence leads to wrongheaded treatment of other people and an overreaching of one’s own limits, and thereby to disaster.\(^{17}\)

This mechanism of success—overconfidence—disaster is only part of the larger uncertainty of human fortune, though. Throughout the History, the reader is frequently reminded of the precariousness of human life (by, for instance, the massacre of unsuspecting Mycalessians at 7.29, the phrasing of which clearly expresses the narrator’s disgust),\(^ {18}\) the unpredictability of events (by, for instance, the narrative of the Pylos and Sphacteria campaign at 4.1.14 and 29–40, with internal evaluation)\(^ {19}\) and the infinitesimally small margin by which human life and death are decided in war (e.g. ‘so close did Syracuse come to disaster’, παρὰ τοσοῦτον μὲν αἱ Συράκουσαι ἢλθον κινδύνου: 7.2.4).\(^ {20}\)

The big difference between the uncertainty that rules the world of Thucydides and the one that governs the universe of Herodotus is that

\(^{17}\) Stahl (2003) argues that Thucydides does not moralise in this passage, but that he recognises the universality of the Athenian mistake. I would agree that Thucydides probably considered the success—overconfidence—fall pattern universal, but would add that he consciously directs the reader’s attention both to the nature of the Athenian mistake and to its cost, and in the light of 1.22.4 I find it unlikely that he did not hope his readers would learn from this.

\(^{18}\) On the moral bearing of the Mycalessus narrative see Kallet (2001: 140–6).

\(^{19}\) This narrative has been brilliantly analysed by Hunter (1973: 61–83), who has shown that Thucydides is taking pains to make the success of the Athenians look fortuitous rather than carefully planned. She argues convincingly that the purpose of this misrepresentation is to show Demosthenes, the man most responsible for the success at Pylos, as a paradeigma of the unexpected good fortune which would eventually destroy Athens by cementing Cleon’s power and the people’s pleonexia. Rood (1998: 24–39) modifies Hunter’s interpretation by correctly observing that the Pylos narrative is not about the ‘intervention of fortune’, but about the ‘role of the unexpected’, the most unexpected thing of all being the Spartan surrender. See also Connor (1984: 108–18) and Stahl (2003: 138–49).

\(^{20}\) For a discussion of such side-shadows (i.e. hints at other possible outcomes) in Thucydides see Grethlein (2010) and Hau (2013).
Thucydidean uncertainty has nothing to do with superhuman powers. The Thucydidean narrator never ascribes any events to an act of a god, the gods or the divine. Only twice does the narrator attribute events to *tyche*, both times pertaining to weather (Thuc. 3.49.4 and 4.3.1).21 Speakers in the *History* largely mention the gods for two reasons: either to call them to witness on the justice of their own course or the injustice of their enemies’ and to pray for their help, usually with no effect, or to claim that the gods are or will be on their side in a war or battle, in which they are proved wrong more often than not.22 Nine times in the *History* speakers use expressions with *tyche* to warn that plans might go wrong in the future, and, crucially, the *peripeteia* of which the speaker has warned always comes true.23 However, in every instance the narrative provides the reader with a different, and human, cause of this *peripeteia*. For example, Nicias warns the Athenians that, due to *tyche*, they may well be defeated in Sicily (6.23.5), and they spectacularly are, but the reader who has followed the story through the voice of the narrator knows that their defeat is, in fact, due to the desertion of Alcibiades, the timely arrival and great talents of Gylippus and the resourcefulness of the Syracusans, not to any intervention of superhuman forces.24 Likewise, two speakers in the *History* use *tyche* as an explanation for a previous defeat while the narrative of that defeat has shown it to be due to such human causes as lack of skill or planning.25

This discrepancy between the world as experienced by the characters inhabiting it and as described by the narrator is clearly intentional. The fifth-century reader is here faced with a world he knows and is presented with two different views of how it works: on the one hand the homochronic view of people heavily involved in historical events, on the other hand the retrospective view of a detached, analytic observer. The analysis of Thucydides (presented most often not as analysis, but as narrative) shows

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22 Speakers who invoke the gods: Athenians in Sparta 1.78.4, Plataeans before the Spartan siege 2.71.4, Archidamus before besieging Plataea 2.74.2, Plataeans after their surrender 3.58.1, 3.58.5 and 3.59.2, Brasidas at Acanthus 4.87.2, Boeotians at Delium 4.97.4, Athenians at Delium 4.98.6, Athenian spectators to the Battle in the Great Harbour 7.71.3. Speakers who claim the gods are on their side: Sthenelaidas 1.86.5, Corinthians in Sparta 1.71.5, 1.123.1 and 2, Pagondas 4.92.7, Nicias 7.69.2, 7.77.2, 3 and 4.
23 Thuc. 1.78.1, 1.84.3, 4.18.3–4, 4.62.3–4, 4.78.3, 5.102, twice in 5.104, 6.23.5. The instances have also been collected by Edmunds (1975: 181–2), who, however, substitutes 4.64.1 for 4.62.3–4.
24 This is well discussed by Edmunds (1975: 182–9).
25 Peloponnesian generals at Thuc. 2.87.2–3 and Nicias at Thuc. 7.61.3. Hunter (1973: 47–56, 107–13) has a good discussion of both as well as of the conclusions to be drawn from their similarities. Nicias’ reference to *tyche* is picked up by Gylippus at Thuc. 7.67.4 and, with a memorable metaphor, 7.68.1, in order to show his and the Syracusans’ superiority at this stage.
the reader that events which are unforeseen and therefore seem incomprehensible when experienced first-hand really do have human causes when properly investigated and analysed. It demonstrates that the world can be understood without recourse to divine powers, but only in hindsight. When living through the events, it is impossible to foresee everything that is going to happen, and for that reason one should not become overconfident in success, but stay moderate and clear-headed.  

The discrepancy between the characters’ and the narrator’s worldview is shown nowhere more clearly than in the Melian Dialogue (Thuc. 5.84–116). The dialogue is highly artificial, certainly unhistorical, and clearly composed by Thucydides in order to make a moral-didactic point. In it, the Athenians attempt to persuade the Melians to give up their neutrality and join the Athenian alliance, threatening them with destruction if they refuse, while the Melians argue that they should be allowed to keep their independence. Prevented from arguing on the grounds of justice by the rules set down at the outset by the Athenians (5.89–90), the Melians argue that they have to resist in order to preserve their honour (5.100); that fortune is changeable, so the struggle might equally well turn out in their favour (5.102); that the gods will be on their side because they are in the right (5.104); and that the Spartans will come to their aid because they are their colonists and because it is the honourable thing to do (5.104, 106, 108). In other words they use arguments based on a traditional concept of honour, the notion that fortune is fickle, a belief in divine justice, and the bonds of kinship – all fixed features of the Herodotean world. The warning about the changeability of fortune (Thuc. 5.102) is essentially the same argument employed in Herodotus by Queen Tomyris when warning Cyrus not to invade the land of the Massagetae (Hdt. 1.206). The difference is that Tomyris is proved right by the subsequent narrative and gets her revenge, while the Melians are proved wrong and are defeated and annihilated. This difference is significant. In the world of Herodotus, a warning like the one given by Tomyris only occurs when the person warned is about to embark on an unjust war, and, when ignored by the person warned, signals to the reader with absolute certainty that that person will fail in his enterprise,
most probably with disastrous results. When the same type of warning is given in the world of Thucydides, in the same breath as a condemnation of the injustice of the aggression, it works on an intertextual level – not just with Herodotus, but with the traditional Greek worldview – to make the reader aware of the traditional pattern and the expected narrative result of the warning, but at the same time also acutely aware of the fact that in the ‘real world’ portrayed in Thucydides’ History such causality does not exist, and the gods do not favour the righteous.

The Athenians, on their side of the dialogue, argue that might is right (5.89, 5.97); that it is dangerous to trust in hope, prophecies and oracles (5.103); that the gods favour the strong, not the just (5.105.1–2); that the Spartans only ever act out of self-interest (5.105.3, 107, 109); and that clinging to one’s honour leads to disaster (5.111.3–4). Does the narrator agree with them? Much ink has been spilt on arguing about which side of the dialogue Thucydides favoured. The very fact that such uncertainty can exist surely shows that he did not mean to take sides: the purpose of the dialogue is to illustrate a clash of morals and worldviews which he saw in his own time, between a traditional, more or less ‘Herodotean’ attitude based on the notions of divine justice and reciprocity, and a new, Sophistic attitude based on self-interest and the rule of the stronger. The subsequent narrative shows the shortcomings of both types of ideology: in the short term the Athenians certainly prove that the Melians should neither have cared about their honour nor have relied on hope, the gods and the Spartans. In a longer perspective, however, Athens suffers mightily for its overconfidence. The peripeteia is initiated in 6.1, the very first chapter after the narrative of the destruction of Melos, with the Athenian decision to launch the Sicilian Expedition. The message seems to be that one should not trust in either kinship (no help comes from the Spartans) or the gods, but that those who take advantage of this realisation to become overconfident and overreaching will suffer disaster. The destructive force is not divine, but rather a force inherent in the very nature of overconfidence, perhaps in the very nature of human beings, helped on their way by the de-civilising force of war (see particularly 3.82.1–2).

30 Hornblower (1987: 185–6) points out that the Athenians do not explicitly say ‘might is right’. This is true, but their statement in 5.105.2 comes very close to saying so, and they certainly act as if this is their belief.

31 Crane (1998) argues cogently and lucidly for a tension in the History between a traditional attitude which was prevalent at the time and a ‘modern’ or ‘realist’ attitude, which Thucydides tried and failed to reconcile. I would argue that Thucydides left the tension in his narrative deliberately as a piece of descriptive moral didacticism.

32 Others have reached similar conclusions. Particularly enlightening are the analyses of de Romilly (1963: passim, but esp. 327–8), Stahl (2003: 159–72) and Orwin (1994: 97–117).
This leads us to the question of how to act in this world without gods. On this topic Thucydides’ guidance is rarely more than implicit. The History offers no moralising digressions on virtues or flaws and only one extended evaluation of a character (Pericles at 2.63; more about this below). Guidance is given throughout, however, in the form of correlation between behaviour and result, juxtaposition, speeches and the occasional evaluative phrasing.

Most of all, it is clear how one should not behave. Throughout the History, decisions made in an emotional state, because of anger, desire or fear, consistently lead to disaster. Thus, the Athenians make the decision to annihilate the Mytilenians ‘in anger’ (ὑπὸ ὀργῆς: 3.36.2), but then later realise that such an action would be ‘cruel and enormous’ (ὁμοῦ τὸ βούλευμα καὶ μέγα: 3.36.4), and they decide on the Sicilian Expedition under the influence of strong, emotional desire, emphasised in the narrative by a cluster of words denoting mindless passion (τὸ ἐπιθυμοῦν: 6.24.2; ἐρωτοῦν: 6.24.2; ἐρως ἐνέπεσε τοῖς πάσιν ὁμοίως ἐκπλεῦσαι: 6.24.3; πόθῳ: 6.24.3; τὴν ἄγαν ἐπιθυμίαν: 6.24.4). Fear is the reason for the witch-hunt following the mutilation of the Herms (6.53 and 60), and for the outbreak of the entire war (1.23.6). Another important vice in the world of the History is greed for power, territory and wealth, expressed by the noun πλεονεξία and the expression πλέονος ὀρέγειν. This is the force that drives the Athenians to reject the Spartan peace offer (4.17.4 and 4.21.3) and is also a powerful motivator for the expedition to Sicily, and it plays a vital part in the breakdown of morals during the civil war in Corcyra (3.82.6–8 and 84.1).

The role of these three irrational emotions in Thucydides has been recognised by many. Less discussed is an emotion which is no less destructive in the History, namely despondency brought on by misfortune. This state of mind and its disastrous effects are demonstrated repeatedly by the Spartans, both individually and as a body. Thus, Alcidas, the Spartan general sent to the relief of Mytilene, loses courage completely when he learns that the Athenians have already taken the city, and is too despondent to listen to sensible advice from his Elean adviser which might have saved Mytilene after all (3.29–31); and after their defeat at Pylos, the whole city suffers from it:

33 De Romilly (1963: 158), Hornblower (1996: ad loc.). The narrator also signals his distaste for the original decision by the vivid and emotional description of the effort made by the trireme sent to annul that decision; see Connor (1984: 16–17).

34 For the negative role of emotions in Thucydides see Stahl (2012).
καὶ ἅμα τὰ τῆς τύχης πολλὰ καὶ ἐν ὀλίγῳ ξυμβάντα παρὰ λόγον αὐτοῖς ἔκπληξιν μεγίστην παρεῖχε, καὶ ἐδέδισαν μή ποτε αὖθις ξυμφορά τις αὐτοῖς περιτύχῃ οἵα καὶ ἐν τῇ νήσῳ. ἀτολμότεροι δὲ δι’ αὐτὸ ἐς τὰς μάχας ἦσαν, καὶ πάν ὅτι κινήσειν ᾤοντο ἁμαρτήσεσθαι διὰ τὸ τὴν γνώμην ἀνεχέγγυο γεγενῆσθαι ἐκ τῆς πρὶν ἀηθείας τοῦ κακοπραγεῖν.

At the same time, they were in shock over the many misfortunes that had happened to them in a short space of time unexpectedly, and they were afraid that some other disaster should strike them, like the one on the island. For this reason they had little heart for battle, and every move they made they believed would be a mistake because their morale had been undermined as they were not used to setbacks. (Thuc. 4.55.3–4)

This is clearly not a desirable state of mind for a city, and it allows the Athenians a free rein in their sea raids (4.56–7). In fact the Spartans remain in the grip of this despondency (it is referred to at 4.108.7 and 5.13) until the Battle of Mantinea, when their allies rejoice that ‘although depressed by fortune, they were still themselves in spirit’ (τύχῃ μὲν, ὡς ἐδόκουν, κακιζόμενοι, γνώμῃ δὲ οἱ αὐτοὶ ἔτι ὄντες: 5.75.3). The one Spartan who does not suffer from this inability to act in difficult situations is Brasidas. His un-Spartan quality is made clear when the cities in the north are elated by his successes and believe that the Spartans are finally acting decisively (4.108.6), but the narrator immediately lets the reader know that Sparta as a state does not want anything to do with Brasidas’ actions (4.108.7). It is clear that the decisiveness is all his and has nothing to do with his fellow-Spartans. The true destructive force of despondency is, however, brought out by the actions – and, above all, inaction – of an Athenian, namely Nicias. His setbacks in Sicily bring him to despair, clear and contagious in his letter to the Athenians (7.11–15). Later, after even more setbacks, he advises against leaving Sicily because he cannot make up his mind what to do (7.48.3). The result is a delay (ὀκνος τις καὶ μέλλησις

35 See Edmunds (1975) for Brasidas’ ‘Athenian’ characteristics.
36 τὸ δὲ μέγιστον, διὰ τὸ ἰδονήν ἔχον ἐν τῷ αὐτίκα καὶ ἵπτε τὸ πρῶτον Λακεδαιμονίων ὀργώντων ἐμελλόν περισσέσθαι: 4.108.6.
37 οἱ δὲ Λακεδαιμόνιοι τὰ μὲν καὶ φθόνῳ ἀπὸ τῶν πρῶτων ἀνδρῶν οὐχ ὑπηρέτησαν αὐτῷ, τὰ δὲ καὶ βουλόμενοι μᾶλλον τοὺς τε ἄνδρας τοὺς ἐκ τῆς νῆσου κομίσασθαι καὶ τὸν πόλεμον καταλῦσαι: Thuc. 4.108.7.
38 ἐπιστάμενος τὸ μὲν ἔργο ἔτι ἔτι ἀμφότερα ἔχον καὶ διασκοπῶν ἀνείχε, τῷ δ’ ἐμφανεῖ τότε λόγῳ οὐκ ἔρχεται ἤπαινεν τὴν στρατιὰν. εὐδ’ ἐνδέχεται ὅτι Αθηναῖοι σφῶν ταῦτα οὐκ ἀπεδόθησαν, ὡμετέραν καὶ αὐτῶν ψηφισμένον άπελθαν. ‘Nicias was aware of all this and, though in fact he held back because he still could not make up his mind what course to take and was still considering the question, in the speech which he delivered openly on this occasion he refused to lead the army away. He was sure, he said, that the Athenians would not approve of the withdrawal, unless it had been voted for at Athens’ (7.48.3). Strangely, many scholars have taken his pretext – unwillingness to face the Athenian demos after a failed expedition – to be his real reason (e.g. Finley 1947: 240, Edmunds 1975: 134, Williams 1998:
which means that the Athenians are still in Sicily to experience an eclipse of the moon (7.50), which results in their final, fatal delay.

This final delay is due to a characteristic which is a virtue in every single other Greek historiographer (perhaps with the exception of Agatharchides), but which comes very close to being a vice in Thucydides: piety. Piety does not play a big part in the world of the History. In striking contrast with his continuator Xenophon (as we shall see), Thucydides keeps silent about the large number of sacrifices that were routinely carried out by generals in the course of their duty. Only three times in the course of the History are we told that someone consulted an oracle before making an important decision; in two cases the answer received leads to disaster: the Epidamnians are told to hand their city over to Corinth for protection, which leads to war with Corcyra and the destruction of Epidamnus (1.25.2 and 1.29–30), and Cylon is told to go ahead with his attempted coup in Athens, which ends in the death of all his supporters (1.126). In the third case, during the narrative of the plague, the narrator simply states that consultation of oracles was ‘useless’ (ἀνωφελῆ: 2.47.4). Moreover, the narrator twice passes negative judgement on the practice of taking guidance from oracles and omens: at the end of the plague narrative he comments on the retrospective interpretation of an oracular saying with the wry statement that ‘people were adapting their memory (of the saying) to be in line with what they had experienced’ (οἱ γὰρ ἄνθρωποι πρὸς ἃ ἔπασχον τὴν μνήμην ἐποιοῦντο: 2.54.3); and when Nicias gives in to the demands by his troops to obey the omen of the lunar eclipse and so fatally delays the retreat from Syracuse, the narrator explains his decision by the remark that ‘he was a bit too dependent on superstition and this kind of thing’ (ἦν γὰρ τι καὶ ἄγαν θειασμῷ τε καὶ τῷ τοιούτῳ προσκείμενος: 7.50.4). This bit of narratorial moralising is not as negative as has sometimes been made out. However, the narrator explicitly states that this was only the reason which Nicias gave in public (τῷ μὲν ἔργῳ . . . τῷ δ’ ἐμφανεῖ, followed by the pretext in oratio obliqua), probably because he thought that that would resonate with Demosthenes and his other advisers.

The exception is 6.69.2, which is part of an unusually detailed battle description.

There are three instances in the History of people responding to oracular sayings from an earlier time period: 1.103.2, 2.17 and 2.54. These all seem to come true, in keeping with Thucydides’ remark about the retrospective interpretation of such sayings at 2.54.

his response to the eclipse: partly such a response to an unusual natural phenomenon was normal and expected in the world that he and Nicias shared, and partly Thucydides appreciated Nicias’ adherence to traditional morality (as we shall see below), of which piety was an important part.

Another important vice in the History is self-seeking at the expense of one’s city. This is the major flaw of Alcibiades, who is described as a supremely capable politician and general (6.15), but who only ever acts with his own glory in mind: he sabotages the Peace of Nicias because he feels slighted by the fact that it had not been negotiated through him (5.43), he advocates the expedition to Sicily because he wants the glory of conquering not only Sicily but also Carthage (6.15), and he defects first to Sparta and then to Persia out of spite (6.92). The narrator does not comment on any of this beyond the inference of motives, but when Alcibiades finally does something right, as late in the narrative as book 8, he calls this his ‘first beneficial act for Athens’ (πρῶτον τὴν πόλιν ὠφελῆσαι: 8.86.4). Self-seeking and lack of patriotism are likewise among the flaws of Cleon (4.27.3–29.1), who is usually recognised as the most villainous character in the History. His other flaws are expressed by evaluative phrasing: brutality (3.36.6), inability to stay moderate in good fortune (5.7.3) and cowardice (5.10.9–10).\footnote{Brutality is described in vivid detail and earns explicitly moralising comments in the description of the atrocities during the civil war in Corcyra (3.81.5 and 3.82.2) and in the short, sharp narrative of the massacre at Mycalessus (7.29.4–5).} The inability to stay moderate in good fortune is demonstrated repeatedly by the Athenians and leads to their downfall (see above). Cowardice does not otherwise play a part in the History.

After this list of vices, it is time to look for virtue in the History. It says something about the bleakness of the work that this is rather harder to find. The clearest statement about moral virtue made in the narrator’s voice comes, strangely, in the course of the abstract summary of the civil war in Corcyra:

οὕτω πᾶσα ιδέα κατέστη κακοτροπίας διὰ τὰς στάσεις τῷ Ἑλληνικῷ, καὶ τὸ εὔηθες, οὗ τὸ γενναῖον πλεῖστον μετέχει, καταγελασθὲν ἠφανίσθη, τὸ δὲ ἀντιτετάχθαι ἄλληλος τῇ γνώμῃ ἀπίστως ἐπὶ πολὺ διήνεγκεν.

\footnote{It has been argued that this portrait of Cleon is unlikely to be historical, and that Thucydides presents him in a bad light out of personal hostility. The historicity of Cleon’s personality as presented in the History is not our focus here, but we might note that if Thucydides did invent some details of it, he chose to include some very traditional vices, perhaps to make sure that his readers got the message.}

\footnote{On the moral bearing of the Mycalessus narrative see Kallet (2001: 140–6).}
Thus every form of evildoing was established during the civil wars in Greece, and simplicity, which is a large part of nobility of character, was ridiculed and disappeared, and a distrustful, battle-arrayed hostility in opinion largely prevailed. (Thuc. 3.83.1)

What exactly is this ‘simplicity’? We can get a sense of it from the abstract summary of events of which it forms part (Thuc. 3.82.3–83). This summary begins with the statement that ‘men assumed the right to reverse the usual values in the application of words to actions’ (καὶ τὴν εἰωθυῖαν ἀξίωσιν τῶν ὀνομάτων ἐκ τὰ ἔργα ἄντηλλαζαν τῇ δικαιώσει), conditioning the reader to think about the new ‘values’ honoured by the Corcyraeans as vices and to go through his own mental process of reversal in order to think about the virtues thus destroyed. Going through the long list of honourable terms applied to despicable behaviour and imagining their opposites, we arrive at the following set of no-longer-existing virtues: moderation in/avoidance of violence (3.82.3), foresight and moderation (3.82.4), respect for kinship (3.81.5 and 82.6), loyalty, honesty and abiding by oaths (3.82.6–7 and 83.2–3), lack of greed for money and power (3.82.8), justice (3.82.8) and willingness to put city interests before self-interest (3.82.8). These qualities are very much in line with the virtues propounded by both Herodotus and the Hellenistic historiographers, and it is clear that the Thucydidean narrator considers them virtues as well. Disturbingly, however, Thucydides does not present these virtues as straightforwardly worthy of emulation: in these chapters on civil war, these are exactly the qualities that lead people to their deaths. In fact, the overall point of 3.82.3–83.4 is that such virtues have become liabilities that will most probably get you killed. This is seen not just in the Corcyra narrative, but also in the Melian Dialogue, as we saw above, and, with greater emotional force, in the brief obituary of Nicias:

καὶ ὁ μὲν τοιαύτῃ ἢ ὅτι ἐγγύτατα τούτων αἰτίᾳ ἐτεθνήκει, ἥκιστα δὴ ἄξιος ὢν τῶν γε ἐπ’ ἕμοι Ἑλλήνων ἐς τοῦτο δυστυχίας ἀφικέσθαι διὰ τὴν πᾶσαν ἐς ἀρετὴν νενομισμένην ἐπιτήδευσιν.

And he died for such a reason or something very close to it, he who least of the Greeks in my time deserved to come to such misfortune, because he had ordered his whole life towards moral virtue. (Thuc. 7.86.5)

44 The translation offered here is the one by Mynott (2013).
45 Williams (1998) analyses the ‘ancient simplicity’ on this basis in more detail.
46 The meaning of διὰ τὴν πᾶσαν ἐς ἀρετὴν νενομισμένην ἐπιτήδευσιν is contentious. The discussion centres on whether νενομισμένην is to be understood with ἀρετὴν, giving ‘merely conventional virtue’ (among others, Rutherford 1994: 62 and Orwin 1994: 139 n. 41) or ‘what was considered virtue’ (Connor 1984: 205 n. 53), or with ἐπιτήδευσιν, rendering ‘his lifestyle having been regulated’ (among others, Gomme et al. 1970: ad loc. and Rood 1998: 184 n. 9). I follow the latter interpretation and also take πᾶσαν with ἐπιτήδευσιν.
This explicitly moral evaluation set forth in the narrator’s own voice has caused much consternation in modern scholarship. Many scholars have found it incongruous that Thucydides could at the same time show Nicias to be partly responsible for the Athenian disaster in Sicily and praise him as a good man and lament his death. The explanation is surely that Nicias’ behaviour – moderate (6.8.4), minded for peace rather than war (5.16, 6.8.4), cautious (5.16, 6.8.4), foreseeing (6.8.4–6.14), pious (7.50.5), unmotivated by greed for either power or money (5.16, 6.8.4), loyal to Athens (he sails to Sicily despite his misgivings and remains in command even during illness and after having made it clear that he considers the campaign a disaster) – is the epitome of the ‘simplicity’, or traditional virtue, which Thucydides admired and wished to be central to the way the world works, but which he increasingly saw ridiculed, outmanoeuvred and destroyed. By turning the reader’s attention at this moment of grief and high drama to a picture of the world as it should have been, Thucydides makes the reader grieve not just for Nicias, but for himself as a creature of this world.

If such traditional virtue is not recommended in practice, what behaviour does Thucydides advise his readers to emulate? Across the eight books of the History, there is only one positive and viable paradeigma for behaviour, and that is Pericles. Pericles’ virtues are extolled in his obituary, the only extended character evaluation in the work (2.65). This passage focuses on Pericles’ supreme ability as a leader: his power to rule the ungovernable demos (2.65.1–4 and 8–9), his moderation and foresight (2.65.5–7), his authority, intelligence, integrity and lack of power lust (2.65.8), and the fact that his successors destroyed Athens by lacking these virtues (2.65.7). These same virtues are demonstrated in the other passages where Pericles plays a part: his strong leadership (1.127, 1.139, 1.140–4, 2.21, 2.34), his foresight (2.13), his intelligence (2.34), his integrity (2.13, 2.60), his commitment to putting the city before himself (2.13, 2.35–46, 2.60–4). No criticism of Pericles is ever voiced or implied by the narrator. The absence of criticism might be considered surprising given the fact that Pericles is

For attempts to explain away this narratorial evaluation see Gomme et al. (1970: ad loc.), Edmunds (1975: 142) and Connor (1984: 205). Strangely, this is not discussed by Kallet (2001), although one of her main conclusions is that Thucydides blamed Nicias for the Sicilian disaster. Hornblower (1987: 168–9) argues convincingly that Thucydides was critical of Nicias as a general, but sympathetic towards him on a personal level. For a good defence of the sincerity of the remark see Williams (1998: 244–6).

Finley (1947: 245–6) comes close to saying this when explaining the remark by a reference to Nicias’ ‘moderation and stability’.

Rood (1998: 198 with n. 72) observes that the primary function of the character of Nicias is to create pathos, and comments on the similarity between the phrasing of the Thucydidean obituary and Arist. Poet. 1453a4 on the evoking of pity in tragedy. Cornford (1907: 190) also labels the character Nicias ‘pathetic’.
the politician who leads Athens into the war. This is, however, presented not as a villainous act, but rather as something about which the Athenians in reality had no choice: Pericles twice states as much in speeches (1.140, 2.61.1), and it is confirmed by the narratorial discussion of the causes of the war: the underlying reason which made the war necessary (ἀναγκάσατ) was the growth of Athens and the fear this caused in Sparta (1.23.6). Since war was inevitable, Pericles showed his quality in recognising this to be the case, in galvanising the Athenians to face it with courage, and in advising them against overreaching themselves in the course of it. Foster has demonstrated how discrepancies between Thucydides’ narrative and Pericles’ speeches show Pericles’ enthusiasm for war and confidence in Athenian victory to be wrong, but it is significant that Thucydides does not mention these shortcomings in the character evaluation of 2.65: they are failings, but minor ones compared to Pericles’ virtues. Pericles, then, is a paradigm of great leadership. The History has nothing to say about his traits as a private individual, and in this Thucydides’ moral paradeigma differs from the ones seen in Herodotus and the Hellenistic historiographers.

Pericles dies in Thuc. 2.65. His moderation and foresight dominate only the very beginning of the war and are then countered by the self-seeking, overconfidence, power lust and greed of his successors. Pericles’ qualities are to a certain degree mirrored in Hermocrates of Syracuse (see especially 6.72.1), and some of them in other Athenian leaders (moderation and foresight in Nicias, strong leadership in Alcibiades), but no one else is presented as a paradeigma for emulation. This makes the world of the History a very bleak place: old-fashioned virtue is dying and being hunted down, and there is no contemporary virtue to displace it.

**SUMMARY OF RESULTS**

Thucydides’ History cannot be separated from its moral lessons. When Thucydides decided to write a true narrative of the Peloponnesian War, this narrative for him entailed showing the truth about the absence of divine justice and the dying out of simple morality in the world. In this
Thucydides way he intended to make his work useful for a reader who wanted to see the world ‘with perfect clarity’, and thus make it ‘a valuable object for all time’.

Thucydides’ moralising has escaped censure by modern scholars because of its minimalist subtlety. His minimalist moralising feels ironic, almost postmodern, and rewards the alert reader. His speeches and the Melian Dialogue leave the conclusion hanging and give the reader scope to think for himself. Both of these techniques are more to the twentieth- and twenty-first-century taste than the explicit moralising of Polybius and Diodorus. Thucydides does, however, also moralise explicitly, using some of the techniques that we see in Hellenistic historiography. Moreover, he moralises on the macro-level, by means of a pattern of success–overconfidence–disaster that plays on intertextuality with Herodotus and contemporary performance literature, and by means of repeated contrasts between the interpretation of the world offered by the characters and by the narrator of the *History*.

Through these means, an ancient reader of Thucydides is presented with a picture of his own world that is as radical as it is bleak: it is a world with no gods, where virtue does not pay, and the wicked often come off better than the good. Is this, then, moral didacticism? If Thucydides was recommending wicked behaviour as more advantageous and praiseworthy than virtuous behaviour, that would be anti-moral didacticism. He is, however, not doing that. It cannot be stated clearly enough that the narrator of the *History* presents the injustice of the world as a deplorable reality (especially in the narrative of the Corcyraean civil war and in the obituary of Nicias) and not as an opportunity to be grasped. He would prefer the traditional virtues to prevail, but has learned from experience that they do not. This means that he cannot strongly recommend any way to act in the world. Pericles’ moderation and selflessness combined with a great statesman’s skills are a shining example, but the fact that it is the only such example in the work and disappears early in the story shows how rare it is in reality. Rather, Thucydides’ didactic message is an intellectual one; he offers understanding of the world, of human motivation and interaction, and of military success and failure, but no very certain recipes for how to obtain it. This is the ‘clarity’ promised in his preface. If his work should inspire readers to begin to practise traditional virtue in an attempt to save it from extinction, he would no doubt consider that an added achievement, as long as they did so with intelligence, foresight and the understanding of the world gained from reading his *History*. 