

Realism, Narrative, and Happenstance: Thucydides' Tale of Brasidas

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Neorealism and some versions of realism seek to furnish nomothetic theories of the international system at the same time that they also strive to prescribe policy for political leaders. Insofar as practical advice is insufficiently articulated by means of either nomothesis or the structural theoretical framework that (neo-)realist paradigms supply, these two aspirations seem contradictory. This essay is an examination of what contemporary realism and, especially, neorealism require to make practical wisdom available for practitioners. It argues that narrative, which is exemplified in the so-called classical realism of Thucydides, remains a crucial component of practical realism and neorealism.

Realism and, particularly, neorealism both hold to a pair of seemingly contradictory aspirations. On the one hand, modern realist and, especially, neorealist theorists seek to furnish theories of the international system that establish law-like axioms concerning the nature of that system (Kegley 1995, 27; Waltz 1979, 65–67, 116–17, 127, 186–87, 1995, 71ff.). On the other hand, both also strive to prescribe policy for political leaders. Accordingly, realism and neorealism must be understood not merely as academic “theories of international relations,” but also as attempts to acquire a kind of “practical wisdom” concerning interstate or international matters. What is meant by practical wisdom is that realists and neorealists (including the most ardent neorealist defender of realism as a scientific theory, Kenneth Waltz) ultimately are interested in communicating their ideas to practitioners of politics and prescribing to such practitioners the best course(s) of action.¹ The seeming contradiction between these two aspirations comes to view when we consider that practical wisdom is insufficiently articulated either by means of positing law-like generalizations (nomothesis) or the structural theoretical framework that the realist paradigm supplies. Appearances notwithstanding, the search for a nomothetic theory of world politics *hinders* neither realists nor neorealists from attempting to offer practical advice. It is therefore valuable not only to consider the many and important theoretical and doctrinal differences between various realists and neorealists, but also to consider the differences in the *modes*

in which their theories and doctrines can be delivered. More specifically: What, if anything, must we add to nomothetic statements and structural theories to provide practically useful (neo-)realist “policy” prescriptions, and why?²

REALIST WISDOM AND MORAL WISDOM

My argument is that the practical wisdom of either realism or neorealism must, by its nature, be communicated not merely through axioms, but also through narrative, and that an example and justification of the latter kind of communication may be found in Thucydides' realism as it is revealed in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*.³ Nomothetic statements and theoretical frameworks remain insufficient. Two objections against this claim immediately come to mind. First, practical wisdom seems a questionable term to use in the context of realist or, especially, neorealist theories for two reasons. In the first place, realism (and here I include neorealism) has been described on the moral side as “skepticism regarding the applicability of ethical norms to international policy” (Forde 1992, 373). If we understand wisdom in a Platonic sense as the

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¹ Thus, according to Kegley (1995, 8), “a theory of international relations needs to perform four principal tasks. It should describe, explain, predict, and prescribe.” In a more strongly moral tone, Waltz (1954) proposed in his early work that “to explain how peace can be more readily achieved [which, he implies, we all desire] requires an understanding of the causes of war” (2). For a critique of neorealism from the perspective of policy prescriptions, see Holsti 1995, 57–58. For purposes of this argument, realism can include any of the four types that Doyle (1997, 41–193) identifies.

² A leading critical alternative to the realist and neorealist schools, constructivism, is “interested in the construction of identities and interests” in the international arena (Wendt 1994, 385). Because such identities are constructed in large part through narratives, we might expect narrative to appear more strongly in constructivist theory. The renewed emphasis on culture and formative ideas in constructivism would lead to the same expectation, since both are either formed in narrative or embedded in it. In both cases, however, this expectation remains unfulfilled at present (cf. Wendt 1999, in which no mention of narrative appears), perhaps because constructivists like Wendt are interested exclusively in explanation, not practical advice, and perhaps because their theoretical commitments concerning constitutive and causal science lead them to overlook or even reject narrative as a core phenomenon for study and a core constituent of explanation itself. For example, Wendt's (2001) most “pragmatic” article leaves an unarticulated opening for narrative inquiry, but no more. Lebow's (2001) ingenious treatment of Thucydides as a constructivist analyzes the narrative nomothetically with due sensitivity to the form of the narrative itself (549) but without engaging in narrative analysis. As constructivists move from analysis to prescription, one may expect problems of narrative to press on them more explicitly. A renewed appreciation for narrative as a *political* phenomenon worthy of attention is apparent in the political studies of protest movements and other domestic phenomena, but that work is tangential to my concerns here (see Brysk 1995).

³ For purposes of this account, I take Thucydidean realism to be, broadly speaking, what Doyle (1997, 41–92) takes it to be, and I take Doyle's description, broadly speaking, to be accurate.

possession of practical *moral* knowledge concerning the relationship between a concrete particular and a possibly knowable whole, (neo-)realist moral skepticism seems to exclude such wisdom as a possible human virtue. Yet realists such as Machiavelli, Thucydides, and Hobbes—none of them “Platonists”—explicitly sought to teach us a kind of practical wisdom or prudence concerning practical matters.⁴ Without assuming Platonic categories, even this kind of wisdom implies an inkling of a knowable whole within which particular words and deeds of a person or a city must take place. At a minimum, a wise person must understand the wider consequences of particular words and deeds. For such realists as Thucydides and Machiavelli, then, excellent men are above all men of practical (not understood “Platonically”) wisdom. They know what to do in accordance with the requirements of the specific situation. Traditionally, wisdom has included above all the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, including the right (or wise) and wrong (or foolish) use of power (Strauss 1964, 7). But the moral skepticism of realism and neorealism forces us to distinguish between practical wisdom concerning traditional moral matters—whose possibility the (neo-)realist may deny—and practical wisdom in “nonmoral,” but political matters—whose possibility the (neo-)realist affirms and hopes to teach.

Second, this separation from traditional moral wisdom seems to make realist and, especially, neorealist wisdom merely a kind of technique (Forde 1992, 373; Wiggins 1980, 221–40). Realism and neorealism do not have an account of a final definitive *moral* human end toward which we deliberate and act. Instead, human ends are comprehended entirely within the field of the material goods and power necessary for corporate and individual survival and material flourishing. If gaining, keeping, and maintaining power are the best we can do concerning questions of the good or the bad, “wisdom” may seem an odd term to employ here, especially since the means of communicating moral wisdom would not seem to be commensurate with the means of communicating realist “know-how” of what to do. And yet, (neo-)realist deliberation about ends and means regarding power could be described in a manner similar to the way in which Aristotle described deliberation about moral matters. For example, practical wisdom, deliberation, and choice are among the elements of right action. Speaking anachronistically, Thucydides is agreed with Aristotle that along with these elements, education and natural endowment secure right action.⁵ And though human well-being is considered by the (neo-)realist not in terms of *eudaimonia* or happiness, but in terms of obtaining material goods, material se-

curity, and the reputation (honor) that comes with the ability to do so,⁶ deliberation about material well-being is in this way parallel to Aristotelian deliberation about *eudaimonia* (Wiggins 1980, 227).

The second major objection to my argument has to do with the necessary bases for practical deliberation. Is narrative, in fact, one of them? Neorealists, represented most articulately by Kenneth Waltz, seem to argue that the behavior of states, which are the only significant actors in world politics, is driven by the systemic imperatives defined by the distribution of capabilities or the perception of such distribution among the states of the world. To understand this principle is to know how the international system works: Further narration is superfluous.⁷ The most widely known contemporary version of realism, articulated by Hans Morgenthau, may give a similar impression that realist practical wisdom or prudence also extends no further than to short-hand formulae by which we may calculate the logic of interstate (or interpolis or international) affairs and then measure our actions by the necessity of this logic. Morgenthau’s theoretical framework looks something like this: (1) The political behavior of states (and individuals) is governed by objective laws that are grounded in human nature; (2) this behavior is first and foremost determined by interest defined in terms of power, (3) in their manifestations, neither interest nor power remains either perennially stable or eternally identical; (4) although political action may have moral significance, morality and the necessities of political effectiveness exist in tension at best; (5) the “moral aspirations” of a particular political community are not identical to universal moral laws, if such exist; and (6) the political sphere of human activity—in which the principle of interest defined in terms of power rules the day—is autonomous (Morgenthau 1954, 1–11). Theories based on various or all of these premises—systems theories of international relations, reductionist theories of interstate behavior, various rational actor models, and the like—presume to give us a measure of predictability concerning the outcome of interactor political behavior.

Despite this famous list of realist principles, Morgenthau remained skeptical about the sufficiency of an axiomatic list for practical guidance (1946, esp. 204–23). In contrast to the neorealist presentation of Waltz, *Politics among Nations* contains many historical examples. Thus, Waltz’s (1979) *Theory of International Politics* wants to steer us in the direction of logical axioms (65–67, 116–17, 127, 186–87) and ignore narrative as a source of information altogether (Garst 2000, 78), while Morgenthau lists such axioms,⁸ but then provides

⁴ Compare Hobbes 1968, 82–84; Machiavelli 1980, 1–4 (“Epistle Dedicatory”); Machiavelli 1996, 5–6 (“Preface”); 123–25 (“Preface”); and Thucydides 1982, I.22.4.

⁵ Sorabji (1980) and Wiggins (1980) provide a full examination of these elements of Aristotle’s ethics. I take education to be an important thrust of Thucydides’ *History* (I.22.4); we also find it important in the writings of classical realists such as Machiavelli. (See the dedications and introductions of both *The Prince* [1980] and the *Discourses* [1996].)

⁶ Of the realist theorists, Hobbes (1968) most explicitly related honor to power. “To pray for another, for ayde of any kind, is to Honor, because a signe we have an opinion he has power to help; and the more difficult the ayde is, the more is the Honor. To obey is to Honor; because no man obeyes them, whom they think have no power to help, or hurt them” (152). See also Thucydides 1982, III.39.5.

⁷ The refinements within neorealism, as, for example, in the typology of Van Evera (1999, 7–11), do not materially affect the argument here.

⁸ The six items in Morgenthau’s list no doubt would have a different meaning for him than for Waltz.

us with an argument sprinkled throughout with anecdotes. Nevertheless, Morgenthau does not integrate these stories into a narrative whole, and their narrative function as a way of delivering practical (realist) wisdom is understated and undertheorized, if it is considered at all. The stories and illustrations even in Morgenthau's realist analysis of politics among nations—to say nothing of Waltz's much more sparse neorealist argument—do not do the kind of work that I argue here they must do in order for realist practical wisdom to become fully apparent and useable (cf. Johnson 1993, 62, 70–71).

Statements by Thucydides and the characters of his *History* in support of several of the realist theses enumerated above are readily available (1982, I.76–I.77; V.89, 105.2, 107). Machiavelli similarly provides us with a clear political calculus in the form of a number of maxims of political action that are consistent with the aforesaid realist principles (Parel 1972, 7–12, 29–32). Likewise, Thomas Hobbes writes a treatise that will teach his readers how one might “govern a whole Nation,” which includes a view to foreign powers (1968 [1651], 83, 227–28, 230–31, 257, 272, 375). All three writers, moreover, believed that their works illustrated transhistorical principles based on a knowledge of a human nature and a nature of political things that was not historically contingent, but fairly constant, and that was not governed by universal moral laws, but by the autonomous workings of the logic of political power. Human beings would behave in similar ways in similar circumstances of power relations (Hobbes 1968, 81–83, chap. 46, 727–28; Machiavelli 1996, I.39; Thucydides 1982, I.22 4; cf. III.82.2).

Yet while all three do provide general principles of political action and human nature, none simply writes out a list of maxims for us to follow. Thucydides writes a *History*, which is primarily an account of human words and deeds. It is the ultimate story that, better than any other, illustrates “the human thing” (I.22). Machiavelli delivers many maxims and proverbs to guide action, but his works are largely made up of historical examples—stories. To put his maxims and proverbs into action, we require examples that we can follow. For Machiavelli, just as the science of medicine is “the experience of ancient physicians,” so statecraft requires for its right practice examples (stories) of antiquity to imitate. The use of stories does not deny the possibility of scientific rules of action, but it illustrates “the actual context of [their] application” (Machiavelli 1996, 5–6, 123–25; Parel 1972, 10). Although Hobbes (1975a, 18) writes careful philosophical treatises, he also translates Thucydides' *History*, summing up the practical use of the *History* with the observation that “the narration itself doth secretly instruct the reader, and more effectually than can possibly be done by precept”. Even for Hobbes, realism must be contextually displayed: “For the principal and proper work of history being to instruct and enable men, but the knowledge of actions past, to bear themselves prudently in the present and providently towards the future: there is not extant any other (merely human) that doth more naturally and

fully perform it, than this of my author [Thucydides].”⁹ Stories give us practical wisdom in a way that is central to the realists' distinct concerns. Just as neorealists miss the importance of the speeches that Thucydides records for an understanding of Thucydidean realism (Garst 1989, 3–27), so too do they miss the role that narrative plays in delivering the practical wisdom of his (and their own) realism. The kind of narrative that Thucydides provides, richly reflecting the reality of international politics and human agency, accident, chance, and contingency within those politics, must augment any axiomatic or even anecdotal account of such politics.¹⁰

The scope of this argument suggests an extended monograph, but I restrict myself to a “case study.” To demonstrate the argument, I examine for its illumination of practical wisdom the story of the Spartan general Brasidas, who, despite his ultimate demise and political shortcomings, Thucydides represents as among the most excellent of the Spartans. This approach itself seems open at the outset to at least two objections. First, an extensive and growing literature that explores the literary techniques Thucydides used to answer the question “What happened?” finds in his mode of presentation a series of patterns, reversals, symmetries, deliberate asymmetries, and disjunctions that together reveal his thought. Participants in this literature do not necessarily agree with each other in either the details, the larger patterns, or even the general “lessons” in them that Thucydides intends to deliver to his readers.¹¹ Nevertheless, all could lend support to an argument (although not all intend to do so) that the lessons of Thucydides are not found in details of what, when, and how so-and-so did such-and-such, but in the broad patterns of behavior, action, and response among contending polities that together weave the fabric of the *War*. And yet, regardless how we may interpret these larger patterns, they are made up not merely of broad and vaguely defined “forces” that affect human life, but of the speeches and actions of individuals. Cogan (1981), in particular, has shown Thucydides' intense interest in the role individual words and deeds play in initiating larger movements of people and communities and in determining their fates (cf. Garst 1989). Telling stories of individual lives and sketching broader historical or behavioral patterns are not mutually exclusive.

Second, and more specifically, the Thucydidean case I have chosen—Brasidas—seems particularly

⁹ Hobbes 1975b, 6; cf. 17, “In sum, if the truth of history did ever appear by the manner of relating, it doth so in this history: so coherent, perspicuous and persuasive is the whole narration, and every part thereof.”

¹⁰ “Counsel, woven into the fabric of life as it is lived, is wisdom” (Benjamin 1972, 442). My argument here implies a critique even of Machiavelli on this score; his anecdotal method (in which the historical accuracy and practical advice of specific anecdotes are clearly open to question) can give rise to highly intelligent interpretations that need to consider narrative nearly not at all. See, for example, the mischievous interpretation by Mary Dietz (1986), on the one hand, and the numerological aspects of the interpretation by Leo Strauss (1958), on the other.

¹¹ Connor (1984), Cornford (1907), Edmunds (1975a), Hunter (1973), and Rawlings (1981) are among the important contributors to this tradition.

vulnerable to an objection that this “minibiography” is only a vehicle for pointing to wider concerns. In this vein, Robert Connor argues that Thucydides is not especially interested in Brasidas and that he intends “not to affirm Brasidas’ virtues, but to lead the reader from a recognition of these qualities to an appreciation of their long-run importance.” This argument is compatible with my purpose. It is, after all, within a larger context that the actions of the individual are rendered intelligible and useful for practical lessons of conduct. Connor (1984, 130–31) pushes the argument with the claim that Thucydides’ comments about Brasidas are neither in praise nor in blame of him, but to emphasize Brasidas’ importance in the greater trends of the war. Here, I think, Connor overstates his case. We can isolate the story of Brasidas, as I have done, and find there a roughly complete picture of the man. Thus, to reject his interest in Brasidas, we must assume *a priori* that Thucydides is concerned only with larger patterns and that his focus is essentially on the cities, without any real interest in the character of Brasidas. The larger perspective is undeniably present, but my interest is in how Brasidas interacts with that context, and it seems to me that Thucydides also had an interest in that direction, so that critical interest in Brasidas is not off the mark as Connor suggests.

Brasidas was the direct opponent of Thucydides during the engagements around Amphipolis and Eion (IV. 104–IV.107). The Athenian *demos* mistakenly attributed the loss of Amphipolis directly to Thucydides, for which it exiled him for 20 years, thereby—ironically—giving him the leisure to write his *History*. This “personal” connection to Brasidas makes it even less likely that Thucydides had no specific interest in him unless we again make Connor’s *a priori* assumption, but it also raises a new complication: Is Thucydides’ account of Brasidas self-exculpatory? There is scant evidence in the narrative to support such a charge: Thucydides was careful to lay out pertinent details of the campaign that his readers could check independently. Furthermore, while a case study of the career of Brasidas reveals important lessons of the *History*, Thucydides does not elevate the role of Brasidas in the overall narrative either negatively or positively beyond what the actions and qualities of Brasidas, separate and apart from this “personal” connection, would seem to allow.¹²

Finally, Thucydides’ thematic treatment of Brasidas parallels his treatment of another leading character in the *History*: the Athenian leader, Nicias. Both figures clearly display traits of the city—Athens or Sparta—against which they are fighting. These opposing sets of traits are a major theme of the *History*. Brasidas displays his “Athenian” traits with success, whereas the “Spartan” traits—hesitation, caution, and superstition—of Nicias magnify the scope of the Athenian disaster in Sicily.¹³ Similarly, Brasidas is set in deliberate, ironic contrast with Cleon. Further (ironic)

parallels with Demosthenes and Pericles are also possible to discern.¹⁴ These broader thematic contrasts, which space considerations force us to leave aside here, are additional grounds for considering the career of Brasidas as a source for practical wisdom.

This essay is a reconsideration of the mode in which realist and neorealist wisdom in general must be presented, taking its point of departure from a specific case that illustrates the complex contextual interactions of luck and excellence. This cannot be an objectionable procedure if we remain aware that traditional realists do not all write in the same way and that their visions of the world are not all identical. Indeed, as Steven Forde (1992) argues in his magisterial comparison of Thucydides and Machiavelli, it is precisely in the literary presentation itself that one may discern crucial differences between various kinds of realism (381, 382–25; cf. Palmer 1989).

BRASIDAS: CHANCE [*TYCHE*] AND EXCELLENCE IN COMPLEX CONTEXT

What does the story of Brasidas tell us about the world that a set of axioms or maxims would not? Brasidas seems an unlikely character to choose as a paradigm of excellence in practical wisdom. Not only may his role in Thucydides’ larger narrative be open to some question, but also he dies without realizing his goals, which are themselves somewhat questionable. The extent and nature of Brasidas’ “failure,” however, are less than clear, and this ambiguity is itself an aspect of the narrative that is meant to teach us something.

Thucydides’ story of Brasidas is part of a larger one—the story of the greatest motion [*kinesis*] or of the greatest war ever. It was the war between the Athenians and the Spartans and their allies, whose underlying cause [*prophasis*] was the Spartan fear of Athenian imperial expansion (I.23.6, I.88, 118.2). When we first encounter Brasidas in Thucydides’ *History*, it is the first year of the war (432/1 B.C.E.). The Thebans, allies of the Spartans, have made their initial, unsuccessful attempt to subdue Plataea in the first overt act of war. Both sides have begun all-out preparations for war, and approximately 80 days after the first Theban attempt on Plataea, the Spartans invade Attica (II.7.1, II.19.1). By invading and ravaging the Attic plain, the Spartans hope to entice the Athenians into an open, general armed conflict, which both the Athenian leader, Pericles, and the Spartan generals estimate that the Spartans would surely win

vide his own estimation of the man as he does for Brasidas, one might also lay these two careers alongside one another to good comparative—perhaps even ironic—effect. Tracing the career of Demosthenes through the Aetolian campaign, the actions at Pylos, and the expedition to Sicily is instructive, both by itself and in comparison to other careers, as is comparing those careers among each other. The Syracusans butcher Demosthenes along with Nicias after the final Athenian surrender in Sicily, despite the efforts of the Spartan general Gylippus specifically to save them both (VII.86).

¹⁴ His overstatement regarding Thucydides’ disinterest in Brasidas notwithstanding, Connor (1984) is convincing on the *structural* roles that Brasidas plays in the narrative (126–31, 140). Such roles do not seem to me to negate other levels of authorial interest.

¹² But see also Palmer 1992, 6–8.

¹³ While Thucydides uses somewhat different language to describe the career of the Athenian general Demosthenes and does not pro-

(II.13.2–3, II.12.6–8).¹⁵ In response to the Spartan invasion (II.23.1), a sizable Athenian marine expedition makes landings along the Peloponnesian coast and ravages the proximate territory, thereby avenging the invasion and demonstrating to the Spartans the potential costliness to them of the war (II.25.1; Kagan 1974, 58). Enter Brasidas.

The reader's first encounter is unique in at least two respects. First, Brasidas emerges suddenly and by happenstance in the narrative. Having "cruised about the coasts and ravaged the country," the Athenians landed at Methone, and "it so happened" [*etyche*] that Brasidas, son of Tellis, a Lacedaemonian, was in command of a guard for this district. *Etyche*—"he/it chanced"—is the first word concerning Brasidas. As with the happenstance of birth, Brasidas does not choose his own appearance into the deeds [*erga*] of the narrative, but "happens to be" in the right place at the right time, and he has an immediate military success. Hearing of the Athenian attack, he hurriedly and with little apparent planning throws himself into the threatened city, securing it against the distracted Athenians. While his fame or glory may begin with the lucky occurrence of a military encounter, Brasidas possesses the necessary qualities for taking hold of happenstance and succeeding. His "daring exploit" wins him the "thanks of Sparta," which is an honor both generally and specifically: He is "the first officer who obtained this notice during the war."

Second, the reader's first encounter with Brasidas is set off in sharp contrast with Thucydides' description of the Spartan general Archidamus only a few paragraphs earlier (II.18, II.20). The verbs and adverbs tell the story. Archidamus with his large force wastes time delaying, loitering, proceeding slowly, procrastinating. He plans carefully (II.20), but his slowness earns him the "gravest censure" of the Spartans (II.18).¹⁶

Thucydides' introductions of his characters often provide clues to what he thinks of them. Nicias, for example, is a central character in the *History* whose hesitation in Sicily leads to the annihilation of the Athenian army; he is introduced to us in seven separate actions of a wide variety before we first hear him speak in a very cautious speech (Strauss 1964, 202). Thucydides makes sure to let us know that Nicias is a man not of hesitation, but of action and moderation. His hesitation and moderate speech appear not to be a display of weak character but are prudential and circumstantial, and we know this, because his call for moderation is preceded by seven actions that show that his modera-

tion is neither cowardice nor laziness. Similarly, we first meet Cleon, another central character, as he is making a speech advocating the death of the Mitylenians for their revolt against Athens. Thucydides introduces him as "the most violent man at Athens." His violence, Thucydides implies, is a violence of speech and not deeds. In contrast to men like Nicias and Brasidas, Cleon would prefer to leave deeds to others (IV.27–IV.28).¹⁷ In this vein, Brasidas is a man of action, and he is so introduced. Even his speeches are not delivered in debate, but are exhortations or declarations with the express purpose of accomplishing an immediate, predetermined end. The action of Brasidas, moreover, is closely linked to the luck of his appearance; his success is bound up with the audacity and swiftness with which he takes advantage of *tyche*.

Brasidas' success at Methone was not decisive, since the Athenians continued their raiding (II.25.5, II.30.1), but it was, as Gomme (1954, 130–32) notes, a foreshadowing of things to come. Not for the last time, Brasidas had surprised the Athenians and upset their plans. The incident at Methone is the first of five that make up the first half of Thucydides' "biography" of Brasidas; the second half is a protracted campaign in Thrace. After Methone, Brasidas disappears from the narrative until the third year of the war. He reappears in the story of a defeat, brought on by (bad) luck. In the third narrative, Spartan lack of resolve and fear of risk bungle an opportunity to take the Piraeus, Athens' own port (II.93–II.94.1). In the fourth story, the disposition of the Spartan high admiral, Alcidas, which was similar to that of Archidamus—hesitant (III.27.1), slow to act (III.29.1), overly cautious (III.31), and politically inept (III.32), so that Thucydides' illustrations of his blundering caution let one nearly think he was a coward (III.31.2, III.33.1, III.69.1)—makes Brasidas' attempts at prudent counseling ineffective. In the fifth episode, Brasidas' minor but noteworthy part in the crushing Spartan defeat at Sphacteria (IV.15) lets Thucydides claim that of all those who took part in the battle, Brasidas most distinguished himself (IV.11.3–4). In these first five incidents, then (which we cannot recount fully here), Brasidas succeeds once, and on four occasions he or those he is with are defeated. Until his death, however, Brasidas suffers serious defeat only when he remains part of a larger Spartan contingent and cannot act independently. In every case, his energetic actions and speech are contrasted with the more common Spartan demeanor of caution and slowness. Two of these incidents expressly exhibit the role happenstance plays in bringing success or failure to excellence. In one case luck is on the side of Brasidas; in the other it is not.

These first five episodes constitute, as it were, the first "act" of the drama of Brasidas. Thucydides' only explicit statement of evaluation about Brasidas' qualities in this first act comes in the fifth episode, where he points out Brasidas' distinction among the Spartans at Sphacteria. But by drawing the contrasts that he does in the stories, and by relating the incidents to us in

¹⁵ For a general but precise discussion of the various strategies and issues involved, see Kagan (1974, 17–69).

¹⁶ We find a parallel story in the high admiralship of Alcidas in the fifth year of the war (III.28–III.33). Edmunds (1975a, 80) points out that Thucydides attributes "intelligence" [*to zuneton*] to Archidamus and Brasidas, among others, and that only Archidamus is mentioned as having both this quality and moderation in combination. In fact, Thucydides does not attribute these to Archidamus but states that he was "reputed" [*dokon einai*] to have them (I.79.2). Archidamus' deeds then put this reputation to the question. Thucydides' attitude toward reputed events and characteristics is demonstrated in I.20 and VI.5460.

¹⁷ On Thucydides' possibly unfair treatment of Cleon and its basis, see Kagan 1981, 323–24.

the way that he does, Thucydides seeks to teach us about excellence in warcraft and statecraft. Brasidas' virtues include an ability to speak, initiative and speed, alertness and audacity, courage, strategic skill, and intelligence. The narrative shows us how these qualities operate in the actual ("realist") world of power politics, contingency, and luck. Together, these qualities may not yet make a thoroughly wise man, but they may make an excellent one, or, at the very least, a "resplendent" one (Orwin 1995, 79). We find the remaining qualities needed to make a man of practical wisdom in the second half of Thucydides' biography of Brasidas, where the excellence of Brasidas manifests itself in full in the campaign in Thrace.

Thucydides indicates a new beginning, or a second act, with the reintroduction of Brasidas in the eighth year of the war. The bulk of Thucydides' narrative from this point in Book IV until Book V.20, which brings us to the tenth year of the war and the so-called Peace of Nicias, is concerned with Brasidas. The sentence that begins this second story of Brasidas contains striking common elements with the introductory sentence of our very first encounter. The situation, moreover, is similar to the first. The Athenians have hatched a plot to take Megara, and they have succeeded in capturing Nisaea, its port. "Brasidas, son of Tellis, a Lacedaemonian, at this time happened to be [*etyche*] in the neighborhood" (IV.70.1). Thucydides fully reintroduces Brasidas, who again "happens to be" in the right place at the right time. He is on other business, but success in this affair can only bolster his prestige as he continues with preparations for Thrace. With the haste and clever strategy of the first incident at Methone, Brasidas proceeds against the Athenians. The Megarians, embroiled in a factional conflict that is part of the Athenian plot, refuse him entry into the city, so he moves to another strategy: He fortifies his position and waits. Brasidas wins the waiting game; the Athenians, being outnumbered with the arrival of Brasidas' forces and no longer holding the advantage of surprise, (once again) do not desire a pitched battle with the Spartans and, so, withdraw (IV.72.4; Kagan 1981, 276–78). The campaign in Thrace can now proceed. The story illustrates the practical wisdom of Brasidas: His audacity and penchant for quick action do not overcome his better judgment, so when the situation calls for patient waiting, he waits.

According to Thucydides, Brasidas was sent to Thrace because he wanted to go. This desire is a further indication of his daring and initiative. The unlikely and dangerous campaign served at least two important purposes for the Spartans: It relieved them of the threat of a Helot revolt (IV.80.5), and by shifting the focus of military activities to the north, it might relieve somewhat the pressure Athenian raiding from Pylos and Cythera was placing on the Peloponnese (IV.80.1). It appears to have achieved both of these objectives and two more: The Spartan-induced revolt of these strategically critical cities from the Athenian empire gave them something with which to bargain when they eventually concluded an armistice with the Athenians, and in the second installment of the war (the so-called Decelean War), "it was the virtue and intelligence [*arête*

kai xynesis] that Brasidas had displayed at this time—qualities of which some had experience, while others knew of them by report—that did most to inspire in the allies of the Athenians a sentiment favorable to the [Spartans]" (IV.81.2).¹⁸

Brasidas demonstrated all of his usual qualities during the campaign, and his "comprehension" or "intelligence" [*xynesis*] and his "goodness" [*agathon*] proved him to be a wise man as well. His intelligence is displayed in his ability to speak well. On his way to Thrace, he had to pass through Thessalian territory, where the democratic faction was hostile to Spartan intentions. Stopped by a party of the democrats, he was able with a clever speech to persuade them to let him pass through (quickly) without bloodshed. Having reached Thrace, he was able, again without the use of force, to persuade a number of the cities there to rebel against Athens. Brasidas' rhetorical skill leads Thucydides to observe—it is unclear, Kagan says, whether with "delicious irony or condescension"—that he was "not a bad speaker for a Spartan."¹⁹ Thus, his "seductive, though untrue statements" in some instances (IV.108.5), his skillful combination of threats and promises on other occasions (IV.86.1–2, 87.1–7), and his seeming integrity and measuredness²⁰ (IV.81.2, 3) led Thucydides to conclude that Brasidas was successful because he "in other things showed himself measured, and in his declarations everywhere made plain that he had been sent out for the liberation of Hellas" (IV.108.2). Thucydides contrasts the tactful intelligence of Brasidas with the impatience and violence of Polydamus, the Spartan commander at Mende,²¹ whose angry behavior is instrumental in creating a factional conflict within the city that results in its fall to the Athenians, who have come to recover it to their empire (IV.130; Kagan 1981, 313). The outcome of Brasidas' actions earlier in the campaign had been much different: "The towns subject to the Athenians, hearing of the capture of Amphipolis and of the terms accorded to it, and of the gentleness of Brasidas, felt most strongly encouraged to change their condition, and sent secret messages to him, begging him to come to them, each wishing to be the first to revolt." Finally, the successes of Brasidas in Thrace are clearly contrasted against the concurrent mood of the Spartans, who had been entirely unnerved by the string of Athenian successes that included above all the occupation of Pylos (IV.55.1–4).

The crowning achievement of Brasidas' campaign was the capture of Amphipolis. Bit by bit his victories

¹⁸ For further details of the strategic considerations in this campaign, see Kagan 1981, 288–94.

¹⁹ Kagan 1981, 293n110, and Thucydides 1919, IV.84.2; cf. IV.85–IV.88. For an analysis of Brasidas' apparent audacity in at least one speech, see Orwin 1995, 84.

²⁰ *Metria* may be translated as "moderation," which is preferred by Crawley (Thucydides 1982) and Smith (Thucydides 1919). Palmer (1992, 38, 130n31), however, makes a convincing case for translating *metrios* as "measured," especially in the Thucydidean context, while using "moderation" to translate *sophrosyne* (also "temperance"), and for recognizing the importance of the distinctions between them. I follow his lead here.

²¹ Rawlings (1981) argues that he was not a Spartan (241–42).

distracted, then annoyed, then seriously threatened the Athenians.²² Amphipolis was a key city for the Athenians: Its capture could interfere with the grain supply from the north. To capture it, Brasidas relied on internal treachery and surprise, which alone would have succeeded, according to Thucydides, but Brasidas for once delayed, “vainly waiting for a demonstration on the part of his friends within” (IV.104.2). When his partisans did not fulfill their part of the plan, he “offered measured terms” to the Amphipolitans, who, surprised at the fairness of the terms “in comparison with what their fear had suggested,” gave him the city (IV.106.1). Unable to complete the task with the usual sort of military strategy, Brasidas turned to the persuasiveness of measured (but deceptive) speech.

Having briefly recounted the story of Brasidas, we may now fairly ask, What do we learn from it that a straightforward list of axioms would *not* tell us? Thucydides delivers to us a kind of catalog of virtues (excellences) in his narrative of Brasidas’ life. We learn from his story that Brasidas is conspicuous among the Spartans for his ability to speak (not always truthfully) (IV.84.2, IV.88.1, IV.108.5, IV.121.1), his valor (IV.2.4), his energy (IV.81.1), his apparent justice (IV.81.2), his measured conduct (IV.81.2, IV.108.2), his goodness in all things (IV.81.3), his gentleness (IV.108.3), his initiative (II.25, V.10.5), his superior strategic abilities (IV.128.1), and his good fortune (IV.117.2). Thucydides seems to share Aristotle’s understanding two generations later that the best sort of citizen is the one who best serves his city or regime.²³ If fear, honor, and interest are the principal motivations of political action, and if they are premised on the primary necessity of securing power that is not self-defeating or self-corrupting for the city or the state (which is therefore the chief object of political action), then the best Spartan is the one who best accomplishes the political ends of Sparta. In Thucydides’ estimation, it appears that Brasidas was such a man. His excellences ranked him among the most excellent Spartans. His speeches and his displays of measured conduct, justice, and goodness also showed him to be wise. Such displays, however, are not the same as actually possessing these qualities, a problem to which we will return.

(REALIST) WISDOM AND NARRATIVE

The nature and role of narrative—a summary term for all of the “things” that are “going on” at “the same time” in a story—have not been entirely neglected, but certainly underrated among political theorists and political scientists alike. Recent studies in a variety of academic fields have reestablished the importance of narratives to our understanding of political phenomena from the perspective of practitioners and scholars.²⁴

²² IV.108.1. For an analysis of Thucydides’ manner of telling this story, see Gomme 1954, 136–37.

²³ Aristotle 1984, 1276b16–35. Aristotle is also careful to distinguish this sort of “best” from the morally best (1276b. 16–35). Compare Thucydides (1919, VI.54, VI.14).

²⁴ Examples include the many instances in the summary article by Brysk (1995), Frei 1974, and Ricoeur 1991.

The reasons for underestimating the role of narrative are neither obscure nor mendacious. Both political science and political philosophy are largely analytical activities. Analytical categories and the techniques of dialectical theorization, not stories, are the modes of investigation and explanation. Yet underlying both Enlightenment and positivist science, on the one hand, and the analytical dialogues and treatises of philosophy beginning with Plato, on the other,²⁵ is a series of base stories or metanarratives without which these activities and their written products would be unintelligible.²⁶ Stories are not entirely superseded even in our social sciences.

But why narrative? Is it fair to argue that theoretical guidance is inadequate, no matter how theoretically complex or valid such guidance might be? Since interpretation itself is contingent—as Thucydides himself admits—and since the wisdom that comes from such contingent interpretation seems to be highly variable, does narration really provide any useful guidance? Narrative guidance, moreover, means not merely making sense of a “given” past, but making sense of an as yet unknown future, which is to say, of events that are not yet the subject of a narrative history. Can narrative accomplish this task?

It would seem that we do not require a *story* for the kind of catalog of the virtues I have listed. The list and brief explanations of its contents are all that is required to tell us what we should do if we wish to achieve success in preserving our polity in a complex and anarchic world in which politics are circumscribed by the necessities of fear, honor, and interest and affected by the vagaries of seemingly random events. Not so: The story itself serves to render intelligible the function or meaning of Brasidas’ virtues—whether actual or apparent—in ways that merely listing them would not. With regard to our concern for practical guidance, to know what a virtue is and to know how it functions are to know what one looks like in practice. It is only in a story of how a virtue manifests itself in the midst of the contingencies and complex, multilayered human encounters that we can learn anything practical, not to say intelligible, about it or from it (MacIntyre 1984, esp. 204–20).

While the nomothetic theories of realism and neorealism may be a good start, they are insufficient for giving statesmen practical advice, and they are too thin an account of the world of political action to give scholars sufficient purchase on the context and possibilities of such action. Were it not for the fact that nearly all realists and neorealists seem to think that their theories should have *practical* effects, this insufficiency would perhaps be inconsequential for (academic) realism and neorealism. The need for stories on this practical level emerges most immediately out of the *practical* need to marshal personal and material resources to engage the world successfully. This need becomes more evident

²⁵ The narrative character of Plato’s dialogues does not vitiate the claim that an analytical investigation remains at their dialogical core.

²⁶ For expositions of such metanarratives, see, for example, Milbank 1990; Mitchell 1993, 1–18, 46–97; and Waterman 1991.

when we notice that two overwhelming accompaniments of the principles of action and motivation in the world of human beings are the presence of indeterminacy or contingency, and complexity. To overcome the workings of contingency, happenstance, or luck amidst a complex necessity requires the practical wisdom that points to success, which is constituted by more than the predictive axioms that we find, say, in the theories of Waltz.²⁷ Narrative provides the materials that theoretical analysis dissects. It precedes such analysis, and only in the context of narrative can such an analysis retain its coherence. Because we are contingent beings who are temporally constituted, we need narrative to make sense of our existence. Indeed, our temporal existence means that our lives are at root narratively formed, so that the narratives we render to make sense of our existence are but reflections of the deeper narrative—elusive as *that* may be—that *is* our existence.

This centrality of narrative leads to three more specific claims. First, Thucydides, who remains one of the foremost thinkers of the so-called realist tradition in political thought, confronted these questions and treated them in a way that deserves a kind of attention among modern scholars of international relations it has not received. Second, narrative is the specific way in which the problem of human excellence as a means to success is illustrated and explored for purposes of *practical* advice in Thucydides, and it cannot be otherwise. For if the wisdom of realism is, in fact, a kind of practical wisdom, then we may assume that the principles of transmitting such wisdom and of deliberating wisely hold true for realist wisdom as they do for traditional practical moral wisdom. And here again, even Aristotle, although his discussion of ethics is presented in the form of demonstrative, analytical treatises and not stories, suggests that the virtuous or excellent life begins with a model of the good man. To live a virtuous life is to live as a good man would (Aristotle 1962, 1105b5–9, 1140a24). Such models are only partially made accessible to us by means of lists of axioms. Ultimately, we require either direct, sustained observation of “role models” or apprenticeships under such men, or, failing such opportunity, we require as a substitute at least such stories about them as realists like Hobbes praise and Thucydides and Machiavelli tell, albeit in radically different ways and for significantly different practical and even moral purposes (cf. Kahn 1994, 545–56, 553–54; Palmer 1989).

Third, and most importantly, Thucydides implies that the possibilities of human excellence and the success it brings are substantially attenuated by the radical contingency that is woven into the fabric of human existence, and he proposes to tell his readers stories as one way of communicating the characteristics of human excellence, which is so fragile and yet so necessary for successfully accomplishing one’s ends in the world.²⁸ The importance of considering the Thucydidean pre-

sentation of realist wisdom is that the kind of excellence we think is possible circumscribes the kinds of human actions—including political and military—we think are possible and desirable. Accordingly, the question of excellence and how to illustrate it remains a question for students of international relations and political philosophy alike, but also for policy makers and political leaders. As Waltz (1988) points out, his neorealist theory is an effort to “explain how the organization of a realm acts as a constraining and disposing force on the interacting units within it” (618). Structure almost always leaves some room for individual initiative and chance, and stories pick up this key point by displaying the ways in which individuals maneuver within structural constraints and within the vagaries of contingency. Good statesmanship, moreover, does not necessarily lead to political or military success: Thucydides, along with later realists like Machiavelli, was keenly interested in understanding why.

This argument is not some entirely new reading or interpretation of Thucydides or realism and neorealism in general; it shows, rather, that by examining his storytelling, we discover a necessary dimension of *prescriptive* realism and neorealism that has remained under-appreciated in the secondary literature. Uncovering this dimension adds a needed caveat to a realist or neorealist theory of international politics that would too readily disparage the “role of the accidental and the occurrence of the unexpected” so as not to “dampen [our] theoretical aspirations” (Waltz 1995, 71). I am not suggesting that the accidental should overtake theory, nor should stories exclude other ways of communicating what we are calling practical wisdom or prudence in the light of the accidental; rather, taking the accidental into account is a vital part of realist wisdom, and narrative is a crucial mode of communicating such wisdom, even while nomothetic theories may continue to hold first place as the “necessarily slender explanatory construct[s]” with which we begin and end (Waltz 1995, 75). Narratives, anecdotal compilations, theories, and the conclusions of theoretical analysis are all, for better or worse, either forms of knowledge or the media for specific kinds of knowledge. As Nietzsche argued so eloquently, every form or medium of knowledge is a way of both seeing and not seeing (cf. Nietzsche, 1983, 59ff.; 1968, 470 [sect. 24]; 1966, 9–32). Stories, in particular, can exhibit not only explanatory constructs, but also sensibilities, through which authors can teach their readers.

The need for stories as transmitters of wisdom rests on four general characteristics of narrative. First, stories display particularities in such a way as to shed light on the complex generalities that constitute the context of the particulars. They permit a kind of inductive reasoning. From a story we may derive one or more general, probabilistic principles of human conduct, but we also retain the complex context of such principles for action. The narrated events of a story are “revealed as possessing a structure, an order of meaning” by the narrative itself and which they do not possess as “real events” apart from some narrativized content

²⁷ We recall again Morgenthau’s (1946) skepticism regarding the sufficiency of axioms for practical guidance (204–23).

²⁸ For a catalog of Thucydides’ uses of “*arête*,” see Palmer 1989, 368–71.

(White 1987, 4, 5). Stories become a guide for prudent deliberation about what to do in similar circumstances (Cogan 1981, 232–38). Whereas we may glean axioms, maxims, or abstract principles from a story, it is the story itself that provides the context that permits judgments about what axiom to follow in what way in a specific instance.

Second, stories display the essentially contingent character of human life, but they weave the contingent occurrences of our experiences into a comprehensible whole. Stories “disclose a world in which its readers are invited to dwell, or a character in relation to whom the readers are asked to see themselves.” Thus, a story becomes “a context for reflection and action” (C. Wood 1987, 12). In this way, a story is not first and foremost a work of abstract reason specifically, but of what we might call such intelligence generally. Whereas the notion of reason is a particular philosophical construct with clear implications about the structure of the rational mind and what it perceives or can perceive, the general concept of intelligence is broader. Intelligence on this count is “a working endowment rather than a theory and can be active in the absence of a philosophical theory about the rationality of the universe and the structure of mind that enables it to grasp the rationality inherent in the world.” We might call intelligence “a quality of brightness that enables all normal human beings to some extent and some to an extraordinary extent to grasp relations and implications in complex situations” (Wyschogrod 1983, 5).

In terms of astory, then, it follows “[f]rom this intelligible character of the plot” that “the ability to follow a story constitutes a very sophisticated form of understanding” (Ricoeur 1991, 4). Such a notion of intelligence or understanding, which is embodied in stories, makes it the foremost constituent of wisdom. It gives us a wider sense of human knowledge and wisdom than analytical reason alone, especially with regard to the role of narrative in providing the insights of wisdom. Both in its accessibility to induction and in its display of contingencies within a larger whole, narrative provides a context within which actions and events can be understood. It may also provide a context that clarifies for us why some phenomena remain quizzical or even incomprehensible. One such mystery concerns the phenomenon of radical contingency within a complex context and successful action against it.

Third, then, narrative is prior to analysis and the axioms it produces. Analysis is the activity, as its etymology indicates, of “loosening up” the narrative, which includes discerning its parts, testing them for conceptual coherence and consistency in usage, and unearthing the logic of the story. Out of such analysis, which is a critical reflection on the story being told, may come prescriptive axioms of behavior. Both the analysis and its axiomatic results, however, are “nonnarrative mode[s] of discourse” that depend on a prior narrative for their comprehensibility (Lash 1982, 76). Accordingly, we may note that neither Morgenthau nor even Waltz can either derive or present their theories without reference to examples and illustrations, e.g., stories

(Morgenthau 1954; Waltz 1988, 620–28).²⁹ Narrative is in this case the instrument for concretizing theory.

Fourth, if stories are not theoretically (or analytically) precise, and yet remain intelligent and intelligible, then they illuminate in a particular way. One quality of wisdom is that it “cannot be said . . . but only done or practiced.” This implies that while axioms may help us, we can ultimately make our wisdom visible to others only indirectly or reflectively (Strauss 1989, 91). Stories are such reflections of wisdom by indirection, because they form, as it were, a “Gestalt” of the world. Thucydides used illuminating stories, because the nature of that on which he sought to shed light is more accessible to the intelligence of narrative than the strictures of rational, categorical theorizing. In stories we hear the words and see the deeds that manifest wisdom or its absence. Wise proverbs are guiding maxims, the past practice and future reference of which are manifested in the words and deeds of our experiences or of a narrative. The meaning and substance of prudence and choice are made known to us in a narrative that integrates the words and deeds that constitute prudence into a context that serves to make sense of the world for us: “Ultimately, history cannot make a complete break with narrative, because it cannot break with action, which itself implies agents, aims, circumstances, interactions, and results both intended and unintended. But the plot is the basic narrative unity that organizes these heterogeneous ingredients into an intelligible totality” (Ricoeur 1991, 5; cf. Hauerwas 1983, 38–44).

In the context of their plot, stories contain a subject, which is sometimes a group but most often an individual. For our purposes, the storied activities of such groups or individuals satisfy the need of the decision-maker to be given illustrations of principles. Since scientific realism does not explicitly examine the role of group behavior or individual action, it seems to offer little for the individual decision-maker beyond a justification for resignation. Scientific realism and neorealism articulate the structural constraints of a system; they may leave room for action and for chance, but that is not their concern.³⁰ Morgenthau and Waltz, for example, tell leaders what is beyond their control—which is important. But what such leaders *also* want to know is what to do with that which is *within* their control. To that end, they must observe the prudent and excellent actor, the wise man, to become wise themselves. Machiavelli, Thucydides, and Hobbes, among others, all claimed to have observed, to have become wise, and to have passed on to us (in very different ways) the words and deeds they saw or about which they read, so that we, too, might become wise.³¹

In summary, then, a narrative is a particular way of answering the question, “What happened?” It is a way

²⁹ A more explicitly “narrational” explication of realism may be found in Carr 1964, esp. 22–94.

³⁰ “To realize the possibility [of systems theory] requires conceiving of an international system’s structure and showing how it works its effects” (Waltz 1979, 69).

³¹ Hobbes 1968, 82–83; Machiavelli 1996, 5–6, 123–25; Thucydides 1919, I.21.1, I.22.3–4. In this way, as Euben (1977, 50–56; 1990, 198–99) argues, Thucydides is a political educator.

of unifying speech and action into a comprehensible whole after they have occurred. At the same time, it may display disjunctions and disunities between the two (Euben 1977, 37–38). It is prior to theoretical analysis insofar as it provides the material for such an analysis. But here, it is also *after* theoretical analysis that Thucydides is trying to communicate in stories a notion of excellence. Told in stories, such a contextualized picture of practical excellence communicates to leaders the wisdom that is their concern as practical actors.

THE “MESSAGE(S)” OF THE STORY

Practical guidance requires a context in which to make sense of action. That context is usually a complex one. In Thucydides’ account, its properties include irony, which is made evident in his praise of Brasidas and which is best expressed in a narrative. The import of this irony is to contextualize Brasidas’ virtues in such a way that we learn to be measured and moderate in our praise of them. We also learn, therefore, to be measured in our expectations of the “technical expertise” that the substitute apprenticeship of narrative or any set of axioms derived therefrom can provide.³² It is a commonplace to observe that as Thucydides unfolds his story, he establishes a general contrast between the Spartan and the Athenian ways. He illustrates the differences in manner between the two chief antagonists of the war by means of their deeds, through the words of his characters, and sometimes in his own evaluations. The Spartans are slow and unwilling to dare, whereas the Athenians are quick and enterprising (VIII.96, I.70); the Spartans are moderate (*sophrosyne*), the Athenians immoderate (I.68, I.70, I.83); in foreign affairs, the Spartans are accused of limited knowledge, the Athenians credited with extended knowledge (I.68, I.71); the Spartans are characterized as conservative and hesitant, the Athenians as innovative, hasty, and tenacious (I.70, I.71, I.102). These contrasting characteristics may be related to the differing bases of power of the two foes: Sparta is a continental power, exhibiting the calmer qualities of land, and Athens is a maritime power, exhibiting the restless qualities of the sea (I.83, VIII.96). In brief, Archidamus in certain respects and Alcidas in general both display examples of the worst characteristics of the Spartans, whereas Brasidas frequently seems more an Athenian than a Spartan.³³

Against this background we observe several ironies in the story of Brasidas. The first emerges as we begin to notice with Edmunds that while Thucydides seems to praise Brasidas and is himself an Athenian, he also seems to affirm the Spartan virtues of provident delay, moderation, and planning, or cautious deliberation, while he associates the Athenian characteristics of audacity, impulsiveness, and quick action with the vices and injustices of the internecine strife of the Greek

cities during the war. In the *stasis* of Corcyra, for example, virtues (usually associated with Sparta) become vices, and their opposites (often Athenian characteristics) virtues. This *stasis*, Edmunds argues, contains an inversion of what was for Thucydides the natural or normal order of political things (Edmunds 1975a, 75, 76, 81, 89–91; Thucydides, 1982, III.81.4–5, III.82). Accordingly, Thucydides would seem to favor aristocratic Spartan over democratic Athenian qualities. As the story of Brasidas unfolds within the context of the story of Athens and Sparta, however, we are led down a path only to find a jester at its end.³⁴ Spartan virtues seem superior to the Athenian, but the most successful Spartan in the first part of the war behaves like an Athenian. Ultimately, the very nature of irony implies that this problem of the Athenian/Spartan dichotomy in Brasidas’ career cannot be entirely resolved. What are we to make of this as a comment on excellence and, especially, practical wisdom?

Let us recall that the great motion (*kinesis*) of which Thucydides provides a history is itself a kind of disorder. The *stasis* of Corcyra and eventually of other Greek cities is possible only as a result and in the context of such a *kinesis* (III.82.1). In such a situation, the virtues of the Spartans are insufficient. In the Archidamian war, at least, the characteristics of the Athenians seemed largely to give them the upper hand, as, for example, in the battle at Sphacteria. The Athenian qualities, however, are not stable. The Athenians (“with whom an enterprise unattempted was always looked upon as a success sacrificed” [IV.55.2; cf. I.70.7]) want too much after their victory at Pylos/Sphacteria and, so, eventually lose much of what they have won there (IV.41.4, IV.21.2). They do not know when to stop, consider carefully, consolidate their gains, and perhaps rest, as the Spartans urge them to do at the peace conference in 425 B.C.E.³⁵ At the same time, the portrait of Athenian power and adventuring spirit, which is in large part responsible for initiating and sustaining the events that allow Thucydides to write the work that reveals “for all time” its abiding truths concerning human things, shows us that Spartan qualities alone are also insufficient. The “Athenian” virtues of Brasidas win wars, but only if they are tempered by “Spartan” virtues, and Spartan

³⁴ Connor (1984) has illuminated the role of surprise and the unexpected in Thucydides’ *History* generally (16–17, 53ff.).

³⁵ Cogan’s (1981, 73–76) argument that the Spartan presentation to the Athenians is rhetorically inelegant is persuasive; however, it is the Athenians, as he points out, not the Spartans, who make it so. One element of rhetorical effectiveness is the audience, which in this case is impossible to please. The Spartans may not have been good speakers, but it is difficult to imagine what could have persuaded the Athenians for peace at this point. This difficulty rests on what have by this time clearly become Athenian vices—ambition and greed. These vices, combined with general Athenian enthusiasm, have made the Athenians aimless. In Cogan’s words, “They lacked a general and agreed conception of their aims that could tell them when they had won,” whereas Pericles’ strategy would have indicated victory at this point (76). In the Sicilian expedition, predicated upon Alcibiades’ assertion that endless activity and expansion are not vices, but necessary for the city’s survival (Thucydides, 1919, VI.18.6–7), these Athenian qualities end in a disaster that is not the end of the war only because Spartan hesitation does not take advantage of it (VIII.2.1, VIII.24.5, VIII.96.4–5). Compare Connor’s (1984) summary analysis (73ff.).

³² Here again, a comparison with the setbacks and successes in the career of Demosthenes may be instructive.

³³ Strauss (1964) calls Brasidas the Athenian among the Spartans (213).

qualities alone do not win wars either. The conservative and self-serving behaviors of many Spartan leaders, for example, extended the war in its final stages (Kagan 1987, 70, 330–31), and the Spartans were not above cruel severity (IV.80). When the Spartans did eventually win the war, however, they did not deal with the Athenians (despite the urging of their allies) as these did with the Melians. In the latter stages of the war, the extreme impatience of the Athenian *demos*, on the one hand, and Spartan moderation combined with a newly developed but desultory adventuresomeness, on the other (as when, under Lycurgus, they built a large navy to match that of the Athenians [Kagan 1987, 325–53, 376–412]),³⁶ gave the Spartans the ultimate victory even while they permitted Athenian survival.

Thucydides' realist wisdom is correspondingly bifurcated. In the greatest motion [*kinesis*] of all time, human nature leads to political corruption (III.82–III.83), yet some of the qualities needed to keep power for preserving one's own city are precisely the ones that bring about the *kinesis*, which is in conflict with the aims of preservation. The tendency to *kinesis* is brought on by the desire for preservation (I.75.1–I.76.3, I.88.1).³⁷ If they are not checked, the qualities needed for preservation of the city will lead to a *kinesis* that may well destroy it. In the same way, then, those excellences of Brasidas that helped his city and permitted personal satisfaction for him may ultimately have contradicted the interests of his city. We see this contradiction in the conclusion to Brasidas' story.

In the spring of 423 B.C.E., the Athenians and Spartans agreed to a one-year truce. Both sides hoped to negotiate a more general peace. During the truce and contrary to the agreement, Brasidas continued military activity in Thrace. His actions understandably aroused Athenian ire (IV.122.4–5, IV.123.3) and threatened the prospects of a more lasting peace. Thucydides does not tell us if Brasidas was pursuing a military or political policy in his continuation of the operations in Thrace that were excluded by the truce. We are told only that Brasidas was the principal Spartan opponent of peace, because of the “success and honor” [*eutychein te kai timasthai*] the war brought him. Brasidas' opposition to peace pairs him with Cleon, the greatest Athenian opponent to peace, for whom the war kept his crimes and slander from catching up with him. Apart from the possible damage to his own city's interests, Brasidas was running considerable personal risk: If he failed, he could be exiled or even capitally punished (Kagan, 1981, 309).

At the same time, it was Brasidas' successes that helped end the first war. The towns Brasidas captured either by persuasion or by treachery from within gave the Spartans something with which to bargain when negotiating the peace (IV.81.2, IV.117, V.14.1–2). In the view of the Spartans, however, the “good fortune”

[*eutyche*] of Brasidas would not last forever (IV.117). The success of Brasidas, moreover, was not entirely equivalent to the success of Sparta: The Spartans hoped to bargain their way out of what remained for them an adverse situation. Not until the battle of Mantinea in the third year of the Peace of Nicias did they regain their self-confidence and their reputation among the Greeks (V.75.3; Kagan 1981, 133ff.; Strauss 1964, 222). Brasidas, on the other hand, was considerably more ambitious. His enterprise in northern Greece, if successful, would establish a virtual empire there, for whose existence he would be almost singly responsible while commanding an army composed of Helots and other Greeks but few, if any, Spartans. In his final campaign, and the last military action before the peace, Brasidas surrendered to the darkness of chance (I.78.1–2, V.10). With his usual skill, swiftness, strategy, and good speaking, he successfully defended Amphipolis against an Athenian attempt to retake that vital city, but he fell in battle. Ironically, his death cleared the way for peace, but his ambition and successes made the negotiations and Spartan calls for moderation possible. Success—the achievement of one's purpose—is not always what or as it appears to be.

A second irony in Brasidas' story, which foreshadows later episodes in the war and to which I have already alluded, concerns the question of his honesty. Brasidas was not always truthful (IV.85.7, IV.88.1, IV.108.5, IV.122.3, IV.122.6, IV.123.1, V.16.1).³⁸ The untruthfulness of Brasidas' speech is deeper, however, than mere misrepresentation or seductive oratory, so that his reputation for honesty, measured conduct, justice, and goodness results in an irony that Machiavelli would have especially appreciated. Before Amphipolis, Brasidas had presented himself to the Acanthians as a liberator of Hellas, promising them autonomy, not a new subjection to Sparta (IV.85.1, IV.86.1). The Spartans intended, he said, to free Hellas, not to enslave it. The Athenians, moreover, would not attempt to retake the cities for their empire. If necessary, he would force the Acanthians to be free from the Athenian yoke. His character was such that force was not required: The cities gladly revolted. The measured conduct and apparent honesty with which Brasidas freed the Hellenic cities from Athenian hegemony were “what mainly created in the allies of Athens a friendly feeling for the Lacedaemonians.” Indeed, his reputation was so strong that the Hellenes held a “confident belief” that the other Lacedaemonians were like him (IV.81.2–3). This confidence would be tragically disappointed. In the “latter part of the war” (IV.81.2), Lysander would establish a harsh hegemony over the former Athenian allies: Thucydides foreshadows this Spartan rule at IV.132.3. The Spartans, contrary to Brasidas' promises, send Spartan military governors to Amphipolis and Torone, and the Athenians do reply to the revolts in

³⁶ On the “democratic” importance of the Athenian navy, which ran strongly contrary to Spartan inclinations, see Garst 2000, 71–72, and Thucydides VIII.72–VIII.79.

³⁷ This problem is analyzed more generally by Robert Jervis (1978) as the “security dilemma” in international affairs (167–214).

³⁸ Hunter (1973) shows that the first untruthful speech of Brasidas is before his own men (II.87) as he tries to encourage them into battle against the previously victorious Athenian commander, Phormio.

force.³⁹ As a careful reading of the latter part of Book IV makes clear, Brasidas himself is at least partially responsible for the falsification of the claims in his speech at Amphipolis (Conner 1984, 130–38). In Machiavellian terms, the representative of the Spartans (Brasidas) made the Spartans seem good by his words and deeds when neither, especially the latter, was (cf. Machiavelli 1980, chap. XVIII). “Later on in the [Decelean] war” (IV.81.2), the reputation Brasidas gave to the Spartans would serve them well.

Thus, Thucydides’ seeming preference for the “Spartan manner” is ambiguous. Sparta’s success rests in part on duplicity. Blithe estimations of Athenian reaction prove false, while the Spartans, too, will seek hegemony over Greece, just as the Athenians had warned that they would even before war broke out.⁴⁰ Thucydides praises the “excellence and comprehension” of Brasidas (IV.8.2) that secured these cities as bargaining chips, a purpose that Brasidas had originally denied, most likely because he did not know ultimate Spartan intentions. The “just and measured” Brasidas at the beginning of the campaign (IV.81.2) merely “shows himself” measured in Thucydides’ second evaluation, and the cities “hear” of his “gentleness” and his assurances, which helps incite them to revolt. Calling Brasidas’ statements “enticing but untrue” (IV.108.5), Thucydides can drop the attribution of justice, which the reader has discovered is a deceptive appearance whose seductive power will end either with Athenian revenge on some of the “liberated” cities or with Spartan tyranny.

Third, the complications, ambiguities, and ironies of Thucydides’ account of Brasidas’ campaign in Thrace stand in sharp contrast to the simpler account of the distribution of capabilities that the structural theoretical framework of a neorealist paradigm might supply. As both Garst and Johnson argue in different ways, neorealism, in particular, pays insufficient attention to the human intentions, interpretations, and efforts of rhetorical manipulation and counter-manipulation that make up the substance of Thucydides’ story of this campaign and, indeed, of the war (Garst 2000, 75–84; Johnson 1993, 208–29).⁴¹ Why do the cities of Thrace align as they do? Perhaps, following one part of neorealist reasoning, they rallied to the side of Sparta to balance the growing power of Athens after her victory at Pylos (cf. Waltz 1979, 126; 1987, 148–61). On the other hand, some neorealists might predict (or even prescribe) that the Thracian states would “bandwagon” rather than “balance,” keeping and even strengthening their ties to Athens, given their closer geographic proximity to that increasingly powerful city (Van Evera 1999, 176; Walt 1987, 172–80). As Garst persuasively argues, however,

³⁹ For a close analysis of this episode and of the Hellenic “hope” based on Brasidas’ character, see Rawlings 1981, 234–43.

⁴⁰ I.76.1–2, VIII.2.4. The apparent binary structure of the *History* adds weight to the ironic contrast between Brasidas and Lysander (see Rawlings 1981, esp. 357).

⁴¹ Van Evera (1984), for example, does not neglect “human factors,” but, in contrast to Thucydides, he does not elaborate beyond international structural or baseline domestic constraints on the calculations of statesmen.

the democratic character of these small Thracian cities made them natural allies with Athens, and Thucydides appeals to this internal characteristic as an “explanation” for their alliance behaviors (Garst 2000, 84). It is their decision to forgo this domestic link in favor of the persuasive arguments of the tactful, measured, and therefore smooth-tongued Brasidas, who represents the oligarchic Spartans, rather than a calculation of the interpoleis balances of threat and power, which is of particular note to Thucydides. In contrast to the possibilities of balancing and bandwagoning, which can certainly constitute a simplified baseline of reckoning even for Thucydides (IV.108), his more complicated, ironic account may render no greater predictive certainty than the hypotheses of neorealism. Indeed, the quest for certainty appears to be contradicted by Thucydides’ *political* story, but the prescriptive power of his narrative lies precisely in the ability of his more complex and even ironic narrative to give us practical wisdom.

The theme of “context” has appeared on multiple occasions in this essay, and we have seen that it is common for commentators on Thucydides’ *History* to refer in one way or another to the ways in which he establishes “context” in his work. Discerning the various threads in the woof and warp of the narrative tapestry that Thucydides weaves may well be the central problem for interpreting his *History* and thereby extracting from it the practical wisdom that he intends to bring before us for consideration. Because the texture of the *History* is so multilayered and complex, one may even question whether practical wisdom—if such wisdom, as I am arguing, requires some “context”—is possible at all for Thucydides. He believes it to be possible, but it is precisely the need to establish a context that is rarely, if ever, predetermined that gives practical wisdom its third ironic quality: No context can be absolutely determined, and contexts are likely to be multiple.

The *force* of the ironies that surround the complex context of Brasidas’ life can only be delivered in a story (laying them out axiomatically would be like explaining the punchline of a joke), and they are important to a full (practical) understanding of the world Thucydides seeks to illuminate for us. A simple, axiomatic, structuralist, or hypothesis-driven description of the world, attenuated with a few provisos and caveats, is not in and of itself false, but insufficient.⁴² Thucydides implies that the world does not appear to us in that way, and neither can an account that purports to give us guidance in it. Furthermore, even though this guidance, permeated by the ironies of the situation, cannot be absolute, a simple list of “laws” as a tool for guiding practical action will not do: Its decontextualized character makes it insufficiently intelligible to be practically useful. Such a list is also boring; despite an “absence of romance” in Thucydides’ history (I.22.3), political pedagogy means that the *History*’s readers are to be inspired by it to action (Euben 1990, 195). In this sense, Euben is right to note that Thucydides’ *History* contains an element of the

⁴² Compare Benjamin 1972, 144–45.

“bardic” in its preservation of great deeds for all time. Such a poetic immortalization or preservation renders the deeds of the political actors in Thucydides’ *History* meaningful in a way that transcends their immediate occurrence and specific utility for those whom they first concerned. Political (and military) action is thereby preserved—in a story—as something worth doing, because it brings a glory that does not pass away immediately after its appearance and that displays a meaning that is greater than the act or the words themselves, at the same time that it may be beset by moderating ironies. Such a display is possible only in narrative.⁴³

Even as we may be encouraged by Thucydides’ account to be just, energetic, moderate, measured, courageous, clever, and audacious (if not for reasons of morality, then for reasons of successful action), the ironies of his history contextualize this list of human excellences in such a way that they remain undogmatic and not merely utilitarian. The accounts of excellence in Thucydides display the tragic truth, as Euben (1977) has it, “not that truth is never useful, but that it is sometimes futile” (199). Brasidas died in battle—a risk in any military venture. More importantly, his political ambitions, while they could be sustained by his abilities in the field, could not overcome the lack of appreciation his city Sparta had for them. Whether his failure to recognize the lack of Spartan support constitutes a miscalculation on his part, or simple political stupidity, or deliberate (and perhaps foolish) disregard is unclear from Thucydides’ account alone. In any case, Brasidas’ excellences were imperfect, the success they wrought was partial, and their ultimate outcome ambiguous and ironic. And that is best grasped—for practical purposes—by telling a story about it. Thucydides’ view of excellence as necessary, yet assaulted by contingency and enmeshed in complexity, can be conveyed in an intelligible manner only by way of either a story or a list of axioms, but the story, or “narrating,” is much more powerful, “exactly because narration is the ‘science’ of the particular, is a more basic category than either explanation or understanding” (Hauerwas 2002, 206; Milbank 1990, 264–67).

SUCCESS, FAILURE, AND EXCELLENCE: REALIST INDETERMINISM

The story of Brasidas is an illustration of excellence, yet also of ultimate failure, which is not, however, entirely a matter of bad luck. Brasidas committed a crucial political blunder by overestimating his ability to prevail against the Spartan government in his apparent ambition to expand the Spartan empire into northern Greece. He either misjudged or ignored the Spartan rulers, who seem to have been uninterested at that point in empire. They sought only the return of their soldiers (IV.117.2). His death, the ultimate “defeat,” may have foreshortened a possible success, but it is incidental to his political shortcomings. Why consider such failures?

We may make five brief observations. First, one can learn as much about the requirements for excellence

from an example of their absence—a story of failure—as from an example of their presence. Second, it is hard to find an unambiguously successful man in Thucydides’ *History*. Pericles and Nicias, perhaps the two most obvious candidates for excellence and success, are both eventual failures. Their failures are partially of their own doing and partially circumstance. Pericles’ hold on the Athenian demos was never absolute (I.21.3; II.65.1–4), and he died too soon to see his policies through. Athens was left in the hands of increasingly self-seeking, unscrupulous despots, while the morals and even the instrumental rationality of the city itself seem to have declined (IV.65.3–4, II.65.6–12; Edmunds 1975b, 73–82; cf. Plato’s [1987, 515e–516d] criticism). One may argue, moreover, that many of the apparently tyrannical activities and proposals of Alcibiades were a consistent extension of the policies of Pericles (Palmer 1992), which would further complicate any assessment of Pericles’ ultimate success or failure. In a difficult and perhaps ironic passage, Thucydides eulogizes Nicias as a man who gave “lifelong devotion to the practice of law-bred virtue [*arête*]” (VII.86.5).⁴⁴ Yet Nicias was unable to persuade the adventuresome Athenians to moderation, and as the result of unfavorable political and military circumstances and his own mistakes, he ended his life as a traitor, butchered by ignoble enemies (VI.86.4; Strauss 1964, 198–99), and leading a large Athenian army with him into annihilation. The absence of unambiguous success even in virtue that is indicated in Thucydides’ qualified praise of Nicias seems itself to tell us something about human possibilities. Thucydides’ portrayal of the world may serve to attenuate striving for power and security, if not for moral reasons, then for practical ones. Thucydides’ story of Brasidas is therefore one example of an effort to teach us something practical about human excellence and its possibilities.

Third, Thucydides’ narrative does not deliver to the reader an explicit or exhaustive catalog of the excellences that he believes are required for success in any circumstances. A life is itself a circumstantial set of events, never to be repeated. At the same time, however, to recount it in a story illuminates for us some, even if not all, of the principles that attend our human existence, regardless of the outcome. No matter which figure in Thucydides’ *History* one were to choose, the catalog, by reason of the nature of narrative, would always be partial, requiring analysis of the stories that offer us the material to consider. Such partiality obtains even when a larger narrative (such as Thucydides’ *History* in toto) incorporates the many smaller stories into itself. While we might thereby achieve a kind of “impartiality” because of the multiperspectival, summary viewpoint we are given and can share with one

⁴³ On the political significance of such stories, see Arendt 1958, 175–99.

⁴⁴ I am here following Palmer’s translation of this philologically entangled passage. On its importance to an interpretation of Thucydides’ understanding of virtue [*arête*], see especially Palmer 1989, 369–70, 380–81, 383n18, and Strauss 1964, 207–9; Thucydides’ qualified praise of Nicias is an important point for reading the *History* in general, even while its meaning is open to considerable dispute. Compare Connor 1984, 205–6, Edmunds 1975a, 141ff., and Gomme, Andrews, and Dover 1970, 461–64.

another, it is not possible to retreat to a synoptic, Archimedean point (cf. Arendt 1958, 11, 248, 251 vs. 175–212; and esp. Arendt 1954, 48–52). In this way—to repeat—narrative remains an essential complement to nomothetic approaches, a primary if not exclusive source of practical wisdom. Since I am articulating the story of Thucydides in a partially “nonnarrative” and certainly abbreviated form, this exercise seems circular, but it is not viciously so, because the order of our lives is indeed given only narratively, so that “we cannot set [theoretical or axiomatic] explanation and [narrative] understanding over against one another” (Milbank 1990, 266). The two are complementary. They are two aspects of an analyzable but irreducible whole. Accordingly, as Robert Keohane (1998) has argued, “Each analyst of world politics has to locate herself or himself somewhere along the dimension between . . . nomothetic and narrative epistemology” (194). (Nevertheless, the very form of the present argument illustrates the recurrent, ironic tensions between narrative and analytical explanation or exposition.)

Fourth, one may proceed from this point to a larger mode of comparison. How, for example, do the narrative styles of other traditional realists—say Machiavelli or Morgenthau—stack up against that of Thucydides? Among the many comparisons of differences between realists, Steven Forde has shown that close attention to their narratives is one way in which we discern these differences. We may find that the relationship between excellence and happenstance in different realist narratives points to a difference in the wisdom they pass on to us.

Fifth, there is the matter of luck. Thucydides seems to show in the story of Brasidas and its context excellences that require each other for their full realization but that also tend to exclude each other from fulfillment. He also means to show the role of contingency in the complex of human affairs, an understanding of which remains for him a crucial part of wisdom.⁴⁵ We may note that the gods of the Greek pantheon are largely absent from Thucydides’ history. This absence has led Bernard Williams to observe that Thucydides’ picture of the world is peculiarly modern—an observation that is confirmed by Nietzsche’s appraisal of Thucydides—namely, as a world in which there is nothing “beyond some things that human beings have themselves shaped . . . that is intrinsically shaped to human interests, in particular to human beings’ ethical interests” (Nietzsche 1968, 558–59; Williams 1993, 163).⁴⁶ In such a world, luck or contingency plays a crucial but impersonal role.

The foremost realist systematically to take into account the role of contingency, which he referred to as “Fortuna,” is generally considered to be not Thucydides, but Machiavelli. In Machiavelli’s Italy, “personalized” notions of contingency (known as Fortuna) and

the human excellence required to overcome it were widespread and influential (Flanagan 1972, 130–35). Derived adjectivally from the Latin *fors*, which ultimately derives from the root of *ferre* (to bring), *fors* is that which is brought; Fortuna is the goddess who brings it. *Tyche*, similarly, derives from a Greek root meaning “to succeed,” or “to attain.” Thus, as Thomas Flanagan (1972) concludes,

The basic meaning in both cases is not what we moderns term ‘chance,’ that is, events which seem to occur randomly. Rather the connotation is that of success, which is brought about by an unseen person or power who works in ways inscrutable to us. Thus there is never a clear distinction between fortune and fate. Both conceptions refer to the order of the gods which can never be fully understood by men. If there is a difference, it is one of emphasis. Fate represents the divine will as something fixed and inflexible, while fortune represents it as elastic, unpredictable, and open to influence by human supplication. (130)

Fortune was for Machiavelli, however, an entirely immanent phenomenon, which he personalized for purposes of prescription. The vagaries and vicissitudes of fortune in the realist world have no transcendent, divine source, nor do we have recourse against them in such a transcendent realm. Fortune is what times and circumstances bring us, to which we must respond with the immanent tools we have at hand (Flanagan 1972, 142–56; Newell 1987, 628–29). Moreover, Machiavelli did not believe that men can entirely overcome Fortune with virtue, but that they can at times control “her.” As Flanagan has it, “Machiavelli in effect promises only that we can increase our chances against Fortune, not that we can eliminate her effects entirely.” Fortune is variable, changing with time and place.⁴⁷ The man of virtue must accommodate himself to her caprice if he hopes to achieve his ends.⁴⁸

Thucydides, similarly, did not treat *tyche* as either a force or a goddess that we can control. The unexplained, unforeseen events of *tyche* are not to be manipulated by us, nor are they the product of malevolent or benevolent forces. Like the later Machiavelli, however, Thucydides believed that *tyche* can be countered with preparation and experience. The Athenians, for example, take advantage of *tyche* at Sphacteria, and Brasidas’ generalship along with the discipline of his troops overcomes adverse *tyche* in his campaign in Thrace. Earlier, in a somewhat disingenuous speech before his troops

⁴⁷ One might usefully compare this notion of Fortuna with Carl von Clausewitz’s (1968) depictions of “friction,” chance, and incalculability in war (117, 140–42, 157, 162–67).

⁴⁸ In the famous twenty-fifth chapter of *The Prince*, Machiavelli suggests that Fortune controls our doings about half the time, and in the other half we can control her with the proper qualities of virtue. Space limitations deny a rehearsal of Machiavelli’s teaching on Fortuna, nor is it to the point here, but his statement that “I think it may be true that fortune is the ruler of half our actions, but that she allows the other half or thereabouts to be governed by us” (1980, chap. XXV) [*“Nondimanco, perché il nostro libero arbitrio non sia spento, iudico potere essere vero che la fortuna sia arbitra della metà della azioni nostre, ma che etiam lei ne lasci governare l’altra metà, o presso”, a noi*] (Machiavelli 1995, 162–63)] does not imply, it seems to me (pace Strauss 1953, 178), that proper virtue will also permit us entirely to rule that half of our actions of which fortune is the ruler.

⁴⁵ Indeed, Cornford (1907) claims that *tyche* is a central figure in Thucydides’ “drama.”

⁴⁶ Thucydides’ “modern” qualities may also be accentuated by his methodological relationship to the Greek students of medicine and to naturalistic philosophers like Anaxagoras and Democritus (cf. Voegelin 1957, 351–58).

prior to the naval engagement at Rhium, Brasidas encourages his men with the questionable (and ultimately false) observation that previous defeats were the product of adverse *tyche*, now to be overcome by their own preparations. These words prove false largely because the Spartan preparation against the unforeseen is not as thorough as that of the Athenians (II.85.2, II.87–90).⁴⁹ *Tyche* is the material happenstance to which the man of excellence is prepared to respond. *Tyche* is for Thucydides, too, a material and immanent, not a transcendent or divine element of incalculability in the affairs of men. Such incalculability can have various immanent sources, and it is not always possible to overcome it (Bury 1909, 128–30; Edmunds 1975a, esp. 7–88, 174–204; Woodhead 1970, 168–69), as the stories of Brasidas show. Most narrowly, the virtue that may overcome *tyche* is *gnome*, which consists principally of the twin aspects of reason and resolve (Edmunds 1975a, esp. 7–88; Rawlings 1981, 130–35). The other virtues that Brasidas exhibits supplement these and assure the success that begins with reason (or intelligence) and resolve.

Tyche is the term Thucydides finds at hand to symbolize systematic unpredictability in the world. Since *tyche* is not systematic in its appearances, however, we cannot overcome it by mere calculation. The stories we tell are a way of rendering the incalculability of fortune or *tyche* intelligible and, thereby, of gaining wisdom concerning its place in human affairs. By means of stories we may prepare ourselves to be excellent and thereby counteract bad luck or take advantage of good luck within the complex reality that is our existence. The story of Brasidas, which includes his political failures and his untimely demise, is one such tale.

CONCLUSIONS

Daniel Garst has persuasively argued that Thucydides' *History* presents a picture of political power that not only is richer and more nuanced than the neorealist conception, but also points to a serious theoretical defect in it. Thucydides' use of political speeches captures a distinction between the possession and the exercise of political power that neorealism misses. This confusion also leads neorealism to understand less nimbly than Thucydides did the workings of hegemony in international affairs (Garst 1989, 20–22, 22–24). On the literary front, we have noted that Steven Forde finds in Thucydides a presentation of the nature of power that perceives ironies and tragedies not evident in the writings of realists like Machiavelli (or of contemporary neorealists). I have added to these arguments concerning the richer depths of Thucydides' realism an argument that the narrative itself works as a pedagogical device to which modern realists and neorealists aspire,

⁴⁹ Hunter's (1973) analysis of this incident gives several reasons why, in Thucydides' likely estimation, Brasidas' speech is flawed (140–41, 150–51, 157–58); cf. Allison 1989, esp. 28–65. Since the intention of this speech was to motivate troops to victory, "tactical" (but unsuccessful), rather than "flawed," may be the correct adjective for its apparent lack of veracity.

but that they cannot emulate with nomothesis or even anecdotes alone.

The Thucydidean realist world is a world of action and contingency, of human purposes and the vagaries of happenstance. Human beings are motivated to action primarily (but not necessarily exclusively) by fear, honor, and interest, which are linked either to acquiring or to maintaining political and material power. One overcomes contingency and luck not with obedient piety, but with preparation and skill, which are shaped by the qualities of one's own character that one brings to bear in a particular situation. Moderation or even hesitation may, as with the Spartans, help us to see the limitations of our pursuit of power, but other qualities actually enable the pursuit. These other qualities are displayed in stories of how men pursue and keep power.

Realist and neorealist reservations concerning morality notwithstanding, Thucydides' story of the war may also have a moral purpose of sorts. Perhaps it intends to moderate our adventurism, because it shows us the ironies and ambiguities of pursuing power. Thucydides' wisdom moderates us in a Spartan direction, because we come to see that an unbridled response to fear and an unbridled pursuit of honor and interest defined in terms of power are ultimately self-contradictory or self-destructive, as was Brasidas' strong-willed policy in Thrace and Athenian policy after the death of Pericles. This self-contradiction may not always be apparent, as it was not to the avaricious Athenians, or to the Hellenic cities of the Athenian Empire, who, won over by the smooth words and seeming goodness of one general, exchanged a measured tyranny for a harsher one (which, ironically, was Spartan, despite that city's many measured characteristics). Thucydides does not explicitly espouse a moral theory, and a reading of his *History* might make one wonder if that were possible, yet he leads us to see *through his narrative* that the pure pursuit of material advantage may require a conventional moderation to keep it from self-contradiction.⁵⁰ Perhaps this is one of the "secret instructions" of which Hobbes speaks.⁵¹

Thucydides' concern with human limitations along these registers is not a sentiment merely of frustration, but of a kind of tragedy that serves as an admonition. For Thucydides, pursuit of one's own ends and the ends of one's city, for example, may result in a tragic conflict,

⁵⁰ See also Palmer 1989, 373, 381, and Forde 2000. In the larger structure of the *History*, we might also compare the statements of the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta before the war with the growing extremism of Athenian policies as the war continues. In the pre-war debate, the Athenians admit to "realist" motivations of "fear, honor, and interest" for retaining their empire (I.76, I.77), but they also claim "measured conduct" in the treatment of their imperial subjects (I.77). That measured "tyranny," which parallels the initially measured tyranny of Hippias and his predecessors at Athens (VI.54), stands in contrast to Athenian language and conduct at Melos, in Thrace, and in later episodes (cf. VI.61).

⁵¹ Similarly, the Periclean appeals to glory (II.42–II.45) imply that longevity, stability, or even moderation is not necessarily politically ultimate. Attaining glory may render individual or collective survival itself secondary: Better a short, bright light than a dimmer and longer, but less worthy one. Since Hobbes ([1651] 1968) preferred survival, he endeavored to discount glory (130, 150–60).

as they did for Brasidas. Similarly, the virtues that preserve a city in war must be tempered by those that keep peace, yet these virtues may conflict. To survive, one not only must shore up and expand what one has, as some realists might suggest: One also must rest as the Spartans suggested to the Athenians.⁵² This, too, is part of “realist” wisdom. The need for moderation in the face of tragedy means that Thucydides cannot tell stories, except of certain military incidents, that are as simple as, say, Machiavelli’s terse examples of *virtu* in the *Prince*. Thucydides does not reduce every human activity to a kind of military—which is to say, technical—activity (Wood 1967, 170–71). Instead, the intentions of others, the ambiguities of objectives, and the tragedies of complex human interactions are a part of that which is permanent in the nature of things, exposed by the greatest *kinesis* of all time. Thucydides need not tell us so directly: His *History* can mean nothing less. This aspect of the *History* reminds us of Hayden White’s (1987) observation, taken from Hegel, of the seeming fact that “every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to moralize the events of which it treats” (14). Thucydides seems strictly to avoid moralizing, and yet, to understand his real[ist] world of human action and contingency, we must understand not only calculations of interest or fear or honor defined in terms of power, but also the other elements of human life. These include the conflicting intentions of our desires (justice and revenge, security and glory), the conflicting ends within a single city or even person and, most especially, the possibility of happenstance. Without being aware of these dimensions of human reality, we cannot be wise in Thucydides’ sense.

While the focus of this essay has been on the decision-making of *individual* leaders, similar considerations are valid for decision-making “collectives,” such as the Athenian assembly. As we have seen, Thucydides identifies specific “character” traits of the two central cities of his historical narrative, Sparta and Athens, a number of which he then transfers to a variety of individual actors in that narrative, including Brasidas. The Athenian *demos*, moreover, is a decision-maker in its own right: its hastiness and impatience, subsequent regret, and false hopes, for example, lead to decisions of considerable import throughout the *History* (III.49, VI.93). Thucydides’ lessons concerning moderation and measured conduct can apply alike to individuals and to groups that are articulated to action. While we should beware a one-to-one transference and while leadership *within* group processes is an important aspect of such processes (that it was for Thucydides is revealed, for example, in many of the speeches he records), groups,

⁵² To give an example of such disputes among realists, one might point to Machiavelli’s (1996) negative evaluation of Spartan moderation (21–23 [*Discourses*, I.6]; Mindle 1985, 219). His indictment seems nearly “Athenian,” at least if Alcibiades’ arguments for imperialism can be thought to be the attitude of the majority of the Athenians after the death of Pericles (Thucydides 1919, VI.18.4–7; cf. Forde 1992, 384–87, 389); as noted above, Palmer (1992, esp. 41–42, 97, 119–120) shows that the arguments of Alcibiades in favor of Athenian imperialism are consistent with the prior arguments and policies of Pericles.

like individuals, can be characterized by the qualities of their collective decision-making processes and outcomes (cf. Ober 1989, 68–95).⁵³

The story of Brasidas reminds those who argue for the realist or neorealist schools in the study of political philosophy or of international relations of three principles. First, axiomatic knowledge of material or systemic factors in international relations may be a good “first cut” (even though it is logically subsequent to narrative), but it is insufficient for practical purposes, since we must also take into account the roles of contingency, luck, and chance in a narratively contextualized way. Nomothesis, therefore, remains perhaps a good first glance but an insufficient lasting endowment for political practice. We require not only theoretical exposition, but narrative. That is, we require stories that integrate, contextualize, illustrate, and illuminate in those specific ways that theoretical analysis cannot.

Second, luck and contingency are central to the success of human enterprises and they require human excellence—revealed in narrative—to deal with them, even under the conditions that realism holds to be true. The first point of wisdom in realism is that happenstance is a real phenomenon of the world, requiring excellence to overcome, and that this combination of luck and human response is an integral part of the world, which the practitioner (or student) of politics denies at his or her peril. Success, fame, or glory in international affairs requires not only the knowledge of the scholar or keen observer, but also the excellence of character to use that knowledge to one’s own purposes and, perhaps, the good fortune to be placed into the circumstances of power in which one can, in fact, employ such knowledge and character.

Finally, as Daniel Garst (1989) also shows in a differently contextualized argument, the story of Brasidas points to the prudential requirements of political power (21–24). The incalculability in the complexity of human affairs that the story of Brasidas illustrates prevents politics from becoming simply a technique of mastery and demands that it be a practical science requiring prudence, wisdom, and, most likely, luck. The nature and qualities of this incalculability can be partially articulated in axiomatic generalizations, but, without excluding lists of axioms, they are more ably and usefully demonstrated in that most potent substitute for direct experience—stories.

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⁵³ Wallach (2001, 189–90, 230, 298–99) follows Plato in treating the *demos* as a unitary or semiunitary actor.

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