DOI: https://doi.org/10.29173/histos685 *Histos* 18 (2024) XCIII–CI

REVIEW–DISCUSSION
REASSESSING THUCYDIDES' STYLE

Tobias Joho, *Style and Necessity in Thucydides*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. xiv + 354. Hardback, £117.50/$135.00. ISBN 978-0-198-81204-3.

This is a very good book, not least because it asks a very good question. Joho (henceforth 'J.') takes the long-standing discussion of Thucydides' idiosyncratic style, pairs it with an exploration of Thucydides' understanding of free will and determinism, and asks how the two topics might illuminate each other. J.'s conclusion is essentially two-fold: i) Thucydides' abstract and impersonal style is intrinsic to his work—*contra* Dionysius of Halicarnassus' rhetorically minded critique—because it 'enacts' the impersonal forces which dominate it (summarised 15–17); and ii) Thucydides has a partially deterministic view of historical causation (summarised 23–4). J. builds extensively on a variety of recent scholarship, but also on older studies of Thucydides' style (notably Macleod's and Parry's), as well as a wealth of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century scholarship. The result is a challenging, rich, and tightly argued book, which builds from highly detailed close readings to searching reflections on historiographical themes.

Although he treats it in unprecedented depth, J.'s question is not a new one. In a famous article, which J. highlights (e.g. 3, 54), on Thucydides' *stasis* excursus (3.82–3) and Dionysius' treatment of it, Macleod explored the relationship between Thucydides' abstract style and his diminution of individual agency.[1] Even more famously, R. G. Collingwood posed the question in his brief discussion of Thucydides in *The Idea of History*. Following in the footsteps of Dionysius rather than Macleod and J., Collingwood lets his frustrations with Thucydides' fiendishly difficult Greek boil over:

> [The style] of Thucydides is harsh, artificial, repellent. In reading Thucydides I ask myself, What is the matter with the man, that he writes like that? I answer: he has a bad conscience. He is trying to justify

[1] Macleod (1979). Poschenrieder (2011), also drawing on Macleod, similarly (albeit much more briefly) builds on Dionysius of Halicarnassus' reading of 3.82–3 in a discussion of Thucydides' impersonal style.

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> himself for writing history at all by turning it into something that is not history.[2]

It is worth pausing on Collingwood's reasoning. For Collingwood, Thucydides was 'the father of psychological history': unlike Herodotus, he was primarily interested in demonstrating psychological laws rather than narrating events. Thucydides, Collingwood argues, was predominantly influenced by Hippocratic science (the *stasis* excursus is one passage he cites as evidence). That meant his text was predominantly concerned with the laws governing events, and that is why, for Collingwood, Thucydides chooses his abstract style. Collingwood never actually quotes—let alone analyses—any of Thucydides' Greek. But Collingwood does stress that these laws which Thucydides' style reflected were *unchanging*: 'But these laws are precisely such eternal and unchanging forms as, according to the main trend of Greek thought, are the only knowable things'.[3]

Whereas J. will carefully—and somewhat inconclusively—argue for limits to Thucydides' determinism, Collingwood is rather more decisive. It is striking that, although J. and Collingwood both compare Thucydides with Herodotus, and both see Thucydides as influenced by Hippocratic ideas, they end up with quite different responses to the question. That is in part because J., like Macleod, embraces the nuances and eccentricities of Thucydides' style.[4] But it is perhaps also because Collingwood—controversially—puts Thucydides in a philosophical context, as a precursor to Plato. His concluding description of Thucydides makes that explicit:

> The Thucydidean speech is both in style and content a convention characteristic of an author whose mind cannot be fully concentrated on the events themselves, but is constantly being drawn away to some lesson that lurks behind them, some unchanging and eternal truth of which the events are, Platonically speaking, *παραδείγματα* or *μιμήματα*.[5]

One might disagree with Collingwood on Thucydides' philosophical outlook. But the goal of answering J.'s question in a way which clearly situates Thucydides in the history of philosophy will strike many as commendable. The

[2] Collingwood (1994) 29.

[3] Collingwood (1994) 30. J. quotes this line on the one occasion he mentions Collingwood (224 n. 58).

[4] Cf. Macleod (1979) 64: 'Where a writer of Thucydides' stature is concerned, it seems more profitable to use such criticism [*sc.* Dionysius'] as a challenge to understand rather than an excuse for unreasoning dislike; for if his manner puzzles or arrests the reader, it is likely to do so by design'.

[5] Collingwood (1994) 31.

difficult thing, I think, is ascertaining how far this *philosophical* goal is compatible with a robustly *philological* approach.

J.'s book comprises a substantial introduction, eight chapters, and a brief conclusion. Chapter 1 outlines Thucydides' 'abstract nominal style', which J. boils down to four (overlapping) features (29–36): using abstract nominal phrases where other constructions are available; putting abstract nouns in subject position; using nominal periphrasis; and using agent-less periphrasis. J. then contrasts the preponderance of such features in the *stasis* excursus with their relative absence in the narrative of *stasis* in Corcyra (3.70–81) which precedes it. (It perhaps bears mentioning that J. does not discuss questions of composition; he seems to assume a unitarian position.) Like every chapter, it is thoroughly and precisely evidenced, discussing a range of passages and handling them masterfully. One might quibble with the odd detail—J. is a little quick, for instance, to speak of Thucydidean coinages (29), given how little fifth-century prose survives—but there is much to admire in his close reading. More substantively, though, we might wonder about other ways of framing of the chapter. J. tends to work back from commentators—ancient and modern—on Thucydides' style, which is a perfectly sensible approach. But, as J. occasionally acknowledges (32, 71 n. 54), many of these stylistic features also appear characteristic of Antiphon, whom ancient tradition held to have taught Thucydides. They are also reminiscent of Gorgias, as Solmsen observed in an insightful paper, which treated Thucydides' abstract style as part of a step towards what he regarded as conceptual thought in a Platonic mould.[6] Again, this might not be the context we want to read Thucydides in. But—especially given the emergence of near-contemporary discussions about such style in the likes of Alcidamas[7]—we should probably see Thucydides' abstract style as at least partly inherited and as involved in these contemporary debates.

Chapter 2 asks what this abstract style achieves. It focuses largely on 3.82, although it concludes with an important discussion (73–5) of the complementary roles of Thucydides' plain style (e.g., 3.70–81) and abstract style (e.g., 3.82–3). J.'s reading of 3.82 is characteristically detailed, elucidating the rich variety of ways Thucydides highlights the power of impersonal forces. Certain features are briefly but fruitfully compared with Hippocratic texts (65, 68). J. essentially finds himself in agreement with Macleod and Parry (54–5) that the abstract style reflects the circumstances of war overwhelming—or, as J. more carefully frames it, marginalising—individual agency. But we might wonder whether starting with 3.82 narrows J.'s conclusions. In a revealing discussion (52–3), J. observes that, in one of the passages Dionysius cites as an example of the impersonal style (1.71.7), the Corinthian speakers 'have to use an

[6] Solmsen (1971), esp. 397–407.

[7] See, for instance, O'Sullivan (1992) 32–6.

impersonal noun' ('the Peloponnesus') rather than a personal one ('the Peloponnesians') because of the rhetorical context. That is surely right. But it raises the question of whether strategic concerns—a need for vagueness, a wish to avoid attributing blame, or even the desire to *insinuate* that an outcome is inevitable—govern other examples of such style in the speeches. Even in Thucydides' narrative voice, J.'s examples of nominal periphrasis (1.23.6: *λύσαντες τὰς σπονδὰς ἐς τὸν πόλεμον κατέστησαν*, see p. 33–4) and agent-less periphrasis (7.75.5: *κατήφειά τέ τις ἅμα καὶ κατάμεμψις σφῶν αὐτῶν πολλὴ ἦν*, p. 35) from Chapter 1 could plausibly be read as circumlocutions to avoid pinning blame on individuals or groups. Especially in a language with the same word for 'cause' and 'fault' (*αἰτία*), we should be very wary of separating questions of necessity and exculpation.

J. is undoubtedly alive to the rhetorical contexts of the speeches. In Chapter 3, which focuses on Book 1, J. treats the Spartan debate in some detail, and twice explicitly warns us not to overlook the Athenians' rhetorical context (79, 92). He also offers a sensitive and balanced discussion of the nature of the speeches in Thucydides (84–8). But J.'s inclination is always—as Collingwood's was[8]—to treat the speeches as potential vehicles of Thucydidean insight (e.g., 106–7: 'The Athenians' emphasis on the ineluctable pull of human nature bears the stamp of a genuine insight'). That is, of course, a perfectly reasonable approach. But it can also be flipped on its head. Whereas J. emphasises how stylistic parallels with a detached Thucydidean narrator can suggest abstract language in the speeches reflects detached insights, another commentator might emphasise how the manipulation of such style in the speeches shows that the Thucydidean narrator is capable of just the same.

Chapter 3 is the first to engage deeply with philosophical questions of free will and determinism. At the start of the chapter (77–8), J. argues against the idea that Thucydides' work aims at practical usefulness, on the grounds that Thucydides i) claims no such thing in 1.22.4 or 2.48.3, but also ii) displays a 'circular pattern' in his text (cf. 17 n. 39, on the role of chance, and 117, on the Athenian claims in the Melian Dialogue). As Hornblower noted, Thucydides never quite suggests a circular view of history;[9] but J. knows that, for the picture that emerges in Chapters 3 and 4 is more nuanced. J. suggests that some speakers (such as the Athenians at Sparta) reason from the constancy of human nature that human behaviour is predictable, and thus imply that deliberative bodies *can* make informed decisions which improve their lot. Others, however, articulate a different perspective: they see the forces of human nature as so overwhelming that they cannot be overcome. Chapter 4—probably the most insightful in its close readings—draws on parallels from

[8] Collingwood (1994) 30.

[9] Hornblower (1991) 61 (discussing 1.22.4).

Hippocratic texts, Herodotus, and Euripides to explore how speakers such as Diodotus and the Athenians on Melos speak of human nature in much the same way those parallel texts speak of the divine. This idea of two perspectives is a very good one, and the attempt to contextualise Thucydides' framing of human nature is rich, although not all of J.'s intertextual suggestions are completely persuasive. But in the process, J.'s Thucydides has evolved. As 3.82–3 fades into the background, Thucydides has become a somewhat aporetic figure, who is a determinist to a considerable degree, but maybe not in quite such a thorough-going way as he first appeared. At the end of Chapter 3, J. suggests that the juxtaposition of these two perspectives creates a 'tragic ambiguity' (106). But more than ambiguous, Thucydides' own position seems increasingly vague—in particular, vague on the details of how he is what we would call a compatibilist.

J. is, in general, quite wary of philosophical theory. It first appears mid-way through Chapter 4, in a footnote (127 n. 36) to an explanation of how Diodotus collapses the dichotomy between internal and external conditions (passions, though internal, take the form of external forces; circumstances, though external, affect individuals as though they were internal experiences). The footnote clarifies that this explanation was inspired by a section of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Then J. continues: 'This connection is not anachronistic because Heidegger, in developing his ideas about the fundamental role of moods, went back to Greek thought'. This is an odd claim. For one thing, it does seem to be anachronistic (doubly so if, as J. notes, Heidegger drew on Aristotle's *Rhetoric* in this section). But more importantly, if it is anachronistic—why should we mind? All sorts of categories used by J. and those he cites are, strictly speaking, anachronistic. And that is no bad thing, insofar as they elucidate the text from our standpoint. In that regard, J.'s Heidegger parallel strikes me as very useful and very interesting (doubly so if, as J. suggests, there might be a reception angle too). Of course, thoughtless anachronism is a vice. Later (257), J. will rightly warn against importing schematic, twentieth-century assumptions about deterministic causation into our readings of ancient historiography (cf. also 217 n. 44). But I wonder whether modern theory might have its own role to play in unpacking the philosophical questions Thucydides poses about what we think of as free will and determinism.

Chapter 5 analyses several key decision-making episodes in the narrative (deliberation before the war, deliberation after Pylos and Sphacteria, deliberation before the Sicilian Expedition). Here, J. offers his first detailed reading of the vexed passages about how the war broke out (160–9; see also 257–63). The chapter concludes (193–4) that in such episodes, Thucydides uses *both* active language (stressing agency) and impersonal language (stressing passivity), much in the way he uses the plain style alongside the abstract style in 3.70–83. That is clearly right. J. then further suggests (194) that Thucydides

tends to use impersonal language 'when probing the deepest causes of major decisions', but that he nonetheless retains an agential perspective because 'it provides the only framework by which it is possible to give a narrative account of *what* happened—and this factual basis must precede any attempt to probe *why* something happened'. This is an important idea, which takes us back to the heart of Collingwood's argument. I shall return to it below.

Chapter 6 develops the argument of Chapter 5 by focusing on the Sicilian Expedition and Alcibiades' role within it. (This is an aspect of Thucydides' work on which J. has written before, in some detail.)[10] Closely engaging with Cornford, J. finds that Thucydides again includes both agential and impersonal elements in his narrative. Given the focus on Alcibiades, J. might have considered the old debates around i) how far Thucydides changed his view on the role of individuals because of Alcibiades and ii) whether Alcibiades (or someone close to him) was in fact one of Thucydides' sources (cf. 207 n. 15).[11] J. then moves onto a comparison between Herodotus and Thucydides, arguing that both see roles for individual agency and super-human forces, which in Herodotus' case are divine. This is an illuminating comparison, although it leaves open tough questions about Thucydides' theological persuasion. The chapter begins to touch on problems of theodicy (especially when discussing Vernant on Herodotus), which seem to me inextricable from any ancient treatment of causation and necessity, and which are undoubtedly posed by several of the passages discussed in Chapter 4 (e.g., Thuc. 5.105.1–3).

Chapter 7 explores in greater detail the idea that necessity in Thucydides is not absolute, but instead leaves some room for human agency. Its argument is, to a large extent, built by introducing an understanding of causation in terms of contest-like interactions (247–57), which J. is keen to present as an emic idea.[12] The chapter proceeds partly by close reading of key passages (e.g., 1.23.6; 3.38.1; 5.25.3; 6.6.1), and partly by further comparison with Homer and Herodotus, whom Thucydides is once again taken to follow. In this chapter, J.'s case is that Thucydides' notion of 'natural necessity'—taken as roughly equivalent to Homeric and Herodotean notions of fate and the divine—allowed some scope for contingency, even though underlying conditions made certain outcomes inevitable. Again, the comparative material is often helpful, and in some cases might go further than J. allows. J. spends some time, for instance, on the role of fate in Calypso's interactions with Odysseus in the *Odyssey* (235–8); what J. might have also mentioned is that *Circe's* interactions with Odysseus, in many ways parallel to Calypso's, place much greater

[10] See Joho (2017) and (2020).

[11] On these questions, see Gribble (1999) 159–64.

[12] Again, I am not persuaded this framework actually is (or needs to be) emic. Here as elsewhere, J.'s desire to avoid anachronism leads him into rather sweeping generalisations about 'Greek thought' (see esp. 248 n. 39).

emphasis on Odysseus' free will, presumably because the story is told from Odysseus' perspective. But that would take us back to something more like the two-perspective picture in Chapter 5 than the limited-necessity picture in Chapter 7. And while there is definitely something to the idea that Thucydidean 'natural necessity' resembles Homeric fate or the Herodotean divine, it clearly differs from them too, since in Thucydides—as J. himself shows—necessity itself tends to derive from human actors' own nature, rather than being something external to them. J. is clearly right that Thucydidean necessity is not completely deterministic, as Ostwald and other have shown. This chapter makes a start at thinking about that question in a more theoretical way. But there is more to be done, I think, in showing exactly how and why Thucydidean necessity is limited, and how far the arguments developed in Chapter 7 cohere with those earlier in the book.

Chapter 8 turns to Pericles. Picking up strands from Chapter 3 and Chapter 6, Pericles emerges as an insightful leader capable of guiding the Athenians to make wise choices, but whose influence is still constrained by necessity, and who recognises as much. J. takes a highly positive view of Thucydides' Pericles and argues for it well. For J., Periclean idealism interacts dialectically with the harsh reality it can partially shape but can never overcome, bringing out 'the tragic strand running through Thucydides' thought' (274–5). Pericles' own speeches, J. shows, use the impersonal style and acknowledge the force of necessity, but at the same time seem committed to the possibility of free choice. The passages and themes J. explores are well-trodden ground, but his close readings discover plenty of new details. In J.'s brief conclusion, Pericles remains in focus, and comes to embody the uneven blend of theoretical pessimism and practical optimism which, drawing on Nietzsche and Burckhardt, J. sees as a characteristic of Thucydides' work (314–15). Pericles is not the only figure with whom J. could have ended, and he has the distinct disadvantage of dying halfway through Book 2. The notoriously unpredictable Alcibiades, still roaming freely when Book 8 breaks off, perhaps poses more difficult questions. But Pericles is a suggestive representative for J.'s argument, and J.'s reading does justice to his complexity.

Two broader thoughts to finish. First, one on the relationship between philosophical and philological reading. Much has been written on the tension between reading Thucydides as history and as literature.[13] One issue J.'s excellent book raises is the further tension—just as prevalent in the scholarship, though perhaps less obvious across disciplinary boundaries—between treating Thucydides literarily and philosophically. J.'s unusually good question forces the two approaches into dialogue; and to a considerable extent, his book is successful in that. It shows how meticulous textual analysis such as J.'s can illuminate quite broad philosophical puzzles about causation, determinism,

[13] Above all Dover (1983).

and free will. Some readers, I suspect, may also want more extensive or systematic engagement with these puzzles, and they may wonder where Thucydides' reflections place him in philosophical, as well as literary, traditions. That might be too much to ask of one book. But one achievement of J.'s book, among many, is that it suggests there might not be any need for compromise between the two approaches.

Second, a thought on Thucydides as a historian. Collingwood, as we saw, thought Thucydides' style betrayed an approach so philosophical that it ceased to be truly historical. That is because, for Collingwood, Thucydides was less interested in the events themselves than the unchanging laws which governed them. Unlike J., Collingwood does not recognise that Thucydides employs different styles at different points. But J. hits on a similar idea to Collingwood in a passage I mentioned earlier, at the end of Chapter 5 (194). There, he suggests that the agential perspective remained valuable for Thucydides because narrating what happened is a prerequisite for explaining why it happened. Both J. and Collingwood suppose, therefore, that being a historian requires you to narrate events on their own terms, *as though they could have happened otherwise*. If true, that insight reveals something quite deep about the historian's craft. It tells us that, insofar as history in the Thucydidean mould involves telling a story about discrete events and explaining them in terms of unchanging processes, such histories will *always* have a compatibilist nature. They will always be part story, part science, and those parts will always present contingency and necessity in different ways. But that insight also suggests something about why Thucydides specifically is so hard to read and understand. This struggle that J. and Collingwood identify permeates his work so deeply that it infuses his language itself.

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