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The Kaleidoscope of Thucydides:

An Analysis of Thucydides as the First Social Scientist through His History of the Peloponnesian War

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Abstract

In this paper, I reevaluate the portrayal of Thucydides as the first social scientist in the context of international relations, through his work on the monumental *History of the Peloponnesian War*. I challenge the traditional interpretation of Thucydides' primary goal, questioning the one-sided analysis that limits him to identifying war causes between Athens and Sparta. I also delve into Thucydides' broader objectives, emphasizing the dangers of simplistic labeling and the need for a diverse understanding of his work. Finally, I argue for a critical, open-minded approach to his history, highlighting the potential for multiple interpretations and the importance of considering the context of international relations during Thucydides' time. This approach helps in understanding the *History of the Peloponnesian War* as more than just a scientific analysis of war, but as a rich text offering various insights into human nature, politics, and society.

Keywords: Thucydides; international relations; Peloponnesian War; political analysis; historical interpretation.

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1. Introduction

Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* was written over two thousand years ago, yet historians, political analysts, and leaders around the world still look at the lessons taught in the text even in the modern world. For example, as the author in [1] suggests, the Trump Administration was reportedly "obsessed" with Thucydides in developing defense strategy for the USA. On a more academic level, a number of researchers such as [2,3,4] in more recent times describe Thucydides' primary goal in writing the *History of the Peloponnesian War* as identification of the true causes of war between Athens and Sparta, and therefore arguing that Thucydides was a possible one of the earliest social scientists of international relations. This analysis of *Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War* (hereafter *History*) sheds light on one aspect of Thucydides and his record of a great war in ancient Greece, the Peloponnesian War. However, I find two crucial problems in this notion and claim that this is a one-sided and misleading analysis of Thucydides' *History*. One problem is its limited understanding of Thucydides' primary goal in writing the *History*, and the other is its analysis of Thucydides as the first social scientist of international relations. This second problem further raises questions of what does social science with respect to international relations mean, and to what context of international relations are we referring.

In this essay, I will evaluate the analysis above regarding Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* by considering these problems and questions. First, I will introduce the historical background of the war and Thucydides' characteristics as a writer of the *History*, and then show relevant arguments about Thucydides' *History* particularly from international relations' perspectives. Secondly, I will examine Thucydides' primary goal in writing his *History of the Peloponnesian War* and give a different point of view as an additional understanding of his primary goal. Finally, I will question the understanding of Thucydides as the first social scientist in international relations by considering the meaning of social science in international relations and the context of international relations regarding Thucydides' *History*. By examining these factors, I will explain why the above analysis is problematic and how dangerous labelling and simplification can be to understand Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. I will emphasize the possibility of diversified understandings of the text and further argue that a critical and open-minded approach to the *History* gives readers a better understanding of the text.

2. Historical Background and Thucydides' Perspective

The Peloponnesian War was fought between Athens and Sparta, former allies that earlier defeated the Persian Empire in 479 B.C., from 431 to 404 B.C. Prior to the war, the mostly independent city-states in ancient Greece were eventually divided into two predominant groupings in Greece, Athens and Sparta, particularly after the end of the Persian War. As the author in [5] analyzes, Sparta established a system of alliances known as the Peloponnesian League, while Athens strengthened its sea power and emerged as an Athenian naval empire subordinating numbers of subject states. The Peloponnesian War broke out against the background of collision between democratic Athens (with a strong navy) and oligarchic Sparta (with a strong army) in 431 B.C., and even though truce was declared in 421, the war began again and lasted until Athens eventually lost its supremacy. Many of the Athenian allies rebelled and Athenian democracy collapsed by the end of the war. In 404 B.C. Athens surrendered to the Peloponnesian League led by Sparta, and thereafter, they never came back as a powerful state in the ancient Greek history.

Thucydides wrote in [6] about the Peloponnesian War until the year 411 B.C. in his book *History of the Peloponnesian War*, describing it as "the greatest disturbance in the history of the Hellenes, affecting also a large part of the non-Hellenic world, and indeed, I might almost say, the whole of mankind". It is an incomplete book because of his death in the middle of the work, however Thucydides' *History* covers not only the era of Peloponnesian war, but also the pre-war era with a detailed description leading up to the final outbreak of the open war, and is still widely appreciated for this effort even now. Thucydides has been identified as an Athenian historian or politician [7], and was known to have attempted to record history of the great war as truthful as possible. He criticizes existing literatures of ancient history, characterized by poets or mythology, which "exaggerated the importance of their themes, or of the prose chroniclers, who are less interested in telling the truth than in catching the attention of their public, whose authorities cannot be checked, and whose subject matter, owing to the passage of time, is mostly lost on the unreliable streams of mythology" [6]. Instead, he claims "to have used only the plainest evidence and to have reached conclusions which are reasonably accurate" [[6]. He describes historical events in chronological order and uses people's narratives to illustrate the history for the purpose of "factual reporting of the events of the war" [6].

3. Literature Review and Diverse Interpretations of Thucydides' Work

Thucydides and his work *History of the Peloponnesian War* has been interpreted in many ways, particularly regarding his purpose of writing and understanding the text. Arguments over the interpretations of the *History* diversify depending on the basis of the perspective, such as historical, philosophical, or political point of views, but here I will focus on the perspective of international relations. A major existing analysis from an international relations' perspective is Thucydides as a realist and his *History* as "a classic of realist analysis" as Crane argues in [8]. Perhaps especially since Thomas Hobbes first translated and analyzed the *History*, Thucydides has been appreciated as a founder of political realism who shed lights on realists' values of international relations such as balance of power, self-interest, and human nature. This is why E. H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, and numerous other scholars who belong to the influential so-called 'realist' school in the study of international politics hold him in such high esteem [5]. Neo-realist Kenneth Waltz also found a shared value with his understanding of international relations in the *History* and argued in [9] that Thucydides' *History* represents an early recognition of "the anarchic character of international politics" which "accounts for the striking sameness of the international life throughout the millennia".

Another trend, which was introduced by Charles Norris Cochrane in 1929 [2], was the genesis of scientific analysis of international relations in Thucydides. It in particular has been heavily discussed since the Cold War period, and the bipolarity model of international relations prompted scholars to seek "propositions about power and conflict that could be made and built upon scientifically" [3]. Simultaneously, attacks on positivism in social sciences and history during the Cold War era encouraged a rethinking of Thucydides among some international relations scholars. For critical thinkers such as Connor, Thucydides is a masterful postmodernist who carefully structures his text to evoke an intended set of responses [10]. Post-Cold War, more international relations scholars started to have broader views toward the *History* and some scholars attempt to apply it to new international relations theories; for example, Richard Ned Lebow argues in [10] "Thucydides is a founding father of Constructivism".

Keeping these backgrounds in mind, I will examine the first problem of the analysis, Thucydides' purpose of the *History*, namely his primary goal of writing *History of the Peloponnesian War*. First, I acknowledge the importance of the line "What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta" [6], and agree with the understanding that Thucydides' purpose to write the *History* was to search for the real cause of the war. 'Fear' is repeatedly mentioned throughout the book as a motive of a nation to go to war and we can clearly see Thucydides' intention to inform this analysis to readers of the *History*. However, this is not the only purpose of Thucydides writing the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, and we cannot avoid the importance of the following statement by Thucydides: "it may well be that my history will seem less easy to read because of the absence in it of a romantic element. It will be enough for me, however, if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future. My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last forever" [6]. This statement shows another Thucydides' motive of writing the *History of the Peloponnesian War*: sending a "useful" message to future generations. Considering this point, Thucydides' primary goal of writing *History of the Peloponnesian War* needs to be understood not only as identifying the real causes of the war.

4. Thucydides' Primary Goals and Multi-Dimensional Analysis

The incompleteness of the *History* makes it difficult to directly interpret this other underlying message, and Thucydides' reticence is also why the understanding of the book has remained so controversial for long time [11]. We already know through his own statements Thucydides' clear analysis of the real causes of the war as one of his messages to any future readers, but, although it is not clearly stated in the book, the *History* contains a lot of factors which divided the destinies of Athens and Sparta before and during the Peloponnesian War, and we can read Thucydides' hidden message of preventing future war in the story as a whole. For example, Chapter 11 in Book 1, "The Spartan Ultimatum and Pericles' Reply to it" describes Pericles' justification of Athens participation in the war by stating that "we shall not start the war, but that we shall resist those who do start it. This is the right reply to make and it is the reply that this city of ours ought to make." [6]. This speech persuaded Athens to refuse the possibility of peace, which was strongly suggested by Spartans, right before the outbreak of the devastating Peloponnesian War. Another peace offer from Sparta in the middle of the war also was refused by Athens. After the success of Athenians at Pylos, an opportunity for peace was ruined because, according to Thucydides, "Athens aimed at winning still more" [6]. We can find these kinds of state decision-making processes and their results in many different situations throughout the *History*, and we can understand them as Thucydides' warnings for the future readers. In short, I believe that Thucydides attempted to send at least two kinds of messages to the future readers of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*; firstly, what caused the Peloponnesian War and what will be the real cause of a war as an empirical message, and secondly how the Peloponnesian War could have been prevented and how war can be prevented in the future, as a normative message.

Now I will look at the second problem of the analysis, a categorization of Thucydides as the first social scientist of international relations. This problem needs two important analyses; what social science in regards to international relations means, and what context of international relations we need to consider here. Regarding the first point, as I mentioned above, Charles Norris Cochrane introduced an understanding of Thucydides as a

scientific analyst of international relations in 1929, claiming that "truth is that Thucydides had the assured faith of a scientist because he was a scientist, because, in fact, he was inspired by contact with a department of positive science which in his day had succeeded in extricating itself from the coils of cosmology". He also stated that unlike Herodotus or Homer, Thucydides does not use religious or imaginative literature and wrote scientific history, so he is the father of political science as well as history [2].

Scientific analyses of international relations were already seen in 1930s, but it began widely being discussed during the 1960s, particularly in the United States in the Cold War era. Ralf Dahrendorf has called this trend "the Applied Enlightenment", that all problems can be resolved, that the way to resolve them is to apply the scientific method assumed to be value free, and to combine empirical investigation, hypothesis formation, and testing, and that to resort to science will yield practical applications that will bring progress [12]. Many main stream theories of international relations such realism and liberalism, neo-realism and neo-liberalism, have adopted this kind of positivist social scientific approach for their analyses and emphasized its principles like value-free, empirical, and generalizing methods for explaining or predicting the world affairs. The authors in [13] argues that this trend of "positivist or 'scientific' approaches still remain crucial, and are indeed dominant in the United States.

Thus, traditional social science of international relations has had the ideal of positivism and aim of objectivity and non-ethical basis. The important point here is whether value-free analysis of international relations as a 'social' science is realistic. This is a kind of question that post-positivist theorists of international relations have asked themselves to develop theories, and among these scholars, a closer relationship between empirical elements of social science and ethics has been widely discussed [14]. Some even argue that "dismissing the impact of values on societies is neither scientific nor objective" [4]. So the validity of an understanding of Thucydides as the first social scientist of international relations depends not only on the content of the *History*, but also on the understanding of social science in this sense. Regarding the content of the *History*, it contains both the scientific and non-scientific elements, such as subjectivity and appeal to ethical values. In the following part, I will take examples from the *History*, parts with more scientific features and parts with more normative features, and then consider the possibility of social science of international relations with values and norms.

As realists or neo-realists often argue, the *History* includes significant factors which are similar in their ideas of international relations, such as significance of states' power, self-interest, and human nature. Also, as Thomas Hobbes describes that "Thucydides is one, who, though he never digresses to read a lecture, moral or political, upon his own text, nor enter into men's hearts further than the acts themselves evidently guide him: is yet accounted the most politic historiographer that ever writ" [15], the pursuit of objectivity was also often considered as a characteristic of the *History*. These elements are certainly seen in the story, for example in the "Melian Debate" [6]. The debate was held between Athenian representatives and the Council of Melians before the Athenians' invasion to Melos, a colony of Sparta. The following Athenian representatives' line shows Athens' belief in the significance of state power and how power becomes a decisive factor of states' behavior: "You know as well as we do that, when these matters are discussed by practical people, the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept" [6]. It also reveals Athens' attitude toward justice and we can observe it explicitly in Athens words to Melians that "you seem to forget that if one follows one's self-interest one wants to be safe, whereas the path

of justice and honor involves one in danger" [6]. In the Athenians' perspective, power and self-interest are prioritized more than ethics such as justice or honor, and it coincides with realists or any other positivists' social scientific analyses of international relations. A natural law of states' relationship is also a key idea in Melian Debate, and Athenians claim that "our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can" [6]. Again, it resembles the principles of scientific approach such as generalization or de facto standard.

On the other hand, we can also find a great amount of elements which contrast with this positivistic, objective and value-freeing standpoint which are usually spotlighted in many analyses of Thucydides' *History*. First of all, even though objectivity was one of the principles Thucydides tried to follow for writing the *History*, as it is shown in his announcement to work on 'reasonably accurate factual reporting of the events of the war', he also implies the possible incompleteness of the attempt by stating as follows: "In this history I have made use of set speeches some of which were delivered just before and others during the war. I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches which I listened to myself and my various informants have experienced the same difficulty; so my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation" [6]. This indicates that there may be some inclusion of subjectivity by his word choice or expressions in the writing despite his intention to avoid them. In fact, although it is not explicitly stated, evaluation of individuals such as Pericles or Cleon, and the description of some events seem to reflect much of Thucydides' own feeling and ideas in the writings. For example, Thucydides analyzes that "so, in what was nominally a democracy, power was really in the hands of the first citizen" and praises Pericles as a great politician with intelligence and integration, comparing him with his successors and criticizing their failure as politicians. Rex Warner also claims that 'just as admires Pericles, so he [Thucydides] dislikes Cleon" and this Thucydides' feeling toward Cleon can be seen in his comments on scenes such as "The debate on Mytilene" or "Sparta's Offer of Peace Refused" [6]. Subjective descriptions of events can be also observed in "Revolution in Corcyra" that he criticizes these incidents using expressions like "savagery" and "evil" things [6]. Moreover, a usage of personal experience in the *History*, such as his suffering from plague even make us doubt his principle of objectivity from the first place [6].

Also, ethics are big themes in Thucydides' *History*. In the "Melian Debate" again for example, Melians assert that the Athenians should not destroy a principle that is "to the general good of all men" and ask Athens for fair play and just dealing [6]. They appreciate justice and refuse Athens' suggestion to give in as an unjust power play. They also believe in fortune and made a decision not to abandon hope, claiming that "we are standing for what is right against what is wrong" [6]. The irony here is that Melians' argument is somewhat similar to Athenian notions during the Periclean period, which has clearly reversed since that time. Before the outbreak of Peloponnesian War, Athenian representatives claimed the importance of justice in their speech by stating that "Those who really deserve praise are the people who, while human enough to enjoy power, nevertheless pay more attention to justice than they are compelled to do by their situation." [6]. Athens' respect of justice is also remarkable in "Pericles' Funeral Speech" [6], although it was completely altered by more realistic and materialistic perspective by the time of Melian Debate. Honor is another factor which was valued by Athens for a long time. Before the war, Athenians considered honor as one of the driving motives of maintaining the Athenian empire as well as security and self-interest, and it was also appreciated by an Athenian politician of much later time, Diodotus. He stated in his debate

that "a wise state, without giving special honors to its best counsellors, will certainly not deprive them of the honor they already enjoy" [6]. By the time of Melian Debate though, Athenians greatly devaluated honor as a thing which often leads states to disastrous consequences and called such an idea "a false sense of honour" [6].

5. Thucydides as a Social Scientist:

Considering what I have written above, the *History* contains both realistic and scientific elements, and idealistic and ethical elements. However, the former perspective has been given more attention in many international relations theorists' analyses of the *History*, particularly with the Melian Debate example. This is because, by the pursuit of an idealistic attitude, Melos ends up being completely destroyed by Athens. Lowell S. Gustafson articulates this point in [3]: "It is often thought that because the Melians are utterly destroyed, Thucydides is saying that their concern for justice in international affairs is shown to be a dangerous chimera and that the Athenians' single-minded concern for power is vindicated. However, it was Athens who lost the Peloponnesian War in the end, and Melian's loss with the idealistic decision-making does not satisfactorily explain superiority of realistic perspective in international relations. Regarding this point, Thucydides only describes people's narratives and does not explicitly express his standpoint. This leaves it open for different interpretations of the text, for example an ethical, political, or diplomatic interpretation.

Considering these three factors, the traditional social science of international relations, the analysis of the *History* in this traditional view, and the contrasting elements in the *History*, an evaluation of Thucydides as the first social scientist of international relations again really depends on the idea of 'social science in international relations'. If it only included the traditional approach such as positivistic, objective, and value-free analysis, Thucydides could not be a social scientist of international relations as his *History* contains too many elements of other sorts of values as examined above, such as subjectivity or ethical values. However, if it was opened up for a wider notion of social science with those additional approaches and values, then 'the first social scientist of international relations' would be one of the possible understandings of Thucydides, especially comparing his principle of writing history with his predecessors such as Homer or Herodotus. In other words, in one context, Thucydides can be considered the first social scientist of international relations, but in another context, he is not. It all depends on the lens from which you view it. So, it is only one of the interpretations of Thucydides and it will not be appropriate to put him in a small category like that and allow us to understand the *History* only within this limited context.

One more point needs to be made clear, which is what does 'international relations' imply when we think about it in the context of Thucydides and the *History*. The ideas of 'international relations' usually trace back to the history of Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the beginning of the international system [3]. The Westphalian system promoted the establishment of sovereign nation-states in Europe which eventually spread all over the world. Terry Nardin claims "the category of 'international relations' is itself historically specific. It best suits the period between the emergence of the European territorial state in the late seventeenth century and the emergence of global institutions in the mid-twentieth" [16]. In history, theorists of international relations have been influenced by earlier thinkers to apply and enhance the meaning of their own theory, like Hobbes did from Thucydides or Keohane did from Waltz. However, any theory or analysis of international relations was constructed against specific historical backgrounds of different eras, so they cannot and should not be applied to the context of different period of history

without being aware of inevitable gaps. Regarding this point, Terry Nardin also argues that "One cannot use a text without wondering whether one has understood it correctly, and to do that one must notice that words change their meaning over time and in translation. One must know not only the text but their contexts as well" [16]. Therefore, it is essential to understand its context if we try to learn something about international relations from Thucydides' *History*, which was written thousands of years ago.

So going back again, in ancient Greece and the period Thucydides lived and wrote the *History*, city-states were the key actors of diplomatic relationships. These city-states were mostly independent with their own laws, but they did not have the modern notion of sovereignty, which characterizes international relations of the period after 1648. Thucydides mentions "Hellenic world and non-Hellenic world... and the whole of mankind" at the beginning of the *History* [6], but the 'world' he lived in was much more limited in expanse than the world now. Also, there were no international institutions such as the United Nations. Even the notion of democracy was quite different back then; for example, even in the speech of Pericles, who respected justice, equality and norms in a greatly, women were almost completely excluded from the idea of equal individuals under the law of democracy [6]. As these factors distinguish the historical context of the *History* from the contemporary world, Thucydides also differentiates the past from his own perspective when "Wars were simply local affairs between neighbours", and security was the chief political principle of governments and nothing beyond immediate local interests occurred [6].

However, there are parts from the *History* which can provide understanding in the contemporary world. Human nature is one thing Thucydides made an assumption to be almost unchangeable even in the future of different circumstances; security, honor, and self-interest are mentioned as motives of states to seek prosperity and in certain situations to start war [6]. These elements of human nature were the leading factors of the tragedy of Athens in the Peloponnesian War and Thucydides concluded that fear of Sparta, which occurred from the threat of an asymmetrical power balance toward Athens, was the real cause of the war.

In narratives in the *History* regarding political decision-making, though, there are examples of wrong judgement because of another kind of human nature: irrationality. An irrational character of human being and nations, such as the pursuit of desire, can make a bad judgement and a wrong decision even on the political stage. Diodotus' speech in the Debate on Mytilene also addresses the irrational attitudes such as haste and anger as "the two greatest obstacles to wise counsel" and explicitly points out the irrational human nature of freedom and power-seeking makes it impossible to control everything by law [6]. This implies there is the possibility of miscalculation in the political sphere led by the irrational character of human nature, and this point can be observed in many cases of contemporary international relations such as regional tensions based on the historical hatred of each other or terrorism driven by desire for the pursuit of ideology. David Bedford describes it in [17] as a contradicting argument with realists' view of states as rational actors and claims that "Recognizing that similar notions of unbounded rationality inform the contemporary thought/practice nexus on international relations, Thucydides' critique is especially instructive to the formulations of an international relations' orientation at variance with Realist dogma".

6. Conclusion and Implications for Modern Understanding

Thucydides wrote the *History of the Peloponnesian War* against the background of ancient Greece, which was certainly different from the context of international relations in the contemporary world, but beyond this difference, there are elements from Thucydides' world which can be reflected in the world we know and help us to understand international relations. "After all, this is a writer who practices self-alienation in his own text," Emily Greenwood asserts in [18], and she introduces John Moles' analysis of the *History* as "a text for any context" [19]. The important attitude toward the *History*, indeed any historical work, is to try to understand the text in its original context first, then try to understand it in a different context. It is impossible to apply the whole of a historical work contemporary international relations, but it is not impossible to gain some knowledge from it, particularly from a text like Thucydides' *History* which was meant to be "last forever".

The analysis of Thucydides' primary goal in writing *History of the Peloponnesian War* and categorization of him as the first social scientist of international relations is a problematic generalization of the text. It indicates a narrow-minded understanding of the *History* which takes only certain factors into account. I raised three main argumentative points to address this evaluation of the analysis: the limited interpretation of Thucydides' primary goal, the analysis of Thucydides as the first social scientist of international relations, and the context of international relations as a whole. The analysis of the first point showed the possibility of an additional understanding of the text regarding Thucydides' purpose of writing the *History*. By identifying the real cause of the war and explicitly stating the text as a universally useful work, Thucydides tried to send messages to future generations, an empirical message of what causes war and a normative message of how to prevent war. The second point looked at the traditional idea of social science of international relations and how much it can be observed in the *History*. We found not only scientific factors but also non-scientific factors such as subjectivity and ethical values, giving us a broader understanding of international relations as a social science. Finally, the third point indicated the essential understanding of the contexts and shared values of international relations in the *History* with the contemporary world. These shared values could even become indispensable sources for the study of international relations.

There are limitations to this analysis of Thucydides' work. Firstly, he never finished writing the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Unfortunately, he passed away before he could finish the work, so we cannot know the true conclusion he would have reached and any further insights he might have passed on to us. In addition, as a work that is over 2,000 years old, and has been translated into multiple languages throughout history, it is impossible to fully analyze all the opinions and arguments that have been created in response to the *History of the Peloponnesian War* throughout human history.

Limitations aside, the three points I have laid out here still show us how inappropriate and problematic the analysis of him purely as a social scientist is because of its narrow-minded and superficial understanding of the text and obscure notion about international relations as a social science, particularly with current and contemporary trends towards international relations as a social science. Moreover, even though the analysis can represent one of the interpretations of the *History*, it still is only a generalization and ultimately dependent on the lens with which Thucydides is viewed. Generalizing the *History* and categorizing Thucydides as a certain kind of theorist or

thinker limits the readers' understanding of the text by unintentionally omitting the other insights to be gained. It is also dangerous to apply everything in a historical text to contemporary world without understanding the different contexts because it can lead to a misunderstanding derived from one's ignorance or even inaccurate analysis. Therefore, it is crucial to approach an historical text like the *History* with an open-minded and balanced perspective, and critically analyze to receive all it has to offer. Thucydides, the social scientist, and Thucydides, the international relations theorist, and Thucydides the ethicist, and whatever other Thucydides there may be would demand this open-mindedness in their quest to create a history that would "last forever."

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