The tragic vision of politics

Ethics, interests and orders

Is it possible to preserve national security through ethical policies? Richard Ned Lebow seeks to show that ethics are actually essential to the national interest. Recapturing the wisdom of classical realism through a close reading of the texts of Thucydides, Clausewitz and Hans Morgenthau, Lebow argues that, unlike many modern realists, classical realists saw close links between domestic and international politics, and between interests and ethics. Lebow uses this analysis to offer a powerful critique of post-Cold-War American foreign policy. He also develops an ontological foundation for ethics and makes the case for an alternate ontology for social science based on Greek tragedy's understanding of life and politics. This is a topical and accessible book, written by a leading scholar in the field.

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To everyone who has defied authority
to maintain *nomos*

To everyone who has defied *nomos*
to promote equality

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Preface

In 1959, in a Western civilization course at the University of Chicago, I read Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* for the first time. I read it a second time in a literature course, and yet again in a philosophy course. Each time, we approached the text with a different set of questions in mind: Thucydides was a wonderful vehicle for making students aware of multivocality. Approaching a rich text from different disciplinary perspectives also encouraged me to reflect back on the several disciplines, and to understand divisions among them as having more institutional than intellectual justification. Scholarship is, or ought to be, holistic, but such an approach, I soon learned, runs counter to the fragmentation and specialization of knowledge within the university.

I read Thucydides at what we now know to have been the highwater mark of the Cold War. My three readings spanned two Berlin crises and Cuba. The parallels between the Cold War and the run-up to the Peloponnesian War were unsettling, and all the more so because of my overly literal reading of I.23.5–6 and its apparent assertion that war was inevitable because of the rise to power of Athens and the fear it inspired in Sparta. In addition to scaring me, Thucydides' history, as I came to understand it more fully, provided a new purchase from which to approach the Cold War. It drew me back from the emotional and short-term perspectives that tend to dominate the untrained mind's response to dramatic contemporary events. It encouraged me to think about hegemonic conflict as a generic phenomenon and to develop a more detached and analytical approach to the Cold War. I emerged with a new set of questions with which to interrogate American and Soviet foreign policy, explore the role of third parties and assess the efficacy and possible consequences of arms races, alliances, deterrence and the emerging emphasis in the Kennedy administration on crisis management and low-intensity warfare.

Thucydides offers readers a double vision. His narrative, speeches and dialogue place readers in the midst of human decisions and actions in political assemblies and battlefields. His text orders and shapes events in a manner that fosters a broad, conceptual understanding of the processes

at work. Readers experience the unresolved tension between agency and structure; the way in which certain outcomes seem preordained but nevertheless depend upon decisions and actions of individuals that appear highly contingent. They also experience the tension between the seeming requirements of security and the values that people are ultimately fighting to preserve. This contradiction becomes painfully apparent in the Melian Dialogue and the parallel Spartan slaughter of Plataeans; both events illustrate how acute conflicts can develop a powerful and self-defeating logic. The reader is not merely told about these developments, but watches them unfold in the mind's eye, and accordingly feels the pain more acutely. Thucydides thus drew me back from contemporary emotional commitments only to involve me in human dramas of ancient provenance. His purpose in doing so, I suspect, was to make me and other readers confront the human consequences of political decisions and the ethical dilemmas to which they give rise.

It was an easy transition from Thucydides to Hans Morgenthau's course on international relations. He shared Thucydides' tragic understanding of politics, reflected in their belief that order was fragile, that human efforts to control, or even, reshape, their physical and social environments were far more uncertain in their consequences than most leaders and intellectuals recognized, and that hubris – in the form of an exaggerated sense of authority and competence – only made matters worse. Morgenthau attempted to frame his theory of international politics within the limits of human understanding and action. He recognized that even something so fundamental to politics as the balance of power was only a general tendency and not a law. It provided a general frame of reference, a starting point for analysis by statesmen and scholars. The same was true of bipolarity. Whether it constrained the superpowers and goaded them into nuclear preemption would depend on the moral qualities of leaders. Like Thucydides, Morgenthau put great emphasis on the determining choices of leaders, and those decisions in turn reflected their vision, character and ethical commitments. His writings aimed not only to help shape their vision, but to make them more aware of the ethical choices they confronted. He never flagged in efforts to use his conceptual skills to help improve the human condition despite his deep pessimism at times about the willingness of leaders and people alike to learn from experience, control their passions and rise above momentary calculations of narrow self-interest.

Morgenthau's commitment was shared by other scholars who influenced my intellectual and personal development, among them, Herman Finer, Karl Deutsch, John Herz and Ivo Duchacek. They were European refugees, and their close-up experiences of war, ethnic cleansing and authoritarian regimes intensified their efforts to understand the causes

of domestic and international conflict and instability and what might be done to alleviate them. They characterized themselves as realists because they rejected as naive and dangerous, far-reaching proposals for transformations of domestic or international orders, but still believed that the world might be made a better place through incremental changes, instituted through consensus by people who had an enlightened sense of self-interest. They were interested in theory, not as an end in itself, but as a means of understanding and responding to the pressing problems of the age. One of theory's goals was to influence policymakers by helping to shape their understanding of the political world.

In the course of the last fifty years the study of international relations, like all the branches of the social sciences, has been deeply affected by the behavioral revolution. One consequence is that the study of theory and policy have increasingly gone their separate ways with, at best, sporadic contact between the communities engaged in each enterprise. International relations theory is ignored by most policymakers, and often considered irrelevant by those few who make the effort to familiarize themselves with the literature. A former national security advisor once confided to me his frustration after reading Kenneth Waltz. Even granting Waltz's claims that bipolar systems were more stable, he observed, such a statement was probabilistic and said nothing about the likely outcome of the one bipolar conflict that interested him: the Cold War. Nor did it offer any policy guidance.

To an even greater degree, theory and policy have both become divorced from ethics. For theoreticians, ethics is a largely extraneous concern, of interest only in so far as ethical commitments influence the calculations of actors whose behavior they are trying to predict or explain. For many policymakers, ethics at best provides a useful rationalization for policies they are committed to for other reasons, and at worst, imposes constraints (most often in the form of laws and regulations) that they lack the power to ignore. Ethical language has largely disappeared from the foreign policy discourse, and people who advocate policies on ethical grounds generally find that their arguments do not resonate within the policy community. Realism, the principal paradigm for both theorists and practitioners, gives priority to interests. Many formulations of realism see ethics as a competing value, and one, moreover, that is only feasible to consider in a society or world made secure by a hard-headed focus on capabilities and interests. The dominance of realism in turn appears to justify the lack of interest in ethics for theorists.

Orientations of this kind are not going to be changed by a single book, no matter how compelling its arguments. I too am a realist, and have far more modest expectations. In the tradition of my intellectual forebears, I would like to stimulate reflection, initially by scholars, about the

relationships between theory and policy and interests and ethics. The latter relationship gets very little attention in the literature, and much of the discussion is premised on the realist assumption that interests and ethics routinely conflict. The "dirty hands debate" examines the circumstances in which it may be acceptable to violate ethical norms for purposes of survival, security or other goals.[1] Thucydides recognized this dilemma, and his Melian Dialogue has remained an unsurpassed statement of the competing claims of justice and security. I nevertheless intend to show that Thucydides believed that justice and security, and interest and ethics, could be reconciled at a more fundamental level; that substantively and instrumentally rational interests could not be constructed outside of the language of justice and the communities it enabled. His understanding was shared by other classical realists – Machiavelli, Clausewitz, Morgenthau – and is particularly pertinent to our time.

Heads of governments, institutions and companies routinely finesse moral dilemmas by convincing themselves that the ethical codes that govern personal behavior do not apply to behavior intended to advance or safeguard the organizations over which they have authority. This logic often goes unchallenged unless the behavior in question rebounds against the interests of stakeholders in the organization or the public at large. I open my book with a short story, "Nixon in Hell," that challenges this morality of convenience in the starkest way. It sets the stage for a more reflective consideration of the question in subsequent chapters that draws on the writings of classical realists, ancient and modern philosophers, and social scientists. This analysis, which makes for the case that justice enables interests, provides the foundation for a critique of post-Cold War American foreign policy.

Modernists, among them Joyce, Pound and Eliot, recognized that no single epoch had a monopoly on experience, understanding or wisdom. Recovery of the past was accordingly essential to human fulfillment. They embraced poetry as the appropriate vehicle for giving voice to events, feelings and language of the past to make them alive to us.[2] By doing so, they not only enriched our understanding of life, but offered vantage points from which to reflect on the present. I want to use the texts of classical realists for much the same purpose. By recapturing the perspectives,

[1] See, for example, Michael Walzer, "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 2 (Winter 1973), pp. 160–80; Christopher Gowens, *Moral Dilemmas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Peter Digesser, "Forgiveness and Politics: Dirty Hands and Imperfect Procedure," *Political Theory*, 26 (October 1998), pp. 700–24.

[2] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 465; James Longenbach, *Modernist Poetics of History: Pound, Eliot, and the Sense of the Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), ch. 10.

emotions and language of Thucydides, Clausewitz and Morgenthau, I hope to enrich our understanding of politics and, more generally, of the post-Cold War world. This task is critical because the conceptual language of modern realism has become so impoverished that it almost precludes asking, let alone answering, some of the most important questions about our interests, the nature of influence and the dangers and opportunities that hegemonic powers confront.

Like the modernists – who here, hark back to Plato – I envisage all forms of expression and inquiry as parts of the broader human project of understanding whose ultimate purpose is to help us lead the good life. Compartmentalization of knowledge obviously has its practical benefits, but it also involves a price that we may not fully appreciate. The metatheme of my book is the need – and benefits – of escaping from parochial perspectives; in this case, by bridging to the humanities and creative arts and using their insights to reflect back upon problems that we consider within the purview of social science. I hope to show that by getting outside of our customary language and related concepts we can develop a new understanding of the nature and sources of cooperation and order, domestic and international.

Chapter 2 provides a more detailed overview of my argument and describes the structure of the book. As the chapter that follows is a short story, I thought it imperative to say something in advance about the nature of my project, why it is appropriate to begin with a work of fiction and how it helps to set up my subsequent inquiry. Let me conclude with a few mundane words about sources and transliteration.

I transliterate the Greek directly into English, not via Latin as was formerly done. So nature is rendered *phusis*, not *physis*. The exception is for the Greek letter 'chi', represented by 'ch' as in *technē*. For most proper names I use the Latin transliteration (e.g., Achilles not Achilleus, Ajax not Aias, Cimon not Kimon), as they are more familiar to the reader. Quotes and references to Homer and Herodotus refer to the book and chapter, and in the case of Thucydides to book, chapter and line. Citations to Plato's dialogues give the section (number) and subsection (letter). This is the standard form in Greek texts and in most English translations. With Aristotle, I also follow the standard numbering procedure. *Politics* 1253a2–3 refers to section 1253, "a" to the subsection, and 2–3 to the lines. Fragments from pre-Socratics, unless otherwise noted, are cited in the form they are given in the "Diels–Krantz" bilingual Greek–German edition, the most comprehensive collection.[3] Fragments are identified by author and number and are followed by the letters A or B. B fragments

[3] Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsakratiker*, 7th ed. (Berlin: Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1956).

are considered by Diels and Krantz to be actual texts and translations. A fragments are paraphrases. Most of the numerous English quotations from Thucydides are from the Richard Crawley translation as reproduced in the *Landmark Thucydides*.[4]

[4] Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Free Press,1996).

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I began this project when I was director of the Mershon Center at Ohio State University. Like salmon swimming upstream, my colleagues and I struggled against powerful University currents to transform Mershon into an open, collegial, anti-hierarchical, collaborative and interdisciplinary enterprise. For a while, we succeeded, and I would like to acknowledge the effort, unflagging spirit and good-will of my still, for the most part, unindicted co-conspirators. They include Richard Herrmann, then associate and now director of the Center, Matthew Keith, assistant director, Oded Shenker (business), Judy Andrews (Chinese Studies), David Hahm (classics), Steve Cecchetti, Eric Fisher and Nori Hashimoto (economics), Dorothy Noyes, Army Shuman and Chris Zacher (English), Alex Stephan (Germanic Languages), Claudio Fogu, Allan Millett and Geoffrey Parker (history), Mary Ellen O'Connell (law), Allan Silverman (philosophy), Tim Frye, Dick Gunter, Clarissa Hayward, Ted Hopf, Bill Liddle, John Mueller, Brian Pollins, Don Sylvan (political science), Marilynn Brewer and Phil Tetlock (psychology), Ed Crenshaw, Richard Hamilton and Craig Jenkins (sociology) and Halina Stephan (Slavic Studies). Visitors and post-doctoral fellows also made a major contribution to the Center, and I would like to express special appreciation for the contribution made

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