

## The Ancient and the Moderns as a new Great Debate, Or Why I.R. Theorists Should Start Reading Leo Strauss

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**Abstract:** This paper brings the philosophic thought of Leo Strauss to bear on disciplinary debates that have taken place within the field of International Relations. Strauss provides clear and explicit reflections on the subject matter of three disciplinary debates in IR, and in each case offers IR theorists a new voice and a heretofore underdeveloped theoretical intervention deserving of consideration. First, I discuss Strauss's interpretations of Thucydides and his relationship to the Realist school of thought. Second, I relate this understanding to Strauss's critique of positivism, the scientific approach to politics, and his analysis of the fact-value distinction, and contrast this analysis to how these questions are addressed in IR. Finally, I discuss Strauss's discovery of the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns, and how this quarrel can inform a theoretical approach and understanding of sovereignty I conclude with suggestions for how Strauss might be read into the discipline, in light of a resurgence of interest around Carl Schmitt, given Strauss's critique and judgement of Schmitt's thought.

### Introduction

The title I have chosen and the topic of this paper require a quick defence, because they beg a number of questions. First and foremost, it is not ultimately clear that International Relations (IR)<sup>1</sup> theory should constitute a strain of political studies separate and independent from the study of Political Theory proper, or that IR Theory approaches the demands of political philosophy as Leo Strauss understood them. Second, Strauss cannot be said to have been concerned with International Relations as a sub-discipline of political science. The most one can assert with confidence is that some subject matter of IR – such as interpretations of canonical texts and attendant questions of might or right – is of a secondary concern to Strauss. Moreover, Strauss states clearly that political *theory* should be properly understood as political *philosophy*: science and the scientific understanding of the relationship between theory and practice are inappropriate for the study of political phenomena (“WLPT” 515-6; *WIPP* 13-14, 28).

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<sup>1</sup> I will follow Martin Hollis and Steve Smith's useful convention of capitalizing IR when referring to it as a discipline of political science, and reserve the phrase “international relations” for discussing its subject matter (1991: 10).

These preliminary issues however do not address the concerns that will arise from the perspective of the IR theorist which may take the following forms. If international relations constitute an identifiable set of phenomena involving the interaction of states and other transnational actors, of what relevance is the work of a scholar whose primary interest concerns interpretive projects in the tradition of political philosophy? Apart from making use of Strauss's interpretation of Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, of what use is he to contemporary debates in IR? That Hans J. Morgenthau thanks Leo Strauss in the second edition of his *Politics Among Nations* for commenting on the new first chapter containing Morgenthau's famous six principles of political realism is surely interesting; but we are then faced with the difficulty that Strauss was reported to have said that he had no more use for a theory of international relations than for a theory of plumbing (Morgenthau 1960; Myers 1997: 262).

Perhaps it is useful to think of *how* IR theorists might engage Strauss's work in order to address the difficulties about *why* we should read him. The most likely scenario for how Strauss can be read into the IR literature is to incorporate his work into the methodological debates that have taken and are taking place in IR. IR has a well established conventional understanding of itself as a series of 'great debates': Idealism and Realism in the 1930's and early 1940's, Realism and Behavioralism in the 1950's and 1960's, and most recently the challenge to positivist assumptions known as postpositivism (Smith 1995: 13-17). Some scholars would like to speak of further theoretical turns such as the post-structural, anti-foundationalist, textual, or methodological turns, and some theorists suggest the discipline of IR is in a state of crisis lacking a foundation after the end of the Cold War (Beier 2005: 57-68; George 1995: 207-9). Nonetheless, there is reason to believe that these many debates can be reduced to two: the distinction between realism and idealism, and a critique of positivism. Positivism's influence has been especially enormous due to its ability to determine what the discipline of IR could talk about, or what "counted" as IR (Smith 1996: 37-38). These fairly recent questions of disciplinarity continue a tradition in IR of methodological introspection, due in part to postwar efforts by academic progenitors of IR – especially scholars in the realist camp – to define a broad scope for the discipline.

During the 1950's a group of IR scholars, including the likes of Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Thompson, actively pursued a research agenda for IR that intended itself to be a new way to study the concept of politics writ large, rather than remain a subfield of Political Science. That is, the study of international relations and the development of a theoretical approach were meant to be the basis of a new study of politics in response to the growing popularity of positivist approaches and value-free social science; IR was meant to develop in opposition to social *science*, rather than exemplify it (Morgenthau 1946: 101-105; cf. Behnegar 2003: 16). This coincided with a general disbelief in the appropriateness of scientific solutions to deal with the dilemmas of politics, especially in light of Morgenthau's critique of science in his *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Morgenthau 1946: 1-10; Guilhot 2008: 295).

This desire for an IR theory was also a symptomatic reaction to the behaviouralism that had evolved in the rest of American political science, and an implicit criticism of it: IR was not meant to be subsumed as a particular subset of Political Science, but rather was intended to stand as an alternative approach to political questions, critical of the positivist-rationalist approach that was becoming the norm. Led by the

example of Morgenthau, postwar IR theory of the sort that would develop into the realist school coalesced around the belief that the social sciences and their positivist-rationalist approach were ultimately utopian because of their desire to study scientifically that which cannot be studied by science: political science deals with “interminable chains of causes and effects” but is “in doubt as to the occurrence not only of the causes but also the effects” (Morgenthau 1946: 129-131). The early peak of this effort to eschew political *science* is Morgenthau’s enumeration of the six principles of political realism that open the 1954 and subsequent editions of *Politics Among Nations*.

### **A Place for Strauss?**

This quick digression into Morgenthau's thought and the founding of the twentieth-century's approach to IR reveals a kinship with how Strauss approached the subject matter of politics. The particulars of Strauss's understanding of political philosophy and his lifelong study of the “theologico-political problem” do not have an apparent common ground with IR's understanding of itself or quest to understand politics through the concept of “interest defined in terms of power” (*LAM* 224; Morgenthau 1960: 4). This said, insofar as Strauss thought it wise to provide separate interpretations of Thucydides and Hobbes that implicitly inform theories of *realpolitik*, and to critique the distinction between facts, values, and value-free social science upon which positivism is built, Strauss's thought addresses the same questions that have concerned IR's disciplinary debates and theoretical turns, providing a preliminary answer for *how* Strauss can be read and integrated into the canon of IR.

David Welch (2003) wryly suggests that international relations theorists should stop reading Thucydides because of their persistent habit to read into his work the theoretical justification for their own political preferences.<sup>2</sup> IR scholars have made *too* good use of Thucydides, so much so that his philosophical intention has been made to disappear from their presentations (Welch 2003: 308-12). When scholars are at last willing to let Thucydides speak for himself, Welch suggests, then it will be appropriate to appeal to his authority in matters of IR and politics. If IR scholars have made use too freely of Thucydides, we might say that they have not made free enough use of Leo Strauss. This should not be surprising: Strauss's work, broad and deep as it is, would not and has not been considered part of the canon of IR (cf. Rengger 2009). What is surprising, however, is the absence of Strauss's work within what is generally understood as the canon of IR, despite the popularity within IR theory of the aforementioned questions – the interpretation of classical realist works, and the application of scientific method to politics – with which he was concerned.

Lest we fall into the trap Welch accuses Thucydides' readers of having fallen into, we must ask first whether Strauss has provided any indication on his own of how his thought can be integrated into the theory of IR. In his remarks on the life and appraisal of the thought of Kurt Riezler, Strauss gives such an indication:

“...it ought to be said that [Riezler's] clear and broad analysis [of the world political situation of 1913] is an excellent model from which students of international

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<sup>2</sup> Welch's article, naturally, inspired the title used here.

relations could learn an important part of their craft. If I had to compile a Reader in International Relations, I would incorporate into it Riezler's analysis.” (*WIPP* 240)

Strauss further sets the example of Riezler apart by saying that Riezler represented “more than anyone else among my acquaintances, the virtue of humanity” suggesting Riezler's humanity was “formed by Goethe more than by any other master” (*WIPP* 234). Riezler himself turns to Goethe to understand the “specific *virtu* of the real statesman” (1946: 378). Preferring Goethe's enumeration of five “powers” which dominate the situation of man (necessity, fortune, *daimon*, love, hope) to Machiavelli's enumeration – despite following “the same tradition” – of only three (necessity, fortune, virtue), Riezler concludes that the specific virtue of the statesman must embrace necessity and fortune on the one hand, and love and hope on the other (1946: 378-9). It is the statesman's embrace, referral to, and constant interplay between both 'fortune and necessity' and 'love and hope' that constitutes the statesman's virtue.

We can conclude that recognition of this inner dialogue, and the reality that even this “real” statesman may not find political success, constitute Riezler's humanity, a humanity which Strauss says reminds him of the “quiet and manly gentleness” of Thucydides which “looks in freedom, but not in indifference, at the opposites whose unity is hidden” (*WIPP* 260). We can further conclude that Strauss's inclusion of Riezler into his hypothetical reader of International Relations is intended to emphasize the importance of this virtue of humanity in the statesman and the political-historian as a matter of study for IR. Thus we should naturally turn our attention to the tradition of realism understood to be inaugurated with Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

### **Strauss and the “Great Debates”**

The twentieth-century variant of realism is often understood to be an extension of a 2400-year tradition of political thought focusing on power, interest, and rationality, claiming Thucydides as its authority and his *History* as its authoritative text (Keohane 1986: 158-9).<sup>3</sup> Broadly speaking, the realist perspective on politics can be summed up in the ideas of the rule of the stronger or *might makes right*, the assumption that the state is *the* key actor in international politics, and that actors engage in a zero-sum quest for power broadly defined. With these very general characteristics of realist approaches in mind, one can appreciate the common association of Thucydides and Hobbes with this tradition, and the innovation of Strauss's interpretation.

Strauss's analysis of Thucydides demonstrates that a sole focus and concentration on material power and compulsion is misguided. Strauss inverts the traditional opinion of what Thucydides considers to be realist and idealist, concluding “there is something

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth mentioning that only recently has the realism of Hans Morgenthau been treated as a 'critical' variant of realism, or that Morgenthau's reputation differs greatly from his written work. For examples of efforts attempting to treat Morgenthau's thought with care see Michael C. Williams, ed., *Realism Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and William Scheuerman. *Morgenthau* (Malden: Polity Press, 2009). Strauss's thought might share common ground with the careful reading of Morgenthau, but does not appear to share much with the description of realism being discussed.

reminding of religion in Athenian imperialism” (CM 229). Nowhere is this clearer than in the Melian dialogue, the episode from Thucydides' *History* most closely associated with the tradition of realism (cf. Lebow 2003: 34-39). As Strauss puts it,

“Today not a few people believe that Thucydides...was in sympathy with the imperialism which went with the Athenian democracy or that he believed in “power politics”; accordingly they hold that Thucydides' comprehensive view is stated by the Athenians in their dialogue with the Melians. This interpretation is indeed rendered possible by Thucydides' reticence, by his failure to pass judgment on that dialogue. Yet the same silence would justify also the opposite interpretation.” (CM 145)

Thucydides tells us that the Melians were Spartan colonists but were neutral in the war, staying inactive until the Athenians started plundering their land in an effort to convince this island colony to submit to their authority (Thucydides V.84). The Melians – attempting to argue from necessity but ultimately relying on justice – recognize that capitulating to Athenian demands means either slavery or death for Melos, and thus respond that the action Athens proposes is unjust: “we have faith that we will not go without our fair share of fortune from the gods, as righteous men who stand in opposition to unjust ones” (V.104). This is the paradigmatic formulation of the opposition to the Athenian belief that compulsion is the only determinant factor of political behaviour; Strauss calls this perspective that the gods will reward the just and punish the unjust the Spartan view, or the peak of the opposition to the Athenian emphasis on necessity and human nature (CM 191). The Athenians respond by exhorting the Melians to only consider matters about the present so as not to cloud their judgement with hopes about unknowable future events, and above all not to indulge the hope of help from either the gods or the Spartans (Thucydides V.105). Hence, the Melian dialogue lets readers see the interchange between what we can call the purified Athenian and Spartan views, because the case for each is being presented in its most extreme manifestation (Orwin 1997: 97).

The sharp confrontation between justice and compulsion that Thucydides indicates with the opening words of the first two speeches he records in his *History* are now recapitulated in the Athenian comment, “those who are superior do whatever they are capable of, and the weak make way” (Thucydides V.89; cf. CM 174).<sup>4</sup> Yet, as Strauss emphasizes, the Melian perspective is characterized precisely by the equivocation of support from the Spartans and the Gods: “what is true of divine help is true of Spartan help” and Thucydides suggests that the gods are as little concerned with justice when dealing with humans as the Spartans are when dealing with foreigners (CM 189-90). The Melians cannot abide by the classical formulation of realist politics because their *idealism* retains a reverence for justice, coming to light in this case as “trust in the favour from the gods, which has preserved Melos up till now” (Thucydides V.112).

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<sup>4</sup> I have preferred Orwin's translation of this pivotal phrase (1997: 98ff.), as opposed to Lattimore's: “possibilities are what superiors impose and the weak acquiesce to” though references to Thucydides have been to Lattimore's edition.

As Strauss reminds, Athenian ambassadors approached Melos in the hope of finding agreement and avoiding war, but “owing to the presence of the Athenian army” the Melians see only the possibility of entering into war or slavery (*CM* 184). It is the failure of the Melians to accord with the expectations of the Athenian thesis and remain hopeful in the face of certain death that is, in this instance, problematic for peace. Simply, the Melian piety, belief in justice, and Spartan protection makes them blind to the necessity of the present circumstance, causing their actions to fall outside of the explanatory capacity of the Athenians' world-view. Of course, the Melian blindness to necessity is attributable to their belief that some things are more important than survival.

The Melian view of the divine does not accord with the Athenian view of the same. Whereas Athenians initially justify their empire asserting that Athens does nothing varying from human behaviour, the current envoys suggest that Athens does nothing varying from the divine way (Thucydides V.105). Both humans and gods are compelled by their natures to rule over others, and so the Athenians, far from being blamed for their actions, claim to deserve praise for godlike behaviour and that others would act in accordance with this divine law if they had the power to do so (*CM* 187). Athenian imperialism once again reminds of religion, but in this instance religion has been reinterpreted to conform to the Athenian thesis of naturally compelled empire.

Buttressed by this reinterpretation of natural and divine right, there is no space in the Athenian thesis as presented to the Melians for the reality that those who believe themselves to be on the side of justice will not submit to those they deem unjust. To submit to Athens is for the Melians to admit that there is no hope left in their situation, and their reluctance to do so indicates Thucydides' judgement on the reliability of the expectation that people or cities will behave in the rational, predictable, ways of the Athenian thesis. By choosing war, the Melians at least retain the hope of remaining a free city, and indulge the hope that the gods will enforce justice in the world.

Rather than demonstrating the fidelity between Thucydides' presentation of the dialogue on Melos and the tradition of realist thought, Strauss's interpretation of this central episode of Thucydides' *History* reveals a twofold critique of realism. First, the inability of the Athenian thesis to consider the compelling power of justice in political relations is on clear display: the fear, honour, and self-interest of the Melians is not enough to thwart their hope for just rewards, even when faced with the reality of assured violent death. Strauss rephrases this problem:

“the question of whether the Melians act nobly by resisting the Athenians has been reduced to the question of whether they act wisely in doing so....Whether they act foolishly or not is now seen to depend entirely on how well grounded is their hope in the divine on the one hand and in the Spartans on the other” (*CM* 187).

The question of whether the Melians are acting reasonably (i.e. realistically) or not is transformed by Strauss into a question of the (enlightened) self-interest of the Melians, or to a question of the wisdom of Melian action. Had the Melians simply had a more informed opinion of the reliability of their Spartan and divine allies, we are left to wonder if they may have reached a different conclusion in their deliberations with the Athenians.

The successful predictive ability of the Athenian thesis now appears to depend on the wisdom and knowledge informing the self-interest of the actors in question. The Athenian thesis as political *theory* has difficulty accounting for self-interest that is misguided or untrue, rendering the Athenian thesis unrealistic or rather idealistic in itself (Ahrens Dorf 1997: 237-8). By offering an explanation that ignores the reality of justice in political relations, the sort of realism typified by the Athenian thesis gets the facts of politics wrong. Strauss therefore reveals that the two 'great debates' – Idealism vs. Realism, and the critique of Positivism – are fundamentally the *same* debate about how to properly approach the study of politics, and how to account for the political action. From the perspective of IR theory, Strauss's innovation is not simply that he has shown justice to be of the central concern of the central episode in Thucydides' *History*, but Strauss speaks directly to how IR as the study of politics between nations or politics writ large should carry out its business.

Strauss provides us with some reason to associate the critique of positivism with the Melian dialogue. In his famous critique of the fact-value distinction in *Natural Right and History* Strauss argues that Weber's scientific method leads him to the following error:

“He did not hesitate to consider the dialogue between the Athenians and Melians in Thucydides' *History* as a sufficient basis for asserting that “in the Hellenic polis of the classical time, a most naked 'Machiavellianism' was regarded as a matter of course in every respect and as wholly unobjectionable from an ethical point of view.” To say nothing of other considerations, he did not pause to wonder how Thucydides himself had conceived of that dialogue.” (*NRH* 58)

That this “most naked Machiavellianism” has been the popular interpretation of the Melian dialogue is not surprising, as Strauss admits in his recognition of Thucydides' reluctance to explicitly judge the exchange. Nonetheless, Strauss identifies Weber's error in his understanding of Thucydides' presentation of the Melian dialogue as following necessarily from the methodology of the social scientist. It is the social scientist's boast that “he does not praise or blame, but understands.” The frame of reference for a social scientist “is more likely than not to be a mere reflection on the way in which his own society understands itself in his time. Accordingly, [the social scientist] will interpret societies other than his own in terms that are wholly alien to those societies” (*NRH* 56). The propensity to “understand” Thucydides' work by standards that are “wholly alien” to Thucydides leads to these misinterpretations and misunderstandings of Thucydides' teaching on the relationship between might and right in politics.

We might push the critique of social science in Strauss's remark a step further, and ask whether or not this critique can be levelled against the Athenian envoys sent to Melos, and whether the fate of the Melians represents an instance of the profoundest failure of this social science methodology? By virtue of judging the actions of the Melians by the standards of the Athenian thesis, the envoys not only interpret Melian responses “in terms that are wholly alien” to the Melians, but also obscure any ability to

understand the Melians' response by assuming that the Athenian thesis is the explanatory principle for all human and divine behaviour. Belief in the objective truth of the Athenian thesis leads to the conclusions that the actions of the Athenians were entirely appropriate and the execution of all the Melian men and enslavement of women and children were necessary (Thucydides V.114-116). The Melians deny the truth of the Athenian threat in their situation “in favor of the beautiful and the sacred;” the underlying difficulty is that this preference for “pleasing delusions and edifying myths” that convince Melos not to submit to Athens makes the actions of the Melians *rational* or *consistent* with the standards of their self-determination (NRH 48). Strauss's analysis suggests that it is not sufficient to consider the tradition of realism and the application of positivist science to politics as critiques of idealism in and of themselves; rather, we must recognize how a critique of idealism must incorporate critiques of the realist and scientific approach to politics if they are to continue the “broadest and deepest analysis of political idealism ever made” (CM 127).

### **Innovation, or Reminder?**

Strauss's reduction of these two apparently separate disciplinary questions of might versus right and the fact-value distinction into a single question about the proper approach to the subject matter of politics is reminiscent of the critique we have already discussed Morgenthau levelling against idealism. Just as Morgenthau is critical of the attempt to apply the methods of the natural sciences to politics and especially international relations, so to does Strauss share the conclusion that belief in this sort of analysis is utopian or idealistic.

The contemporary example *par excellence* of this scientific approach that Strauss and Morgenthau critique is Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*. Waltz wants to import a definition of theory from the natural sciences and economics that understands theory to be the explanation of laws pertaining to certain phenomena, and apply this to the structure of international politics (Waltz 1986: 82-87). For Waltz, the primary fact of politics is the anarchic structure of IR. Waltz focuses on the structure of the international system because he believes it is the enduring constant of international relations: states with every imaginable variation of institutions have all fought wars, meaning the anarchic structure of international politics “accounts for the sameness in the quality of life through millennia” (Waltz 1986: 53-54).

Waltz's unique solution for understanding these issues is his presentation of balance-of-power theory, asserting that this is the most likely candidate for a “distinctively political theory of international politics” (Waltz 1986: 116). The balance of power that ensues from this international anarchy and accounts for the similarity in political experience across millennia is either true, or it is at least a delusion “of long standing” (Waltz 2001: 198). Waltz's theory inquires into the *nature* of international politics, affirms the method of natural science for studying IR, and wants to understand political action in relation to the overarching structure of the anarchic state system. As Waltz puts it:

“States, like people, are insecure in proportion to the extent of their freedom. If freedom is wanted, insecurity must be



accepted...If might does not make right, whether among people or states, then some institution or agency has intervened to lift them out of nature's realm.” (Waltz 1986: 110)

Thus Waltz's approach to political problems is new, but the problems he seeks answers to – especially the tension between freedom and security or obedience – are recognizably permanent ones. Strauss, however, emphasizes the problems inherent in the movement from the “facts” to “laws” of politics, as a political *theory* would be wont to do (*WIPP* 24). This attempt to treat politics scientifically requires the clarification and distinction of political things from nonpolitical things, a clarification that Strauss says cannot be “dealt with scientifically, but only dialectically,” and it is a dialectic which must treat prescientific knowledge most seriously (*WIPP* 25). The dialogue between scientific and prescientific knowledge is absent from Waltz's scheme by design, as prescientific knowledge cannot meet the epistemological demands that Waltz sets for a theory of politics (Waltz 1986: 41-45).

The neorealist approach that Waltz introduces into IR theory suffers from a dependence on an incomplete or overly rational and flawed depiction of human nature, as a result of his reliance on scientific method. (cf. Pangle & Ahrens Dorf 1999: 254-7). For example, Waltz believes that the spread of nuclear weapons can be construed as a great force for peace because of the great deterring and moderating effect they have on political action (Waltz 1990: 734-736). Deterrence works when the threats of the deterring party are deemed credible, with a focus on what *can* be done rather than what *will* be done. The difficulty is that successful deterrence requires effective reasoning on the part of the party that is being deterred. As Strauss's interpretation of Melos has shown, a hope for survival caused the Melians to discount Athenian promises and were undeterred by their threats. Waltz's model of deterrence would need to account for the Melian behaviour, which it cannot. Though Waltz's presentation may be seriously flawed, his efforts to address questions of rationality, human nature, and the realities of political life point towards the same set of questions that Strauss brings to the fore, albeit with much different answers.

Strauss's interpretation of Thucydides pointed us in the direction of these questions, but Strauss also pointed us in the direction of the problematic role the emotion of *hope* plays in politics, and of the broader issue of the relationship between the passions and rationality. It is hope that kept the Melians from acquiescing to the demands of the Athenians and enabled them to resist the compulsion of their immediate situation. For Strauss, these questions are most clearly addressed in his work on Hobbes (who is the progenitor of the image of the warlike natural condition) and Hobbes's explicit attempt to incorporate Galileo's 'resolutive-compositive' method into his political science in order to manage human passions. It is difficult to overstate Hobbes's influence within IR theory, especially the impact that his account of the natural condition has had on the discipline's approach to understanding relations between states. We can provisionally assert that Hobbes's political philosophy is echoed in Waltz's attempts at a political theory of IR, but Hobbes unsurprisingly avoids the shortfalls of Waltz's approach by recognizing the problems of hope, self-interest, and human nature that are dramatized on Melos.

Hobbes *Leviathan* appears in 1651, three years after the treaties underpinning the Peace of Westphalia came into effect in 1648. These are two related political moments.

Daniel Philpott (2000) stresses the transformative nature of the Peace of Westphalia and the new emphasis on state sovereignty, moving away from the Christian authority of the middle ages. Before Westphalia, sovereign statehood and political authority were essentially incompatible; it was not until the treaties of Munster and Osnabruck that states were essentially bequeathed sovereign authority with the Holy Roman Empire no longer posing as a serious rival (Ibid.: 211). Philpott traces the origin of Westphalia and the institution of sovereignty to the Reformation: “were it not for the Reformation, persistently medieval features of Europe...would not have disappeared when they did, to make way for the system of sovereign states” (2000: 214). Strauss speaks of this same coincidence of the origin of state sovereignty and a revolution in religious and political authority in the thought of Hobbes. For Strauss, these two events are not merely coincidental but conscious attempts to grapple with the conflict between political theology and political philosophy, a conflict which is at the heart of Hobbes's thought:

“The two fundamental innovations which are to be attributed to Hobbes, the subordination of law to right and the recognition of the full significance of the idea of sovereignty, are closely connected. *One sees their common origin when one retraces the condition which made possible the problem of sovereignty.*” (PPH 158, my emphasis)

Strauss asserts that the idea of sovereignty “lies at the very root of the whole theory of the State” (PPH 157-158). The “problem of sovereignty” that Strauss refers to arises “only when the right to rule on the part of reason and reasonable people is called into question” (PPH 158). However, because reason is “essentially impotent” it is not enough to assert that reason alone is the “seat of sovereignty,” as philosophy “shows no way to the application of the norms which it establishes or proves” (PPH 108). The “law of nature” regarding who should rule loses its dignity in Hobbes's political philosophy, and is replaced by a “right of nature” that accords with reason but is dictated by passion, or the fear of one's own death (PPH 159).

The fundamental distinction between classical and modern philosophy that Strauss says Hobbes's thought represents is that modern political philosophy takes “right” as its starting point, where classical political philosophy begins with “the law” (PPH 156).<sup>5</sup> The problem of sovereignty follows from the reality that the rational account of who should rule is no longer persuasive. This problem of sovereignty also results from the inability of the natural or divine law to provide a justification for who should rule that

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<sup>5</sup> Strauss admits in the preface to the American edition of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* that it was not Hobbes but Machiavelli who was the originator of modern political philosophy. Strauss attributes this error to the differences in rhetorical clarity between Machiavelli and Hobbes rather than a difference in their clarity of thought (PPH xv-xvi). I have made the conscious, though limiting, choice to focus on Thucydides and Hobbes and their relation to IR theory, at the expense of considering Machiavelli. This was done primarily because of the strong association between Thucydides and Hobbes according to Hobbes's own admission and the assumptions of the traditional approach in IR scholarship. The problem of sovereignty that has grounded approaches in IR also comes to light much more explicitly in Hobbes's political philosophy and in Strauss's interpretation. Finally, Strauss's explication of what Machiavelli's expansive understanding of *arms* means, and how this would affect the tradition of IR theory, requires a much longer treatment than can be done justice at present.

will satisfy or quiet human passions and imagination, especially the vain contemplation that follows from imagining one's superiority over others (cf. *Leviathan* XIII ¶¶5-7, XV ¶21). As Hobbes himself puts it:

“The passion to be reckoned upon is fear, whereof there be two very general objects: one the fear of spirits invisible; the other, the power of those men they shall therein offend. Of these two, though the former be the greater power, yet the fear of the latter is commonly the greater fear.”  
(*Leviathan* XIV ¶31)

The fear of the power of others is only awakened by the “event of battle” or the attempt to “extort a greater value from [one's] contemners” when one feels undervalued by them (*Leviathan* XIII ¶5). As a result, Hobbes's solution to this problem of who should rule must have a pre-rational basis, which he asserts is the fear of violent death. This fear, therefore, replaces the rational and divine account of who should be sovereign: the “impotence of reason” is solved in Hobbes's scheme by the emotional fear of violent death - “pre-rational in its origin, but rational in its effect” - which is the basis of law and the state, as well as “the root of all right and therewith all morality” (*PPH* 17-18). In distinction to the vanity “which dazzles” and the fear of spirits invisible which is made ineffectual by Hobbes's natural science, fear of violent death at the hands of human beings is the passion that enlightens humanity: it persuades us, where reason cannot, that it is in our interest to be kept in awe by a power outside of ourselves (*NRH* 198; *Leviathan* XIII ¶13).

Vanity, as we have discussed, ushers in a war of all against all in the effort to be valued at the rate one sets upon oneself. Fear of violent death, arising when one is confronted with unforeseen mortal danger, is the new violent teacher that “brings man to reason.”

“Vanity is nourished by success. Thus man profits more from ill fortune than from good fortune. Ill fortune prevents him from over-estimating his power and intelligence, awakens fear in him, and fear is a good counsellor.” (*PPH* 111; cf. 22-27)

Strauss traces Hobbes's preference for monarchy to its ability to adequately curtail humanity's vanity and pride, for which the state “has no other *raison d'etre*” (*PPH* 13). Hobbes's theory of sovereignty endorses monarchy because the public displays required for the inflaming of vanity are least powerful under monarchy: public honours and aristocratic pride are exchanged for legal equality and security (*PPH* 111, 120). Strauss attributes this preference to Hobbes's reading of Thucydides' presentation of the *de facto* monarchy of Periclean Athens and the tyranny of Peisistratos (*PPH* 59). These examples lead Hobbes to endorse a political science that grounds sovereign authority on the passions, and reject other theories of sovereignty based on the authority of paternity, tradition, or divine will, as well as sovereignty based on the voluntary delegation of paternal power to a king (*PPH* 66-67).

By grounding his political philosophy on the passions of fear and hope, Hobbes turns political philosophy into a “technique” for transforming defective State into the right State (*PPH* 152). Thus Hobbes's sovereignty signifies a break with antiquity which sought to achieve the good society primarily through “internal policy” or in its famous formulation, “when philosophers become kings, and kings philosophers” (*PPH* 161). As Strauss puts it, this reliance on chance for the coincidence of philosophy and political power for which one “can only wish or pray...will be conquered by systematic philosophy issuing in systematic enlightenment” (*NRH* 200). The Hobbesian sovereign states begin to take on the characteristics of human beings, benefiting from ill fortune, in the constant “state and posture of gladiators,” whose actions are governed by the law of nature and the same right to protect the life of the state as any man can have protecting his own life (*Leviathan* XIII ¶12, XXX ¶30). Just as people benefit and learn from the experience of ill fortune, so to do states: because war is a violent teacher, the primacy of foreign policy ensures the right internal ordering of politics (*PPH* 162).

The anthropomorphizing of the state begins here, and thus Hobbes's theory of IR must also begin with the passion of fear and its moderation of vanity (*PPH* 124). We recall that Waltz says that “states, *like people* are insecure in proportion to the extent of their freedom,” but where Waltz endorsed a rational and scientific approach to politics, Strauss has shown that Hobbes – like Thucydides before him – begins with the passions of fear and hope, but breaks with Thucydides' quiet assertion that fear cannot moderate hopefulness and appeals to fear instead to bolster rational proofs (cf. *History* V.102-104). For Hobbes the “two imaginable helps” that strengthen covenants made are a fear of consequences for breaking one's word, and the hope for glory in keeping it; of these two, fear is preferred because it can persuade and subdue this “hope for glory” or vanity that leads only to the war of all.

What comes through in Strauss's presentation is the deliberateness of Hobbes's choice to reckon on fear when human behaviour is constantly compelled by both hope *and* fear. Strauss also demonstrates that Hobbes's modern political philosophy takes its bearing from the posture of monarchs to each other, or from the primacy of international relations: Hobbes privileges foreign policy because no society can be the good or right society without considering how its relations with other states will affect its internal order (*PPH* 160-163). Hobbesian sovereignty, as an institution for relations between states and within them, is a result of Hobbes *privileging* a political philosophy that takes its bearing from the emotion of fear rather than of hope. Hobbes may say that the law of nations and the law of nature are equivocal, but “natural law will not be effectual if its principles are distrusted by passion” (*NRH* 180). We can put this another way: Hobbesian sovereignty, of a piece with the Westphalian variety of sovereignty, is constructed to account and manage the hope or the imaginary desires of humans. Modern political philosophy in its approach to international relations makes a choice, most visible in Hobbes's thought, to ground its approach and understanding of sovereignty on the assumption that fear is above all the most compelling political force.

### **Reading Strauss Into the Discipline of IR Theory**

Strauss's interpretation of Thucydides reveals the founder of realism to be providing a critique of idealism while demonstrating the idealistic tendencies of within

realism itself. We see that Hobbes begins from the political realities of relations between sovereigns in order to determine the right internal form of his state, but also that he reflects on the problem of sovereignty for the first time as a result of his grounding political philosophy on an understanding of the passions. We can assert with some certainty therefore that IR is the quintessential modern social science, in that it has tried to employ the methods of natural science when explaining social phenomena, and turned to a tradition of historical knowledge for insight and authority. The revered place of Thucydides within IR theory is due to the traditional opinion that the *historian* Thucydides was the only counterpart in IR to the acknowledged theorists in political studies (Wight 1966: 32). As Martin Wight has famously observed, this is especially the case if one considers the study of history in relation to IR to be the equivalent of the study of political theory to the question of the regime (1966: 33). Strauss, however, makes it clear that Thucydides was fundamentally a political philosopher, and that it is Thucydides' thought that above all reveals the connection between the quest for the just or good regime and the order of international society (*CM* 239; cf. *WIPP* 260). As a result of Hobbes's turn to the authority of history – by explicit appeal to “the most politic historiographer that ever writ” or metaphorically in his state of nature – in order to make his understanding of human nature and politics persuasive, IR has been unable to recognize the *break* with tradition that he represents (*PPH* 93-94).<sup>6</sup>

To take the task of integrating Strauss into the theory of IR seriously, one must confront the fact that one of the main questions to occupy so much of Strauss's work is virtually absent from IR's problem set. The quarrel between the ancients and the moderns of which Strauss was so concerned has yet to have a hearing in IR scholarship. Indeed, the trend has been in the opposite direction, with IR theory recognizing an unbroken chain of political thought starting with Thucydides, moving through Machiavelli and Hobbes to the Realist and Neorealist schools of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. But Strauss cautions that any return to the political thought of the ancients in response to a political science made in Hobbes's image must remain “tentative or experimental” and be dialectical in nature if it is not to be a new form of idealism (*CM* 10-11; cf. Tarcov 1983: 7).

Both the Reformation and Hobbes's political philosophy replace the Holy Roman hierarchy with a politics that is infused with liberalism or a newfound prominence for equality (*NRH* 166; cf. Seaman 1999, 232-233). Insofar as there is a system of international relations, it has been unquestionably shaped by this new relationship between politics and religion inaugurated by Hobbes and the Treaties of Westphalia. Were IR to take seriously the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns, any dialectical return to the ancients must take into consideration our modern variant of sovereignty which has been the primary identifying characteristic of modern international relations, deliberately built by Hobbes on a specific picture of human psychology. Strauss demonstrates that the Hobbesian basis for this sovereignty is founded on a specific view of the passions, believing hope in the form of vanity, glory, honour, and the like, can be moderated by a fear of violent death. This contrasts directly with the picture of humanity

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<sup>6</sup> We cannot forget Machiavelli's break with tradition, of course. I have previously alluded to the potential complications of addressing the importance of Strauss's interpretation of Machiavelli to IR theory. An attempt to do so, however, must consider R.B.J. Walker's account of Machiavelli's thought in his *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory*, where he emphasizes the importance of founding new modes and orders in Machiavelli's thought, as it relates to founding the discipline of IR.

Strauss brings to light in his interpretation of the Melian dialogue, where the hope for justice and reward overwhelmed the fear that Athenian threats were meant to evoke.

Insofar as Strauss identifies a difference between the Realism of each philosopher, it can be summarized as follows: Hobbes believes that self-interest reckoning on the fear of violent death is enough to curb the behaviour of individuals and keep them in a state of quiet and peace, moderating their hope for political glory and vain conquests (*PPH* 18-21). By contrast, Thucydides does not believe the human passions of hope, desire for glory, and honour seeking can be calmed and quieted by a fear of violent death. We may go so far as to assert that Thucydides argues, in contrast to Hobbes, that the threat of the most violent death is insufficient to overawe the most irrational hopes in a way that is beneficial for peaceful and stable politics. If, as Strauss asserts, “the real meaning of *la querelle des anciens et des modernes*” is the difference between “a philosophy which believes that it can refute the possibility of revelation – and a philosophy which does not believe that,” we can propose to restate the problem of sovereignty as it has arisen in Strauss's presentation (“RR” 177). Within the context of IR, the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns is between a political philosophy that believes hope can be moderated within politics by reminding humans of their greatest fears, and a philosophy which does not believe that even the most rational fear can overwhelm our irrational hopes.

By incorporating such an approach to understanding the founding of the modern state system, IR theory can recover an appreciation for the philosophical circumstances influencing the political origins of sovereignty. Strauss's interpretations of Thucydides and Hobbes allow us to witness the conscious choice to construct the sovereign state on a specific understanding of the passions. In doing so, Strauss both corrects what has become an orthodox retelling of the history of realism and also provides the basis for a stronger *critical* orientation to this tradition.

The institution of sovereignty easily plays the role of a tradition that has been passed down to successive generations of IR theorists. R.B.J. Walker's *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* offers an explicit attempt to grapple with the problems of sovereignty that are implicit in Strauss's presentations. Walker argues that sovereignty's “logic of inclusion and exclusion” is the foundation of modern politics, and is the source of the divide between IR and political theory (1993: 183). To seek the dissolution of sovereignty, Walker suggests, is to seek the dissolution of the difference between IR and political theory. Strauss's account suggests that this difference is not to be so easily assumed. In distinction to Plato and Aristotle, says Strauss, Thucydides teaches us that the “city is neither self-sufficient nor is it essentially a part of a good or just order comprising all cities...the omnipresence of War puts a much lower ceiling on the highest aspirations of any city toward justice and virtue” (*CM* 239).

There is a doubt, therefore, as to whether classical political philosophy's guiding question of the just and good regime can be separated from the realities of foreign relations. Strauss lets us see that because of the absence of a concern for the debate between the ancients and the moderns and the assumption of an unbroken tradition of IR thought, critical responses to the tradition and theory of IR are built on a dubious foundation. Critical approaches in IR that seek to critique the predominance of realism on the one hand, and the pervasive concept of sovereignty on the other, do so with an understanding of a unified tradition of thought around these ideas. Yet Strauss reveals

that this tradition is not as seamless as is assumed. Moreover, by laying bare the choice that Hobbes made to emphasize fear as the greatest compelling force, Strauss provides IR theory with a clear picture of hope as the greatest compelling force that can form the basis of an alternative or corrective approach to the tradition of IR theory.

### **A Dialogue Within A Dialogue?**

Incorporating Strauss into debates surrounding the theory of sovereignty is not without merit. Currently, one of the most influential reflections on the theory of sovereignty is Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer*. Agamben takes up the debate between Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin on the “state of exception” or “state of emergency,” which begins with Carl Schmitt's definition of sovereign power: “Sovereign is he who decides upon the exception” (1998: 11-12; Schmitt 1985: 5). Agamben, in the opening and closing chapters of this work, identifies his reconceptualization of sovereignty in explicit opposition to Strauss. Agamben argues that Strauss's proposed “restoration of classical political categories” is not possible in the modern era, precisely because of the structure of modern sovereignty (1998: 187). Misunderstanding Strauss's provisional and dialectical return to antiquity encourages Agamben to posit his own distinction that is to be read throughout the history of politics, between what he calls “politically qualified life” and “life as such” or bare life. Where Strauss asserts that a diagnosis of modernity's problems must begin with a return to the founding of modernity and classical political philosophy, Agamben asserts that such a diagnosis can only be brought about with a concern for the distinction between political life and biological life that is at the root of sovereign power. Notwithstanding that Agamben's distinction has recently been shown to be erroneous (Finlayson 2010), this is a clear example of how a most influential critique within IR theory would benefit from a closer and more careful reading of Strauss's work on its own terms.

This is a very specific case of how Strauss's work has and can be engaged within a narrow set of literature. A broader case is found in Heinrich Meier's path-breaking analysis of the hidden dialogue between Strauss and Schmitt between the publications of the 1932 and 1933 editions of Schmitt's *Concept of the Political* (Meier 1995). Agamben, one can assume, incorporates Strauss into his analysis because of Strauss's published critique of Schmitt. By contrast, what has received only recent attention is the hidden dialogue that Schmitt had with Hans Morgenthau. The hidden dialogue between Schmitt and Morgenthau concerns the plagiarism by Schmitt in the 1932 edition of *Concept of the Political* of core arguments from Morgenthau's 1929 dissertation (Scheuerman 2007: 62). As Morgenthau claims in a 1978 autobiographical statement, Schmitt changed the second edition of *Concept* in light of propositions from Morgenthau, “without lifting the veil of anonymity from their author” (Morgenthau 1978: 68). Morgenthau suggested a change to Schmitt's initial conception of politics that does away with the autonomy or separation of the political sphere and defines the political in terms of the degree of the *intensity* of relations at hand, which was adopted by Schmitt in the 1932 edition (Scheuerman 2007: 63). Meier argues that this movement to a model of intensity from a model of *domains* allows Schmitt to consider revolution and civil war, and by implication include one's family and friends, within the friend-foe distinction (Meier 1995: 22-25).

The upshot is that Morgenthau's unspoken inclusion in the 1932 edition of *Concept of the Political* implicates him in the ensuing dialogue between Strauss and Schmitt. That Morgenthau and Strauss go on to exhibit similar concerns throughout their career regarding their critiques of social science and realism/idealism, and that Morgenthau publicly acknowledges in the 1954 edition of *Politics Among Nations* that Strauss commented on the enumeration of the six principles of realism, there is all the more reason to grant Strauss a hearing in IR alongside one of its founding fathers. These are merely sociological reasons for considering Strauss of interest in the lore of IR scholarship. However, when we consider Strauss's insights and interpretations of Thucydides and Hobbes, and his sustained reflection on methodological issues that have been of fundamental concern to IR theory, and above all his reflection on the problem of sovereignty, the case for including Strauss within IR scholarship becomes a hard one to deny.

## Conclusion

IR theory has looked back on the work of Thucydides, upheld as the universal point of departure for realists and non-realists alike, with unflinching modern eyes (cf. Doyle 1997: 49-92). Not only is it the case that IR theorists forget that this hard-headed realist saw a role for natural or divine justice in politics (*SPPP* 100-101), but we must consider the possibility that IR has forgotten the philosophical circumstances of its founding. The thought that, for Thucydides, the role of godly justice in political affairs is a question that must be reckoned with to clear the path for dealing with the question of justice simply is both ignored and impossible to pose in a discipline that either asserts the supremacy of might and self-interest, or critiques this orientation in the name of anti-foundationalism. The explicit application of the method of the natural sciences to international politics made famous by Kenneth Waltz forecloses the sort of dialectical return to antiquity that Strauss advocates. A return is foreclosed in the dominant theoretical approaches because of their progressivist and historicist nature: the history of international conduct and faith in one's ability to predict actions because of a constant international *structure* is no more than a repetition of what Strauss identifies as the fallacy of progressivist science. Such attempts turn intellectual inheritance into a living force, transforming philosophy into a system of thought, or science, recognizing philosophy to be distinct from science ("RR" 143-144).

To state things more clearly in the language of IR theory, despite a growing concern with the question of political theology and the "miracle" of the "state of exception" and "sovereign power" as articulated in the thought of Carl Schmitt, the lack of attention to Strauss's revelation of the quarrel between the ancients and moderns prevents addressing the "theologico-political problem" using Strauss's means, despite concern with this very problem. As the interest in Schmitt's understanding of political theology in relation to sovereign power is in ascendance, political theorists of all types – but IR theorists especially – will benefit from a concern with Strauss's most earnest response to this same question (Meier 2006: xv).

That Thucydides represents a critique and alternative to main theoretical approaches, rather than acting as their forebear, and that international politics need not take place "under and empty sky" are issues that concern for Strauss's thought can



address and make clear in this subdiscipline of political science. Whether posing such questions of IR allows it to remain a subdiscipline or political science, or whether doing so risks it being subsumed under the umbrella of political philosophy may be the price it pays for disciplinary clarity.

### **List of Abbreviations**

*CM* – *The City and Man*

*NRH* – *Natural Right and History*

*PPH* – *Political Philosophy of Hobbes*

“RR” - “Reason and Revelation”

*SPPP* – *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*

*WIPP* – *What is Political Philosophy?*

“WLPT” – “What Can We Learn From Political Theory?”

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