

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Winter 2021

Volume 47 Issue 2

- 223 *Lewis Fallis* The Political Significance of Friendship in Plato's *Lysis*
- 253 *J. A. Colen & Anthony Vecchio* The First Walgreen Lectures by Leo Strauss (1949)
- 355 *Edward J. Erler & Ken Masugi* **An Exchange**
Schaefer contra Political Philosophy
- 375 *David Lewis Schaefer* Unretired: A Reply to "Schaefer contra Political Philosophy"
- 385 *Borys M. Kowalsky & Joseph Phelan* **Review Essay**
Nietzsche and Modernist Art, Part I: The Value of *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Artists of the New Weimar*
- 401 *Kevin J. Burns* **Book Reviews**
"From Reflection and Choice": *The Political Philosophy of the Federalist Papers and the Ratification Debate*, edited by Will R. Jordan
- 407 *Steven Forde* *Thucydides on the Outbreak of War: Character and Contest* by S. N. Jaffe
- 413 *Jerome C. Foss* *Good Things Out of Nazareth: The Uncollected Letters of Flannery O'Connor and Friends*, edited by Benjamin B. Alexander
- 419 *Steven H. Frankel* *Power and Progress: Joseph Ibn Kaspi and the Meaning of History* by Alexander Green
- 425 *Thomas Powers* *Multiculturalism in Canada: Constructing a Model Multi-culture with Multicultural Values* by Hugh Donald Forbes
- 431 *Aaron Zubia* *Taking Comedy Seriously: Stand-Up's Dissident Potential in Mass Culture* by Jennalee Donian

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

- Editor-in-Chief* Timothy W. Burns, Baylor University
- General Editors* Charles E. Butterworth • Timothy W. Burns
- General Editors (Late)* Howard B. White (d. 1974) • Robert Horwitz (d. 1987)
Seth G. Benardete (d. 2001) • Leonard Grey (d. 2009) •
Hilail Gildin (d. 2015)
- Consulting Editors* David Lowenthal • Harvey C. Mansfield • Thomas L.
Pangle • Ellis Sandoz • Kenneth W. Thompson
- Consulting Editors (Late)* Leo Strauss (d. 1973) • Arnaldo Momigliano (d. 1987) •
Michael Oakeshott (d. 1990) • John Hallowell (d. 1992)
• Ernest L. Fortin (d. 2002) • Muhsin Mahdi (d. 2007) •
Joseph Cropsey (d. 2012) • Harry V. Jaffa (d. 2015)
- International Editors* Terence E. Marshall • Heinrich Meier
- Editors* Peter Ahrens Dorf • Wayne Ambler • Marco Andreacchio •
Maurice Auerbach • Robert Bartlett • Fred Baumann • Eric
Buzzetti • Susan Collins • Patrick Coby • Erik Dempsey •
Elizabeth C'de Baca Eastman • Edward J. Erler • Maureen
Feder-Marcus • Robert Goldberg • L. Joseph Hebert •
Pamela K. Jensen • Hannes Kerber • Mark J. Lutz • Daniel
Ian Mark • Ken Masugi • Carol L. McNamara • Will
Morrisey • Amy Nendza • Charles T. Rubin • Leslie G.
Rubin • Thomas Schneider • Susan Meld Shell • Geoffrey
T. Sigalet • Nicholas Starr • Devin Stauffer • Bradford P.
Wilson • Cameron Wybrow • Martin D. Yaffe • Catherine
H. Zuckert • Michael P. Zuckert
- Copy Editor* Les Harris
- Designer* Sarah Teutschel
- Inquiries* ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***
Department of Political Science
Baylor University
1 Bear Place, 97276
Waco, TX 76798
- email* interpretation@baylor.edu

S. N. Jaffe, *Thucydides on the Outbreak of War: Character and Contest*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 248 pp., \$90.00 (hardcover).

STEVEN FORDE

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS (EMERITUS)

Steven.Forde@unt.edu

This book adds to the voluminous literature on Thucydides's view of the origins of the Peloponnesian War. Its primary claim to novelty or distinctiveness is its "characterological" or "political-psychological" approach (45, 119, 197). That is, the "necessities" that Thucydides sees as ultimately making the Peloponnesian War inevitable are not objective but subjective, rooted in the distinctive characters of the cities. Athens and Sparta have different views of what is compulsory. The circumstances at the outbreak of the war brought both sides simultaneously to see going to war as compulsory, driven however by different understandings of what is compulsory (201).

The book pursues the somewhat unusual strategy of drawing exclusively on book 1 of Thucydides's History. This makes sense in that book 1 is obviously the book devoted to the coming and causes of the war, and Jaffe is almost fastidious in not referring to other parts of the History. Jaffe does make good use of book 1, discussing at length all its major parts and episodes, including the Archaeology and the Pentecontaetia, not necessarily in the order Thucydides presents them, but according to an internal logic of the unfolding argument of book 1 as Jaffe sees it. For it is part of his argument that Thucydides crafted book 1 as a more or less self-contained whole, leading the reader meticulously to certain conclusions about its major themes.

The book is therefore organized more thematically than textually. The first chapter is "The Manifest Quarrels"; the second "The Spartan Congress" immediately before the war; the third "The Athenian Logic of the Truest πρόφασις"; the fourth "Sparta's Greatest πρόφασις for War." The last two

give some indication of a key argument of the book. Their titles derive from Thucydides's statement in 1.23 that implicitly separates a "truest reason" for the war, which was least spoken of, from the reasons most spoken of, which reasons ignored or concealed the truest reason.

This truest *πρόφασις*, in Thucydides's telling, is that the growth of Athenian power struck fear in the Spartans and compelled them to go to war. Jaffe argues, reasonably enough, that this is a reason of the type that Athens and not Sparta brings forth for the conflict. This might even be the crux of Jaffe's argument: that the truest *πρόφασις* with all its logical underpinnings encapsulates the Athenian worldview and the Athenian way, whereas the "greatest *πρόφασις*," the one heard most in speech, represents the Spartan way.

The truest *πρόφασις* revolves around necessity understood in terms of security and advantage: cities (and individuals) are compelled to act in whatever way is required for their survival or in whatever way "profits" them. The Spartan greatest *πρόφασις*, in contrast, revolves around justice and piety: these are compulsory in the Spartan view, and of course are rewarded by the gods (21, xx). Different understandings of the advantageous underpin these worldviews. As Jaffe puts it, "The Athenian conception of advantage orbits the twin stars of honor and profit, while the Spartan one orbits those of fear and profit" (73; cf. 94). This may be tying things up a bit too tidily, though, since, as Jaffe shows at length, neither Athens nor Sparta fits so neatly into those boxes. Better to say that "a city's conception of its own advantage is defined by some relative prioritization of fear, honor, and profit" (94), with different cities striking the balance differently.

This perspective has important implications for interpreting Thucydides and the causes of the war. For example, the Athenians are correct to identify "fear, honor, and profit" as the three master compulsions of human nature. But they are incorrect to believe that their prioritizing of these three is the only or the "natural" one. The Spartan version rests on the same foundation and is equally viable. This in turn implies that both are in some sense conventional rather than simply natural. Jaffe explicitly acknowledges this (73, 76, 109), but it does muddy the waters considerably for interpreters. If both cities (and potentially other possible prioritizations of the three compulsions?) have equally "natural" sets of conventions, what do we say of human nature, or even the nature of the three compulsions in themselves? Are we forced to say that both the Athenian and Spartan accounts of the causes of the war are correct? Jaffe does draw the conclusion that both cities are equally compelled to war, but that their compulsions are fundamentally different. To say that a

city is “compelled” to do something means that, given its view of the world, the gods, and the human compulsions—its *character*—it cannot do otherwise. Indeed, “war can become necessary precisely because all of the actors believe it to be so, without any of the necessities being genuine ones” (205). Expansion is a compulsion for the Athenians, and piety is a compulsion for the Spartans. Each city’s view of its advantage comes to sight as “a conception of the good in the quasi-Aristotelian sense, which, like the Aristotelian good, exerts a teleological compulsion or pull” (197; cf. 9). This does not mean that cities always act “in character,” but that it is their strongest tendency to do so.

One possible objection to the way this argument is developed is that it is forced to shoehorn all political configurations into the “fear-honor-profit” mold. It would seem more natural, and tidier, to reserve that for the Athenian way, and add other impulses—piety perhaps, or justice—as independent compulsions that can drive human beings. Or to roam beyond book 1 of the *History* and draw on the “eros” and “hope” of Diodotus. Otherwise, we are forced to make piety simply a manifestation of fear, which Jaffe sometimes seems to do. Of course, some of the “human compulsions” might then not be universal to mankind, which would create problems of its own.

Jaffe sees in the *Archaeology* a Thucydidean prehistory of the two major civic character-types, through an interesting derivation. Noting that piracy was common in ancient times, and that Thucydides even maintains that piracy was not considered a dishonorable profession, Jaffe finds this an ur-type for the bold and daring character that blossomed later in Athens. In his interpretation, the *Archaeology* discloses two types of human being: those who boldly risk their lives for profit—pirates—and those who cower or flee in their presence—the farmers and other populations of archaic Greece who are driven from place to place, never daring to accumulate a surplus or build anything permanent. Jaffe glosses these as “the strong” and “the weak” (144). The strong eventually subjugate the weak, or the weak submit to the strong to gain security and a share of the plunder. This then becomes an archetype for (a certain type of) political community. Jaffe then draws a line from the early pirates to Hellen the son of Deucalion to Minos and even Agamemnon as head of the Greeks that went to Troy (145, 146, 151), though he concedes that Thucydides never calls any of these “pirates” (145). Rather, “the highly compressed logic” of the early chapters of the *Archaeology* implicitly makes the connection. Jaffe’s argument here is indeed ingenious, though readers may find it a bit Procrustean.

In this way, the Archaeology is seen to be a first exploration of what became the Athenian and Spartan psychologies. Both prize profit or advantage, but it is characteristic of the psychology of the weak to prioritize security above additional profit, that of the strong to pursue profit even at a risk to security (151). This in turn leads to divergent worldviews, or even cosmologies. The strong have faith in their power, human power, to master fortune. This mastery for them becomes a compulsion. The weak feel hopelessly vulnerable to capricious fortune or stern gods (67), leading them to see justice and piety as compulsory.

It is possible for cities to err or miscalculate as they act under their characterological constraints. In a very subtle and nuanced reading of the first Spartan Conclave in book 1, Jaffe explores how Thucydides uses the claims and counterclaims of the parties to develop this and other themes. This is the conclave where the Athenians unveil their remarkable thesis on justice and compulsion (Thuc. 1.75–76). The Corinthians begin the conclave, however, by accusing the Spartans of creating the strategic bind that she and her allies are in, though of course Sparta was acting all along “in character.” The Corinthians explicitly cite the Spartan character as the source of their woes, going so far as to assert that not Athens but Sparta herself is guilty (Thuc. 1.69). Thucydides himself voices a similar viewpoint when assessing culpability for Athenian subjugation of her erstwhile allies (1.99; Jaffe, 129). If the Athenian allies and the Spartans are exemplars of the psychology of the weak, prioritizing security above all, they have miscalculated in that their meekness toward Athens has wound up jeopardizing their security. The strong may make parallel errors, by overestimating their power or overextending themselves, for example.

This raises the question whether one of these two views of necessity is more objectively correct than the other, or whether Thucydides favors one over the other on those grounds. Or, to use terms that Jaffe introduces, which quasi-Aristotelian view of the good is more correct or better. Wisely, perhaps, Jaffe declines to make a definitive statement on this issue, though there is a brief review of possible arguments at the end of the book (205ff.). In pursuing this theme, we might consider Thucydides’s “Athenian” statement that Athens’s allies were themselves to blame for their subjection (1.99)—not the only case of Thucydides adopting the Athenian position in his book, as Jaffe points out (166). We might further consider that the Spartans themselves are forced to adopt this position, to suspend their “Spartanness” temporarily, violating their treaty oaths and launching the war in the name of security. We might also argue that the Melians blundered disastrously in not submitting

to clear necessity—not Spartan or Melian “necessity,” but necessity *tout court*. In the other balance, of course, we would need to put Thucydides’s clear concern with the barbarization that threatens as the Athenian policy plays out.

Finally, we have the issue of nature vs. convention in the perspective of Jaffe’s Thucydides. This issue Jaffe does tackle head on, though it results in some subtle shades of gray. He asks whether his Thucydides is a “constructivist,” to which the answer is necessarily “yes and no.” What saves Thucydides’s perspective from being purely constructivist is that there is still a bedrock human nature that both the Spartan and Athenian cultural formations are rooted in (73, 76, 109, 198). This nature confines cultures within a range of possibilities. This view is completely defensible, though it does raise the question noted above, whether in Thucydides’s view one set of conventions is naturally better, more correspondent to reality or more appropriate to humanity.

Seth Jaffe’s book is full of insights, close interpretive readings, and ingenious connections. If some of the connections seem forced to this reviewer, they do not detract from the richness of the whole. It is a book that should draw the attention of the community of Thucydides scholars.