This book consists of an Introduction, four chapters and four Appendices, Endnotes, a Bibliography and an Index.

In the Introduction, S. sets out to restore «the wonder of Thucydides», discusses «theoretical preliminaries», and offers a «short outline». Chapter 1, 'Thucydides' Vision', begins with basic features of Thucydides’ text and ends with Thucydides on his method and the causes of the Peloponnesian War. In Chapter 2, 'The Case for Pericles’, S. explores Thucydides’ portrayal of Pericles on the basis of his three speeches juxtaposed to his account of the plague in Athens; in the same chapter he goes on to show how, in three contrastive individuals, Pericles continues: Cleon and Diodotus; Brasidas and Hermocrates; Nicias and Alcibiades, and concludes with Themistocles. Chapter 3, the main section of the study, explores the use of the term δεινόν chiefly in Athenian tragedy, and the relationship between tragedy and Thucydides. Chapter 4 deals primarily with Thucydides’ relationship to Plato. Appendix I treats key terms in theoretical preliminaries, and offers a short outline of the wonder of Thucydides, Appendix II deals with the pre-tragic history of δεινόν, Appendix III with Wittgenstein’s 'fly-bottle' model, and Appendix IV with Heidegger’s views on «world» and «originary temporality».

This is a highly original and in many ways a productively provocative book. Following in the tradition of, e.g., Cochrane, H.-P. Stahl and Virginia Hunter, S. views Thucydides within a metaphysical framework, here Heracleitean, within which the central component in Thucydides’ vision is that of a man characterized by irreconcilable tensions. As stimulating and provocative as this book in so many instances is, it at the same time raises as many, if not more, questions than it answers. As in so many cases, the devil is in the details. Here I shall concentrate on only a few, those which I consider to be the most important.

The fulcrum of this study is the concept of δεινόν. The principal problem posed by S.’s discussion of this word is the tendency that one size fits all. To give it its full force, S. introduces what appears to be a new word, namely δεινόσφιδα (13). In both lexical and English usage, this word raises questions. Lexically, S. follows Smyth, and avers that «the suffix -σφιδα (sometimes) denotes what ‘may, can, or must be done’. Δεινόσφιδα, then, at first glance, can be translated as ‘dreadable’» (170). But how does ‘dreadable’ work in English? One may, for instance, ask what the difference might be between tearful and tearable, fearful and fearful, sinful and sinable, dreadful and dreadful?

In terms of Greek usage, δεινόν can have, separately, a range of meanings, but also, simultaneously, a double meaning. While the sense of ‘fearful’, ‘terrible’ prevails, ‘clever’ and ‘skilful’ are well attested (LSJ). Instances of the latter are: ἀνδρὶ Ἑλληνὶ δεινὸ τε καὶ οὐσὶ (Hdt. 5.23), and specifically in tragedy: γλῶσσῃ δὲ δεινὸν καὶ οὐσίον (Soph. Phil. 442); λέγουσα δὲ δεινός (Soph., OT 54).

The double meaning can be extremely important. One such instance is one of the most famous passages in Greek tragedy, the Ode to Man, in Sophocles’ Antigone (332–385). It begins with the remarkable words:

πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ καῦδεν ἄν-
θρωπόν δεινόσφιδον πέλει (332–333).
As S. notes, «there is nothing more deinon than man, but what might deinon mean here?» (85). He goes on to explain that «the standard translations of deinon as ‘powerful’, ‘monstrous’, ‘wonderful’, or ‘formidable’ seem inadequate» (86). He cites ‘strange’ (Nussbaum), but in the end favours Heidegger’s idea of «unheimlich», awkwardly translated as «unhomely» or «not-at-home».

«The feature of deinon that Heidegger wishes above all to emphasize is that it is ‘counterturning’ ... . Humans, like sailors, are always venturing towards home while already at home, and the more they are home, the more they are homeless. Heidegger’s translation of the opening of the Ode to Man captures this: Manifold is the unhomely, yet nothing more unhomely looms or stirs (pelen) beyond the human being» (87).

This translation does not do justice to a large part of the Ode. There is, however, also the claim that «deinon should be translated in such a way that the ambiguity of power, instituting as well as undermining civilization is made clear» (Oudmans and Lardinois) (86). That is indeed valid, but what one word in German or English would capture this? Certainly not «unheimlich» and above all not «unhomely» or «not-at-home». Nor does «dreadful».

Almost 75 per cent of the Ode to Man coincides with cleverness and skill (τὸ δείνον καὶ τὸ οοφόν), which would coincide with ξυντός and ξύνεις and φτεροτός γνώμον, as demonstrated most exemplarily, in Thucydides’ view, by Themistocles (1.138.2–3). This τὸ δείνον enables man to master seafaring against the formidable obstacles presented by the sea, to master agriculture, exploit the fruits of nature by hunting and fishing (περιποιαθής ['very thoughtful, very skilful'] ἄνηθ = ξυντός) (37); and, accordingly, man, through his «natural genius [οἰκεία ξύνεις]» has mastered virtually every thing else, including diseases – hence, ξυμπέφρασμα (364). It seems to me that S. seriously misses the point when he maintains, «After all, the chorus will go on to mention the sea, the earth, wild beasts. These are all more powerful than humans and all far more likely to be described as deinon in the canon that is Homer and Hesiod» (86). «In Homer deinon [following Voit] always means ‘terrible or powerful’» [242 n. 3]. It is not, however, a matter of being ‘powerful’, but of using οἰκεία ξύνεις.

According to the last Antistrophe of the Ode, it is only in the social and political spheres that man’s ultra-cleverness (οοφόν τι τὸ μορφόν τέχνας ὑπέρ ἐκλείπον ἐγὼν) ‘brings now to ill, now to good’ – and reveals the other, the ‘fearful’, ‘terrible’ side of man.

In short, «dreadful» / «more dreadful» does not appear to be an adequate translation for τὸ δείνα ... δεινότερον at the beginning if the Ode to Man (332–33). In fact, no one word in English does, and so one will have to resort to the awkward solution of using more than one.

Elsewhere, in discussing the revolution on Corcyra in 427 BC, S. states that «deinon has many meanings in this context» but then extrapolates only two, more or less, the two included in τὸ δείνα at the beginning of the Ode to Man in the Antigone: «it is clever to detect a plot and it does make one formidable» (111). What other meanings are included in ‘many’? S. does not tell us.

S. also makes much of ἐπιείκεια, as compared with the slight attention given to it by Thucydides. While the «standard translations» of the word may be ‘reasonableness’, ‘fairness’, ‘clemency’ or ‘equity’, and one may extrapolate from this that «in an agnostic society, epieikeia is what keeps the society together by
creating countervailing cycles of generosity, of accepting loss», and ἐπιεικεία is «that which harnesses the deinon in order to maintain the polis against the deinon of competition» (111), and the Athenian speakers at Sparta in 432 BC may lay claim to epierekeia, this is all nullified by Pericles’ acknowledgement in 430 that, from a Greek point of view, Athens’ empire is like a ‘tyrannis’ (Thuc. 2.62.2), reaffirmed by Cleon in 428 (3.37.2). If Pericles and the Athenians were to show genuine fairness, or leniency and equity, they would, within the framework of Greek mores, dismantle the empire.

Many more examples can be cited which demonstrate the above, that numerous conclusions do not stand up to detailed scrutiny.

S. uses the term deinon over 400 times in the book, sometimes as an adjective, more often, it seems, as a substantive, but seldom offers a translation. The rendering, «dreadable» will simply not do for all, if indeed for any. Translations are required for the «many meanings» claimed for the word.

There are, clearly, different shades of δεινόν. The sense of «terrible», when the axle of a farmer’s overloaded wagon breaks (Hesiod WD 692) is not the same as the situation in which Electra finds herself (Soph., Elec. 221–22), or the state of democracy in Athens described by Cleon (Thuc. 3.37.3). It would therefore be useful to have a study of all the uses of δεινόν, in its sense of «fearful/» «terrible», and as «clever», and those instances where it is used with both meanings simultaneously, as well as in respect of the different shades within each category.

In his discussion of tragedy, S. shows a great tendency to be eclectic rather than syllogistic. Here too there are numerous instances of broad conclusions which lack detailed argument.

Nor is there always complete consistency. There is, e.g., «the disastrous recall of Alcibiades» (114), which, presumably, can only mean that, had Alcibiades not been recalled, the Sicilian expedition would not have failed. Elsewhere, however, things do not seem to be so certain:

«The Athenians do not know who they are, and because of this they sail off to fight themselves [with Alcibiades one of the generals]. If they had trusted in themselves (i.e., Alcibiades) [but Alcibiades was the real architect of the expedition] or generally behaved more like who they are (i.e., if they had been more aggressive) [but upon arriving in Sicily it was Alcibiades’ less aggressive plan that they adopted], they might at least have avoided annihilation and might well have won» (115).

At the very heart of the book is the thesis that «The Athenians are, like Oedipus, a paradigm of the human, and not just another polis». In short, they are universal, and therefore also stand for us. As a society, or «group» Thucydides describes them, «in three notable instances», as «making themselves deinon». And in all three instances, «they have done so with disastrous consequences» (113). The first of these is the rebuff of the Athenians at Ithome in 462 BC. When the Athenian contingent returned home, the Athenians δεινόν ποιησαμένοι (i.e., ‘were furious’), and acted precipitously, by making a full-blown alliance (symmachia) with Sparta’s old enemy, Argos, and, together with Argos, made an identical alliance with Thessaly (Thuc. 1.102.4). According to S., this began «the cycle that will lead to their eventual downfall», and, presumably, in that sense the precipitous action was ‘disastrous’ (113). Apart from the fact that the Spartan rebuff, one of the most intractable and most enigmatic episodes in the whole of
Thucydides’ History, cannot be dealt with in a single paragraph, it is a stretch to draw a direct link between this ‘consequential’ action on the part of the Athenians and their ultimate defeat. It would seem more cogent to argue that the death of approximately one third of the Attic population from the plague in four years had a direct bearing on the outcome of the war, but neither Thucydides nor modern scholars have drawn such a conclusion. It was of course possible for the Athenians, δεν ουδεμιστα, not to have entered into an alliance with Argos. In other words, δεν ουδεμιστα was not the decisive factor.

In light of the immense weight given to the Athenians, and above all to Pericles, it is regrettable that the book does not reflect the recent study by Wolfgang Will, Thukydides und Perikles. Der Historiker und sein Held (2003), which marks a significant juncture in Thucydidean scholarship.

The essence of this book can be summed up in the claim that Thucydides’ History and Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex are not ‘timeless’, but the details into which they delve perform a temporality that is our own. These works are not ‘timeless’, but ‘time-full’ (119–120). They are, accordingly, as relevant to our time as they were in the days of Sophocles and Thucydides. And of what does this relevance consist? Thucydides and Plato are influenced by tragedy as well as by the travails of Athenian democracy … Indeed, both authors can be aptly described as Heraclitean in characterizing the violence and chaos characteristic of this [their] world (138). In short, we are still in a ‘dreadable’ situation – with, apparently, no way out. «Heraclitus’ aphiorsisms, Attic tragedy, and Thucydides’ History are nothing if not full of riddles» (153).

Looming large behind the entire discussion in this book are the philosophical figures of Hegel, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Heidegger, who receive 5, 8, 5 and 9 entries in the Bibliography – more than any others. They too are full of riddles. We are all trapped in, not only Thucydides’, but also our own, fly-bottles.

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V.A. unternimmt dies in einer ausführlichen Einleitung, insgesamt acht Kapiteln, in denen die ganze Spannweite des Themas entfaltet wird, und einem Epilog, in dem es um die Relation zwischen Mensch und Gott geht. In einer ‘Conclusion‘ widmet sich der Historiker der Frage, wie Macht und Zeit als die Koordinaten politischen Handelns aufeinander wirkten und wie Xenophon die