

Introduction

Restoring the Wonder of Thucydides

In 411 B.C., the city of Chios revolted from the Athenian Empire. In the midst of narrating this revolt, Thucydides states the following:

After this [battle], the Chians [now under siege] no longer came out against [the Athenians], though the Athenians ravaged their land, their land being well stocked and untouched from the time of the Persian wars until now. For, next to the Spartans, I have observed only the Chians being both fortunate and moderate, and to the extent that their polis prospered, to that extent they ordered [their polis] more securely. And even as regards this revolt, [for people] might think they did it contrary to the safer path, but they did not dare to do it until they would be putting themselves in danger with many good allies and observing that, after the disaster in Sicily, not even the Athenians themselves denied any longer that their affairs were entirely and certainly desperate. And if [the Chians] were overthrown by that which is unexpected in human life, they held the opinion that was in error with many others who thought the same things, that the [power] of Athens would be quickly and utterly destroyed.¹

This does not appear to be a very remarkable passage in any sense. Both the facts, such as that the Chians were completely under siege despite their initial strength, and the analysis, namely, that Athens's resilience was surprising, seem fairly simple. There is nothing even within the more limited context of Thucydides's own work that singles this passage out as exceptional: all of the major themes, such as Thucydides's opinion of the Spartan government and the uncanny resilience of the Athenians, are covered elsewhere, and their development in Thucydides is the subject of much scholarly discussion. Indeed, this passage is from part of

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the text of Thucydides judged so unremarkable by critics, so unpolished (no speeches, seemingly unmotivated repetitions), that this entire book (Eight) is generally taken as a draft, as suggesting what the more complete sections of Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War* looked like before revision.

Book Eight may well be a draft; it is certainly unfinished. And it is also true that from our perspective this passage is not remarkable. It is the primary task of this book to demonstrate what is remarkable in this passage, including our acceptance of it as unremarkable.² When Herodotus, Thucydides's great predecessor, who may well have been finishing his text while Thucydides was beginning his,³ gives a long, digression-filled account of the all-important revolt of Miletus, though there is astute commentary on the power of Persia,⁴ the primary events leading up to the revolt are personal and colorful. From Herodotus, we learn that one powerful Greek, Histiaeus, urges the revolt so that he might return home, and the actual leader of the Greeks in Miletus, Aristagoras, is largely motivated to revolt by the fact that he cannot pay the debts he has incurred to the Persians.⁵ Herodotus also tells us that Histiaeus's order to revolt is tattooed onto the scalp of his slave, and Aristagoras's trouble with the Persians is traced to a dispute over the punishment of a ship's captain who has been negligent in his duties.⁶

We cannot now see the oddities of Thucydides's terse treatment of the Chian revolt because the distinctive features of Thucydides's text, rather than those of Herodotus, have been reinscribed all around us. We live in something of a glass prison, a "fly-bottle," to use Wittgenstein's famous image.⁷ Hans Sluga describes Wittgenstein's fly-bottle as follows:

Fly-bottles, we must know, are devices for catching flies. Attracted by a sweet liquid in the bottle, the fly enters into it from an opening at the bottom and when it has stilled its hunger tries to leave by flying upward towards the light. But the bottle is sealed at the top and so all attempts to escape by that route must fail. Since it never occurs to the fly to retrace its path into the bottle, it will eventually perish inside.⁸

Sluga also notes that the image of the fly-bottle refers back to another famous passage, which reads in part, "the decisive step in the conjuring trick has already been made, and precisely the one that seemed innocent."⁹ There are several crucial ways in which Thucydides's *History* is like Wittgenstein's fly-bottle. The first step into the bottle is innocent and is irreversible. Further, the view from within is, in a sense, complete even as it is sharply circumscribed.¹⁰ This leads to the crucial disanalogy: the

Thucydidean fly-bottle is not fatal but is actually life-enhancing, hence its continued success.

Wittgenstein saw his aim in philosophy to show us *out* of fly-bottles, whereas the task of this book is to show that we are in a fly-bottle, to outline its contours, and, most importantly, to analyze how we have arrived within it. The world to which Thucydides introduces us is momentous, and the outline and the exact steps taken into the bottle are significant. It is not the argument of this book that there is anything to be remedied in connection with Thucydides's enriching of our world through, paradoxically, impoverishing it. This is to say that Thucydides can only make certain features of our world stand out as a coherent whole at the expense of forcing other features into the background.

To understand how quickly even the short, supposedly unfinished passage with which we began can fill our horizon, only a little further analysis of it is required. Chios was a polis on the relatively large island of Chios. It was one of only two cities in the Athenian Empire that, at the start of the Peloponnesian War in 431 B.C., contributed ships rather than tribute to Athens. The other city in this category, Mytilene (on the island of Lesbos), revolted in 427 B.C. (also unsuccessfully) after Athens was struck by the Great Plague. The Chians have waited to revolt until after the destruction of Athens's great Sicilian Expedition, when the Athenian Empire is seemingly on the verge of destruction, as indicated in our passage. The Chians not only have their own ships, which means they have both the actual weapons and the naval experience, but also, as Thucydides tells us, they have wealth as a result of the peace they have enjoyed for nine decades. This is a peace that the Athenian Empire played no small part in preserving for the island cities of the Aegean. The Chians, consistent with their general good sense, pursue their revolt by encouraging the revolt of the tributary cities of the empire, thereby demonstrating understanding that the Athenian Empire relies on its navy, which is in turn funded by the very cities of the empire that the navy has kept in submission.

For all their good sense and excellent preparation, the Chians are mistaken about the power of Athens. Everyone else is surprised too, including the Athenians. The misjudgment of Athenian power is one of the primary factors that contribute to the course of the war. For instance, the Spartans seem to believe Athenian power can be quickly squelched when they start the war, the Athenians seem to believe their power is limitless when they invade Sicily, and everyone thinks the Athenians are finished when the expedition is destroyed. Of course, Thucydides does not just say that it is Athenian power that is misjudged, much less state which aspect of

the Athenians is so unexpected. In the passage presented previously, he simply uses a neuter plural that I have translated as “power,” specifically the power to equip naval expeditions capable of both defeating the navies of others and laying siege to cities. Yet this indefinite pronoun could just as well refer to something about the community of Athens, a singularly dynamic democratic empire that confounds both its enemies and itself.

Nor is it explicit in the passage what it means that the Chians were overthrown by that “which is unexpected [*paralogos*] in human life.” Clearly, the resilience of Athens is unexpected, but it is not beyond all reckoning (*logos*); it is not an earthquake occurring at the crucial moment in a battle, for instance. Here too, the reference is to be understood as to other political calculations and arguments made within the work, and, particularly to the argument that Athenian power, through the symbiotic relationship between its navy and its empire, can be unraveled through a vicious cycle, just as it was built by a virtuous one. This is to say that the first Athenian navy, built by the silver at Laurium to fight the Persians, became the means for securing an empire that then supported the navy. After the defeat in Sicily, it appears that Athens does not have the power to put down cities that revolt, and that without these cities’ tribute Athens will have still less power. Yet this whole train of thought, clearly valid to an extent, is proven to be limited by the fate of the Chian revolt. Why is this seemingly irresistible deduction ultimately delusory? We must read our passage, and all the other passages, again, and, in doing this, we are settling in to the fly-bottle.

Perhaps our brief passage about Chios was meant to be expressed in a series of speeches,¹¹ but its import in light of the rest of the text is still rather clear, as is what should be remarkable about this passage. It is a piece of prose narrative, oriented toward a reader, about near-contemporary events, presented in a characteristic, consistent, and magisterial style admitting of no doubt, though boasting of and occasionally intimating critical research,¹² with little role for the divine or any obvious connection with what we could consider morality, and with relatively little showcasing of powerful personalities or remarkable achievements.¹³ The passage does presuppose recognition of some general types and understanding of related ideas, such as those concerning the nature of the Athenian Empire and naval empires more broadly, as well as, of course, a knowledge of events that have gone before, from the Sicilian Expedition to the Persian Wars. Finally, as our brief analysis demonstrated, any thoughtful consideration of this passage is expansive, drawing in new issues, actors, and analogies. Yet for all the penetrating interconnection,

a hierarchical architectonic does *not* emerge. In fact, as we just saw, our passage is about the frustration experienced by those who thought they had deduced what was to be done.

These characteristics of this passage are characteristics of Thucydides's text in general and are some of the features that distinguish the world that Thucydides's work discloses, a world commonly labeled "historical." Historical here means that these are the features that would thereafter become the identifying characteristics of the genre of writing and later the academic discipline known in the West as "history." Thucydides's text does not merely share these features with later works in the genre; it is the *first* work of the genre and the work that is referenced again and again as such. The peculiarities of Thucydides's text have been reduplicated in the discipline that he founded (and beyond); that is, works of history are consistent narratives written in prose, and are products of both critical research and more or less conscious principles concerning the functioning of individuals, groups of individuals, and institutions within a political entity and without.

We live in a world of history that did not exist before Thucydides. Now that this world has been founded, we presume it to have always been there,¹⁴ and thus we can write pre-Thucydidean history and correct Thucydides. But the assumed ubiquity of Thucydides's concerns only emphasizes the degree to which his approach has triumphed everywhere. No one claims that Thucydides owes this triumph to his personal charm or to the charm of his prose style.¹⁵ Somehow it is the structure of the text itself that had and still has such remarkable power.

It is also not possible to attribute the power of the Thucydidean paradigm to an accident of transmission,¹⁶ to say that if we only had the complete work of Hellanicus (a rough contemporary of Thucydides), then we would see how Thucydides's work was just another work in this genre. We know that no one else wrote as Thucydides did and that the features that distinguished his work were noticed by his contemporaries.¹⁷ Of the major fourth century B.C. historians, we know that Xenophon and Theopompus literally continued Thucydides's unfinished work; Ephorus drew from it for his large-scale compilation and that Philistius was "the most determined imitator of Thucydides in antiquity."¹⁸ Toward the end of the century, we have the work of Hieronymus, which is organized by campaigning season, also features the absence of the gods, and pursues deeper causes. For these reasons Simon Hornblower labels Hieronymus "Thucydides's real successor."¹⁹ Given the historical context, this level of attention indicates that Thucydides's work was indeed an "immediate

sensation.”²⁰ By the time Polybius, the so-called faux Thucydides, wrote in the second century B.C., he has been aptly described as a “pro.”²¹

The act of continuing not only presupposes respect for what Thucydides accomplished (as Thucydides largely showed toward Herodotus), but also that there was something that was appropriate to be continued. Herodotus, Thucydides’s predecessor, told the story of a great conflict, a clash of civilizations in which the “right” side won. It is not clear what it would mean to continue Herodotus’s work or even if such continuation would be appropriate. There was, by definition, no precedent as to what one did with a work like that of Herodotus, and it is hard to argue that there was a clear cultural precedent for continuing. The epic poem cycles did in a sense continue one another, and the tragic poets generally retold the great old stories. Lyric poems often intermingled the present with the past,²² but these were self-sufficient works meant to stand alone. Certainly if one were to continue the work of Herodotus, the internecine savage and seemingly pointless war between Athens and Sparta, told with a notable absence of great deeds, would not have been the obvious continuation.²³ But Thucydides did continue and did tell the story that he did and, in so doing, opened up the possibility of telling the other non-Herodotean stories that make up history – for instance, the rise and fall of the Spartan Hegemony as told by Xenophon.²⁴ If Xenophon’s narrative, the *Hellenica*, contains more conventional ideas, including a more explicit role for the divine, and if he eventually moves to more of his own style (including abandoning the summer/winter format), this should not obscure the fact that his departure point is Thucydides and that we are discussing him as he diverges from Thucydides.

Restoring the magnificence of Thucydides’s accomplishment is not just a task for philology. Founding a new way of looking at the world is a philosophical accomplishment because it is grounded in disclosing the truth. Other texts could have the seamless texture of Thucydides’s *History*, and such seamlessness may disclose a world (as a great novel does), but Thucydides’s accomplishment was of an entirely different order, an achievement here labeled “founding a world.” Thucydides touches us even now because, despite his seemingly idiosyncratic oversimplification of the world, he has disclosed truths about us, as humans, that continue to resonate. The tragedy of Oedipus is another very odd and alien work that somehow still speaks to us because of its truth. Granted that it is not obvious what truths Thucydides or tragedy succeeded in presenting, but this is partially a result of a later self-presentation of philosophy, particularly of Plato, the other great Athenian prose stylist, also profoundly

influenced by Heraclitus, tragedy, and the decline of Athens. Plato rejects the Heraclitean grounds that are presupposed by both Athenian tragedy and Thucydides's *History*,²⁵ and much of philosophy has followed Plato both in rejecting this tradition and in claiming that its own relationship with truth is privileged.

Nietzsche is the first author I know of who discusses a profound divide between Plato and Thucydides, claiming that Thucydides could serve as a “cure” for all Platonism, which would be no small feat given that, for Nietzsche, “Platonism” is a rough shorthand for all that had gone awry in Western philosophy.²⁶ Typically, though he is deeply suggestive, Nietzsche does not elaborate on how this cure is to work. Chapter 4 and the two philosophical appendixes of this book will seek to provide this elaboration.

Chapters 1 through 3 address the questions of just *what* Thucydides achieved in the first instance and *how*, questions preliminary to whether his text can work a cure. Somewhat paradoxically, seeing this accomplishment, which is preliminary to a cure, also requires that one is already at least partially cured of what, following Nietzsche (if somewhat unfairly), I too will label Platonism. Specifically, we must read Thucydides without looking for essences, not of human nature, or of states, or of constitutions, and we must similarly eschew distilling his narrative into principles that will find their place in a chain of deductions.²⁷ Such a distillation did not much help the Chians in their revolt from Athens. In so refusing, we must also resist the temptation to treat Thucydides's work as somehow adolescent, as striving to achieve the clarity of a modern work of philosophy or the rigor of a modern work of history.²⁸ Though Thucydides's work founded the world in which these modern disciplines have developed, it is a category mistake to retroject these disciplines' current, likely somewhat transitory, criteria of excellence. Indeed, as will be suggested in what follows, Thucydides may well have been successful in founding a world precisely because he operated in a realm free of the jealous territoriality of the modern academy.

Ultimately, as Thucydides makes clear, his is a work about that which is most important, and it is directed toward those with the patience to see what they did not see before. Nietzsche's more recent gloss is that now we are additionally hobbled by thinking we know all about Thucydides when we have instead imported an alien and hostile perspective into his work. Nietzsche does not just associate this hostile perspective with Socrates and with Plato; he describes it as a “morality-and-ideal swindle,” one characterized by seeing “reason in reality.”²⁹ As a preliminary matter,

it is fairly lucid what this means. For instance, Thucydides is the author of the most harrowing account of the self-dissolution of an ancient polis, namely, of the civil war in Corcyra.³⁰ Already in antiquity this was an influential passage.³¹ Already in antiquity (or sometime not long after) there seems to have been anxiety about its lack of prescriptive content, and so a significant evaluative passage was interpolated in Thucydides's voice.³² Modern scholars have wielded powerful critical tools to derive lessons, reasons, from the snippets of analytical narrative that Thucydides did write. But what if there is no such direct prescription to be had? What if this is like asking what Oedipus could have done to avoid his fate?

Plato's rejection of such a tragic perspective on the polis is manifest, as he deduces the structure of not one but two constitutions from first principles. In his second, the supposedly more practicable polis of the *Laws*, the delicate social norms of mutuality, whose loss Thucydides had chronicled, have been rendered unnecessary, even dangerous.³³ There is no need to rely on such fuzzy contingencies when the polis has been regrounded as, quite literally, mathematically perfect. It will be maintained that, contra Plato, Thucydides is correct to embrace the contingent and not to import reason and morality into his narrative. This is one of the central truths that allowed Thucydides's text to found a world. Of course, this appears to be a very bleak truth. Again, it is Nietzsche who, most famously, insists that it is a truth, when properly understood, that impels us to action, not despair.³⁴ Addressing this well-worn subject is beyond the ambit of this book, except perhaps to add the following point. To the extent that the preservation and cultivation of community require the disclosing, and possibly even the founding, of new worlds, of new ways of being together, then restoring the truth of Thucydides's accomplishment, namely, that he founds a new world through embracing the contingency of community, may be a small step forward.

Theoretical Preliminaries

Wittgenstein's image of the fly-bottle is a powerful tool for explaining what it is that Thucydides's text does and how. Yet, not coincidentally, this image, for all its power, is limited. Wittgenstein deliberately deploys brief images, questions, aphorisms, and even drawings in order quickly to clear up specific philosophical problems and not to conduct a more thorough investigation.³⁵ Hence the introduction of new terms, such as "disclose" as the verb for what Thucydides does for those who enter his fly-bottle, "world" for the space in the fly-bottle in which we find ourselves,

and “found” for when the world that has been disclosed has proven so resilient and expansive that it has comfortably absorbed generation after generation of readers. The argument of this book can thus be restated as answering the following question: *How does Thucydides’s text possess the world-disclosive power required to found a world?*

The notion of a text disclosing a world may suggest that what will be offered is some sort of psychological reading (i.e., here is what Thucydides *does* to his readers). Yet we will not be interested in excavating Thucydides’s mental states, and neither will we be interested in the presumed mental states of his audience, including those of the later historians who continued his work.³⁶ No doubt Thucydides does profitably conflate form and content. For instance, though quite capable of writing a lucid narrative, Thucydides allows his narrative to get confused in its account of a battle that was confused.³⁷ No doubt this isomorphism has an effect on readers, perhaps even an effect that is entirely deliberate, though such an argument is generally difficult to cash out in specific instances because the open-endedness of Thucydides’s text is such that revisionist readings can almost always find traction. Still, Thucydides’s conflation of form and content is central to the *akribeia* (precision) he is aiming for, and scholars influenced by reader response theory are right to claim that Thucydides’s style presupposes an audience of patient hearers and readers. But even granting these claims and an emotional impact on readers, are we any closer to understanding Thucydides’s unique accomplishment? Ion the rhapsode moves his audience, the Hippocratic doctors pursue *akribeia*, Gorgias takes wordplay to new heights (or lows), and the Athenians adore verbal gamesmanship to such a degree that Thucydides’s own Cleon rebukes them. Not one of these ingredients, or even all of them together, can explain the world-founding function of Thucydides’s text, and explaining this power is the task of this book.³⁸ World foundation ain’t in the head. Thucydides’s work represents a meta-physical event in which we all now partake whether we, as individuals, have read Thucydides or not.

What is meant here by “metaphysical”? The new world disclosed by Thucydides’s text is not a physical world.³⁹ Rather, in this context, a world is a boundless sphere of significant engagement. The “world of the theater” captures the sense I am aiming at, but only for someone who lives in that world. If taken backstage, I, as an outsider, would see everything as strange, or at least new, and there would be much that I would not understand and more still that I would not even see at all (say, nuances in the lighting). An actor would not even notice the oddities that

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strike me (say, the flimsiness of the props) and would engage with cues that I would miss; this is just the space in which she lives and works. Most worlds we live in predate us, and we are initiated into them seamlessly – in most cases we are not even aware of being there (e.g., one does not remember that one lives in the “world of the driver” until one has to teach someone else). Every once in a while, we actively and consciously engage in joining a world – say, when we learn how to drive. A world, which was always there, is then dis-closed to us; that is, a series of connections and meanings that were always there but hidden to us are suddenly opened up. Very rarely, we are drawn into disclosing a new world; new political movements or technological innovations are helpful paradigms of this phenomenon. To take a somewhat limited example, I grew up using a typewriter but am now so absorbed in the world of the personal computer that I cannot even imagine writing a letter, much less a book, without a computer. Indeed, the personal computer has changed the way I think, and I could not function the same way without it. Once one is in a world, the world appears to have always already been there.⁴⁰

Related to the notion of “world,” in what follows “language” will generally be replaced by “logos.” Logos expresses a great deal more than language. Logos reveals, first, that we are the creatures who *argue*, though not necessarily logically. Second, even more importantly, logos relates to the *ordering* in which we live. The rhythm of the chorus or the reckoning of a monetary account, for instance, may not fall within language, but they are within logos, as they are part of the ordering that creates significance within our world.⁴¹ Throughout this book I will be careful not to claim that ancient writers naively conflated distinct concepts. The Greeks thought about logos, about ordering the world, not language, and their supposedly naive conflation may instead reflect a profound insight into the connectedness of notions that we moderns have torn asunder. Specifically, logos, especially as used by Heraclitus and implicitly used by Thucydides, may refer to a notion of world-ordering that we moderns have difficulty seeing, particularly as we cling to logos as language, where language has simple referential propositions as its paradigm. It is indeed hard to understand how a series of referential propositions could disclose a world. If our paradigm for logos were instead a play of Sophocles, then the world-disclosive power of logos is easier to grasp.

A work, author, or invention is *foundational* if it discloses a world that is epochal; one might think here of the works of Newton or of Freud. There are important family resemblances between disclosing the world of driving and the world of gravity; they are spheres of significance into