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# 'How Warped the Mirrors'

## Postmodernism and Historiography

Ryan Scott Olson

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27 JAN 2003

Submitted for the Master of Arts degree

University of Durham

Department of Theology

2002

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How warped the mirrors where our worlds are made...

W. H. Auden, 'In Sickness and In Health', 1940

The illusions of science and the fashions of the academic tend to transform the young historian into a grey, lean ferret gnawing at the minute fact or figure. He dwells in footnotes and writes monographs in as illiterate a style as possible to demonstrate the scientific bias of his craft.

George Steiner, 'The Retreat from the Word', 1966

Historical sense and poetic sense should not, in the end, be contradictory, for if poetry is the little myth we make, history is the big myth we live, and in our living, constantly remake.

Robert Penn Warren, *Brother to Dragons*, 1953

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## Abstract

Ryan S Olson

'How Warped the Mirrors': Postmodernism and Historiography  
Master of Arts Thesis 2002

Postmodernism, though it may be described in many ways, may be thought essentially to be captured by Lyotard's phrase, 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. The first chapter of my thesis attempts to define both 'postmodernism' and 'historiography', and then surveys historiographical discourse today. Because it is often ancient history that most frequently may be open to radically differing interpretations, I take in chapter two a 'generative' example, namely the speech compositions of Thucydides. This example I consider as 'generative' in the sense that it opens up questions, not only about the *History* of Thucydides itself and about how Thucydides is conceived in the ancient historiographical tradition, but also about what it means for an historian to disclose the 'truth' of an historical situation. My third chapter takes up the suggestion by Keith Jenkins that postmodern philosophy, particularly the conception of 'truth' and 'knowledge' proffered by Rorty, is a good way for history to acclimatise itself in the postmodern era. I survey Jenkins' proposals, and then discuss a work Jenkins largely ignores, i.e. Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. I demonstrate not just the familiar point that Rorty attempts to overturn 'foundationalist epistemology', and proposes 'new vocabularies' that involve 'hermeneutics' which set up discourse as 'conversation'. This overturning involves for Rorty an assertion of 'unarbitrability', i.e. that it is impossible to argue that one view is better or more true than another. Thus Jenkins wishes to enter a world of a plurality of interpretations. In chapter four, however, I draw upon the work of Charles Taylor who argues for the necessity of 'arbitrage' in human discourse, whilst still wishing to overturn epistemological foundationalism. I therefore wish to advocate in my fifth chapter a 'third way', drawing on Taylor's theory of interpretation that requires neither a correspondence theory of truth, nor unarbitrability. Throughout the chapter I demonstrate how my conclusions regarding Thucydidean speeches and my discussion of postmodern philosophy may serve as a way of thinking about the task of historians, and not just ancient historians. I conclude with some theological reflections on the arguments offered.

To my grandfather

George Olson

## Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank his supervisors, Canon Professor David Brown FBA and Professor Ann Loades CBE, for their very able supervision; in particular, Prof Loades for energetically picking up the work at Easter Term when Prof Brown went on sabbatical, and Prof Brown for taking him on late, patiently allowing him to work out the arguments as new vistas appeared, and for many kindnesses. In addition to his dear friend Prof James Houston of Vancouver and the many other friends who deserve mention, he should like to thank the community of Durham Cathedral, particularly its residentiary canons with whom he enjoyed so many services that have given such rich texture to his time in Durham. He is thankful beyond expression to his whole family, and especially to his parents for their indefatigable support in so many ways; and also to his Grandpa and Grandma Olson for their support; it is to this grandfather, a decorated veteran of the Second World War, that his thesis is dedicated.

*Pentecost 2002/  
All Souls' Day 2002*

# 'How Warped the Mirrors'

Postmodernism and Historiography

1  
The Fair

The idiot goes round and around  
With his brother in a bumping-car  
At the fair. The famous idiot  
Smile hangs over the car's edge,  
Illuminating nothing ...<sup>1</sup>

THIS thesis does not seek to lay out a prescriptive historiography, that is to say a particular method of doing history, whereby applying its principles an historian might favourably respond to the so-called 'postmodern condition', a situation, at least in the fields of history and theology, that has (or should have, perhaps) members of the guilds walking round on methodological eggshells. Rather, I work conceptually further away from that specificity of application with the assumption that history writing is a task that draws on particular theoretical understandings. Those understandings are what are so contested today among philosophers, theoreticians, and historians. The 'incredulity toward metanarratives', as Lyotard so famously has said in that characterisation of postmodernism often invoked by those attempting to summarise this sprawling discourse, is just such a critique levelled at an understanding of human knowledge. History writing, or more accurately, historiographical discourse, has been largely consumed with the question of the extent to which an 'objective' account can be given of a particular period of time, a group, a biography, and so on. The move by (often self-proclaimed) postmodern historians (or theoreticians) to repudiate objective knowledge has met with vehement opposition. This is, I suggest, because the very existence of 'history' is on the line—that is to say that such 'hard historians' reason that if objective facts are turned out onto the street, as they have been in so many disciplines, they too will be left without an home. But the concern goes beyond this personal interestedness, which is also to say that it goes beyond the survival of history as a particular, valid mode of discourse: if all

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<sup>1</sup> R. S. Thomas, 'The Fair', in *Collected Poems 1945-1990* (London: Phoenix, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2000).

history is open to 'interpretation' so that no account can measure up to things as they 'really were', and no such idea of 'correspondence' is valid to any extent, we might even question whether an event happened at all. This is to point up the danger not only of the loss of history as a discipline, but now to history, as in an event-in-the-past. Lest this be thought an extreme representation of the problematic potentialities involved, we can note that this is precisely the state of discussion in studies of the Holocaust of the Jews at the hands of the Nazis in the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> The problem, of course, is illustrated well by the statement that looms largely not only on the wall but also, somehow, in the air of the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, D. C.: 'Never Again'. The point of the elaborate, three-story historical display in that building is that if members of the public among the national and international 'communities' are so impressed with the absolutely (and I use this word intentionally) horrific events that took place in Germany from the late 1930s until 1945, no one will ever stand idly by and allow such destruction and desecration of human life to happen again.

The fear, then, is that an approach to history that would allow the argument that such a thing never actually happened (which is, of course, an extreme case of the argument) necessitates *relativism*, and that relativism puts us on the slippery ethical slope. It should be very clear from this gravely serious example that this thesis is not concerned with inane irrelevant philosophical questions (one wonders whether this formulation of the relevance of philosophical discussion could any longer be tenable after the twentieth century), but with questions the answers to which ought to be treated and applied with the utmost seriousness. I do not take the issue of historiography lightly.

The aforementioned fear (of relativism) is one that ought, then, to be taken very seriously. It is not simply a matter, as some theoreticians may have us think, of historians simplistically 'defending their turf', though this may be the case occasionally. The issue turns out to be rather thorny, however, because the 'natural' defensive move against relativism is often a deeper entrenchment in the foundationalist epistemology identified with the empirical sciences, a move sharply criticised, and rightly so in my view, by

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of this, M. Shermer and A. Grobman, *Denying History: who says the Holocaust never happened and why do they say it?* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2000).

postmodernists, as those which indeed to some extent led to the atrocities perpetrated by ideologically-driven regimes who, when triumphalistically combining their views with political power, produced disgustingly destructive consequences. This thesis does not directly examine these ethical issues; I frame the discussion this way to highlight what is at stake, and I do not think I can be accused of over-dramatisation.

The question that animates this thesis, then, is whether this construal of the situation as a choice between objective, scientific historiography and absolute relativism, which I will eventually call 'unarbitrability', is a good one. In the first chapter, we will survey the current discourse of historiography, discussing it under three ideas, ubiquity, contingency, and nature, after first briefly describing working ideas of postmodernism and historiography themselves. In reply to the charges of many (influential) historians that theoretical work is purely mischievous, or at least a distraction from the 'real task' of doing history, I will conduct an historical discussion myself, which, far from being merely an example, serves as a formative analysis that ought to generate further questions about how we conceive the task of the historian. This will be focussed upon the speech composition of the fifth-century BCE Greek historian Thucydides, by which I will ultimately raise the question as to the extent to which the traditional consideration of Thucydides as an aberrant (scientific) historian in the ancient historical tradition is any longer a helpful one. Indeed, the very means by which this has been argued has been on the grounds that Thucydides drew on developing ideas of medicine to treat his subject matter as a doctor might train another doctor: that is, he writes his *History* in such an objective way that his readers might be able to recognise and predict the same patterns that will occur again so as to avoid whatever disease he sees embodied in the Peloponnesian War. This points to the famous cyclical view of history 'the Greeks' supposedly held. I posit that Thucydides did not have such an untortured view and that his reticence about deciding the matter centred on his own ambiguous views of human nature, especially as it works itself out in the context of democracy. I seriously question whether Thucydides has in his speeches given us 'what was really said' (or had any interest to do), but lest it be thought that by such argumentation I am attempting to condemn Thucydides or to imply that his work is less important or 'useful' than it

might have been supposed formerly, I must hasten to add that I will question whether giving the 'straight record' is truly better than having 'composed' the speeches himself, a bias that is still a strong one among historians.

Does this not leave us, then, with 'unarbitrability', with relativistic description that can be nothing more than a so-called subjectivist perspective, a label that is often intended to be a pejorative, slanderous accusation? Thus in chapter three I situate this question within the proposal of Keith Jenkins, a somewhat prolific English thinker about postmodern historiography today, that we take Richard Rorty's formulation of human knowledge as 'hermeneutical' over against 'epistemological', one highly regarded among 'postmodernists', as the most helpful one to understand the philosophical background upon which historians do their work. Jenkins has apparently seen the issues as warranting his time and attention enough to engage in the historiographical discourse in numerous books and, more frequently, in journals, especially *Rethinking History*. His method has been that of summary and appropriation, as opposed to laying out his own novel methodologies. It is thus very clear to his readers in which direction he desires to see historians take their enquiries, and especially, behind whom their task should be carried out. The book that will occupy the lion's share of our time and attention here quite fully discloses his programme: *On 'What is History?': from Elton and Carr to Rorty and White*. This programme he makes very explicit:

In today's climate, then, for history to be credible it must therefore partake of the postmodern; it must fit into the sort of intellectual debates Rorty exemplifies, the point being, of course, that if Carr and Elton do not fit into these then White very clearly does.<sup>3</sup>

Against this suggestion of Rortian hermeneutical theory, in the fourth chapter I discuss a view of hermeneutical understanding characteristic of Charles Taylor's conception of interpretation in the human (social) sciences, arguing that we ought to see arbitrability as an indispensable feature of human discourse. By so spelling out the argument, I explicitly engage historiography and a particular argument characteristic of much of postmodern discourse, one that is implicit in the argument of chapter two.

The point toward which I drive, then, in my fifth chapter, is not to suggest a method by which to do history in a postmodern context, which would defeat my very argument, but to suggest (perhaps quite singly, though

not unimportantly) that there is a 'third way'; that we are not forced, as Rorty, Jenkins, and many 'postmodernists' would have us think, to choose between objectivity and 'relativity', but there are ways ahead (my argument represents one) beyond the endless redescription, redefinition, and unarbitrariness, all characteristic of Rorty, that do not necessitate the resumption of problematic foundations of knowledge, foundationalist epistemology, triumphalism, and so on.

With my own historical formative example, the value structure of science or 'nothing', relativity or 'nothing', is wiped out so that we must seriously consider that Thucydides has given us something much more valuable than the 'straight record'. This is a point that is supported by the deconstructive work of postmodernism, but one that must carefully be worked out, in my view, with a reconstructive argument, the conclusion to which I bring the thesis.

In the fifth chapter I also briefly present three theological reflections on my argument, the first that ought to be seen more as an underpinning of the argument. With this sketch of the argument in view, let us turn to the question of postmodernism and historiography.

### Postmodernism and history

An obvious question with which to begin would be the relationship the author sees between postmodernism and history. Whilst this is one we will address in due course, I submit that there is a probably more fundamental question to which we will only be able to tip our proverbial hats, namely concerning whether 'postmodernism' (aside from the issue of whether this exists: we will assume it does) is a worthy topic in the first place. I, as might be suspected, hold that it is, for the very reason that those so-called postmodernists (and they make up a much-variegated society) hold, among other things but perhaps most 'fundamentally', that the very foundations of knowledge are chimerical at best and are, at worst, purely corrupting. Refutation of such critics founders when interlocutors realise the grounds upon which they argue are no longer tenable: the very *method* of knowing,

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<sup>3</sup> On 'What is History?', 99.

that is to say epistemology, is itself shifting sand. This conversation, now surprisingly aged, continues to rage on, and its critics range in their many fields over various positions of rejection and acceptance, all having representatives characterised by thoughtlessness and carefully weighed critical analysis. Those who would attempt to hold on to meaning, even beyond authorial intention, in a work of literature, for instance, are considered horribly unsophisticated and pathetically irrelevant to assert that literature and its discourse are substantial 'just because'. Thus even those with a predilection to reject what some have characterised as neo-Nietzschean discourse are obliged to argue on what grounds they continue to hold such foundations of knowledge or meaning frameworks. This is the case not least in fields located within the humanities and social sciences; indeed, though it seems to have been slow to catch on among some non-scientists who have a penchant for adopting methods from the empirical sciences that apparently guarantee objectivity (think of sociobiologists who maintain a Churchillian-bulldog-hold on scientific optimism), a claim that has since been called into serious question by, for instance, Thomas Kuhn's work in the philosophy of science, or twentieth-century developments in the field of physics. I intend to show in this introductory chapter, therefore, that scepticism is of primary importance in any field of inquiry that could be situated in the Western tradition, and that postmodernism, at least in many of its forms, represents what might be called a radical position in the long history of scepticism. We could say then logically that because no field of inquiry can isolate itself from such traditionally pervasive topics, it is of crucial relevance to the field of history; nevertheless, such *apologiai* are not needed, as will be seen, because the questions of postmodernism have already made their presence felt in radical ways in that field.<sup>4</sup> Before we get ahead of ourselves, however, let us set out a definition of postmodernism.

Papers that begin with a characterisation of 'the postmodern' must consume many thousand miles of library shelving in our world. The task of defining the requisite terms is nearly as daunting, but nevertheless it must here be undertaken. This thesis cannot begin to adjudicate disputes between brokers of definitions of postmodernism, for example. However, we must

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<sup>4</sup> For an example of a way to make the case, i.e., on the basis of the 'mere variety of topics pursued by historians today', M. Poster, *Foucault, Marxism, and History: mode of production versus mode of information* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), 70-3.

make some attempt at defining this broad, amorphous term. Sociologist David Lyon urges by way of 'rough analytic device' that the terms *postmodernism* and *postmodernity* ought to be distinguished one from the other. The former, he recommends, is best used to accentuate cultural aspects, and the latter social. He notes, however, the difficulty of separating social from cultural, and so cautions that this should not be any more than a 'rough' distinction.<sup>5</sup>

'Postmodernism', then, in Lyon's construal, refers to 'cultural and intellectual phenomena, to the production, consumption and distribution of symbolic goods'<sup>6</sup>. One example 'intellectually' would be the 'forsaking of "foundationalism", the view that science is built on a firm base of observable facts, in the philosophy of science'<sup>7</sup>. In general, Lyon observes that postmodernism questions all the 'key commitments of the European Enlightenment'. Postmodernity concentrates upon the 'exhaustion of modernity', but also has to do with 'putative social changes'. Whilst we will focus on the intellectual characteristics of postmodernism in this thesis, we acknowledge that the cultural cannot be understood without the social, and vice versa.<sup>8</sup> As will be intimated at several points throughout the thesis, social realities often prick the consciences of intellectuals, causing them to question received doctrines and to purge residual effects in various arenas of discourse.<sup>9</sup>

Generally, this thesis will use the terms 'postmodern' and 'postmodernism' to refer to that which challenges the 'key commitments', the prevalent assumptions, of the cultural phenomenon that elevates reason, progress, and tradition (to name a few), namely the modern project or 'modernity'. Of course, it is difficult to attempt to gather up vast stores of discourse in 'one fell swoop': some bits always are left out. For example, it is now very popular to condemn anything smelling of the triumphalism of the empirical epistemology found in the Enlightenment tradition; however, it is a

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<sup>5</sup> D. Lyon, *Postmodernity* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1999), 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> The reverse can also be the case; for the complicated relationship between intellectuals and politics, D. Linker, 'Philosophy and Tyranny', *First Things* 119 (2002): 40-49, which discusses two recent books on the subject, one generally and one on Heidegger particularly; for an introductory and instructive discussion of the arguments regarding the complex issue of Heidegger's involvement in Nazism, G. Steiner, *Heidegger* (London: Fontana, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1992), 116-126.

quite common error to fail to realise that present-day scepticism, this time levelled at the Enlightenment thinkers' answers to the problem of scepticism and thus taking forms to which we apply the label 'postmodern', is really not such a new thing. Indeed, the Greek Schools should be seen as the birthplace, or at least the place of systematisation and documentation, of critical enquiry. Such critical thinking must form the foundations of doubt. Indeed, it should be acknowledged that this is the nature of two-thousand five-hundred years of received Western tradition.<sup>10</sup> Incidentally, but not irrelevantly, we westerners might be surprised by similar trends in the Orient, such as the late-fourth century BCE Taoist thinker Chang Tzu's questioning of convention; the commonly accepted Indian author of the *Nyaya-Sutras*, Aksapada Gotama (between 400 BCE and 100 CE), explores the means of knowledge and the epistemic value of testimony, an important category for his reliance upon Vedic scripture, but also generally for the 'uniformity' of the meaning of words, differing as it does from culture to culture and from time to time (Vatsyayana on *Sutras* 49-52); and the critiques of Nagarjuna, a Buddhist monk of the second century CE, of the circular arguments of the Nyaya school.<sup>11</sup>

In light of the fact that critical engagement with the world exists within Occidental and Oriental traditions throughout history, it would be far too simplistic to say that in postmodernity, we are finally 'waking up' from the delusions of Enlightenment tradition, itself a naïve reaction to the childishness of the Scholastics; this atmosphere is frequently pungent in the critical air of postmodern discourse that often seems to pride itself on the sophistication of its decimation of intellectual conventionalities through radical scepticism. Though of course our conceptions of scepticism must be sufficiently nuanced, it should be an humbling thought that we continue to wrestle today with issues similar to those first raised by early Greek thought, to which the long tradition of scepticism, constituted by such figures as

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<sup>10</sup> For the centrality of epistemological questions and thus scepticism in the Western intellectual tradition, M. Williams, *Problems of Knowledge : a critical introduction to epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), e.g., 1-7; the view is characteristic of the whole work.

<sup>11</sup> D. E. Cooper, ed., *Epistemology: the classic readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 61-72, 75-86, 88-95; in addition to the texts provided, I have also drawn from Cooper's incisive introductions throughout this section.

Locke, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, and Hegel, has proposed solutions.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, whilst there is no doubt that the radical critiques of Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, and Michel Foucault, for example, have something to commend them, it should not be forgotten that Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Merleau-Ponty offer critiques that not only lay behind much of the adaptations of so-called postmodern thinkers, but also form hugely significant and, many would argue, largely superior (and more devastating) interaction with the Western tradition.

Historiography is another term that begs definition. I differentiate it from 'history' which seems to be used to refer to one of two things: either the discipline whose task it is to inquire into past events<sup>13</sup> themselves or the Past, as in the 'events that really happened'. Historiography, then, is the writing up of such events, the discourse of those engaged in the discipline of history. It encompasses how history is conceptualised and thus what historians and theorists think historians are doing when they 'do history'. Some today would argue that History (as Event-in-the-Past) does not exist but only historiography (that is, the interpretation of supposed events). At the risk of over-anticipating our extensive discussion below, I will leave this issue to the side for now.

Though I have set this issue aside for now, I must hasten to add that this is precisely where the two terms I have been describing, postmodernism and historiography, are married. The extreme scepticism of postmodernism can be worked out into the 'killing of history', as one author has described it<sup>14</sup>, or, more mundanely, as Francis Fukuyama has termed it, 'the end of history'. Now, it would not be correct to think that this is the first time that history and scepticism have danced. Of course, history as a 'discipline', that is a distinct field of critical inquiry, dates from the eighteenth century, and can no doubt be associated with Enlightenment scepticism regarding human knowledge

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<sup>12</sup> For a sample of Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, *ibid.*, 59; for more on these two scepticisms, see the chapters especially on Agrippa's trilemma and Cartesian scepticism in M. Williams, *Problems of Knowledge*, 54-104.

<sup>13</sup> There are numerous disciplines that concern themselves with history, but usually history as it is relevant to another topic; that is to say that insofar as soon as a discipline is founded, it has a history that can be researched and discussed on the level of intellectual discourse, or more broadly at the level of society or culture. I do not here want to draw fine distinctions, but only to provide a rough generalisation.

<sup>14</sup> K. Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: how literary critics and social theorists are murdering our past* (New York: The Free Press, 1996); of particular relevance to this thesis are his chapters on 'history as social science', 185-226, and 'the fall of communism and the end of history', 159-84.

and what then came to be viewed as medieval naivety.<sup>15</sup> It seems oft overlooked, however, the role that scepticism plays in the Western tradition generally and, equally, the critical analysis that has long been part of the writing of history, even in the ancient world where it is often supposed that historians simply accepted any myth or testimony or archival record they found conducive to their own biased, corrupted (so the line goes) purposes. Even Herodotus, however, critiques Homeric myth, as Thucydides also famously (though, of course, more frequently) does; though, conversely, even Thucydides accepts myth without explanation.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, as we shall see, there are often two sides drawn up within the discipline of history itself: those who see the radical scepticism regarding the plausibility of historical knowledge as playing games with language or knowledge, and those who see the other side as naïve to suppose that history can be anything but the game of various interpretative stories. Those who fall into the first camp seem to be tired of the persistence of pernicious pseudo-historians, and those on the other seem to be tired of the ‘other historians’ failure to see the problems. And those outside the debates themselves may be tired of listening to the whole thing, as general conversations at the popular level might reveal.<sup>17</sup> Thus it seems that we may well be in a state of exhaustion regarding this entire issue of scepticism both on the level of general discourse, and in particular within the area of historiography.<sup>18</sup> So, as is often the rhetorical custom for ‘another thesis on

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<sup>15</sup> M. Bentley, *Modern Historiography: an introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999), 1-7; but note the distinction between discipline and *profession*, which Bentley places after the First World War, 71-80. Note particularly his reading of Vico, 5-7, and his placement of ‘historiography’ used in a sense approximating the contemporary flavour in the last quarter of that century, 3-4, though his characterisation of recent opinion of Vico as verging on ‘absurd’ seems to me a bit harsh as in Vico we certainly do have a towering intellectual whose notions of purposeful social change were hugely important, though, of course, one must take care not to construe his ideas as proto-Hegelian, and whose contribution is perhaps still not widely enough appreciated.

<sup>16</sup> I am anticipating my discussion below, so appropriate references will there be made. My point here is that by assuming that critical inquiry in matters ‘historical’ begins in the eighteenth century, which is, of course, not an untrue view, we can often fail to accord previous historians their due methodological credit, and therefore our readings of their works can become distorted. This caution cuts more than one way, however, as will be seen in our discussion in subsequent chapters in due course.

<sup>17</sup> Notice even very recent discussion of ‘revisionist’ history’s understanding of Sir Winston Churchill in a popular American periodical: C. Hitchens, ‘The medals of his defeats: examining the revisionist version of Winston Churchill’, *Atlantic Monthly* Vol. 289, No. 4 (April 2002): 118-37.

<sup>18</sup> Witness, e.g., a work already referenced here: “‘Are you a postmodernist?’ The tedious question emerges pretty quickly among gatherings of historians nervous of historiography and terrified by “theory”. It is meant to carry the same force that “Are you a Protestant?”

this topic', one might ask, how can one more thesis on the topic be justified? Hasn't this topic been 'beat into the ground' enough? Is the attempt to find some way forward merely facilitating further 'intellectual alcoholism'?<sup>19</sup>

On first survey of the topic, the answer appears to be 'yes'. However (and of course the fate of this thesis hangs on this 'however'), if we think of the amount of discussion particular issues have apparently merited for hundreds of years, and consider that there are probably many more people involved in the discussion today than ever has been the case (all apparently with a penchant to publish), it begins to make a bit more sense. The question of the existence (or role) of God, for example, is a topic that could evoke similar responses, discussed as it has been by Plato and Aristotle, through St Anselm to Descartes and Locke, from Leibniz to Nietzsche through to John Hick. If we were to quit the discussion only because 'it simply is too longeval', we would certainly cease much human enquiry (as some are interested in convincing us to do).

Thomas' idiot 'in a bumping car at the fair'<sup>20</sup> seems to me an apt metaphor for our task as I have framed it within the context of two movements. One is a shifting corpus of thought that embodies a critique of exhausted modernism. The other is a seemingly exhausted subject whose nuances and variations tell of endless fragmentation and self-perpetuation. The question, however, is: does idiocy mean meaninglessness?

### Historiographical issues today

We begin, having noted the extensive nature of the current discussion, by attempting some observations about the field of historiography today. I am here not attempting to cover every book and article, nor do I think that my generalisations will hold true in every case (of course, generalisations rarely do). Such delusions recognised, let us attempt to 'get hold' of this vast

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might have exerted during the Counter-Reformation,' Bentley, *Modern Historiography*, xi; note also his similar stance on the relevance and necessity of the theoretical questions for the whole field of history.

<sup>19</sup> F. R. Ankersmit, 'Historiography and postmodernism', *The Postmodern History Reader*, K. Jenkins, ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), characterises attempts to solve the problem thus, 278; for the issue generally, 277-95.

5discussion. We will observe characteristics under three headings: ubiquity, contingency, and nature. The first observation that should be made, if only because it is so obvious that it hardly need be made at all, is the ubiquity of questions and issues of historiography in contemporary culture. Journals have been founded regularly and thoroughly to discuss the relevant issues.<sup>21</sup> It frequents the scene of general intellectual discourse, as evidenced, for example, by a number of issues during the autumn of 2001 of *The Times Literary Supplement*.<sup>22</sup> The issues are raised in endless discussions of 'postmodernism', in literary discourse, in the works of historians who are disinterested in the questions generally.

Even at the popular level, such questions are being raised as the general populace seems to be growing more interested in history through television historical programmes (an entire cable television channel has been dedicated to such themes in the United States since 1995) and popular historical narratives and edited epistolary collections (an attentive eye will catch the biographies of American figures by David McCullough, for example, in many an airport or on the beach).<sup>23</sup> BBC Radio Three dedicated an entire episode of its 'Undercurrents' programme to the topic in November 2001.<sup>24</sup> In America, historical films have been pouring out of Hollywood for the last few years, dealing with World War II ('Saving Private Ryan', 'U-571', 'Pearl Harbor'), the American Revolution ('The Patriot'), and singular events (Oliver Stone's 'JFK' on the assassination of American President John F. Kennedy, 'Thirteen Days' on the Cuban Missile Crisis), and one specimen takes more recent 'historical' events as its subject, the conflict in Somalia ('Blackhawk Down'); in every case, masses of people leave cinemas asking

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<sup>20</sup> Incidentally, Thomas' poem reveals its metaphor as 'mankind being taken for a ride by a rich relation', a social critique that is not (and should not be) misplaced in this world of thought.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, *Rethinking History* published by Routledge in the United Kingdom and *History and Theory* founded by the Wesleyan University in the United States.

<sup>22</sup> *TLS*, 26 October 2001, included a 'Commentary' column by a *history* professor in the University of Manchester entitled 'A quiet victory: the growing role of postmodernism in History' which provoked much lively response in subsequent issues.

<sup>23</sup> See W. M. McClay, 'History for a Democracy', *The Wilson Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2001): 99-106.

<sup>24</sup> The air date was 13 November 2001; the edition took E. H. Carr's popular book, *What is History?*, on the event of its republication (Palgrave, 2001) with a new foreword by Professor Richard Evans, as a starting point, and discussed 'objectivity' and the media's presentation of 'facts' and 'history' in narrative history programmes.

each other questions about how 'true' the film may have been to how it 'really happened' and whether such things make any difference.<sup>25</sup>

Recent events in the United States, 'September 11<sup>th</sup>' most obviously, seem to have raised history in general to a greater level of consciousness among the American public. American President George W. Bush was seen carrying a book on Sir Winston Churchill, reportedly for 'inspiration in wartime'; comparisons have been drawn with the fateful events of 'December 7<sup>th</sup>' at Pearl Harbor<sup>26</sup>; even the relation between the history of comic books and the event in question has apparently become a worthy object of study!<sup>27</sup>

Though they deal only with history as a general topic, these last several examples from popular culture are of significance for my point regarding historiography in that the greater the awareness of history in general, the greater will be the interest in how history is conceptualised and done, as I think my point about the film industry bears out. Thus it seems quite apparent that the issue strikes something deep within the psyche of lay person, academic historian, philosopher, and theorist alike, not least because of the important relation between history and democracy evidenced, for instance, in the modern epoch by the importance of the United States' constitution to American national identity and judicature, or by Thucydides' *History* in the ancient world.

A second point concerns the nature of historiographical discourse. It seems to be possible, with reference to method, to sort historiographical discussions into one of two categories. The first includes discourse that summarises the history of historiography, usually down to the present day; the second is that which addresses directly (or indirectly through philosophical enquiry) how history ought to be done. The division does not have to include whole books (though it often does), as some can be divided between the two. Michael Bentley's excellent book, *Modern Historiography*, already referenced, is one example of the first ilk; Bentley, Professor of Modern History in St. Andrews, concisely and thoroughly examines several epochs of history writing, whilst in a postscript he slips, at least descriptively (if not prescriptively), into my other category by interestingly revealing his

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<sup>25</sup> Indeed, America's History Channel has created an entire programme, *History vs. Hollywood* to discuss this very topic.

<sup>26</sup> For the issue of post-September-11 American society, war, and history in general, J. Fallows, 'Councils of War', *The Atlantic Monthly* 289, no. 1 (2002): 23-25.

<sup>27</sup> J. Wolcott, 'It's a Bird, It's a Place...It's the *Zeitgeist!*', *Vanity Fair* 499 (2002): 56-59.

own view that 'relativism will not go away'. Discourse of the other variety includes the book that is primarily in question in this thesis, as well as others, such as Hayden White's *Metahistory* that includes much historical summary, but also a fair bit of characterisation of that material which then allows him to posit his theory of the metahistorical basis of every historical work under the rubrics of argument, emplotment, and ideology.

This rough categorisation of discursive types is helpful, I posit, because it makes some sense of the vast literature available today, some of which is interested in asking where historiography has been, and some of which is interested less in these questions and more in those regarding where historians should be going, as it were. Indeed, we can see that certain scholars choose one type of discourse over another, but, as has been shown, I am proposing only rough generalisations as even single books can be placed in both categories.

Whichever way an historiographical work can be methodologically characterised, the nature of historiographical discourse is overcast by the long shadow of science, which points to a genuine ambivalence about its relationship with history.<sup>28</sup> Related to naturalism and empiricism, positivism can be identified with the natural sciences generally and thus, with reference to philosophy, can be defined as 'philosophy acting in the service of natural science'<sup>29</sup>, which means that positivists are obliged to deal with 'facts' and 'laws'. The ambivalence to which I refer might even seem to be confusion. G. J. Renier writes:

With the scientist and the pragmatist philosopher we shall henceforth adopt the view that we can acquire knowledge sufficiently secure to justify the carrying out of our task...<sup>30</sup>

This is not the full story for Renier, however, who stresses that intellectual honesty is of more importance to the historian than to the scientist because the historian, unlike the scientist, cannot submit his conclusions to the test of experiment, so that history is not science. Yet historians approach their task in the same spirit as scientists, that of pragmatism. Whereas for pragmatists such as James, knowledge comes through action, so scientific knowledge

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<sup>28</sup> I use the word conscious of Zygmunt Bauman's analysis: *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), esp., e.g., 8n4 on Ricoeur; 38-45.

<sup>29</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: OUP, 1946), 126-33, esp. 126; the positivists' understanding of natural science consisted of 'ascertaining facts' and 'framing laws'.

<sup>30</sup> G. J. Renier, *History: its purpose and method* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1950), 155

comes through experiment just as historical knowledge comes through telling a story, as long as one is honest about his evidence<sup>31</sup>.

R. G. Collingwood's placement of history in the field of science is more 'generic' and seems to be a medial position: it is part of the forms of thought 'whereby we ask questions and try to answer them'<sup>32</sup> and, as shown here, is a complex of relations between subjectivity and objectivity:

The activities of whose history [the historian] is studying are not spectacles to be watched, but experiences to be lived in his mind; they are objective, or known to him, only because they are subjective, or activities of his.<sup>33</sup>

Many wish to maintain (or recover) the scientific character of historical inquiry. H. Rickert, for example, seems to argue this, particularly on the grounds that the 'cultural sciences' are empirically objective because they hold the same 'basic' belief in objective values that are also a prerequisite of the 'philosophic enterprise', even if 'under the influence of scientific custom'<sup>34</sup>. Many books today, whilst evidencing an agonised conscience about the scientific endeavour, nevertheless argue for 'facts' and 'objectivity', even if through contortions unknown to the field of science.<sup>35</sup> The trend to 'scientise' other fields, especially those included among the social sciences should be noted as well.<sup>36</sup>

Alternatively, the argument for history as non-scientific can be made on methodological grounds; whilst both historians and scientists are trying to discover things unknown, the historian views 'present phenomena as evidence from which to *infer* knowledge of an otherwise unknown past' whereas the scientist attempts to discover, through *induction and deduction*,

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 159; for the place of bias in his schema, 251-56.

<sup>32</sup> *Idea*, 9.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 218; unfortunately, we cannot here explore Collingwood's work, especially given the extensive literature on Collingwood.

<sup>34</sup> *Science and History: a critique of a positivist epistemology*, G. Reisman, tr. (New York and London: D. van Nostrand Company, 1962), 135-45.

<sup>35</sup> As an example, see the review of G. Iggers' latest book *Historiography in the Twentieth Century from scientific objectivity to postmodern challenge* (Hanover, NH and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), by Professor Richard Evans, characteristic of his own conception of historiography, in *History and Theory* 41 (2002): 79-87, esp. 86.

<sup>36</sup> For an example, E. O. Wilson's works, particularly *On Human Nature* and *Sociobiology* demonstrate it quite clearly; see the critique of such trends by the retired lecturer in moral philosophy at the University of Newcastle, Mary Midgely, *The Ethical Primate: humans, freedom, and morality* (London: Routledge, 1994), in which she harshly criticises such 'reductionistic' tendencies. Her latest book, *Science and Poetry* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) further develops her views.

'how reality is structured and what 'laws' govern its manifold operations'<sup>37</sup>. So, Lemon, for example, argues that the 'epistemological form' for history is 'factual narrative', the kind of discourse that has the form 'this happened, *then* that'<sup>38</sup>; this is over against 'this happened *because* of that', which is the causal analysis that is the tool of the scientist.<sup>39</sup> Lemon attempts to (re)establish narrative as the way in which historians may establish events and explain their occurrence<sup>40</sup> by means of assuming a 'general theory about human conduct...not an explicit, specific theory but a set of assumptions about how people behave and how the world works, which may even be contradictory'<sup>41</sup>. The question of narrative arises with force when dealing with the controversial work of Hayden White.

This question is very difficult because it seems that the enterprise of natural science is itself quite unsure about its own nature. We need only to note the diffidence exemplified, for example, by leading scientists I. Prigogine and I. Stengers:

As randomness, complexity, and irreversibility enter into physics as objects of positive knowledge, we are moving away from the rather naïve assumption of a direct connection between our description of the world and the world itself. Objectivity in theoretical physics takes on a more subtle meaning.<sup>42</sup>

With such changing views among scientists and also with uneasiness toward instrumentality in several fields, questions about the spuriousness of methods exported from the sciences have come under weighed criticism. In philosophical discourse, one notes particularly, for example, Heidegger's critique of the Western tradition and technological society; or the construing of moral problems by, for example, Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self: the making of modern identity*; or cultural studies and philosophy by Albert Borgmann<sup>43</sup>; or in theological and devotional discourse as, for example, in the work of James Houston on prayer or Eugene Peterson on parochial life.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> M. C. Lemon, *The Discipline of History and the History of Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 8-9, italics mine.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 42, italics his.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 52, italics his.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>42</sup> *Order out of Chaos: man's new dialogue with nature* (London: Heinemann, 1984), 54.

<sup>43</sup> For the philosophical grounding of Borgmann's thought, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984): 'the pattern of technology is fundamental to the shape that the world has assumed over the last three or so

Whatever our belief about this, the diagnosis of literary critic George Steiner seems not only eloquent, but, to some degree, right when he laments the 'seduction' of historical writing from its 'veritable nature, which is art' by 'the ambitions of scientific rigour and prophecy'. He writes:

Much of what passes for history at present is scarcely literate....The illusion of science and the fashions of the academic tend to transform the young historian into a grey, lean ferret gnawing at the minute fact or figure. He dwells in footnotes and writes monographs in as illiterate a style as possible to demonstrate the scientific bias of his craft.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to, and perhaps in some cases extending from, the question of the relation between science and history, basic philosophical problems lie on the horizon of historiography. These problems primarily concern traditional epistemology. As we will see, they are questions that have been occupying the field of philosophy, and are far from resolution. These lines of inquiry are appropriated to the discipline of history through questions such as 'what is the relationship between the historian and facts?', or 'to what extent should we expect history texts to "tell the truth"?' Of course, questions of this type are not new: they are related to epistemological questions raised by Cartesian solipsism (that is, does anything exist outside the thinking, doubting subject) that have presented problems ever since. Heidegger's *Dasein* is a revolutionary move toward resolving the seemingly insoluble problem. Still, such ideas seem either slow to be worked out by practitioners or are judged by them to be irrelevant.<sup>46</sup> Whatever the case, questions of history and facts are still being asked.<sup>47</sup> We will see the so-called postmodern attitude to such things throughout the present thesis. Other

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centuries'; for its relation to science, 7-31; for such theory's workings out in culture, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 110-16.

<sup>44</sup> For Peterson's characteristic approach, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), especially the overall tenor of his introduction, 1-21; his arguments are generally helpful, though they can often be given to ululation and over-ground axes.

For Houston's critique of instrumental understandings of prayer, *The Transforming Friendship* (Oxford: Lion, 1989); for the doctrinal basis of his position, see his book, fascinating and especially engaging from the perspective of a former Oxford geographer-cum-theologian, *I Believe in the Creator* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979), e.g., 41-4.

<sup>45</sup> G. Steiner, *Language and Silence: essays 1958-1966* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 36.

<sup>46</sup> Raising the issue of epistemology within historical discourse is troubling for some and difficult for all; K. Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991) sees the limits of 'historical epistemology' stemming from the virtually limitless 'content', the 'lostness' of the subject (literally, history is events, not accounts), its nature as personal construct, and its dependence upon exaggeration for meaning, 10-13. We will examine these issues in great detail in following chapters.

<sup>47</sup> For the relation of the work of 'normal' historians with '(f)actuality', R. Berkhofer, 'Challenge', 145-50.

views will be discussed in contrast, but it would be wise to note one prominent dissident voice in the 'postmodern climate', Gertrude Himmelfarb<sup>48</sup>; she argues that the theorists' 'disdain for truth' fails to see that historical methods are designed to accommodate 'hard cases':

committed as they are to a theory that repudiates any "realist" or "essentialist" notion of facts, that sees history (the past as well as the writing about the past) as inevitably "fictive", it is only by an "inordinately circuitous and abstract" mode of reasoning...that they can elude the most relativistic consequences of their theory—if not a denial of the fact of the Holocaust, then a denial of any objective truth about it.<sup>49</sup>

Raising this issue makes quite clear at least some reasons why such questions continue to occupy historians, not least church historians, who, as is often noted, are often confronted with gruesome and awful events that must not only be carefully recounted, but also prick the conscience of the historian to ask larger questions regarding the nature of evil, theodicy, human nature, causation, free will, and so forth (as will be shown in our own historical 'test case'). However, it is not only recent unseemly historical events that raise the issue of 'truth' and facticity. That is to say that though we may think ourselves particularly shrewd interpreters of these things to suppose that the search for the 'real event' is a modern inclination, the problem evidently could be said to begin with Herodotus' critical engagement with Homeric myth, infrequent though it may be.<sup>50</sup>

Yet another feature figuring into our presentation of the nature of historiography today is the interpretative nature of history, which is first raised in the present round of discussion by E. H. Carr's famous little volume *What is History?*. In that seminal work he argues that all history is interpretation: certainly Caesar crossed the Rubicon, but so have millions of other people throughout history. What makes the event an object of historical study is the historian's *interpretation* of this 'event' as significant and, therefore, 'historical'.<sup>51</sup> Hayden White continues the theme in his *Metahistory*, though more severely, in his assertion that history's formal constraints are those of narrative, that is story. The problem comes when we realise that the

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<sup>48</sup> G. Himmelfarb, 'Telling it as you like it: postmodernist history and flight from fact', *Postmodern History Reader*, 158-74, esp. 162-64.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 164; on the Holocaust and historiography, *Postmodern History Reader*, 384-433.

<sup>50</sup> This point seems to me to be important as it is often Herodotus who is criticised by 'moderns' who see much more affinity with the empirical sciences in Thucydides.

<sup>51</sup> E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 1-24, here 6.

'story' does not exist in history (people do not live stories), but is a subsequent creation of the historian who moves from the chronicle and event to story through interpretation. This view would be disputed by Elton, though, who holds that the historian's 'involvement does not equal dominance'<sup>52,53</sup>. And again, for Croce, 'the past does not live otherwise than in the present, as the force of the present, resolved and transformed in the present'<sup>54</sup>.

The problem of subjectivity leads us directly on to the prevalence of 'linguistic games' in historiography today. Kellner expounds two alternative views regarding the substance of historical investigation: that historical substance rests on the infrastructure of materials that make up sources or else upon 'mental protocols', foundationally linguistic, so that stories arise from the Nietzschean act of contemplation, which Kellner calls 'reading crookedly'<sup>55</sup>. Gabrielle Spiegel construes the relation between history and language this way:

the dissolution of the materiality of the sign, its ruptured relation to extralinguistic reality, is necessarily also the dissolution of history, since it denies the ability of language to "relate" to (or account for) any reality other than itself. History, the past, is simply a subsystem of linguistic signs, constituting its object according to the rules of the linguistic universe inhabited by the historian.<sup>56</sup>

A feature that underlies several of those already noted with regard to the nature of the discourse in question, but nonetheless should be clearly brought into relief, is the complete aversion to ideological commitments: metanarratives are 'out-of-bounds'.<sup>57</sup> It is apparently no longer fashionable to

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<sup>52</sup> G. R. Elton, *Return to Essentials*, 43.

<sup>53</sup> Note also Collingwood's ambivalence about the limitations of 'interpretation', which he frames it in terms of 're-enactment'; *Idea*, 281; for Carr's discussion of this idea, *What*, 15-17.

<sup>54</sup> *On History* (London and Eton: The Ballantine Press, 1921), 91; for Croce's life and work, A. D. Momigliano, 'Reconsidering B. Croce (1866-1952) (1966)', *A. D. Momigliano: Studies on Modern Scholarship*, G. W. Bowersock and T. J. Cornell, eds. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1994), 80-96.

<sup>55</sup> H. Kellner, 'Language and historical representation', *Postmodern History Reader*, 127-137, esp. 135-7; for the resultant view of archives, N. Partner: 'Archives may contain interesting things, but Truth is not included among them', 137.

<sup>56</sup> G. Spiegel, 'History, Historicism, and the social logic of the text in the Middle Ages', *Postmodern History Reader*, 180-98, 184; she drives the discussion into unmistakably postmodern territory by noting the global move from Saussurean structuralism to poststructuralism, a discussion that inevitably evokes such infamous and controversial thinkers as Derrida and Foucault; for her response, 198.

<sup>57</sup> For K. Jenkins' discussion of ideology and historiography in his own summary of 'history today', *On 'What is History?'* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 22.

transcend the discourse by a sense-making Archimedean point such as, for example, Marxism or psychoanalysis.

Even if the total past were reconstructed for historians, it would still not be the Great Past let alone the Great Story, without analysis and interpretation by historians—and professional ones at that—because the past as history cannot even be predicated without interpretation according to some customary presuppositional framework.<sup>58</sup>

Though the issues are prevalent today and have such nuance of characterisation, we should also note, as a third heading, the contingency of historiographical discourse. 'Normal' historians often do not want to be bothered with questions of theory, but *simply* want to 'get on with it'.<sup>59,60</sup> Add to the issues of scientificity those of language and we seem to be launched on tumultuous seas indeed. Full engagement with this complexity is objected to by the famous British Tudor historian Sir Geoffrey Elton:

The truth we seek is the truth of the event and all that surrounds it, not the possibility that a truth abstracted from the event is being proclaimed and can be teased out by the techniques of the critic. Once this essential distinction is grasped we can leave the philosophers and critics to play their games and attend to our proper task.<sup>61</sup>

It would not be difficult to characterise such a statement as arrogant and intellectually closed-minded. Such characteristics would not seem to serve a disposition toward accepting the 'otherness' or reality of the past. Certainly summaries such as the following would cause one further to question his approach: '[the mix of deconstructionism and Marxism] is like spiking vodka with LSD'<sup>62</sup>. One can only guess how he would have characterised the present thesis, which seeks to raise questions of theory within the context of concrete historical example. As should be unmistakably obvious and clear by now, this

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<sup>58</sup> R. Berkhofer, 'Challenge', 155n15; for metanarratives and history, Berkhofer's essay is incisive, esp. 150-53.

<sup>59</sup> R. Berkhofer, 'The challenge of poetics to (normal) historical practice', *Postmodern History Reader*, 139-55, characterises this tendency of historians as stopping where the poetic theorists begin, precisely because, to the 'normal historian', 'the past is not problematical beyond this point in practice': see his diagram, 141; this points to the disjoint between the 'professional historian' and the philosopher of history.

<sup>60</sup> But note the interesting turn made by M. Bentley, *Modern Historiography*, when he describes his intention of giving a paper at a conference that included two philosophers who were attempting to defend the historian's ability to 'tell the truth', while he, the presenting historian, was arguing for the import of relativism upon the discipline of history (pp. 159-60).

<sup>61</sup> G. R. Elton, *Return to Essentials* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 31; but the method he outlines in his third lecture (pp. 64-73) certainly seems to work for him.

feature, to my mind, is one that ought not to exist. The reasons for such a statement will be given throughout this thesis.

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

## Concretising theory: Thucydidean speeches as generative example

MANY types of history seem worthy candidates for an historical 'test case'. To reveal a bit of my own personal interests, we might study comparative historiography with the national histories of Sweden, examining the works of professional historians such as Ingvar Andersson or Michael Roberts and that of Vilhelm Moberg, an emigrant journalist and historical novelist whose complete history of the Swedish people arose out of his research into the background of Swedish emigration; he frequently inserts into his historical work personal memories of his childhood and folk tales to round out his narrative.<sup>1</sup> Or perhaps the history of World War II might be taken as an example, approached via biographies of Churchill or Roosevelt, through the plethora of historians of battle and strategy, Bourke's social and psychological history of killing in the period, the pictorial history of Richard Holmes<sup>2</sup>, personal interviews, or its effects on the work of Vonnegut, Tolkien, Lewis or Golding<sup>3</sup>. Or again, we might examine approaches to history throughout different intellectual periods, studying, for instance, the idea of history for Romanticism, particularly the historical ideas of Coleridge, moving from the empiricism of Hume and Locke and the materialism of Condillac and Condorcet<sup>4</sup>, the out-workings of Romanticism by other literary figures, such as Sir Walter Scott in his 'historical fiction', and by historians themselves, for example, Carlyle in his history of the French revolution as well as other intellectuals, notably the American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson whose essay 'On History' reveals much.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., M. Roberts, *The Early Vasas: A History of Sweden, 1523-1611* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), I. Andersson, *A History of Sweden*, C. Hannay and A. Blair, tr. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1955), and V. Moberg, *The Emigrants; Unto a Good Land; The Settlers; The Last Letter Home*; G. Lannestock, R. McKnight, tr. (Minnesota: Historical Society Press, 1995); *History of the Swedish People*, P. B. Austin, tr., 2 vols. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> See R. Overy, 'Beyond the battlefield', *Times Literary Supplement* 5143 (26 October 2001): 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> K. Myers, 'On J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century: an interview with Tom Shippey', *Mars Hill Audio Journal* 52 (September/October, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> C. Parker, *The English Idea of History from Coleridge to Collingwood* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 9-31.

My point with these examples is not simply to draw a distinction between popular and academic history; rather, it is to point to the notion that different approaches, different ways of thinking about and even 'doing' history, whether those of the commonly-accepted methodologies of professional historians, or of historical novelists who seem to be able to 'capture' an historical period through vivid description better than an 'academic' text, or of intellectual historians who may examine the effects of a particular period on philosophy or art historians upon art, may result in different interpretations and presentations of a particular period of history.

While any of these historical examples would readily demonstrate their fecundity in this thesis, it seems to me that the branch of history known as 'ancient' constructs the most conducive forum in which to explore the relation between postmodernism and historiography. This may seem a surprising choice, but antiquity is certainly as 'other' as any period may be, and it is this otherness which thrusts us inevitably into the deep end of scepticism, a theme by now familiar, regarding the plausibility of historical knowledge.<sup>56</sup> Further, we are forced to rely almost entirely on literary accounts whose authors intended them to be 'history', whatever may be understood by this term at this stage.<sup>7</sup> Archaeology, with its epigraphy and numismatics, offers to the modern historian the hope for objects that can be approached 'scientifically', and thus might seem to give the hope of 'objectivity' as a court of appeal from the biased accounts of those who have sought to serve future ages with some kind of account of their times or states. Recent discourse in the field of archaeology, however, throws us onto the horns of dilemma even regarding the *interpretation* of artefacts. Indeed, recent developments within that field critique so-called processual archaeology, a 'developed, more mature form of the New Archaeology', a 'school of thought

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<sup>5</sup> Note the difficulties even with recent history: A. B. Spitzer, *Historical Truth and Lies About the Past* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 97-115, esp. 103, wherein he discusses American President Ronald Reagan's trip to Bitburg.

<sup>6</sup> But note Collingwood's belief that it is more 'writable' than contemporary history, which is 'too unconnected, too atomic': 'History, which seems to be essentially remembrance, is only possible through forgetfulness, a forgetfulness which it takes away and makes it impossible for us ever to understand what is left', R. G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, 236, cited in Parker, *English Idea*, 175.

<sup>7</sup> This could also be said of modern history to some extent, but note the importance of cultural objects for modern social history in, for example, Laurel T. Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001); for a summary of Ulrich's publications, particularly with reference to women in history, A. Taylor, 'Threads of history', *The New Republic* (4 March 2002).

that ...tends to generalise and adopts a broadly postivist approach'<sup>8</sup>. Such suspicions having been raised, we come once again to the necessity of relying entirely on literary sources. This qualification for selection is not unique to the field of ancient history. What exists for many other periods, however, is different kinds of literature. This is not to deny that this situation is not present and will not be useful for ancient history, but the resources are admittedly much more limited. The field commends itself also because of the long tradition of (translation and) interpretation that so remote a period provides, thus providing several models for interpretation of the 'evidence', if we should want them.

But this selection is far more than an example to work out theory. It is a generative analysis; that is to say that setting it out in the way in which we will here do should open us to the insight that Thucydides himself appears to be doing a much different task than many modern historians have supposed. He actually raises issues by the way in which he sets out to write history that can be well considered in our own 'postmodern context'. It may be said that I am simply reading my own view, or that of my intellectual background, into my interpretation, a statement that would, of course, be most correct. But, I am making the same statement about other interpretations. Again, we are apparently landed at a choice between an objective, 'true' interpretation of Thucydides, or a plurality of interpretations without any way to adjudicate the field. I intend that this issue will be resolved as we progress, especially throughout chapters four and five.

### Why the speeches of Thucydides?

While it is eventually this range at which I would intend to aim, I must narrow even further so that I might bring this particular 'test case' into the sepulchral depths of the postmodern with some level of integrity, so as to avoid its hull being crushed under what some may call an oppressive pressure. I have chosen the speeches of the Greek historian Thucydides as the foundation of this chapter. Particularly in focus will be Thucydides'

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<sup>8</sup> For this movement, M. Johnson, *Archaeological Theory: an introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), wherein he discusses characteristics of 'postprocessual archaeology'; because of the diversity of this movement, he prefers the term 'interpretative archaeologies', 101; for general discussion, 98-115, esp. 101-108; for the notion of understanding culture processually, 25.

conception of history which is closely bound up with his reason for writing history and the reflection of these things in his method of creating the speeches.

An enormous history of interpretation of and reaction to the work of the historian is extant, ranging from Xenophon to Hobbes to Arendt, all taking from him points relevant to their own time. This points to the fact that Thucydides, like other ancient authors for other fields, has been a lightning rod for themes of historical writing throughout history.<sup>9</sup> For those who wish history to be more 'scientific' than 'artistic', Thucydides' assurances of not composing a work 'to meet the taste of an immediate public' (1.22) will surely satisfy. Those who wish to doubt determinism in history will find water at this well. Those for whom the social sciences are essential in interpretation will find here a rich source for psychological exploration and sociological explication.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, those who may welcome the loss of one oppressive interpretative schema will undoubtedly be repulsed by the searching for generalisations regarding human nature. Those who are suspicious of progressivism will welcome cyclicism but will perhaps find it difficult to accept the alleged evolutionary move to democratic idealism. Those who are dogged with memories of brutal totalitarians will find the idyllic democracy inviting, but may be shocked with more potent representations of the supposedly innocent Periclean ideals. And again, our historian's confession of falling short of *ipsissima verba* will slake the thirst for honesty in a long tradition of positivism while also leaving one wondering how that which was 'called for' (1.22) could be known in each historical situation in question.

With this chapter, which is essentially an historical discussion (or a summary of one), I hope also to make some progress toward 'unmending' boundaries between theory and history in preparation for the third chapter, 'for something there is that doesn't love a wall'<sup>11,12</sup>. Moreover, I wish to

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<sup>9</sup> See concise examples given by G. Crane, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity: the limits of political realism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 5-6; Crane's own view stands out from that of his predecessors as he sees in Thucydides a desire to 'reconstitute the ancient simplicity—the ideology of the elite into which he had been born and of which he was a product—and to reconcile what we might now call the real with the ideal...', 324.

<sup>10</sup> Collingwood calls Thucydides the founder of 'psychological history', *Idea*, 29.

<sup>11</sup> The line is an allusion to Robert Frost's 'Mending Wall', *Robert Frost: Selected Poems* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1971), 43-4. Admittedly, the speaker wishes not to have a wall between he and his neighbour because their acres are possessed of distinguishable personal property,

demonstrate with this discussion of Thucydidean speeches, even tacitly, the foundational [meant metaphorically, not philosophically] nature of language and questions surrounding epistemology, to the discussion of history, a theme prevalent in postmodern discourse, as we have seen. With events, the historian's limitations are imposed by interpretation of a sequence of actions; with speeches, the historian is faced not only with 'making sense' of the actions, but of working with language at several levels: what was 'actually said', what were the reasons behind the utterance, and the reconstruction of what was said in a way that, depending upon the historian's intentions, is faithful to the personality of the speaker, whilst also being relevant to the particular interpretation that the developing narrative puts up. The discussion necessitates an adventure into the intricacies of the historian's own philosophy of history, which is essential to his reasons for writing history in the first place. This is important historically not only for seeking to establish a Greek philosophy (or, perhaps, Greek philosophies) of history, but also because that philosophy has direct relevance to how the speeches are interpreted and to how the subject of the work in general is interpreted.

The speeches also raise the perniciously persistent issue of 'objectivity'. Thucydides composed a history and, like other Greeks of his age, was self-conscious of his task as analyst and interpreter. He was not performing the Herodotean work of simply recording events nor was he, like the later Strabo, cataloguing geography and defining what we might call ethnic identity<sup>13</sup>; rather, he was intentionally selecting and arranging evidence to fit his agenda of narrating the Peloponnesian War, which included the decline of his polis and generally the nature of power and the essence of democracy: history was political.<sup>14</sup> His consciousness as a reasonable observer is not only to be

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his apple orchard, the neighbour's pine. Nevertheless in this case, I am not convinced that 'good fences make good neighbours'.

<sup>12</sup> But note this as a feature of the academy in general today: L. Menand, 'The making of the public mind: undisciplined', *The Wilson Quarterly* 25 No. 4 (2001): 51-9.

<sup>13</sup> For the ancient geographers' ethnographies, R. Laurence, 'Territory, ethnonyms, and geography: the construction of identity in Roman Italy', *Cultural Identity in the Roman Empire*, R. Laurence and J. Berry, eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 96-102.

<sup>14</sup> For Thucydides, history is necessarily bound up with forms of government, relations within an empire between the governing and the governed, the effects of power on those who wield it and those who are subjugated by it. One must be careful, however, not unwittingly to collapse questions of sociology into history. The problem of dissolving sociology into history or vice-versa is a real one, however, and one that is discussed by historians today. For example, the economic historian C. Lloyd, *The Structures of History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), discusses the problem in terms of 'event history' and 'structural history' and sees in a four-quadrant system (historical/empirical enquiry, domain of events

discovered in the narrative itself but in his expressed intentions, which confession proves to be an important anticipation of even our contemporary historiography, embroiled as it has been in the hackneyed Carrian critiques of objectivist history writing.<sup>15</sup>

The question of objectivity also, of course, places our discussion of Thucydides' speeches in relation to the empirical sciences—whose relevance will be seen directly in a particular 'school of Thucydidean interpretation'—as discussed in chapter one. The historian of the Peloponnesian War wished to deny the fanciful stylising characteristic of his ominous predecessor, thus making him the friend of all who would seek for history to be a purely scientific endeavour. Conversely, it can be seen that he is not necessarily interested in history as a science, in the way in which we might conceive of such a task as an arid, 'objective' recounting of the 'facts', but was (also?) a skilled stylist who found himself in the midst of a shift to prosaic discourse<sup>16</sup> which put him in the enviable place of familiarity with poetic conventions of symbolic meaning while also seeking to move in the direction of the philosophical rationality to which prose aspired. His burden to be accurate, yet to be a skilled rhetorician, with his own 'voice' and with those of his speakers, make him quite suitable as a 'test case'. Thucydides' history commends itself to us, in addition to its supposedly pre-modern 'scientific' character, as a work of art.

The speeches raise the question of 'truth'. It is quite obvious that Thucydides was not present for many (any?) of the speeches he offers his readers, which he readily admits. The veracity of the speeches naturally comes into question: in what sense are they 'true', as the historian maintains that they are? It is hoped that this initial discussion of Thucydides' aims of writing history, especially as he works such intentions out in the composition

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and actions, theoretical/sociological enquiry, domain of structures) mutual interdependence. His own approach is not 'methodological individualism', which takes individual events, people, actions, and beliefs as reality and holds society to be only a collection of individuals, nor 'methodological holism', which makes society an autonomous force that acts through individuals, but 'methodological structurism', which holds that society is a real structure (it can be said to exist metaphysically) made up of rules, roles, relations, and meanings that 'has to be produced, reproduced, and transformed by individuals while causally conditioning individual actions, beliefs, and intentions', 47. See 21-65, esp. 62-4, 159-61.

<sup>15</sup> A specimen for example: 'The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy, but one which it is very hard to eradicate', *What is History?* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 6.

<sup>16</sup> J. H. Finley, *Three Essays on Thucydides* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1968), 111; *Thucydides*, 257-59.

of speeches, will open just such a discussion up and allow us yet another piece of common ground on which to discuss postmodernism and history, with particular reference to the field of ancient history.

One further note regarding the selection of an example seems necessary before proceeding any further. Anyone familiar with the diversity of intellectual endeavour known as 'theology', will see the incredible relevance of the topic to the field, particularly here to that 'branch' known as 'biblical studies', whose aim, it seems to me, has often stopped short of (what I take to be) its responsibility both to take into account the Western intellectual tradition with its questions of epistemology and metaphysics<sup>17</sup> and to address itself, in addition to the faithful community, to that tradition of which it is inseparably a part, however much such a thought may be unwelcome to some biblical scholars. This is not to assume that biblical studies is only concerned with an historical task; its task is much more than this and, perhaps, much more important than this, from the perspective of Christian faith and theology. It is, however, to say that it is necessarily a part of the task not only because of movements arguably catalysed by the Gablerian dichotomy<sup>18</sup>, but, more fundamentally and essentially, because confessionally Christianity is a faith in particular historical events<sup>19</sup> and is, by

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<sup>17</sup> Though this has been approached by some biblical scholars in discussions of philosophical and theological hermeneutics. Note in particular the work of A. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament hermeneutics and philosophical description with special reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980), esp. regarding history, 51-84 and language, 85-142. From a systematician's perspective, K. van Hoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text?: the Bible, the reader, and the morality of literary knowledge* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998); E. Troeltsch, e.g., *Religion in History*, J. L. Adams and W. F. Bense, tr. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 11-32, esp. 16-19; V. A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: the morality of historical knowledge and Christian belief* (London: SCM Press, 1966). In the field of Old Testament studies, note I. Provan, 'Ideologies, literary and critical: reflections on recent writing on the history of Israel,' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 (1995): 585-606; a work that addresses the issue of a 'theological interpretation of Scripture' is R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). With reference to New Testament studies, two scholars are noteworthy: N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992) and B. F. Meyer, whose thinking is much influenced by the philosophy of Bernard Lonergan, *Critical Realism and the New Testament* (San Jose, California: Pickwick, 1989).

<sup>18</sup> J. Sandys-Wunsch & L. Eldredge, 'J. P. Gabler and the distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology: translation, commentary, and discussion of his originality', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980), 133-58; see also L. T. Stuckenbruck, 'Johann Philipp Gabler and the delineation of biblical theology', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52 (1999): 139-57.

<sup>19</sup> The attempt to work out the consequences of this fact needs to be made, though to date, more often than not, such attempts have not been very successful. See, e.g., H. Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1949), 1-8, 113-29; on history and Christianity, 93-112: 'Those who say that everything in history can be explained without bringing God into the argument would be doing no more than walking round in a circle...', 107; see further, H. U. von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963) who argues that Christ is the centre of history, 89; cf. 14-21.

its own definition, dependent upon the historicity of the Resurrection in particular for its claim to 'truth' and, indeed, for an understanding of its God.<sup>20</sup> Whilst I shall not be able thoroughly to examine the implications of this thesis for such issues, I shall offer in my fifth chapter one worked example of my criticism of one prominent biblical scholar's methodology.

To summarise, turning directly to the speeches of Thucydides is to drive the discussion of historiography, even in its relation to theology, directly into the hurricane for it will summon the fierce winds of postmodern scepticism ever closer. This is not to be regretted; it is, in fact, precisely the point at which we want to be. To stress the point made in chapter one again: the academic discourse of historiography often appears to be an historian's holiday or a philosopher's hobby; the urgency of the issue is often lost on the remoteness of the actual object of study. Theoretical discussions seem to play with ideas with very little connection to praxis within the guild. To 'play with ideas' is not wrong or evidence of a proclivity for vanity; on the contrary, it is often essential to open new lines of inquiry and to pull back the curtain to new or (perhaps more often) long-forgotten vistas which will enliven thinking and enrich praxis. In light of this conviction, it is my intention here to provide what in many ways is a summary of an historical discussion both as a creative backdrop on which to discuss the relevance and critique of 'postmodern historians', and as an example generative of categories that may well critique modernist agendas in history writing. (The seeds of historiographical discourse will find a fertile field in thinking about the nature of the speeches of Thucydides and it is the sowing of this field to which we now turn.

### The speeches of Thucydides

The investigation into Thucydides' speeches<sup>21</sup> has its own history that is long and complex.<sup>22</sup> The inauthenticity of their content, to say nothing of their

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<sup>20</sup> See R.W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume One: The Triune God* (New York: OUP, 1997), 42-46, who insists that the identity of God is bound up with his agency in the resurrection of Jesus as much as the exodus was central to the Israelites' knowledge of the identity of God.

<sup>21</sup> For a cataloguing of the speeches in the *History*, W. C. West III, 'The Speeches in Thucydides: a description and listing', *The Speeches in Thucydides* (Charlotte, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 3-15.

<sup>22</sup> E.g., W. C. West III, 'A Bibliography of scholarship on the speeches in Thucydides 1873-1970', *Speeches*, 124-61, which, covering (only) 97 years, contains 351 entries, excluding the listings of several reviews listed with almost every monograph.

form, is frequently assumed. For example, introducing an essay that begins by giving great hope to the reader that there will be an even-handed attempt at sorting through the aims and intentions of Thucydides' characters, H. D. Westlake rules out of court even attempts to assign the speeches to a descending-order plausibility group (A, B, C) regarding the derivation of events.<sup>23</sup> Before we can look at some of the issues surrounding the discussion of the speeches, however, their place in the overall history must be explored.

The beginning of a work usually provides a framework through which the rest of the work could be interpreted. Thucydides begins with a section that has traditionally been called the 'Archaeology' (1.1-23<sup>24</sup>) in which he is obliged to justify the following: '[the Peloponnesian War] was the greatest disturbance in the history of the Hellenes, affecting a large part of the non-Hellenic world, and indeed, I might almost say, the whole of mankind' (Warner, 1.1). The shadows in which Thucydides works cast by the lights on authors from Homer to Herodotus is great and he is at pains to justify his evaluation of the importance of his topic, as well as the way in which he will set out to examine it.

This way often involves a rejection by Thucydides' critical mind of the tradition which presumably, in Thucydides' judgement, can often be adapted to meet the needs of the hour, as it were; indeed, 'in investigating past history, and in forming the conclusions which I have formed, it must be admitted that one cannot rely on every detail which has come down to us by way of tradition' (Warner, 1.20.1). As Thucydides was inclined often to do, he called into question interpretations that necessitated divine activity and favoured the agency and will of humans as an explanation; in this vein, then, he scoffs at the confused memory of oracular utterances recalled in explaining the plague that apparently accompanied the invasion of Attica (2.54). The significant interpretation of the oracle hinged on the confusion of λοιμός and λιμός and Thucydides here reveals his wariness of tradition as λοιμός was chosen to fit the situation: οἱ γὰρ ἄνθρωποι πρὸς ἃ ἔπασχον τὴν μνήμην ἐποιοῦντο. ἦν δέ γε οἴωμαί ποτε πόλεμος καταλάβῃ Δωρικὸς τοῦδε

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<sup>23</sup> H. D. Westlake, *Studies in Thucydides and Greek Historiography* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1989), 201-2.

<sup>24</sup> Whilst the opening section has been taken to cover chapters 1-19 by some (e.g., J. H. Finley, *Thucydides* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1942), 297 n 8), Gomme argues rightly according to the structure of the argument that the unit should be considered to chapter 23.

ὑστερος καὶ ξυμβῆ γενέσθαι λιμόν, κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς οὕτως ᾄσσονται<sup>25</sup> (2.54.3).

So for the fickleness of the interpretation of tradition.

He also claimed to be sceptical of fanciful stylising. Two examples should suffice; both are substantive also as introductory matters deserving our attention early on. The first involves Thucydides' attempt to situate his work in the context of other literature and the history or myth being entertained by his contemporaries. At 1.20.3 he mentions those credulous writers who exercise no critical judgement: most people, in fact, will not take trouble in finding out the truth, but are much more inclined to accept the first story they hear (Warner)<sup>26</sup>; his work, in contrast, will reach conclusions only based on evidence put forward (1.21.1). He differentiates himself also from ποιηταὶ (poets) who 'exaggerate the importance of their themes' (Warner, 1.21.1; cf. 1.10.3) or from the λογογράφοι ('prose chroniclers'): they are 'less interested in telling the truth than in catching the attention of their public, whose authorities cannot be checked, and whose subject matter, owing to the passage of time, is mostly lost in the unreliable streams of mythology' (Warner)<sup>27</sup>. Herodotus could be one such λογογράφος as he often refers to parts of his work as λόγοι<sup>28</sup> and is probably intending in his introduction to separate himself from his predecessor as he does elsewhere.<sup>29</sup> The charge does not necessarily refer to the reliability of the authors in question (Thucydides is happy to quote them throughout 1.1-23), but refers to their bias of προσαγωγότερον τῇ ἀκροάσει<sup>30</sup>, which bias very well could carry its methodologist away from the 'truth' and toward pleasing an audience with entertaining stories.

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<sup>25</sup> Warner: 'it was a case of people adapting their memories to suit their sufferings. Certainly I think that if there is ever another war with the Dorians after this one, and if a dearth results from it, then in all probability people will quote the other version'.

<sup>26</sup> Οὕτως ἀταλαίπωρος τοῖς πολλοῖς ἡ ζήτησις τῆς ἀληθείας καὶ ἐπὶ τὰ ἐτοῖμα μᾶλλον τρέπονται.

<sup>27</sup> ξυνέθεσαν ἐπὶ τὸ προσαγωγότερον τῇ ἀκροάσει ἢ ἀληθέστερον, ὄντα ἀνεξέλεγκτα καὶ τὰ πολλὰ ὑπὸ χρόνου αὐτῶν ἀπίστως ἐπὶ τὸ μυθῶδες ἐκνενηκτότα...

<sup>28</sup> Gomme, *Commentary I*, 138.

<sup>29</sup> For the relationship between Thucydides and Herodotus, especially with reference to ξυνέθεσαν (composed, which the author marks as distinct from Liddell and Scott's 'narrate in writing', p. 20, 20n59) and 'all' Thucydides' predecessors, S. Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides: Volume II* (Oxford: OUP, 1996), 19-38; interacting with several disparate points of view, he argues for intertextual engagement of Thucydides with Herodotus, whilst acknowledging the 'thematic differences' on, e.g., attitudes to women, religion, causation. For a more detailed discussion of his use of Herodotus, see annexes, 122-45.

<sup>30</sup> A point mentioned but not developed by Gomme, *ibid.*, 139.

His counterparts, first, then, were given to stylising, a method from which Thucydides clearly wishes to separate himself. A second example of his aversion to artful methods following on from the λογογράφοι, deals with the intention of his work: Κτῆμα τε ἐς αἰεὶ μᾶλλον ἢ ἀγώνισμα ἐς τὸ παραχρῆμα ἀκούειν ξύγκειται ('My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public', but was done for all times, Warner, 1.22.4). Thucydides acknowledges that his work might therefore not be enjoyable to read (1.22.4)<sup>31</sup>, but he is content with accomplishing the task for which he sets out: to understand historical events which will inevitably occur again. In summary, then, in his introduction, Thucydides separates himself from his predecessors and contemporaries both formally and intentionally.

### The varieties of historical-philosophical interpretation in Thucydides

When we approach the question of Thucydides' philosophy of history and survey Thucydidean scholarship, we are immediately faced with problems. The issue primarily in question is the nature of human beings. What an interpreter believes Thucydides held about human nature ultimately affects his interpretation of Thucydides' project and thus philosophy of history. One group takes the position that he held a progressive view of social forms and individuals and thus of history. Alternatively, it is argued that Thucydides held a cyclical view of history based on his pessimistic belief regarding human nature; that is to say that, because of the inevitability of human nature's proclivities to throw off constraints and indulge in self-interested activities motivated by ambition or freedom, especially under the pressures of natural disaster or history, as will be seen below, history will repeat itself endlessly. Ultimately, it seems to me to come down to how one interprets the speeches and role of Pericles. The 'progressivists' see him as the pinnacle of ideal democracy. The 'cyclicists' see in him a particular phase that represents human nature obeying the laws of civilised culture; his view that Athens could remain 'above the fray', so to speak, by keeping aggression in check

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<sup>31</sup> The translation of J. de Romilly, tr., *La Guerre du Péloponnèse Livre I* (Paris: Société d'édition «Les Belles Lettres», 1958), 15) is especially good: A l'audition, l'absence de merveilleux dans les faits rapportés paraîtra sans doute en diminuer le charme.

and maintaining her navy, was unrealistic, these critics say. Thus there is among the cyclicists a view that Athens' policies and ideologies shifted as the war progressed, as seen from the orations of Pericles to the Mytilenian deliberations to the Melian dialogue to the debates regarding the Sicilian expedition. The point could turn out to be minor because both sides ultimately hold the view, in most cases, that Thucydides wrote his history so as to provide a means by which such disasters could be averted in the future (thus it is 'for all times'): the human will can rise up against human nature, especially before it is taken too far. The key point is exactly what the possibility of this is; for the cyclicists, it is less possible because human nature is so easily caught up in the events by ambition and the necessity to subjugate less-powerful states. For the progressivists, it is more feasible because there is the possibility of foresight, as demonstrated by Pericles. Which view Thucydides himself held is also central to scholarship on his work: was he convinced of the ideal form of democracy, or had the ravages of war, sped along by his exile and the failure of such a form, so disillusioned him that he was no longer able to subscribe to the ideal?

I will spend more time with the progressivists' point of view below, and then follow on with a discussion of it on several points with the cyclicist position. As to what Thucydides' own belief of this was, it seems to me that the reason there is such variance in interpretation is that Thucydides himself did not have a clear answer on the issue:

The real difficulty in locating the whole of Thucydides is in the fact that there is genuine ambivalence in the man, especially on questions connected with the pursuit of power, and the abuses to which its exercise can lead. Reticent but also self-aware, he makes room in his history for arguments that speak to each side of the ambivalence. But I do not believe that he ever fully resolved it, and the interpreter must resist the inclination to impose solutions on him.<sup>32</sup>

So clean distinctions cannot always be so easily made, but for the purposes of this chapter, it is hoped that the categories are helpful in understanding Thucydides' interpreters. In any case, the issue of Thucydides' 'philosophy of history' is important for the reason that his belief in the practical benefits of historical knowledge (ὠφέλιμα κρίνειν αὐτὰ ἀρκούντως ἔξει, 1.22.4)

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<sup>32</sup> G. Crane, *Thucydides and Simplicity*: 300-1, quoting P. Pouncey, see 301n11; for Crane, the tension between change and continuity is a theme throughout the *History*: Thucydides uses the theme of continuity to describe the change of society that took place, 302-3.

apparently provides the impetus for him to record events and his interpretation of their causes.<sup>33</sup>

### *History as progressive*<sup>34</sup>

The pedestrian mantra given when summarising the philosophies of history in serial fashion always includes 'the Greek view of history' which, so we are told, is 'cyclical'.<sup>35</sup> Those who advocate such a view as self-evident may be right with reference to Plato and Aristotle, but Herodotus and Thucydides have been given short shrift.<sup>36</sup> Now, it is certainly true that Thucydides was concerned to examine clearly τῶν γενομένων ... καὶ τῶν μελλόντων ποτὲ αὐθις (the things which happened...and the things which are destined to happen (or the things being intended, the things about to happen, the things to come)<sup>37</sup> again at some time). Admittedly, cyclicism (in some form) appears to be here present; however, those who see the element of progression present believe that it is against the movement of Thucydides' argument in chapters 1-23 to imply that such events will simply occur over and over.<sup>38</sup>

The reasoning is as follows: the argument as a whole implies the development of Hellas from being unpopulated (1.2.1) to the harmonious but uncultivated life of refugees (1.2.2-6) which was also of a lesser worth because of its lack of political organisation or unity (1.3.1) evidenced in the fact that it did not even have a name (1.3.2-5). That scenario was altered through the

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<sup>33</sup> For the importance of a written text over an oral performance for the purposes of study and learning, L. Kurke, 'Charting the poles of history: Herodotus and Thucydides', *Literature in the Greek and Roman World*, O. Taplin, ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 150-154; on the issue more generally, S. Yaginuma, 'Did Thucydides write for readers or hearers?', *The Passionate Intellect: Essays on the transformation of Classical traditions*, L. Ayres, ed. (London: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 131-42; for this case in tragedy, C. Segal, *Interpreting Greek Tragedy: Myth, Poetry, Text* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), 80-109.

<sup>34</sup> What I mean here essentially is 'non-cyclical' versus 'cyclical'; it would not be entirely accurate to say that if one's idea is that Thucydides' view of history is not cyclical, then it must be progressive, though that is how it seems the discussion has gone. And, of course, it is to say nothing regarding the discussion of a philosophy of history more generally, the vicissitudes of which have a very long and complex history indeed.

<sup>35</sup> E.g., A. Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 13-17; demonstrating the characteristic Christian formulation, R. A. Herrera, *Reasons for Our Rhymes: an inquiry into the philosophy of history* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001), 1-4.

<sup>36</sup> The point is also made by J. H. Finley, *Thucydides*, 82.

<sup>37</sup> I belabour the translation because it will become apparent that the varieties of translation of the verb με/λλω are significant for Greek historiography and thus for our discussion; see Liddell & Scott 1099a.

<sup>38</sup> The following sketches the shape of the history outlined in the 'Archaeology'. For the scientific nature of the section, T. J. Luce, *Greek Historians*, 74-6.

organisation by Minos of a navy (1.4) which was intended to fight piracy. Piracy characterised not only the barbarians but the Hellenes as well (1.5-1.6.2), though Thucydides reports that the profession was considered as φέροντος<sup>39</sup> . . . δέ . . . δόξης μᾶλλον (but which also is admitting of much glory) (1.5.1). This was followed by a more peaceful lifestyle, begun, as we might have guessed, by the Athenians (1.6.3), which preceded the development of walled cities defended by navies against piracy (1.7-8), still prevalent at the time, but perhaps more so among non-Hellenes (cf. 1.6.3, 1.8.1) as the Hellenes were acquiring more security and settling into their walled cities (1.8.2-3). The desire to be self-governing and not only to seek profits but to bring other smaller cities under their control (1.8.2-4) developed next, which led to competition among the varying peoples of the Hellas (1.9-1.12.3), until Athens eventually gained superiority, establishing peace and colonising Ionia and most of the islands (1.12.4). The first πατρικαὶ βασιλεῖαι (patriarchal kings) were the result and then, with τῶν χρημάτων τὴν κτῆσιν . . . ποιουμένης ('general economic progress')<sup>40</sup>, tyrants increased among the cities, which trend resulted in τῶν προσόδων μειζόνων γιγνομένων ('the public revenues becoming greater')<sup>41</sup>, leading to the building of navies and the battle for domination by such means (1.13.2-1.17). Tyranny was ended in Greece by the Spartans who had never had this form of government (1.18.1) but had for 400 years an oligarchic government (Athens had had tyrannical government, but not as long as the rest of the Hellenes); such was the state of things with the Persians, which involved Athens first and then (albeit slowly) unified the Hellas behind her (1.18.2-1.19<sup>42</sup>).

This 'Archaeology' covers more than 400 years of history and the picture with which Thucydides presents us is hardly one of unending cycles; rather, say the progressivists, it is of the evolution of Hellas. To claim that Thucydides had in view only a cyclical history is to ignore everything before

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<sup>39</sup> Incidentally, the verb Thucydides uses here can mean 'to carry something away as plunder', which, if intended, points to Thucydides' abilities as a literary stylist, interested in more than the 'reporting of facts'.

<sup>40</sup> Translated thus also by Gomme, 1.121.

<sup>41</sup> This translation captures the idea that is, to my mind, inherent here: because the wealth increased, tyrants became more prevalent (apparently as a more efficient governing form necessitated by a growing treasury), so that revenues increased (cf. the practice of the Roman Republic of appointing a dictator when facing the threat of a great battle in order to consolidate power and mobilise the state more efficiently [e.g., Livy 4.21, 22]), which allowed for the building of larger navies, which continued the whole escalation.

the seemingly 'cyclical statement', an interpretation which, they hold, would be irresponsible: a view allowing more nuance is surely requisite.

It is commonly recognised that, throughout his history, Thucydides shows his rejection of the intervention of the gods and chance in history. There are causes for this that will come up below with reference to the philosophical ideas behind the speeches. The observation is important to make now, however, because Thucydides' dependence upon natural explanations and his complex distinction from the Greek tragedians whose central theme it was to have their characters coming to terms with their inevitable destiny and more toward atomism as a view of the universe that 'struck people as a more honourable and decent world-view than a grovelling and superstitious terror of the gods'<sup>43</sup>, points us clearly to the central role of human volition for Thucydides. At key points in the narrative, Thucydides leads us to believe that things are tragically (in the most general sense) altered because of the choices of Athenian democrats who act less and less out of the Periclean ideal (2.35-46, 60-64) as the war progresses.

A few examples could be given<sup>44</sup>; I choose the Mytilenian revolt because it can be argued from both sides. To the progressivist, Thucydides gives no indication that there was any inevitability in the decision regarding how to punish the Mytilenians. Rather, he sets the scene as a reconsideration of what some had begun to consider a brutal sentence (3.40.2) as there were some who were against the harshness of the punishment that had been suggested and perhaps seemed inevitable, in light of the seriousness of the crime as argued by Cleon and, though certainly in a more tempered way, Diodotus (3.36-48). The harsher sentence was argued for by Cleon, through whom Thucydides reveals the changing character of Athenian leaders from the Periclean view of power for the general good to power that seeks domination by corresponding redress, tit for tat, as it were (3.40.4, 8). Indeed,

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<sup>42</sup> Chapter 19 begins to account for the differences between Sparta and Athens with reference to the Persian War.

<sup>43</sup> M. Midgley, *The Ethical Primate: humans, freedom, and morality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 30; the statement comes as part of her argument as to the beginnings of the 'reductive enterprise' in modern science that has seen its rise to 'imperialism', which has caused it to be adopted by the social sciences, notably by sociobiologists such as E. O. Wilson who have thus turned the human moral tendency to questions of neurobiology rather than to ethics. The extent to which Thucydides influenced such a movement would be fascinating, but is beyond the scope of this thesis.

<sup>44</sup> I have in mind here especially the missed opportunities for peace (e.g., the chief perpetrators of which were presented to be Brasidas and Cleon, 5.16.1) and the Athenian decision for Sicilian aggression.

Pericles was not against defending the polis and her interests as had been expressed so far (1.73-78), but advised undertaking the war only because he thought it had been forced upon them and with particular strictures (1.144).<sup>45</sup> The subtle difference that begins to appear, however, is that whereas for Pericles democracy's fostering of the love of beauty and knowledge without loss of vitality (2.40.1)<sup>46</sup> is an important feature, for Cleon showing pity, except in circumstances directly in the interest of the state, delight in eloquent arguments, and reasonableness or fairness (3.40.2; cf. Diodotus' protest against the same, 3.48.1) are to be avoided as injurious to political interests. The contrast is even sharper in the following incident in which the Spartans execute every Plataean man and enslave Plataean women (3.68), showing by the contrast how Athens is tottering on the brink of failure by her choices and may eventually fall prey to impotent forms of democracy, exemplified in the Spartans' mock-trial of the Plataeans, and political expediency, forewarned by the Spartans' lack of justice in light of the usefulness of pleasing the Thebans.<sup>47</sup>

With the progressivist's high view of human volition<sup>48</sup> in the face of the tragic tradition's place for fate or Homeric divine activity, it is difficult to argue that, for Thucydides, history was simply destined to be a cycle. Further, in view of uncontrollable natural disasters such as plague, which occurred in an unpredictable fashion and not as a result of providential favouritism, it is not possible, they would argue, to so conceive of a Thucydidean history.<sup>49</sup> What seems the more appropriate view is that humanity progresses, but

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<sup>45</sup> On the problematic nature of Pericles, see T. J. Luce, *Greek Historians*, 95, 96; Thucydides' own claim is that it was under him that Athens was at her greatest (2.65); admittedly he was caught in the wheels of the escalating situation himself (see Luginbill, *Thucydides on War*, 220-21), though he is supposed paradoxically to have stood above it with his quality of 'foresight'. For Pericles' view of power in the Funeral Oration, G. Crane, *Thucydides and Simplicity*, 312-325; his position can be summarised in his criticism of Hannah Arendt for looking to the Periclean oration as creating a space for 'human plurality': 'if [it]...provides Arendt with a starting point for her work, Thucydides and his Perikles [*sic*] reveal a habit of thought that would develop into the totalitarianism that haunted Arendt', 322.

<sup>46</sup> See the discussion of the phrase in Gomme, 2.119-21: 'the comparison is with other Greeks, Boetians and Peloponnesians, who would think a love of learning to be as inconsistent with courage as political discussion with decisiveness of action', both of which, in the beginning of the war, Athens showed herself to be no small possessor.

<sup>47</sup> I have here discussed only the revelatory character of the passage as regards the 'intellectual state' of the Athenians as it concerns progressivists. For the wider implications of the Mitylenian affair (which does not make these points), T. J. Luce, *Greek Historians*, 76-9.

<sup>48</sup> A further point in a passage already referenced that is helpful here is that of Thucydides' presentation of the denouement of Pericles' deliberations regarding entering the war: μάλλον γὰρ πεφόβηται τὰς οικείας ἡμῶν ἀμαρτίας ἢ τὰς τῶν ἐναντίων διανοίας.

because of poor decisions by human beings as a result of yielding to the weaknesses of human nature that can be driven in crisis by the passions of envy and ambition (3.84<sup>50</sup>), devolution or decline occurs, which then may come round to progress through human volition, and so forth. This links us forward to a Platonic notion of cyclical history, if we see these falls and 're-progressions' as cycles.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, according to the progressivists, it is more accurate to say that humanity and social form (and thus history, as history, for Thucydides, is necessarily political) progress<sup>52</sup> until they reach a point where power is too enticing, honour and 'the ordinary conventions of civilised life' (3.84) are shed to accommodate the seeking after vain-glory, and the cycle begins again. The key point for them here is that such a 'cycle' is not simply something to which humans must yield as Fate or divine ordinance, even in the context of natural disaster, but can be observed and responded to accordingly by those who have the Periclean virtue of foresight (as Thucydides himself claims to, 1.1). Progress, then, is what was central to Thucydides' conception of political unity<sup>53</sup>, and it can be seen throughout that internal fighting, coupled with lack of resources to hand, ultimately caused the defeat of Athens (2.65).

### *History as cyclical*

To demonstrate this interpretation of Thucydides without simply parroting the above but with the opposite point of view under review, let us examine the view of the Mytilenian discussion, pointing up the essential differences. Marc Cogan<sup>54</sup> calls the above arguments, that Athens is falling away from an ideal democracy and that Thucydides intends to contrast her with Sparta in the adjacent Plataea account, 'moral explanations' that 'will not, unfortunately, bear scrutiny in light of other events in the history'. He argues that Thucydides does not emphasise the Plataea account and that it is

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<sup>49</sup> For the non-cyclical view of history with reference to the adverb *ποτέ*, T. J. Luce, *The Greek Historians*, 87.

<sup>50</sup> Luce discusses 3.82-84 in some detail: *Greek Historians*, 85-86, especially his reference to *nomos* and *physis*.

<sup>51</sup> For the role of destruction within the progressivist position, A. Herman, *Idea of Decline*, 26-27, wherein he discusses Gibbon.

<sup>52</sup> For the likelihood of the idea of progress both in the *History's* Archaeology and in Athenian cultural life of the mid-fifth century, see Finley, *Thucydides*, 82-4; for the relation of this to Platonic cycles, esp. 82, 82n8.

<sup>53</sup> For this theme of progress and its connection to political unity, see Finley, *Thucydides*, 82-93.

<sup>54</sup> *The Human Thing: the speeches and principles of Thucydides' History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 59.

'extremely difficult' to demonstrate any 'progression of brutalisation'<sup>55</sup>. The assumption is of the centrality of the 'human thing': that which causes human beings to act in accordance with the passions and not with reason, which he attempts to show as a reason that the speeches as acts of public deliberation do not always follow 'reason', but must be analysed rhetorically. So, if Thucydides intended to show 'progression of brutality' or the decline from the ideal of the civilised life of democracy as I have put it for the progressivists<sup>56</sup>, he would, apparently in Cogan's evaluation, surely give successive accounts with ever-increasing levels of violence<sup>57</sup>. The cyclicists would no doubt respond that the so-called moral explanation would not necessarily require this method because it seems much more a process characterised by confusion. When the Athenians took Mende, apparently their 'good behaviour' (as referred to by Cogan) was that they did not massacre the town; the generals found it difficult to restrain the soldiers from doing so, which marks the conflict: the leaders are still maintaining a sense of justice, while the masses are slipping further. Therefore, at this point for the progressivist, Cogan's argument would not hold up.

What Cogan is concerned to demonstrate is the shift in policy demonstrated by what he sees to be the three phases of the war: the movement from individual fear to state mobilisation, the ideological rationalisations of the situation, and the escalation of violence and uncharacteristic action brought on by the desire to survive<sup>58</sup>. The speeches thus become the forum in which the individual becomes national; they are the place of public deliberation and can be examined by rhetorical analysis. From this point of view, then, there is not a 'falling away' from ideals but rather simply an evolution or development of policy that reflects the changing circumstances. The changing circumstances are elevating the crisis and causing Athens to act at variance with Pericles' orations before the war. For the cyclicist, this is no problem because Pericles' view was not realistic about

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 60

<sup>56</sup> As does Finley on the point of Athenian decline and Gomme on the contrast with Sparta, who are the ones, it turns out, to receive Cogan's criticism, 268nn15, 16.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 268n17.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-69.

the conditions of war and the strain which such a crisis puts on humans to act out of their ambitious or fearful human nature.<sup>59</sup>

Regarding the idea of the decline of Athenian democracy, R. D. Luginbill discusses the work of J. H. Finley who, he argues, was attempting to prove the unity of the history against the 'analysts' who were set upon solving the 'Thucydides question' by locating the original passages in the history. Luginbill, whilst admitting that 'there is much in [Finley's]...study that is insightful and helpful', criticises that, because of his defensive task, 'he does not seek to explicate Thucydides' system for its own sake'<sup>60</sup>. This Eltonian ideal<sup>61</sup> of 'history for its own sake' is very attractive, but one wonders whether there can be such a thing. To place on this an ideological label such as 'doing history for its own sake' or not is problematic.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, Luginbill advocates a 'synthesis'<sup>63</sup> both of analyst and unitarian positions and of 'optimist' and 'pessimist' ones, the former validating 'human planning', the latter believing that it is 'futile' and that the discovery of historical patterns in the history is misleading<sup>64</sup>. Luginbill's 'optimist' is similar to my 'progressivist' in that, behind the progressivist's view of Thucydides' history, there is a strong sense of the place for human volition, even in view of 'uncontrollable human nature' for the simple reason that one can see the progression of history and break the catastrophic direction in which it appears to be moving with foresight and resolute action. Luginbill's 'pessimist' is similar to my 'cyclicist' because, with a view of humans as enslaved to the ambitions of their nature, history is destined to repeat itself as humans are relatively helpless to dam the flood, as it were, arguably being always possessed of the same human nature. His advocating of a synthesis of his own characterisation of the positions seems to be a move in the right

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<sup>59</sup> See Luginbill's discussion of *orge*, the impulses of human nature (*physis*) and *gnome* (human planning, design), *Thucydides on War*, 53-60.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>61</sup> Elton, *Return*, 64-66.

<sup>62</sup> Elton, *ibid.*, concludes his Cook Lectures with the following exhortation: 'Understand the past in its own terms and convey it to the present in terms designed to be comprehended. And then ask those willing to listen to attend to the real lessons of the past, the lessons which teach us to behave as adults, experienced in the ways of the world, balanced in judgement, and sceptical in the face of all the miracle-mongers', 73. It is strange that studying the past 'on its own terms' teaches us lessons that make us look strangely like Sir Geoffrey Elton himself; cf. K. Jenkins' criticism, *On "What is History?"*, 66-96.

<sup>63</sup> Luginbill, *Thucydides on War*, 20n17.

<sup>64</sup> The inanity of no patterns would seem more characteristic of a committee than a singular author, but even a compendium is scrutinised and arranged by an editor.

direction, if we are not to be caught in perpetual mad dashes between the two poles.

It might appear, therefore, that Luginbill transcends my categories. It does not seem to be so, however, because, even in light of his proposal of a 'synthesis', he holds that

nothing in his work suggests that Thucydides felt the Athenians capable of or in any way willing to alter their national character to conform to such a shift [from a policy of imperial expansion to 'benign neutrality']. Indeed, the functioning of that character...does not even take place in the realm of what we would term rational decision-making. In the absence of a nation-wide reevaluation of attitudes on the part of the Athenians or the Spartans, from Thucydides' perspective, the Peloponnesian War, at any rate, was "inevitable".<sup>65</sup>

The question the passage intimates is at the heart of the positions as I describe them: when is change possible? For the cyclicist, any time is almost too late, for in the throes of passion, the human nature throws off the laws of civilised life and seeks its own satisfaction. For the progressivist, with (early) historical education, one can clearly see the 'signs of the times' and, through human volition, turn the tide and avert destruction.

The interpreter's belief in the influence of Hippocratic medicinal science is significant at this very point.<sup>66</sup> Luginbill argues that Thucydides sees war as analogous to the plague in that it causes the long-constructed and

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<sup>65</sup> *Thucydides on War*, 220-21.

<sup>66</sup> For the relevance of Hippocratic medicine, C. N. Cochrane, *Thucydides and the Science of History* (London: OUP, 1929); Cochrane positions himself against Cornford's appeals to categories of tragedy rather than 'science', Bury's doubt of the scientific quality of Greek history, and Shotwell's criticism that ancient historians neglected social and economic themes that are central to 'modern scientific history' and argues that "Thucydides had the assured faith of a scientist because he was a scientist, because, in fact, he was inspired by contact with a department of positive science which in his day had succeeded in extricating itself from the coils of cosmology [characteristic of other pre-Socratics such as Heraclitus or Permenides], and which by means of a method adequate to the most rigid modern demands was already advancing conclusions which were recognised as valid and immensely significant for human life', 3; see esp 1-3. For a more general discussion, Luce, *The Greek Historians*, 82-6.

Finley, *Thucydides*, 68-72, sees the predictive stance as more a result of the Sophistic argument from likelihood than from Hippocratic science. Taking off from Finley's critique (pp. 70-1), it seems quite like the shift toward relativism that might be connected with the shattering of confident scientific knowledge of the physical world associated with Einstein, but one wonders whether cultural relativism is a direct result or a more general shift of consciousness that may have other explanations. Finley points up similar moves toward the specific in Sophoclean tragedy, Ictinus on the Parthenon, Meton on the calendar, Polyclitus on symmetry, and Hippodamus' urban planning, 71.

For the connection between sophists and medical practitioners, A. W. Nightingale, 'Sages, sophists, and philosophers: Greek wisdom literature', *Literature in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, O. Taplin, ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2000).

For a more recent example, Luginbill, *Thucydides on War*, 7-12, 21-35 argues that, from Thucydides' point of view, 'war is...a disease', 11.

civilised restraints on human behaviour to be discarded; in such a disastrous situation, human beings and nations follow their own character (*fu/siβ*), depending upon how they are inclined to behave on a continuum between two poles, unreflective action or paralysing intellectual consideration, based either on emboldening hope or crippling fear. That which drives human nature (*φύσις*) is either imperialism or freedom. Hence, that which allows that history can repeat itself is the very feature of human nature itself. The same disasters that pressure humans to extreme behaviour (based on national character) are unpredictable, however. In addition, he holds, drawing as well on the sophists, 'learning history's lessons and avoiding mistakes before the fact'<sup>67</sup> to be the goal of the history. If human will can therefore be determinative based on the educative nature of history, it is questionable how war is simply as inevitable and uncontrollable as a plague. To my mind, the ambiguity of the issue again points to Thucydides' own indecision.

It is worth citing one example at some length to show how Luginbill works this out:

According to Diodotus [in the Mytilenian debate, discussed above], men are led into dangerous activities by a variety of circumstances under the influence of their impulsive side (*orge*); supported by hope, desire holds sway over mankind and is wont to take the lead in human activity; with the help of hope, desire contrives schemes that bring disastrous results; one cannot, therefore, constrain *physis* from doing anything it is eagerly set upon doing: [quoting 3.45.3-7] "All men are prone to make mistakes, publicly and privately, and no law can prevent it...Standing in company with all his fellows, every man is prone to make unreasonable estimates of his own abilities".<sup>68</sup>

Now, the progressivist would argue that far from abandoning the entire project to the uncontrollable *physis*, Thucydides' very point is that, with his history as a guide, such tides can be turned before the nature succumbs to imperialism or freedom. The key here is *standing in company with all his fellows*, echoing Thucydides' scorn for the fickleness of the mob (e.g., 2.65). When once a person can learn from the general lessons of history, he can stand apart from the mob, as did Pericles, who was able even to discipline the Athenian masses without losing his ability to govern. Was the war inevitable? After a certain time. The point, it seems to me, is that, in a way somewhat similar to Hippocratic prognosis, the historian recognises with foresight the pattern of

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<sup>67</sup> Luginbill, *Thucydides on War*, 23.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

history and expounds upon it; however, for the person reading this history and exercising its intent, the responsibility is to recognise the character of the situation and to avoid disaster. In this case, war cannot only be 'a disease'. It, like the plague, at one time is threatening; but, just as Thucydides writes of the symptoms of the plague and does not say how it should be treated, so he writes of the features that caused the war so that it could be avoided in the first place (if one recognises the symptoms of plague, one should avoid symptomatic persons).<sup>69</sup>

Thus we can see that the question of medical explanation, which, too, has been an issue of some contention for at least a century, points up the paradoxical nature of Thucydides' philosophy of history and thus of what he believed himself to be doing when he wrote his history.

### The method of the speeches of Thucydides

We cannot tease out the intricacies of these positions here to determine precisely which one is a more faithful interpretation of Thucydides. However, whether one holds to a cyclical or a progressive philosophy of history or synthesises the views in some fashion, the shape of events which we might reasonably assume will be repeated in the future (whether those repetitions are cycles or unpredictable atrophy and rebuilding) are those which can be seen within the limit that Thucydides sets on his investigation, the war between Athens and Sparta (1.1.1). The multifaceted nature of the causes of the events this history records are made obvious throughout the work, but Thucydides explicitly states the cause at the outset: τὴν μὲν γὰρ ἀληθεστάτην δὲ λόγῳ, τοὺς Ἀθηναίους ἡγοῦμαι μεγάλους γιγνομένους καὶ φόβον παρέχοντας τοῖς Λακεδαιμονίοις ἀναγκάσαι ἐς τὸ πολεμεῖν (1.23.6). With this, then, we are thrust into the intrigues of the politics of Attica and the Peloponnesus as they are relevant to the war begun by the Theban invasion of Plataea in 431 BCE (2.2).

Thucydides is not, it is agreed by all, concerned that this particular war will again be waged or that these particular circumstances will again appear as such; such a view would assume short-sightedness, a trait not worthy of

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<sup>69</sup> But note the hesitation regarding the possibility of a cure, L. Kurke, 'Charting', 153.

our historian. What he does record through the interplay of event and speech is the response of Athens and Sparta to extraordinary times, characterised by war and natural disaster. Human nature being what it is, disposed to disregard civilised laws and turn to ambitious ends, those who will best be able to live with contingencies will be those who demonstrate foresight and intelligence that include neither a penchant for hasty action nor a hesitancy to do what is prudent (3.83). Those who can do such are not unlike physicians of the Hippocratic school who were able to see the outward symptoms of disease, make a prognosis of the course the sickness would follow, and, having successfully predicted, be able to find the right moment to give treatment to save the life of the patient. Luce's suggestion of one way to read the speeches, taken as such, as though they were reports by patients, can be helpful, for we are allowed into the inner workings of events whose influences are often unseen ambitions. There must be great care taken with this, however, because we are not dealing directly with science per se; the limited usage of Hippocratic terminology by Thucydides could be metaphorical and may not be intended to indicate that he saw the nature of the task of foresight to be the same as the empirical observation of symptoms, followed by the application of methodical treatment.<sup>70</sup> We can say that at the very least (i.e., it is difficult, as shown in n33, to conclude simply that the speeches are indicative of something like 'medical symptoms') Thucydides in the speeches gives us an intellectual history<sup>71</sup> that is indicative of the flow of events and the shifts of consciousness that take place as a result of the extraordinary circumstances in which the historical cast of characters find themselves.

The idea of 'intellectual history' is agreeable to both sides, though the ultimate purpose in discerning such a history varies. For the cyclicist, intellectual history shows the change of policy of the Athenians, with no indication whether this is good or bad—it simply 'is'.<sup>72</sup> For the progressivist, it shows the decline from the Athenian ideal from the height of Periclean

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<sup>70</sup> See above, n33.

<sup>71</sup> H. -P. Stahl, 'Speeches and Course of Events in Books Six and Seven of Thucydides', *The Speeches in Thucydides*, 60-77, argues that in the speeches Thucydides records an intellectual and emotional history of the speakers and those whom they represent, esp. 69-76 with reference to speeches regarding the Sicilian War.

<sup>72</sup> For an example of this view, Cogan, *Human Thing*, esp 120-69, 173-96, and, regarding the specific function of the speeches as 'public deliberation', 197-254.

speeches through the faltering with the Mytilenians, the fall with the Milesians, and the destruction in the Sicilian debates.

Whatever one's belief regarding the purpose of the speeches, this intellectual history is revealed clearly in them as Thucydides creates them, as I will attempt to demonstrate. I am obviously here assuming that the historian did, indeed, craft the speeches himself and is not recording them *ipsissima verba*. I do so because he tells his readers as much (the Warner translation runs thus):

In this history I have made use of set speeches some of which were delivered just before and others during the war. I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches which I listened to myself and my various informants have experienced the same difficulty; so my method has been, while keeping as closely to the general sense of the words that were actually used (τῆς ξυμπάσης γνώμης τῶν ἀλθῶς λεχθέντων), to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for (τὰ δέοντα μάλιστα εἰπεῖν) by each situation' (1.22.1).

Hammond<sup>73</sup> sees here, wrongly in my view, a distinction between 'on the one hand the actual words and general sense of the speaker on a particular occasion and on the other the arguments which, according to Thucydides' own judgement, would have expressed the essentials of the situation—*ta deonta*'<sup>74</sup>. Thucydides seems rather to be saying that it was his general policy to express 'the essentials', 'that which was necessary' in a situation, whilst (at the same time) keeping to the general sense of the actuality of the speech, known to him both directly and through the mediation of informants. One wonders what in Hammond's own translation gives him this idea<sup>75</sup>, though J. H. Finley's seems much more accurate: 'As for the speeches delivered...I have...made the speakers express primarily what in my own opinion was called for under the circumstances, at the same time keeping as close as possible to the general import of what was actually said'<sup>76</sup>. The participle ἐχομένῳ is at issue: Hammond's translation places a coordinate conjunction with the phrase 'I have kept', which seems to me suspect; I take the participle

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<sup>73</sup> N. G. L. Hammond, 'The Particular and the Universal in the Speeches of Thucydides, with special reference to that of Hermocrates at Gela', in *The Speeches in Thucydides*, 49-59. *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, vol. 121 (2001), noted on a leading page this most distinguished classicist's passing last year.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>75</sup> It runs thus: 'The speeches are written as in my personal judgement each set of speakers would have expressed best the essentials about the circumstances, and I kept as close as possible to the general policy of what was actually said' (p. 49).

as expressive of contemporaneous action, as do also the translations of Finley and Warner. Thus Thucydides is describing one task, that of composing speeches for which he places on himself the burden of holding to the general sense in line with the 'real event', whilst (at the same time) expressing that which was necessary; in expressing the things he sees as necessary, he is abiding simultaneously by the general sense.

'The things necessary' (τὰ δέοντα) remain obscure. In Hammond's schema, 'these latter arguments [τὰ δέοντα, which he has taken as distinct from the 'general sense'], being formulated "according to Thucydides' judgement," certainly included universal statements as well as *ad hoc dicta*; for it was the universal deductions to be made from particular occasions which interested him as an historian. They were the salt of his history'<sup>77</sup>. The problems here are two. First, the 'general sense' is left out of the shaping hand of the historian; he only shaped the universal and '*ad hoc dicta*'; but certainly it must be admitted that Thucydides, whilst 'keeping as closely as possible to the general sense', which sense, he admits, is constructed from his own memory and those of his informants, fractious as they had proved themselves to be, set out to 'make the speakers say' τὰ δέοντα. Here is where the importance of the above hair-splitting comes to the fore: it is all one action, that is to say that the whole of the speech, whether reconstructed from memory (though adhering to the general sense) or expressing what in Thucydides' opinion was necessary, is created by the historian, albeit through apparently reliable witnesses and even through his own acquaintance with Hermocrates, a point that seems to me correct and that we can appreciate as Hammond's contribution here<sup>78</sup>. Secondly, when it is assumed that what is 'essential' is *the* subjective element in Thucydides' history<sup>79</sup>, it becomes quite easy, as Hammond shows, to think that what is the general sense (=objective) can be separated from it. So one begins scouring the speeches for that which is Thucydides' own placement of words on the lips of his speakers and what it is that they 'actually said', general though it may be. This has been the character of the discourse about Thucydides' speeches, but it ignores the fact that Thucydides himself obviously desired to make clear: because of the

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<sup>76</sup> Finley, *Thucydides*, 94-5; see also p. 95n30.

<sup>77</sup> Hammond, 49-50.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>79</sup> *Op cit.*

difficulty of remembering the 'precise words used' he will stick to the 'general sense' whilst expressing that which he deems to be necessary.<sup>80</sup>

This is to say nothing to tarnish Thucydides' reputation for or concern with accuracy. He has expressed, perhaps as well as any historian with his foresight and good judgement could, what his critical engagement with the events of his time compelled him to write. This is also to say nothing yet of the nature of the relationship between the universal and particular, which topic Hammond's essay attempts to address. It is to question the demonising of the 'subjective' over against the purely 'objective', a distinction to which we will return shortly. Further, I hope that it sets us on a proper foundation for approaching the speeches of Thucydides, namely, they are entirely his creations and therefore are necessarily related to the intellectual history pertinent to his day and, to the extent to which he was aware of it (which I believe he was), the intellectual milieu of the events about which he wrote.

The speeches, far from being rendered 'useless' or 'untrue' by their supposedly hopeless subjectivity, are actually expressive of the intellectual backdrop on which and about which Thucydides wrote. This backdrop becomes central to the whole history as the narrative and the speeches interact with one another, through which interaction Thucydides demonstrates what to his mind are the triumphs and frailties of the human person and of political institutions as they work in complex interaction with each other and, together with the flow of historical events interpreted as progressive, cyclical, or synthetic, produce the general truths of both. At least two issues arise here. The narrative and speeches, in their complex interaction, beg to be considered, as does the relation between the universal and the particular. We turn to the former first.

Thucydides does not claim to record the general sense of events; his language about the narrative, demonstrating a stark contrast from the Herodotean method of laying out several viewpoints and declaring an even somewhat provisional judgement<sup>81</sup>, allows us to assume much more 'accuracy to what really happened':

(Warner's translation) And with regard to my factual reporting of the events of the war (τὰ δ' ἔργα τῶν πραχθέντων ἐν τῷ πολέμῳ) I have made it a principle not to write down the first story that came my

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<sup>80</sup> See further Gomme, *Commentary* 1.140, whose argument, incidentally, is similar to mine.

<sup>81</sup> For the movement of history to written narrative, C. Calame, *The Craft of Poetic Speech in Ancient Greece* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 75-96, esp. 93.

way, and not even to be guided by my own general impressions (ὡς ἐμοὶ ἐδόκει); either I was present myself at the events which I have described or else I heard them from eye-witnesses whose reports I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible (ὅσον δυνατόν ἀκριβείᾳ). Not that even so the truth was easy to discover (Ἐπιπόνως δὲ ἠύρισκετο): different eye-witnesses give different accounts (οὐ ταῦτ᾽ ἀπὸ τῶν αὐτῶν ἔλεγον), speaking out of partiality for one side or the other (ἀλλ' ὡς ἐκατέρων τις εὐνοίας) or else from imperfect memories (ἢ μνήμης ἔχοι) (1.22.2-4).

The methodological difference between speeches and narrative, to which I hinted above, is clear but not exactly opposite. He was placing his own words into the mouths of his speakers, though always holding to the general sense of what must have been said. With the events, however, he was describing as accurately as possible the things which actually happened, for which things he had to rely both on his own memory but also on his critical evaluation of witnesses who had differing viewpoints. Gomme describes the contrast of the speeches and events in this way:

If he was to give a speech as such at all, the *words*, the style, that is the *literary* quality (as opposed to the historical content) must be his own, and to that extent he was substituting his own personality for that of the speaker; there was no such *substitution* in his account of actions, even though the style is still his own; for here style takes the place of that of his *informants*, in the speeches it takes the place of that of the real performers.<sup>82</sup>

We thus have the impression that he has gone to all lengths to record the events as they actually happened, which idea seems to lend itself to an objective claim: the narrative of events is 'more true' than the speeches. Such a judgement would be too hasty, however, for two reasons. First, it does not consider what is really meant by 'true' or 'accurate'. Secondly, it does not consider the fact that the events, accurate as they may be with reference to 'what really happened', are interpreted by their very arrangement in the narrative itself. The most obvious example is the slant of the whole history, and thus the cause of the war, toward the political. The reason given by Thucydides, as singular as it is clear, is the growth of Athenian power (τοὺς Ἀθηναίους ἡγοῦμαι μεγάλους γιγνομένους) and the fear it caused among the Lacedaemonians (φόβον παρέχοντας τοῖς Λακεδαιμονίοις), precipitated principally by Sparta's ally Corinth in the incidents regarding Corcyra, a

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-41, all italics his.

Peloponnesian ally who desired to shift her allegiances to Attica, and Potidaea, a colony of Corinth which was facing forced membership in the Athenian alliance. Thus the issue being raised was of the expansion of Athenian power. In the interest of preserving her own power, then, Sparta declared war on Athens, so the story goes. Whether this view, notably proffered by an Athenian—admittedly a disillusioned one though one wonders whether he would still have believed in Pericles' idyllic democracy given better human democrats—is the right or, more accurately, the only proper view, may never be known. It does, however, produce a decidedly 'biased' interpretation of the entire story. This is not to fault Thucydides, who was certainly, even to an extent greater than his own nature, a limited human agent<sup>83</sup>, as is any historian.

To return, then, to the former caution against too hasty judgement of the difference between Thucydides' treatment of the speeches and 'narrative', it should be noted that in broaching the subject of 'truth', we are getting at the topic which is at the heart of this thesis.<sup>84</sup> For our purposes at this point of the thesis, we will assume that the interest in the 'truth' of the speeches of Thucydides is usually a question about the degree to which the speeches as composed by Thucydides correspond to the speeches as they were actually given. It is a question of 'accuracy': in this case, we must agree with critics who deny that they are 'accurate'.<sup>85</sup> But this is not such a triumph because Thucydides says as much! So the conversation is really misguided. The question of objectivity asks: what were the 'real events' and is Thucydides faithful to them? We cannot here look into this question for the issues behind it lie, as stated above, at the centre of this thesis and will take its full length to explore. However, for what it is worth, we can examine what he actually states in the text he will set out to do, and whether he really accomplishes it.

As seen above in the discussion of the Archaeology, Thucydides has set out to compose his speeches, whilst holding to the general sense of what

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<sup>83</sup> A. W. Gomme, *Commentary* 1.25-29.

<sup>84</sup> The theme is central also to historiography. Elton: 'The truth we seek is the truth of the event and all that surrounds it... (*Return*, 30); Lloyd: "'truth" is not an absolute but should be seen in more pragmatic terms [but cf. 24] as the growing plausibility that results from a gradual convergence between our philosophical and methodological frameworks, our theories, our hypotheses, and data. Coherence between all these is highly desirable but never fully attainable' (*Structures*, 157).

<sup>85</sup> Note, e.g., Collingwood, *Idea*, 30.

was said (as over against the 'precise words'), making his speakers say what he thought to be necessary (τὰ δέοντα). But what is the meaning of 'general sense' and what are τὰ δέοντα?

The idea of general sense seems straightforward enough; in a given situation where the events were such and the circumstances were so, and given the memories of Thucydides himself, his informants, and perhaps even the speakers themselves, Thucydides crafted a speech, the outlines of which cohered with a sense of what was 'actually said'. This can be said to be so because they cohered with both the specific memories of the participants and or what would have been called for by Thucydides' imagination, experiencing the logical flow of events again, as he must have, after the events had run their course.<sup>86</sup> The general sense, therefore, is not the 'precise words', but is Thucydides' creation of what was more than likely said on the occasion.

When Thucydides makes his speakers say τὰ δέοντα, which, he tells us he made part of the speeches at the same time so that it all comprises one coherent speech (i.e., so that we cannot work through a speech selecting what was the 'general sense' (which, in the refuted scheme above, =objective) and the 'things necessary' (again, =subjective), which distinction could actually only be between the 'precise words' and a subjective element<sup>87</sup>), we are immediately thrown into an awareness of an element of his history that makes it even more rich than we had realised before.

Seeing this element requires a context, for which I have chosen the Melian Dialogue (5.85-113). The episode with which the speech is connected occurs immediately prior to the Athenian decision to sail to Sicily and after the Athenian defeat at Mantinea in the sixteenth year of the war (418-17 BCE). Alcibiades takes captive 300 Argive citizens who are suspected to be pro-Spartan in that Spartan colony (5.84). Thucydides tells us that they were not willing to obey Athens (τῶν δ' Αθηναίων οὐκ ἤθελον ὑπακούειν) as the other islands had (5.84.2). Seeing that the island had remained neutral in the war, Athens tried to force the alliance of the Melians by laying waste their land (5.84.2, 3) and so provoked them to open war. Before this took place,

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<sup>86</sup> For a discussion on the date of composition of the *History*, Finley, *Three Essays*, 118-169, esp. 118-19, 121, 122-28, 162-69.

<sup>87</sup> Fundamentally, this is not a new argument; for a summary of prevalent positions regarding this, *ibid.*, 118-121.

however, the Athenians sent an envoy to speak with the Melians. The result is a dialogue between the envoy of Athens and the commissioners of the Melians.

A brief summary of the dialogue follows. The Athenians accuse the Melians of disallowing a mass audience because of the Melians' fear that their people might be persuaded and thus 'led astray'. The Athenians propose, then, to discuss the issue of alliance point by point, allowing the Melian commission to object at whichever point they wish to do (5.85). The Melians charge the Athenians with prejudging the issue, demonstrated by their threat of force; either way, if the Melians are right, there will be war, and if they are shown to be wrong, they will be slaves (5.86). The Athenians chastise their suspicions about the future and urge them to consult for the salvation of their city ἐκ τῶν παρόντων καὶ ὧν ὄρατε ('in the present, even of which you are aware', 5.87). The Melians agree to proceed with the discussion (5.88) and the Athenians begin by claiming that they will use no beautiful phrases (ὀνομάτων καλῶν), though they do slip in the example that they could have used, gaining victory over the Persians! The Athenians presume that they aim to accomplish what is possible ἐξ ὧν ἐκάτεροι ἀλθῶς φρονοῦμεν ('from the real thoughts of each one of us' (C. F. Smith)) because δίκαια ('just things') are judged ἐν τῷ ἀνθρωπείῳ λογῷ ('in human discourse/argument') from equal necessity on both sides (ἀπὸ τῆς ἴσης ἀνάγκης, 5.89). The Melians concede that they must speak of necessity or expediency (ἀνάγκης) because the Athenians have so spoken, advocating what is τὸ ξυμφέρον ('the' 'useful', or 'expedient', or 'advantageous') and not τὸ δίκαιον ('the just' or 'the right') and not ruling by the principle of the common good (τὸ κοινὸν ἀγαθόν), thinking, though not having proven, that what is equitable is also just, which is in the Melians' interest in so far as if the Athenians are defeated, they will be an example of the error of their thinking (5.90).

The Athenians respond that it is those who rise up against their rulers and not the rulers themselves who are a terror and that it is for the benefit of their empire (ὠφελία...τῆς ἡμετέρας ἀρξῆς) and of their city that they have come. Further, they will make clear (δηλώσομεν) to the Melians that they desire to have dominion (ἄρξαι) over them without troubling themselves for the advantage of both parties (5.91). The Melians question their logic (5.92);

the Athenians see it as to the benefit of the Melians that they do not destroy them (5.93); the Melians indirectly ask for peace and friendship (5.94); Athens refuses saying that if they were to accept their friendship it would be a sign of weakness (ἀσθενείας) and a concession of their power (5.95). The Melians question this logic again (5.96) and the Athenians counter that their subjects are not possessed nor dispossessed of justice<sup>88</sup> but submit because of power (κατὰ δύναμιν) and because they see that the Athenians do not act out of fear. The Athenians see the security which Melos would provide as a benefit (5.97); the Melians respond that, because the Athenians are making them resort to arguments from what is advantageous, they must argue and attempt to persuade the Athenians of what is to their (the Melians) advantage and question whether the Athenians will not make more enemies by treating them in this way (5.98). The Athenians disagree, stating that they are not threatened by those who have as of yet not been their enemies (5.99). The Melians counter by attempting to turn the Athenians' argument against them by saying that it is the greatest showing of cowardice and baseness (κακότης καὶ δειλία) not to face every option before submitting (5.100).

The Athenians dismiss a question of honour or upright character (ἀνδραγαθίας) and say that the issue is really saving themselves in the face of those who are of much greater strength (τούς κρείσσονας, 5.101). The Melians warn the Athenians that the fortunes (τὰς τύχας) of wars can be impartial and so they will have hope (5.102). Hope is foolish in that it leaves no natural resources after her true nature is found out, the Athenians respond; thus they implore the Melians to save themselves by human means (ἀνθρωπιῶς) whilst they still are able (5.103). The Melian response is that it is their belief that divine fortune (τῆ...τύχῃ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ) will be their advantage and that their alliance with Sparta will make up for their deficiency of resource (5.104). The Athenians also expect divine favour, for 'in no respect are we departing from men's observances regarding that which pertains to the divine or from their desires regarding that which pertains to themselves' (Warner); indeed, they argue, the gods and humanity both rule wherever they have power ὑπὸ φύσεως ἀναγκαίως ('by necessity of [their] nature'). They claim that they did

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<sup>88</sup> Warner's translation runs thus: 'So far as right and wrong are concerned they think that there is no difference between the two...'

not enact this law (θέντες τὸν νόμον) nor were they the first to use (χρησάμενοι) it, but found it as it is, an eternal law. Further, say the Athenians, if you Melians were in our place you would do the same. So they are not afraid of being at the disadvantageous end of divine favour. The Melians' view of their allies, however, the Athenians also find contentious as the Spartans are virtuous but not with respect to human relations, as they consider what is 'agreeable to be honourable, and what is expedient just' (Warner, 5.105). After haranguing over self-interest and honour or justice and calling into question the Spartans' capacities for goodwill toward those in need, the Athenians finally charging the Melians with not having one good argument, they demand that the Melians become allies and pay tribute and give up their folly (5.106-111).

The Melians conclude that they will not surrender but will trust divine fortune, which had helped them thus far (τῇ τε μέχρι τοῦδε σωζούση τύχη ἐκ θείου) and their alliance with Sparta, and fight the Athenians, if they will not accept a final offer of friendship and peaceful resolution (5.112). The Athenians refuse, saying that τὰ μὲν μέλλοντα τῶν ὀρμένων σαφέστερα κρίνετε, τὰ δὲ ἀφανῆ τῶ βούλεσθαι ὡς γιγνόμενα ἤδη θεᾶσθε (Smith: 'you...regard future events as more certain than what lies before your eyes, and [you]...look upon that which is out of sight, merely because you wish it, as already realised') (5.113). The result is that the Athenians withdrew and continued their siege of Melos, which, the winter after the summer dialogue, fell to the Athenians, at which time they put to death all men of military age and sold the women and children as slaves.

The distinct feature of this passage would seem to be that it is a dialogue. However, its only truly unique characteristic is that it is a dialogue in which the sub-speeches are immediately adjacent, without any direct commentary or introduction. There are plenty of examples of antilogical speeches throughout the *History* (for example, 1.68-71 vs. 1.73-78; 1.139.3 vs. 1.140-144; 4.17-20 vs. 4.21.3 [indirect]): in this method Thucydides presents one side and then presents the other, the sides often referring to the previous speech, even if the previous speaker has not been present (e.g., 2.87 vs. 2.89).<sup>89</sup> This feature is, of course, a primary reason that critics doubt that the speeches

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<sup>89</sup> For the relation to Gorgian antithetical innovations, Finley, *Three Essays*, 56- 88.

are 'accurate', which suspicion, again, fails to see Thucydides' own description of his method.<sup>90</sup>

Another feature is that the progression of the narrative is present in the speech. The interpretations of it could be two, in line with the categories given above: either Thucydides is showing that the Athenians are moving further and further from the Periclean ideals with which they began, or he is showing a change in policy<sup>91</sup>. The progressivist's interpretation would run thus: whereas the Athenians were reluctant to put the Mytilenian men to death and to enslave their women and children and eventually relented, following the advice of Diodotus and not Cleon, here there is no discussion (5.116). It is apparently now inevitable that the victor will mercilessly punish the vanquished. This points either to a desensitised conscience, or to the lack of involvement of the Athenians in making so monumental a decision regarding the fate of their subjects, both of which are failures of democracy as immortalised by Pericles. The cyclicists see in it a change in policy indicative of their expanding ambitious motivations: it is 'not about Athenian cruelty...[but about] a new and compelling source of fear, the empire itself. To deal with this fear, imperial principles have undergone a change which involves the denial of any middle, neutral ground between two great blocs'<sup>92</sup>.

Whatever the interpretation of the passage, several features emerge in the way in which Thucydides has the Athenians conduct the discussion that do not impinge upon interpretation: justice is judged by the merits of the best rhetorician (5.89) and therefore is not dependent upon its own essence but upon what is considered to be expedient (5.90), that is, the one best able to persuade the other of the rightness of his viewpoint is the one who is therefore just; the expedient is of more value than a sense of the common good (5.90); those who are in possession of power must seize upon the opportunities it affords (5.101, 105); human agency is of greater significance than divine activity, which the Athenians discuss only in response to the raising of the issue by the Melians (5.103-105, 113); friendship is only offered and received as it benefits the parties politically (5.94, 97; 5.112, 113).

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<sup>90</sup> It is also to ignore the shifting of speech writing methods, with regard to which Thucydides' uniformity of style predates Lysias' use of particular speech patterns to indicate individuality; see *ibid.*, 4-6, 52-3, 116; e.g., Lysias *Orat. Att.* 35.

<sup>91</sup> For the latter, Cogan, *Human Thing*, 87-93; for the former, Finley, *Thucydides*, 208-12.

<sup>92</sup> Cogan, *The Human Thing*, 89, 93.

It is striking that, first, the above features are all apparently 'universals' that can be seen as operative in this particular situation between the Athenians and Melians. In fact, with reference to their exercise of power, the Athenians claim that they are operating on the basis of an eternal law, one by which the Melians themselves would act, if they were in the same position. This eternal law is the foundation of the entire dialogue: the one with more power is obliged to exercise it in any way that that one sees fit. Thucydides demonstrates that this general principle works itself out both in the speech (the Melians protest the law initially by attempting first to invoke a principle of justice and then medially and ultimately by appealing to divine fortune as in contradistinction to it: fortune can be impartial in war with reference to the more powerful side) and in the subsequent events (the Athenians do what is best for themselves: they put the conquered Melian soldiers to death and enslave their women and children).

There is also a striking (and brilliant) feature, the historical faithfulness that Thucydides here demonstrates. Each universal outlined above is a feature of the intellectual landscape of the time of the speeches. They are characteristic of the Sophists; I will attempt to demonstrate the parallels by listing general Sophistic principles<sup>93</sup>, citing each in turn, and then naming the parallel feature in the speech. (1) Man is the measure of all things (Protagoras, 86, 171a)<sup>94</sup>: justice is a question of what is determined to be expedient to the most powerful party, Athens. (2) Every man is right or every man is wrong, therefore every opinion is valid or none is (Protagoras, 87-8, 171d; Gorgias, 94-5, 183a, b, c, 184): the Athenians' subjects do not appeal to right or wrong but to the protection offered by Athens' superior power; the Athenians assert that the issue is not of one side being more just than another or having honour. (3) Rational explanations should be sought for religion (Prodicus, 101, 192a): divine fortune is sought only as an afterthought because natural resources are to be trusted most of all. (4) Divine providence or fortune is denied (Thrasymachus, 103, 194b): the Athenians counsel the Melians not to hope in divine fortune for they will be disappointed. (5) The gods are

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<sup>93</sup> For further explication of the influence of these movements, esp. the sophists, as well as Hippocratic science, upon Thucydides, Kurke, 'Charting', 146-48.

<sup>94</sup> The citations refer to C. J. de Vogel, *Greek Philosophy I: Thales to Plato* (Leiden: Brill, 1950); they refer first to the author (or to the speaker to whom the view is attributed by another Greek philosopher), the page number, and finally to the number that the editor has assigned to them.

'phantoms', images (Democritus<sup>95</sup>, 74, 143d): the Athenians conclude that the Melians, in trusting divine fortune, are trusting what is in the future, unseen, and not what is plainly before their eyes. (6) Might makes right (Thrasymachus, 102, 193b): the foundation of Athens' entire argument in the so-called dialogue runs that they have, by far, the greater power and therefore, to their cause is to be ascribed justice and their aims are those to which Melos should submit.

With these general principles in view, characteristic of the intellectual milieu of the time of the speeches' utterances, it becomes apparent that they run through the narrative like threads. To what extent they do so is still a question, and certainly one that is beyond the ability of the present chapter to provide space to answer. One example, however, is Thucydides' penchant for mechanical explanation and his distrust of divine intervention or fortune, a characteristic of the Atomists (Democritus, 75, 144) and the latter more of the Sophists, as has been shown. It is also evident that Thucydides has learnt the art of being an excellent rhetorician, notably a trait of the Sophists that marked Pericles as well.<sup>96</sup> Newer features in the discussion, for instance, Hornblower's thesis regarding the rhetorical genre of military speeches in everyday contemporary life or Thucydides' debt to rhetorical handbooks, add weight to the evidence of the case.<sup>97</sup> This demonstrates that not only was Thucydides faithful to what was the intellectual climate of his speakers, but he also could be located on that backdrop, even as he himself influenced it.<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, he cannot be said wholly and uncritically to be a 'man of his

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<sup>95</sup> Two objections may be raised here: first, that Democritus came much later than the time about which Thucydides writes; however, it has been shown that it is not entirely possible to demonstrate which ideas came from Democritus and which from his master Leucippus (see, e.g., F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy I: Greece and Rome* (London: Burns & Oates Limited, 1966, 72, 124-126)). Second, strictly speaking, Democritus is an 'atomist', but I am here pointing to a characteristic common to both Sophists and Atomists.

<sup>96</sup> For more on the parallels between sophism and Thucydides' own method and style, Finley, *Thucydides*, 36-68.

<sup>97</sup> S. Hornblower, *Commentary II*, 82, in which he discusses M. H. Hansen's work on the battle exhortation (82n189), disagreeing, esp. from the evidence of 5.69, that battlefield speeches must be inauthentic; cf. 290-7, 301-3; on rhetoric, 83.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 83, on the two-way debt regarding rhetoric; the article he cites (83n198) is also helpful: S. Hornblower, 'The Fourth-century and Hellenistic reception of Thucydides', *JHS* 115 (1995): 48-68. See also T. B. L. Webster, *Art and Literature in Fourth Century Athens* (London: The Athlone Press University of London, 1956), 25, who sees the influence of Thucydides on Plato in Socratic dialogue; for more general developments from fifth to fourth century Athens, 10-45.

time' because he did not necessarily follow the tragedians in their virtuous submission to Fate, for example.<sup>99</sup>

The problem in pointing up the prevalence of such (and other) themes characteristic of the time in which Thucydides wrote is just how to interpret it. It seems as if Thucydides, at least at one time, held to the ideals espoused by Pericles for a democratic state, which ideals have very little to do with the argumentation or results of the Melian dialogue which is shot through with the opposed generalities of Sophism. Is Sophism, then, opposite Periclean democracy? Not at all when we consider that the view that rhetoric is the judge of right and wrong and the argument that 'might makes right' are extreme forms of Sophism that are not essentially compatible with the earlier Sophists who did not place truth and rhetoric at opposite poles, with which Sophists Pericles was surely in agreement.<sup>100</sup>

Thus it cannot be said that Thucydides believes as the Athenians or the Melians do, as the former would not do justice to his obvious admiration of Pericles and the latter would not do justice to his sense of disillusionment at the failure of Athens to live up to the Periclean ideal. We can conclude, however, through all of this that Thucydides is faithful to the intellectual history of his speakers<sup>101</sup>. Further, it can be said that because he did not necessarily hold the views which he places in the mouths of the Athenians and Melians, characteristic of the time about which he wrote, we can conclude that he was able to construct a speech that was faithful to the limited point of view of the speaker<sup>102</sup>, which means that, aside from containing the 'precise words' actually delivered in that historical speech,

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<sup>99</sup> But note the point of C. Pelling, 'Conclusion', C. Pelling (ed.), *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), wherein he draws parallels between tragedy and Greek historiography with reference to the movement from unique cases to general lessons by audiences of Greek tragedy and the individual's role in the context of the whole work, and not simply a virtue or a vice, as significant for moralism, 259; he sees this as significant because of the rise of individualistic figures: Alcibiades, e.g., who transfers Periclean submission of personal interest to himself, making the fate of Athens to destroy itself, in his view, inevitable, 259-60.

<sup>100</sup> See F. Copleston, *History I*, 81-95, esp. 95.

<sup>101</sup> On the dating of the acceptance of Sophistic ideas, see Finley, *Thucydides*, 43 f. See also S. Hornblower, *Commentary II*, 107-122, esp. 107, 119-122 in which he argues for a late date of composition, though he allows that there may have been some parts extant for oral performance; the question generally turns on the issue of whether Thucydides wrote the several parts of his history as events progressed, returning to them to 'polish them up'. The problem is with the apparent incompleteness of the editorial work which even left the history unfinished at book 8. Hornblower sees innovation of artistic approach rather than incompleteness; cf. 86-93.

they convey the general sense of what was said and τὰ δέοντα<sup>103</sup>, that which was to Thucydides' mind necessary to elicit the intellectual workings of his speakers, thus getting behind the *reasons* for their acting and speaking as they did:

... τὰ δέοντα are the instruments of conveying the tendencies of society and human nature on which alone foresight can be based...the sophistic arguments from likelihood, expedience, and from the law of nature were more than mere tools of persuasion. They seemed to provide a more searching...light into human nature...Sophistic rhetoric had arisen because, in the changed conditions of the time, it seemed to furnish the speakers with the means of estimating human conduct and calculating the probable course of events. When, therefore, Thucydides says that he has caused his speakers to say "what was called for", τὰ δέοντα, [he uses]... the term in a half-rhetorical sense to signify the main lines of reasoning possible under various circumstances...<sup>104</sup>

It is this 'universal history' to which Thucydides' presentation of the particular history of the Peloponnesian war points.<sup>105</sup> When once the reader penetrates behind the events themselves to see the reasons, either for the fate of cyclicism or the reasons for falling from progression, she is connected with eternal laws, not unlike those to which the Athenians appealed at Melos. Collingwood argues that it is this appeal to eternal laws, not present in Herodotus, that makes for the developing substantiality of Greek history, which has begun to 'freeze up' with Thucydides. That which is substantial is not the material but, for Plato, is objective form, and, for Aristotle, is mind. Hence that which is knowable is unchanging and history, being precisely

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<sup>102</sup> For the relation between the Thucydidean speeches and his contemporary Euripides' tragedies, Finley, *Three Essays*, 1-54, in which he argues that the ideas and forms of argument of Thucydidean speakers are similar to Euripidean characters of the same time.

<sup>103</sup> 'Thucydides therefore...has set forth in any given speech those broad considerations, political, social, historical or even psychological in character, on which, to his mind, the choice of policy at any given moment depended...The speeches, therefore, are in no sense detailed copies of actual speeches; for, if they had been, they would not have contained Thucydides' own estimate of the situation [which was argued above in that the entire speech was 'subjective']. On the other hand, neither do they set forth his personal views; otherwise they would not have been limited to the standpoint of the actual speakers. They may be described as expounding what Thucydides thought would have seemed to him the factors in a given situation, had he stood in the place of the speakers' (Finley, *Thucydides*, 96); cf. Finley, *Three Essays*, 55-6.

<sup>104</sup> Finley, *Thucydides*, 99.

<sup>105</sup> Interestingly, note Collingwood: 'An act is more than a mere unique individual; it is something having a universal character; and in the case of a reflective or deliberate act (an act which we not only do, but intend to do before doing it) this universal character is the plan or idea of the act which we conceive in our thought before doing the act itself, and the criterion by reference to which, when we have done it, we know that we have done what we meant to do', *Idea*, 309; for history as re-enactment of past experience, 282-302.

about the process of change located in time, is becoming less and less knowable: Aristotelian thought regards poetry as more 'scientific' than history.<sup>106,107</sup>

### Some conclusions

From this study, a few conclusions may be drawn. They will be somewhat provisional as we will return directly to issues raised here in the fifth chapter. An answer to the question regarding the ways in which Thucydides fails and succeeds as an historian must allow for nuance. If we asked Thucydides whether he has given a 'literal' history, his answer would surely be 'no'. Then again, he might reply, 'I told you this at the beginning'. Thus it is an unfair and inappropriate expectation as far as Thucydides is concerned, removed as he is from our present day skirmishes regarding historical accuracy, catalysed as they are at least in large part by the modern scientific method. Then again, we might say that, though he has not provided a 'literal account' of what was originally said in the speeches, he has been faithful contextually. This must be qualified as well, however, in light of his situatedness in the history of the development of prose style, which necessitates agreement with Thucydidean critics who claim that he does not fully extinguish the light from his own person in seeking to elicit that of his speakers: their own voices sound too much like his own. Though he attempts to be, and to some extent is successful at being, faithful to the speakers' intellectual history, their uniqueness is inadequate as far as modern standards are concerned. Nevertheless, as was demonstrated above, he often hides his own opinion, presenting antithetical speeches which are not unlike St. Paul's eye in Dürer's altarpiece of the Four Apostles: they open the scene to and call forth some response from the observer.<sup>108</sup> By presenting different points of view on a given scenario, he

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<sup>106</sup> *Idea*, 42, 43, 24; for the outworkings in Roman historiography and law, 43-5; cf. C. N. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940), 96-113, esp. 96-7; from a very different angle, Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, A. S. Cook, ed. & tr. (London: Atheneum Press, 1890), esp. 14-23.

<sup>107</sup> Of course, my conclusion to this section has moved toward subjects far too broad to be done justice here. Though it is a pity we cannot explore these things further, it should illustrate the importance of the discussion, even in the context of postmodern discourse.

<sup>108</sup> But the eye could as well be accommodating the possibility for the figure to judge the spectator; for the importance of the senses, especially that of the eye, and the intellect in

allows the reader to enter into the rhetorical process by deciding for herself which interpretation seems most felicitous. The problematic question, of course, is whether he has given enough options to allow for the most 'truthful' interpretation. Here it is difficult to avoid opulent demands, but it must be said that the reader's interpretation is necessarily limited by Thucydides' interpretation of the choices. However, as has been argued above, he seems genuinely to be uncertain regarding human nature and the consequences of the Peloponnesian War; such consequences were necessarily a part of his composition of the *History* (as would follow from our references above regarding the date of composition as subsequent to the war<sup>109</sup>). This uncertainty regards the extent to which human nature is irremediably predisposed to realisation of ambitious motivations and potentialities, and that lands us back into the dilemma of his conception of history with little hope of a satisfactory conclusion.

This dissatisfaction points to another conclusion that follows on from the first. Because Thucydides has provided a multiplicity of voices to allow for the reader's engagement and because he has revealed his own uncertainty and has resisted easy categorisation, it only seems appropriate to exact the same standard from the reader: faced with the question regarding whether history was for Thucydides cyclical or progressive, we should conclude that it was both and neither. Both schools of interpretation attempt to pin down Thucydides' philosophy, but the very open-endedness of his narrative ought to caution them against it. If Thucydides, being as close as he was to the events and characters themselves, was genuinely apprehensive about hard and fast conclusions, so should his interpreters be. A synthetic approach is apparently the most faithful one.

Thirdly, then, Thucydides' reticence would seem to be the very strength of his work as an historian, which is rather an unsettling conclusion for those who would demand of themselves or of Thucydides a supposedly scientific certainty: perhaps he cannot live up to his reputation. His intent was not to write a history of Greece during the period in question nor to chronicle events, but to provide a history of the war for all times. It is precisely the options of interpretation provided by the varieties of voice that afford the

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Renaissance criticism, M. Barasch, *Theories of Art I: from Plato to Winckelmann* (New York: New York University & Routledge, 1985, 2000), 224-26.

<sup>109</sup> See n 46, 100 above.

pliability requisite for such a work to be a bridge between the time in question and that of his future readers. This makes his *History* capable of bearing the interpretative weight of later Athenians, social contract theorists, chastened political realists, historians who desire to think about the nature of their craft in light of the contemporary intellectual milieu, and, as we shall see, even hermeneuts<sup>110</sup>.

In view of his ambiguity and the subsequent diversity of interpretation, we must raise the question of truth: is there an interpretation of Thucydides that is 'right', or is there some standard by which we might judge one interpretative effort better than another? Initially and generally we can say that there is a subtlety about our historian that indicates that the pursuit of truth is not necessarily made by producing a literal record of the events as they 'really happened' or the words as they were 'really spoken', perhaps showing this standard to be dubious. Perhaps truth has only been nominally achieved if the straight record is given. Even if it is possible simply to 'tell it like it was', could it be that those 'straight facts' have not told the reader very much? Indeed, purely 'factual' questions, such as when an event occurred or precisely which words were spoken, cannot elucidate human motivations or political intricacies that can act like time-bombs producing effects sometimes many years later or affecting the results of the war, for instance, in ways that the speakers and actors at the time could have had no idea. Thus, in giving us a 'psychological history', perhaps Thucydides has given us more 'truth' than any anachronistic label of 'science' could ever afford.

A fourth conclusion is a point that has begged to be 'let out of the bag', as it were, at several points in the above discussion and, indeed, has been implied and must now be pellucidly stated as it forms an essential link between the speeches of Thucydides and the overall topic of the present thesis and thus regards again the question of truth (to which we will come in our discussion of postmodernism) and history. The art of assessment and persuasion is not necessarily the same as facticity; from our discussion of the Melian dialogue and the debate concerning the Mytillean revolt it is not

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<sup>110</sup> Though this word is defined in the OED in the general sense as 'an interpreter', I am here using it to refer more specifically to those who hold hermeneutics as a theory of human understanding (as will be expounded below) as propounded by Gadamer, Richard Rorty, and Charles Taylor, to mention only a few.

apparent that Thucydides is telling us exactly what was said. This should not dishearten those who are looking for 'historical truth', for what Thucydides actually seems to be giving us, in addition to the interpretative options discussed above, is his assessment of the state of the Athenians; particularly, that which he regards to be persuasive from their point of view at a particular time in the narrative. This, I suggest, is a sort of 'hermeneutical key' for understanding the speeches: they are a skillful, artful way of communicating to the reader the *truth* of the historical situation. Such a technique bears an heavy interpretative weight whose plausibility is greatly aided by a post-war dating of composition. Therefore, rather than giving the reader precise verbiage, Thucydides gives the benefit of his shrewd historical judgement and thus his artful rhetoric.<sup>111</sup> Arbitration concerning the 'truth' of such a style is an issue that will, I hope, find resolution as the thesis develops.<sup>112</sup>

In light of this, then, a further, fifth, conclusion may be made. It has often been assumed that Thucydides' aims and methods are discontinuous with the historiographical trajectory of the ancient world: Thucydides' 'scientific task' is a brief hiccup, if you will, in a long line of 'tall-tale tellers'.<sup>113</sup> However, if, as I have argued, Thucydides did indeed invent his speeches and if his interpretative schema is so pervasive, this evaluation of his work in the context of ancient historiography will need to be revised.<sup>114</sup> Moreover, it would seem better to inquire as to whether, now, *their* own style critiques our own; that is to say that perhaps the ancients have something to teach us moderns (yea, 'postmoderns') about the 'art of history'. A parallel theological point may be made by asking, as indeed some today are, whether medieval

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<sup>111</sup> This seems to me quite a different view than, e.g., H. D. Westlake, *The Subjectivity of Thucydides: his treatment of the Four Hundred at Athens* (Manchester: The John Rylands University Library of Manchester, 1973).

<sup>112</sup> For the relation between truth and rhetoric, M. Warner, *Philosophical Finesse: studies in the art of rational persuasion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 35; for classical models of philosophical argumentation and persuasion generally, 32-66.

<sup>113</sup> Notice, e.g., the commonly accepted belief regarding Livian speeches in J. Briscoe, *A Commentary on Livy, Books xxxi-xxxiii* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), 18.

<sup>114</sup> Take, e.g., C. B. R. Pelling, 'Plutarch and Thucydides', in P. A. Stadter, ed., *Plutarch and the Historical Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 10-40, in which he construes the picture of the relation between Thucydides and Plutarch as between one traditionally held to be 'factual', and one aspiring to the level of admiration that Thucydides had attained; Pelling thus assumes that we might expect Plutarch to develop Thucydides artistically, given that Thucydides had ascended above all other ancient historians with regard to factual history reporting, and says we might be surprised that Plutarch searched for some facts that Thucydides may have missed in his assessment. We will only be surprised, however, if we accept the 'traditional' picture of Thucydides: for Pelling's argument, 10-11. What this may reveal specifically regarding the speeches of other ancient historians remains for another

exegetical methods offer particular riches that show our own modern historical-critical method to be, at best, inadequate to render a full meaning of the Bible, and perhaps even reveal it to be impoverished.<sup>115</sup> Perhaps the first shall be last and the last first.

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study, but it is hoped that from this chapter, the necessity and fruitfulness of such work is apparent.

<sup>115</sup> H. de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, M. Seban & E. M. Macierowski, tr., 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, 2000), esp. xiii-xxi; I do not here intend to argue for a complete return to pre-Enlightenment exegesis or values: note the balanced characterisation of the Enlightenment of D. Brown, *Tradition and Imagination* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1999), 10-32.

## Jenkins, Rorty, and the Postmodern 'Mind'

HAVING thus attempted to set the entire question of 'postmodern historiography' into the context of concrete historical inquiry by attempting a discussion that has integrity as 'history' in its own right and that at the same time raises issues common both to Thucydidean scholarship and postmodern historiography, I should now like to take up the latter issue, relating both for the very reasons discussed in the first chapter.

One very prominent voice in the historiographical discourse is the British theoretician Keith Jenkins, Reader in History in University College Chichester. The thrust of Jenkins' views of Elton and Carr are clear enough in the title he has chosen for his book: *from Carr and Elton to Rorty and White*. The reasons he has misgivings about these two figures are not different enough from the ones noted in our first chapter to warrant a full discussion of them. Rather, I am interested particularly in where he believes the discipline of history needs to be augmented or altered entirely. He suggests as one icon of his proposal the controversial American historian Hayden White. White has occupied the attention of historians at least since the publication of his *Metahistory* in 1973.<sup>1</sup> As Jenkins points out, White is concerned with ideas similar to those which occupy Richard Rorty, such as being 'critical of any correspondence theory of Truth' or of 'any incorrigible or entailed reading between the past and historiography'<sup>2</sup>. He also sees White, like he does Rorty, as 'anti-essentialist, anti-teleological, anti-foundational and utopian'<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, White's work deals primarily with attempts to understand historical methodology by offering a 'formal analysis of the dominant mode of historical representation, the narrative', thus offering a method that is 'currently plausible'<sup>4</sup>. Thus, Jenkins' interest in him seems to be primarily as a practical working out of ideas that Rorty raises theoretically; thus White

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<sup>1</sup> *Metahistory: the historical imagination of nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1973); for the journal given to the discussion of his work, *History and Theory* 37, no. 2 (1998).

<sup>2</sup> On 'What is History?', 132.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-3.

might be seen, though with different particular concerns, as applying general trends of thought that would likely be characterised 'postmodern'.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, I propose to begin this chapter with Richard Rorty, examining firstly how Jenkins presents Rorty's 'thinking' as Jenkins sees it relevant to his own historiographical concerns. Of course, it may not be immediately evident what Rorty has to do with the discipline of history at all. Granted that his work often takes on the form of intellectual history as he attempts to accomplish his own purposes in the Western philosophical tradition, he does not, anywhere that I am aware of (aside from brief mentions), attempt to apply his lines of thought directly to the discipline. Jenkins does not present any such detailed cases in Rorty's work either. Of course, Rorty's construal of the problems of knowledge obviously touch history in some way, as those of postmodern thinkers do generally. But what, in particular, is Jenkins' interest in Rorty?

### Jenkins' Rorty

The supposition that Jenkins admits will 'act as the basis for [his] entire reading'<sup>6</sup> of Rorty's work finds agreement in Dewey's belief that

the most important purpose of "philosophy" is to free mankind from remaining in thrall to what Nietzsche has called "the longest lie"; that is, to release mankind from the idea that "outside the haphazard and perilous experiments we perform there lies something (God, Science, Knowledge, Rationality, or Truth) which will, if only we perform the correct rituals, step in to save us"<sup>7</sup> that behind appearances and the everyday contingencies of time and chance there lies a solid, foundational, "Real World", a sort of perpetual reality which supports us and which we can somehow gain access to and so grasp it true and so grasp it plain.<sup>8</sup>

Jenkins states that Rorty identifies this 'lie' as that which has 'constituted/legitimised' 'The Western Tradition'. He contends that it is Rorty's interest to 'erase any lingering traces of that longest lie' in order to put

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 130-3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

<sup>7</sup> *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 208.

<sup>8</sup> On 'What is History?', 97.

something else—not something true but something metaphorical and attractive—in its place<sup>9</sup>.

Let us take up this question of truth first, then, as Jenkins does. Drawing chiefly on *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Jenkins demonstrates that Rorty, tracing the conception of the making of truth (as opposed to discovering it) back approximately two hundred years, argues that the idea that truth and the world are actually 'out there' is 'a legacy of a mythological age in which the world was seen as a creation of a Being who had a language...of his own—an age whose time had now passed'<sup>10</sup>. Thus, the world cannot 'cause us to be justified' in believing something to be true or not because it does not 'split itself up, on its own initiative, into sentence-shaped chunks called "facts"'<sup>11</sup>. Thus we should not confine ourselves to single sentences, but should examine 'entire vocabularies' when discussing 'worldly facts'.

Jenkins posits that Rorty here is putting his finger on an 'epistemological/methodological mistake' of which historians are also guilty: asserting the past can be known as a collection of discrete facts that 'correspond' to the 'evidential record' which, taken as a collection can be true. Jenkins is drawing a distinction that White also draws between individual statements and chronicles of history and whole narratives, the former being able to 'correspond' to the evidence, while the latter are hopelessly false because interpretative.<sup>12</sup>

The point of similarity between Rorty, White, and Jenkins here is that the whole is imagined, not known like the particular statement. Of course, such 'wholes' or, in Rorty-speak, 'vocabularies' are not suggested to us by the world itself nor by anything resident within the subject. So, continues Jenkins, changes in vocabularies are decided not by 'notions of criteria and choice'<sup>13</sup> but by 'habit'. Thus, Jenkins shows us that Rorty is not concerned to give the 'truth' about the philosophical enterprise, but to introduce a new vocabulary, which is the task of 'interesting philosophy' anyway, which is 'rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis', but is 'a contest between an

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 98.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 100, quoting Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), 5.

<sup>12</sup> See *Metahistory*, e.g., 5-7.

<sup>13</sup> Rorty, *Contingency*, 8.

entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed vocabulary which vaguely promises great things'<sup>14</sup>.

( Jenkins points out that, for Rorty, this task is intrinsically linked with the method of 'utopian politics or revolutionary science' which is 'to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behaviour which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate new forms of linguistic behaviour, for example...social institutions'<sup>15</sup>. So philosophy is to work 'holistically and pragmatically'; it does not 'have a better candidate for doing the same old things which we did when we spoke in the old way', but suggests a burial of the old questions and a vivification of new ones. Though, interestingly, Jenkins rarely cites Rorty's first and most basic (and perhaps most influential) work, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty there characterises Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey in the same way that he apparently intended to frame his own career as a professional philosopher. He argues that they have

brought us into a period of "revolutionary" philosophy (in the sense of Kuhn's "revolutionary" science) by introducing new maps of the terrain (viz., of the whole panorama of human activities) which simply do not include those features which previously seemed to dominate.<sup>16</sup>

And, of course, Rorty is right to point this out with Heidegger, who does wish to overturn the Platonic tradition and return *thinkers* to pre-Socratic questions<sup>17</sup> and so to avoid the tradition's usage of the issue of epistemology, which he sees as predisposing human beings to the instrumental knowledge that dominates the world through technological society; much the same applies to Wittgenstein's epistemological critique.<sup>18</sup>

( Jenkins next turns to Rorty's definition and usage of truth. He now states, in line with the philosopher under discussion: 'By now I think we should have no problem in understanding why Rorty is able to formulate the

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 8-9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), 6-7.

<sup>17</sup> C. B. Guinon, 'Introduction', in G. B. Guinon, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), 1-41, esp. 16; cf. G. Steiner's discussion of Heidegger's *What is Philosophy?*, *Heidegger*, 19-30.

<sup>18</sup> C. Taylor, 'Overcoming Epistemology', *After Philosophy: end or transformation?*, K. Baynes et al, eds. (Cambridge, Mass and London: MIT Press, 1987), 473. Taylor wisely also includes Hegel's attack on tradition in *Phenomenology of Spirit* for its aspiration to individuality and

only plausible concept of truth which there arguably is'<sup>19</sup>; namely, 'the name of a property all true statements share' (which is acknowledged tautologous, as it turns out simply to be a way of validating statements that are generally accepted, as we shall discuss below) and 'the name we give to whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definitive, assignable reasons'<sup>20</sup>. Jenkins identifies three purposes this serves for Rorty (and, presumably, for him).

First, such a definition 'closes down' the Western Tradition that has sought to secure itself on 'upper-case' or 'real' foundations. This is ultimately because 'there is no "Real World"'<sup>21</sup>: it is a 'lie', so we cannot discover its Essence through a particular Epistemology, capturing its Teleology, and so on, 'simply because "it" doesn't exist'<sup>22</sup>. Thus we can 'forget all about the Western Tradition' from Plato and Descartes to Kant, and about the problems that occupied its philosophers' attentions, and, indeed, 'about philosophy full stop':

Pragmatists think that the history of attempts to isolate the True or the Good, or to define the word "true" or "good", supports their suspicion that there is no interesting work to be done in this area....Pragmatists see the Platonic tradition as having outlived its usefulness. This does not mean that they have a new, non-Platonic set of answers to Platonic questions to offer, but rather that they do not think we should ask the questions anymore....They would simply like to change the subject.<sup>23</sup>

Jenkins sees, secondly, that such a conception of truth does not mean that we cannot 'keep using concepts of truth, epistemology, method, [or] theory'<sup>24</sup>, but that we must always restrict such usages to the 'lower case' so that we do not have the problem of 'being able to say without any kind of contradiction ...that for example, "there is no such thing as truth", and to be able to answer the question, "Is it true or false that it is now 10.30 p.m. by the clock?" by saying (if it is 10.30 p.m. by the clock) "Yes, it's true."<sup>25</sup> It is simply a matter of keeping the categories distinct by realising that there is no universal time in the universe, but that this is the way that time has been

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separatedness and Merleau-Ponty's critique of empiricism and intellectualism as of the same "revolutionary" (to use Rorty's adjective) character, 472-73.

<sup>19</sup> On 'What is History?', 103.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 103, quoting Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, xiv.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

conceptualised and described by human beings. This is truth that is 'good by way of definite, assignable reasons' and is, Jenkins asserts, easily intuited (that is, it makes good sense).

The third benefit of this conception of truth as Jenkins summarises Rorty's case, is that it allows for the replacement of the 'upper-case' by 'pragmatic-type language games', which links well with Rorty's political arguments for solidarity (wherein human beings can make sense of their lives by telling stories about how they make a contribution to a human community) as over against 'objectivity' (that is, reference to the transcendental or Truth, which is relation to a non-human reality: reality 'upper-case').<sup>26</sup> Thus we no longer need 'a relation between belief and objects called "correspondence", nor an account of human cognitive abilities which ensures that our species is capable of entering into that relation'<sup>27</sup> because, as the pragmatists hold, 'somebody may come up with a better idea'<sup>28</sup>, which implies that belief can be improved. So a new vocabulary will not thus 'be true', but will be 'a vocabulary which works better relative to the things we want to do'<sup>29</sup>: Galileo's terminology allowed him to redescribe the world in a way that seemed better to seventeenth century minds than Aristotle's: he 'just lucked out'<sup>30</sup>. Again, truth-language and thus epistemology are conventions for what is 'pragmatically rational' at a given time; it represents 'good epistemic manners'. So the pragmatic goal of inquiry that is harmonious with solidarity is 'the attainment of an appropriate mixture of unforced agreement with tolerant disagreement'<sup>31</sup>. Rationality, so construed, is the effort of the community characterised by freedom to preserve and improve itself.<sup>32</sup>

The discussion is then turned by Jenkins to the importance of metaphor in Rorty's schema; it draws primarily on his essay 'Philosophy as science, as metaphor and as politics'<sup>33</sup>. Rorty there posits that we are forced to 're-weave the fabric of our beliefs and desires' by perception, inference, and metaphor. The first two, characteristic of Husserlian phenomenology and

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 104, drawing especially on Rorty's essay 'Solidarity or Objectivity' in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), 21-34.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 105, quoting Rorty, *Objectivity*, 22.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 105; *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 193.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 106; *Objectivity*, 41.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*; *Objectivity*, 45.

<sup>33</sup> In *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), 8-26.

analytic philosophy, are 'conservative' and thus do little to alter our perceptions of our 'linguistically constituted world'.<sup>34</sup> Metaphor, Jenkins shows us on the other hand, allows us to think of language, logical space, and possibility as 'open-ended'; it is 'a voice from *outside* of logical space or a logical-philosophical clarification of it'<sup>35</sup>: it is existential rather than systematic.<sup>36</sup> Statements that on the surface appear false or odd (such as 'a river or a bottle has a mouth' or 'love is the only law' or 'the earth moves round the sun') that long ago would have drawn the response 'you must be speaking metaphorically', now are accepted as 'candidates for literal truth'. In the meantime, both our beliefs and the meanings of the words used changed in such a way as to 'make the sentences literally true'<sup>37</sup>. So Jenkins observes that metaphors, as forerunners of new language games, are seen by Rorty as vehicles by which the new vocabulary can be sneaked in. Witness, then, the 'idiosyncratic genius', poets, visionaries, outsiders, utopians and, ultimately, the Heideggerian Thinker<sup>38</sup> who, according to Rorty, 'permit us to feel the force of ...metaphors in the days before they were leveled down into literal truths', who does not 'facilitate', but 'makes more difficult', and who reminds us of the historicity or contingency of our beliefs and desires.<sup>39</sup> By doing this, the philosopher in the end 'makes things easier for everybody'.<sup>40</sup> Rorty declares himself at this point to be departing from Heidegger's 'elitism' and opting for the pragmatic, democratic Dewey. And here Rorty's language is such that it is difficult to summarise without begging the charge of grandiosity:

...this aspiration [of the philosopher's social role as a metaphorician and thus as a contributor to individual freedom] amounts to the hope that every new metaphor will have its chance for self-sacrifice, a chance to become a dead metaphor by having been literalised into the language...[that is,...] that the social glue which holds society together—the language in which we state our shared beliefs and hopes—will be as flexible as possible.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Essays on Heidegger*, 12.

<sup>35</sup> *On 'What is History?'*, 108.

<sup>36</sup> *Essays on Heidegger*, 13.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *On 'What is History?'*, 109.

<sup>39</sup> *Essays on Heidegger*, 16.

<sup>40</sup> *On 'What is History?'*, 110.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*; *Essays on Heidegger*, 18.

Jenkins claims that while Rorty's position is not 'true', it is 'true enough' to act as a 'contingent "basis" for a liberal utopia'.<sup>42</sup> Rorty argues that this utopia must transcend its enculturation in 'certaintist discourse' by 'prid[ing] itself on its tolerance for a plurality of sub-cultures' and a 'willingness to listen to neighbouring cultures'<sup>43</sup>. Jenkins points out that here there is no room for an appeal to external authorities such as 'Truth or Reason or The Scientifically-Knowable Nature of Reality'<sup>44</sup>;

The best we can do is to take full advantage of our ability to use language by becoming ever more social animals, banding together in ever more complex ways for mutual support. Given this view, it is natural for philosophy to shelve epistemology and metaphysics and to concentrate on politics.<sup>45</sup>

The chapter on Rorty then moves into a discussion of the polity of his utopia as populated with liberal ironists<sup>46</sup> who face the contingency of their beliefs, even their noblest (but 'ungroundable') desires that 'suffering will be diminished' and that 'the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease'<sup>47</sup>. Jenkins describes Rorty's characterisation of thinkers of an increasingly 'historicist' and 'culturalist turn of mind', as those who deny that there exists 'some demonstrable essentialist/naturalist "upper case" human nature or some pristine unity such as "the self"<sup>48</sup>, and who believe it 'more plausible' that human beings are 'perfectly plastic' before culturalisation so that 'constitutive culturalisation' goes 'all the way down'. The relevant question thus is not 'What is it to be a human being?' but a question such as, 'What is it to inhabit a rich twentieth-century democratic society?'<sup>49</sup> The problem of ethical construal still obtains: Rorty distinguishes between public and private moral spheres. Rorty sees the private side occupied by Heidegger and Foucault who desire self-creation and who see 'socialisation as antithetical to something deep within us', and the public one occupied by the likes of Habermas and Dewey who characterise such privacy

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<sup>42</sup> On 'What is History?', 111.

<sup>43</sup> *Objectivity*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> On 'What is History?', 112; quoting Rorty, 'Just One More Species Doing Its Best', in *London Review of Books* 13, no. 14 (25 July 1991), 3-7, p. 6.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> I will not here embark on a full summary of Rorty's requirement for a populace of *liberal* ironists as it does not seem necessary in this context; see Jenkins' own summary, *ibid.*, 113-15.

<sup>47</sup> *Contingency*, xv.

<sup>48</sup> On 'What is History?', 115.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

as “irrational” and “aesthetic”.<sup>50</sup> We now appear to have reached a problem that will require keen arbitration: how does Rorty suggest we address the problem (that is, which is ‘right’)? ‘We shouldn’t’ (address it), Jenkins answers for Rorty: ‘The vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange’<sup>51</sup>. Both are right in their own contexts and any attempt to “rectify” the language of one with the other is to cause the need to appeal to something outside the discourse by which one might be judged more adequate than the other.

Jenkins next asks how this society of liberal ironists might be realised<sup>52</sup>; the answer comes: not by arguing against prejudice or seeking new depths, but by the “ethnographic” ability to see ‘strange people’ as ‘fellow sufferers’.<sup>53</sup> The agent of such utopian realisation is not philosophy, then, but genres such as ‘ethnography, the journalist’s report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel’<sup>54</sup>. Jenkins notes that history’s important place in this society would be secured by taking the form of ‘edifying narratives which would pragmatically connect the hoped-for liberal utopia of the future with the past in order to make that future relatively attractive’<sup>55</sup>.

### Rorty and the mirror of nature

If we are to inquire as to whether Jenkins’ appeal to Rorty’s philosophical positions, particularly to his construal of the problem of knowledge and his interaction with the Western tradition, are justified, we had better get some understanding of Rorty’s work in and of itself. My intent in this section is not to take issue with Jenkins’ presentation of Rorty’s position; I do not think he misrepresents Rorty. However, it is worth noting that Jenkins’ summary comes entirely from Rorty’s later work and fails to make any reference whatsoever, so far as I can see, to his earliest work, a fact that is not bad in

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<sup>50</sup> *Contingency*, xiii-xiv.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>52</sup> I am here avoiding the issue of Rorty’s so-called favouritism for the U. S. A. and for North Atlantic Democracies in general, which is discussed by Jenkins. The discussion, to my mind, is periphery to our purposes and is refuted, though with unnamed points taken, by Jenkins later in the chapter, 118-30.

<sup>53</sup> On ‘*What is History?*’, 117.

<sup>54</sup> *Contingency*, xvi.

<sup>55</sup> On ‘*What is History?*’, 118.

and of itself; indeed, reading and citing much of the early Rorty would do much to strengthen Jenkins' arguments and perhaps his own use of Rorty's philosophical work. My concern is that Jenkins quite easily submits to Rorty's radical attempt to overthrow the long-reigning epistemological tradition, seemingly without much reflection. It would seem much more reasonable to give it full treatment, if we are to discern whether Jenkins' use of Rorty is adequate for historiography, interested as Jenkins is to make history speak language that is easily understood in the postmodern milieu.

I intend in this section, therefore, briefly to discuss Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, in particular the last part of the book, on philosophy. It is a well-known characterisation that Rorty 'deconstructs the Western philosophy of mind'; how does he do this? His argument to this point in the book goes generally as follows. The Western tradition, especially from Descartes onward (but beginning with Plato), has been interested in picturing the mind as a mirror that contains representations that can be studied by nonempirical, pure methods; he argues that it follows that 'without the notion of the mind as mirror, the notion of knowledge as accuracy of representation would not have suggested itself'<sup>56</sup>. Descartes and Kant were interested in attempting to gain more accurate representations by 'inspecting, repairing, and polishing the mirror' (12). Rorty posits that it is this imagery of the mirror and its representations being accurate that accounts for philosophical sense-making of ideas such as "conceptual analysis", "phenomenological analysis", "explication of meanings", "the logic of language", or "the structure of the constituting activity of consciousness". Invoking the names of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Dewey, he draws attention to attempts to overturn this metaphor, and apparently intends to make it his own task to do the same, as we will see.

He explores various options including empirical psychology (chapter five) and the philosophy of language (chapter six), both of which he calls 'optional' because they still attempt to represent the world rather than to 'cope with it' (11), but he maintains that epistemological behaviourism<sup>57</sup> is the

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<sup>56</sup> R. Rorty, *Philosophy*, 12. The quotations of this section, unless otherwise noted, will be taken entirely from this work; for ease of reference, page numbers will be cited in the text.

<sup>57</sup> That is, the study of "the nature of human knowledge" is the study of 'certain ways in which human beings interact' and does not require an 'ontological foundation' that involves a philosophical description of human beings (175). This view, characteristic of Quine and Sellars, posits that philosophy 'will have no more to offer than common sense (supplemented

situation that obtains in the absence of a desire for 'confrontation and constraint', that is, a foundational epistemology (315).<sup>58</sup> The essence of the position is pragmatic: truth is, in James' words, "what it is better for us to believe", rather than accurate representation. We give the label 'accurate representation' to those beliefs which 'are successful in helping us do what we want to do' (10). Rorty apparently wants to make it very clear, however, that he is not commending this position to us as a 'successor object' to epistemology.

Thus arguing that 'the desire for a theory of knowledge is a desire for constraint', and having acknowledged the common angst felt by many for a replacement for foundational epistemology, Rorty takes up the question in the final section of his book of what should take the place of epistemology. It should be noted that this question is not quite the same as 'what is our new epistemology?', for indeed Rorty believes that nothing should become an epistemology: foundationalism is out, therefore no 'successor object' should be chosen (315). Rorty concedes the point that it is difficult to give up such a foundation because it represents for many within the tradition the belief that 'to be rational, to be fully human, to do what we ought, we need to be able to find agreement with other human beings' (316); the notion that epistemology can be constructed amounts to the assumption that common ground indeed exists and need only be found and articulated. *Where* it is believed to exist has been a question; whether it is outside 'us' in the realm of Being rather than Becoming or in Forms that guide inquiry and are its *telos*. In the seventeenth-century, the common ground could be found within the mind so that to understand the mind was to understand the 'right method for finding truth'. The common ground could lie in language, as it is taken by analytic philosophy (316-17). Simply to discard these options as valid candidates for 'common ground' seems to be equivalent to discarding rationality itself. The charge that has been levelled at Dewey, Wittgenstein, Quine, Sellars, and

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by biology, history, etc.)' (176). Rorty argues that to be a behaviourist is not inherently to be reductionistic, but only to refuse 'to attempt a certain sort of explanation: ... [that which] not only interposes such a notion as "acquaintance with meanings" or "acquaintance with sensory appearances" between the impact of the environment on human beings and their reports about it, but uses such notions to explain the reliability of such reports' (176). For his discussion, 173-212.

<sup>58</sup> Here we can see the seeds of Rorty's later arguments already summarised by Jenkins in which he polarises objectivity and 'solidarity'.

Davidson, that of 'relativity', leaves us wondering whether there may be anything beyond it.

Rorty suggests that to pine after an epistemological successor is to confuse 'two roles which the philosopher might play' (317): that of the 'informed dilettante', the 'Socratic intermediary' between various discourses, and that of the 'cultural overseer' who 'knows everyone's common ground—the Platonic philosopher-king who knows what everybody else is really doing whether *they* know it or not, because he knows about the ultimate context (the Forms, the Mind, the Language), within which they are working' (317-18). Obviously the elitism implicit in the latter 'role' will not do in light of our summary thus far.

Rorty proposes a description of these roles, the first meriting the term 'hermeneutics', the second 'epistemology'. Hermeneutics is interested in conversation about the relations between discourses which supposes 'no disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers'; hope of agreement does not depend on this however, but only in the perpetuation of the conversation (and, Rorty acknowledges, *hope* may be all that is possible). Epistemology, on the other hand, takes the hope of agreement as existing only in 'common ground', which may be unknown to participants, but which unites them in 'common rationality'. Hermeneutically speaking, rationality is defined as the abstention from epistemology, preferring rather to 'pick up the jargon of the interlocutor rather than translating it into one's own'. Epistemologically, to be rational is to seek a proper set of terms in which all contributions should be encoded for mutual understanding. Such activity for the first is 'routine conversation', for the second, 'implicit inquiry'. Epistemologists see participants as united by mutual interests to achieve a 'common end' (Oakeshott's *universitas*); hermeneutics are united in *societas* so that participants are 'persons whose paths through life have fallen together, united by civility rather than by a common goal, much less by common ground' (318).

Rorty attempts to justify these distinctions by appealing to connections between holism and the "hermeneutical circle". If knowledge is 'accurate representation', then expressions that represent more accurately will be termed 'basic', 'privileged', and 'foundational' (318-19). Holism suggests that it is not possible to 'isolate basic elements' except on the basis of knowledge of the whole in which those parts occur. 'Thus we will not be able to

substitute the notion of "accurate representation" (element-by-element) for that of successful accomplishment of a practice. Our choice of elements will be dictated by our understanding of the practice' (319), rather than a practice being "legitimated" by a "rational reconstruction" out of parts or elements. Hence, the hermeneutical circle: the parts cannot be understood without the whole, the whole cannot be understood without the parts. Rorty posits that this notion of interpretation is more like 'getting acquainted with a person than like following a demonstration'. There is no dictation from method to practice, from one language to another, but there is dialogue: here one listens and guesses about how to characterise a particular and how to construe the whole. This is culture as conversation, rather than as a structure built upon foundations: it is hermeneutical not epistemological.

Rorty argues that the difference between hermeneutics and epistemology should not be seen in the traditional division of labour (epistemology 'taking care of the serious and important "cognitive" part' (319) and hermeneutics taking the rest), but, as through the pragmatist's lenses (that of epistemological behaviourism), the line between epistemology and hermeneutics is that between 'normal' and 'abnormal' discourse (320), the line between Kuhn's 'normal' and 'revolutionary' science. 'Normal' refers to attempts to solve problems through those explanations that consensus dictates as good, and to what it means for a problem to be solved; 'abnormal' or 'revolutionary' discourse introduces a new 'paradigm', and 'thus a new set of problems'. The difference between the two, then, is not the difference between natural and human sciences, but is merely one of 'familiarity': we are epistemological when we understand 'what is happening but want to codify it in order to extend, or strengthen, or teach, or 'ground' it' (321). We must be hermeneutical 'where we do not understand what is happening but are honest enough to admit it'. Rorty thus sees epistemological assertions not as the result of understanding something about human knowledge or the way things are, but as the result of a certain practice that has been around long enough so that conventions which 'permit a consensus on how to divide it into parts' are 'relatively easy to isolate' (321).

Rorty is interested in Kuhn's idea of paradigmatic differences in periods of scientific history in so far as he holds that the criteria between the choice of theories (even within normal science, not hermeneutics) 'function

not as rules, which determine choice, but as values, which influence it<sup>59</sup> (327). Rorty explores the disagreement of Cardinal Bellarmine with Copernican theory (328 ff.) because for him it reveals, even between two ways of understanding (religious and scientific), that 'mere looking at the planets will be of no help in choosing our model of the heavens, any more than mere reading of Scripture' (332, emphasis his). The change in views from the church's (Ptolemaic) doctrine that the earth was the centre of the universe to the revolutionary (in two senses) Copernican 'scientific doctrine' can be seen either as the 'drawing of proper distinctions among what was really there in the world' or 'as a shift in cultural climate' (332). Rorty suggests that it does not matter which option we take 'as long as we are clear that the change was not brought about by "rational argument" in some sense of rationality in which, for example, the changes lately brought about in regard to society's attitudes toward slavery...would not count as "rational"' (332). Therefore, rationality and disinterestedness were not values 'floating free of the educational and institutional patterns of the day' (331): Galileo was 'creating the notion of "scientific values" as he went along' (331, emphasis his). The 'logical-empiricist philosophy of science and the whole epistemological tradition since Descartes has claimed that there is a great difference between the way in which accurate representations are attained in the Mirror of Nature than in the procedure of agreement about 'practical' or 'aesthetic' matters: 'Kuhn gives us reason to say that there is no deeper difference than that between what happens in "normal" and in "abnormal" discourse' (333), a distinction that cuts across the distinction between 'science and nonscience'.

Kuhn's (and Rorty's) critics confuse two ideas of 'objectivity': one being that which characterises the 'view which would be agreed upon as a result of argument undeflected by irrelevant considerations' and the other as that representation that can be taken as 'representing things as they really are' (333-34). Rorty sees the problem as stemming from the fact that when we take seriously questions such as, for example, the sense in which Goodness is 'out there waiting to be represented accurately' or in what sense physical features as represented by differential equations existed before people represented them as such, and are faced with the fact that 'neither question is answerable', we should realise that we cannot get rid of certain traditional questions if we

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<sup>59</sup> Rorty quoting Kuhn's *Essential Tension*, p. 321.

still 'feel the need to *justify* answers ... by constructing epistemological and metaphysical theories' (334, emphasis his).

As the problem of objectivity-subjectivity is an hugely significant one in historiography, it seems appropriate to swoop down, as it were, for a closer look at the terrain of Rorty's argumentation here (334ff.).<sup>60</sup> Since Kant, the primary way in which metaphysical and epistemological theories have been used is as they apply to the distinction that nothing outside science can be 'objective', or the approbation of certain things such as morals, politics, or poems as objective. Metaphysics thus is the attempt to find out what one may be objective about, examining the differences between, for example, a new article of the Moral Law, a new sort of number or set of spaces, quantum indeterminacy, or that the cat is on the mat. This last example becomes a discovery (as it lends itself well to questions regarding 'contact with reality', 'truth as correspondence', 'accuracy of representation') that is the standard for objectivity: how do values, numbers, and wave packages resemble cats? The epistemologist concerns herself with the sense in which more interesting statements share the objectivity possessed by the *mirroring* statement 'The cat is on the mat'. We cannot discover, in the view of epistemological behaviourism, whether there is a Moral Law to be corresponded to, or any clear feeling regarding what counts as a good metaphysical argument. In Rorty's imaginary age, morality, physics, and psychology would be equally 'objective' because the *consensus* in these areas would be almost complete (335).

Desiring to address the subjectivity-objectivity problem of Kuhn and his critics, especially because the association of objectivity with a moral feeling is so great, Rorty notes that Kuhn distinguished between subjectivity in two ways, as opposed to objectivity, and as opposed to judgement (336). The second opposition is that which Kuhn's critics associate with the 'idiosyncratic features' to which he appeals as subjective (the conflation of the two oppositions causes the protest by his critics that Kuhn deprives science of its objectivity and leaves us with only the category of 'taste'). Rorty clarifies for Kuhn: judgement is not 'taste' in the sense that the worth of a poem or of a person is not a matter of taste; the importance of these things, and of scientific theory, are matters of judgement, not taste.

To help Kuhn's argumentation, Rorty suggests a different distinction between senses of subjectivity than the one he proffers. In contrast to the idea of objectivity as a property belonging to theories which represent a consensual rationality, 'subjectivity' denotes that which 'rational discussants' set aside as not germane to the discussion. If the one accused of subjectivity presses the points excessively, the discourse becomes abnormal. In this sense, subjectivity is unfamiliarity.

Opposed to the second sense of objectivity, that is as a quality of statements that correspond to what is 'out there', subjectivity can be seen as a 'product of what is in here': subjectivity is that which is emotional or fantastical, representing the idiosyncracies of heart and imagination (reason versus passion) (338-39).

In order to begin to draw this summary to a conclusion, we bring the discussion back to the Western philosophical tradition that Rorty is interested to overturn, and note that Rortian hermeneutics cannot be equated with the 'mind' side of Cartesian dualism, nor with the idea of the 'constituting' faculty within Kant's schema of the constituting and structuring faculty of spontaneity versus the passive faculty of receptivity, nor with a 'method for the discovery of the truth of sentences which competes with the normal methods pursued in extra-philosophical disciplines' (343-44). In light of these confusions about hermeneutics, the fear of idealism is difficult to leave behind, especially when it is

enhanced [further] by the thought that if the study of science's search for truth about the physical universe is viewed hermeneutically it will be viewed as the activity of spirit—the faculty which *makes*—rather than as the application of the mirroring faculties, those which *find* what nature has already made (344).

Kuhnians should not follow their founder in his (unfortunate) assertion that each revolutionary scientist was 'presented with a new world', instead of 'using a new description for the world' (344). There is not a 'deep difference' between the image of making and the image of finding, and it has nothing to do with incommensurability and commensurability<sup>61</sup>.

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<sup>60</sup> The following will stick closely to Rorty's arguments, so I will refrain, as much as possible, for interjections such as 'Rorty argues such-and-such...', etc.'

<sup>61</sup> By commensurability, Rorty means the ability to be 'brought under a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached on what would settle the issue on every point where statements seem to conflict' (316).

Or again, the sense in which 'man is a spiritual and not merely a natural being...is not a sense in which he is a being who makes worlds' (345). Confusion over this point is evident in, among other things, the distinction between the *Geisteswissenschaften* and the *Naturwissenschaften*, the 'soft methods' of the 'science of man' and the 'hard methods' of the 'science of nature'. Rorty does not want any sort of traditional division of labour, as noted before. Thus hermeneutics is not set equal to soft methods and epistemology to hard methods. Rather, to recall, hermeneutics and epistemology involve a contrast between abnormal and normal discourse. So the two do not compete, but 'help each other out' (346):

Nothing is so valuable for the hermeneutical inquirer into an exotic culture as the discovery of an epistemology written within that culture. Nothing is so valuable for the determination of whether the possessors of that culture uttered any interesting truths (by—what else?—the standards of normal discourse of our own time and place) than the hermeneutical discovery of how to translate them without making them sound like fools (346).

The notion really comes from the division of the world into parts that can be described by the normal discourse of our own culture and those which cannot be. But if there is no requirement that people be more difficult to understand than things, then what makes the difference between hermeneutics and epistemology is that hermeneutics is needed in the case of incommensurable discourses, and that 'people discourse whereas things do not'. The difference is not 'discourse versus silence' but

incommensurable discourses versus commensurable discourses. As physicalists correctly pointed out, once we can figure out how to translate what is being said, there is no reason to think that the explanation of why it is being said should differ in kind (or proceed by different methods) from an explanation of locomotion or digestion. There is no metaphysical reason why human beings should be capable of saying incommensurable things, nor any guarantee that they will continue to do so. It is just our good fortune (from a hermeneutical point of view) or bad fortune (from an epistemological point of view) that they have done so in the past (374).

The 'traditional quarrel' over the philosophy of the social sciences serves as an example (347). One side argues that "explanation" (subsumption under predictive laws, roughly) presupposes, and cannot replace "understanding": one must have a sense of the whole before seeking to

explain the parts). The other (representing the objective social and behavioural scientists) argues that 'understanding *is* the ability to explain' (347, emphasis his); to proffer the meaning of the whole is the same thing as explaining the basic elements. Both sides are right. Scientists want to assert that human beings cannot escape the 'great unified web of predictive powerful laws' because they can talk: the laws can predict what they will say. Hermeneuts hold that what humans will say has two parts: 'what sounds or inscriptions they make (which become predictable enough, perhaps through neurophysiology), and what these *mean*, which is something quite different' (348, emphasis his). Defenders of science argue then that there are procedures for translating meaning into the single language of science. To which defenders of hermeneutics reply, 'there is no such thing as the language of unified science'. We do not have a language that will be a 'permanent neutral matrix for formulating all good explanatory hypotheses', and we do not know how to get one (349). The problem is that of permanence: we may just decide that one language is no longer helpful or we might think that someone had a better idea.

A summary of Rorty's argument could, of course, go on, but I think we have surveyed it adequately for the purposes of this thesis, especially noting the difference Rorty draws between 'epistemology' and 'hermeneutics'. Indeed, the minefield into which Rorty has deftly sauntered is too delicate to extricate ourselves successfully in such a small space. However, in the next chapter, we will take up a 'conversation', even as Rorty would recommend, between he and his critics, most notably between he and the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, and then conclude by reflecting about ways forward.

## Conversation, polarities, and interpretation

MY characterisation of Rorty's argument as sauntering into a minefield, far from being taken in any pejorative sense, ought to be seen as a compliment to the greatness of his endeavour. Such immensity of scale, however, should indicate something straightaway, however; simply appealing to Rorty's notion of 'truth' may be a bit problematic, which points to the fact that the responsibility of summary and application is so much the greater. It is rather like balancing an Egyptian pyramid upside down: the balance may work well for a time, but shifting ground would reveal who really is so confident about the thing. The heart of Jenkins' interest in Rorty, the point of his pyramid, I submit, is his conception of truth. However, an extraction of truth from what has been an intricate 'epistemology', without any consideration for the rest of the support system, does seem to lend itself to problematic potentialities. Whether this is the case or not remains to be seen.

Because I cannot, therefore, interact with the whole of Rorty's argument as summarised here, I would like to take up the less ambitious (but no less significant, I think) task of allowing Rorty's critics to respond, in so far as it seems to me relevant to salient points of contact between their debate and Jenkins' interest as an historian in Rorty as a postmodern thinker, and more generally with radical historical scepticism today. That is to say that I cannot adjudicate the field between Rorty and his critics, but I can raise points of contention, push their points further within this context, and at least make it clear that the issue is much more complex than bringing a certain notion of truth on board because it seems to tailor history to fit the currents of postmodernism. We will range in this discussion and in the next chapter over the territory of hermeneutics as an agenda not only set by Rorty, but set in a significant way as a replacement for epistemology (but not a 'successor'). It will be the case that we will not be able in this thesis to delve into questions directly about history and hermeneutics, such as entertaining the interesting but broader question of what exactly Gadamer as a prominent twentieth century advocate of hermeneutical theory thought about the nature of historical enquiry; this must be saved for another occasion. Rather, our task

will be to attempt to sort the tangles of epistemology and hermeneutics as a way of clearing the ground or blazing a trail toward historiography. We will be able to draw some conclusions for the primary topic of this thesis, and whilst I believe they will be a moderately significant move forward, I do not have any delusions that they complete a project. On then to the conversation.

## Rorty and the western epistemological tradition

That Rorty desires us to move away from the questions and bother of the Western epistemological tradition cannot by now be in doubt: the point has come in two different summaries of Rorty's positions. The prescription of his critique is not that we find new answers to the questions; implicit in his very method of analysing the subject is a moving away *from* successor objects, be they psychological or linguistic, because they partake of the same tradition and cannot therefore transcend it. The devastating critique then to be made against Rorty would be that his own arguments contain the same flaw. This is exactly the criticism of Charles Taylor. Taylor points out that Rorty requires history to make his own argument.<sup>1</sup> History's significance for Rorty is not an accident, nor is it a 'quirk of his style'. When we get to the broader questions, Taylor argues, such as the nature of philosophical enquiry, our definition of a particular position, even our own, is necessarily contrastive. We draw distinctions about how things have been misunderstood, and attempt to offer some new position or some clarification to set the record straight. It seems that this is difficult for Rorty to deny, given the implication of his own terms for his own work. Rorty desires, it seems, to be an 'edifying philosopher', a *thinker* in the Heideggerian sense, and the means of edifying philosophy is 'not only abnormal but reactive, having sense only as a protest against attempts to close off conversation by proposals for universal commensuration through the hypostatisation of some privileged set of descriptions'<sup>2</sup>. He can only point this out by referring to the 'Western *tradition*', that is, particular positions that have preceded his own, against which positions his is a polemic.

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<sup>1</sup> C. Taylor, 'Rorty in the Epistemological Tradition', *Reading Rorty*, A. Malachowski, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 257.

No doubt Rorty would respond by asserting that he is not partaking of that tradition:

the problem for an edifying philosopher is that qua philosopher he is in the business of offering arguments, whereas he would like simply to offer another set of terms, *without* saying that these terms are the new-found accurate representations of essences...[he is violating] a metarule: the rule that one may suggest changing the rules only because one has noticed that the old ones do not fit the subject matter, that they are not adequate to reality, that they impede the solution of the eternal problems. Edifying philosophers, unlike revolutionary systematic philosophers [who propose radical new ways of seeing or solving a problem within a given construal of the problem], are those who are abnormal at this meta-level.<sup>3</sup>

It is not altogether clear *why* he absolutely insists on offering a new vocabulary and on walking away from the tradition, however. Nevertheless, the problem is not leaving the tradition, but the means by which he attempts to do it. New vocabulary must orientate itself as a reaction against old vocabulary: certain words are not chosen because they have histories ('baggage', to use the therapeutic word) that encumber them and make them unsuitable for particular uses. Rorty is fond of the label 'historicity', which is the claim that all knowledge (including, he asserts with Kuhn, the philosophy of science) is contingent, it is inadequate and, as such, is, in Rorty-speak, 'optional'. (The assumption throughout is that 'history' is made rather than found. Now 'history' might be constructed (this is not (yet) a point in our discussion of historiography but only within the immediate context of this discussion of Rorty), but it is not constructed as anyone sees fit. The Western tradition is not a delusion we can simply tell ourselves does not exist. There are particular, clear, and distinct ideas against which philosopher after philosopher has positioned himself, though, of course, there may be disagreement over interpretations. A person cannot wake up one morning and begin to reflect upon the nature of things without reference to tradition. Whether she knows it or not, she is (as the previous sentence demonstrates<sup>4</sup>) not able even to choose an object on which to muse without particular reasons for doing so. This bespeaks the necessity of narrative, the necessity of history

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<sup>2</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 377.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

<sup>4</sup> With questions over the philosophical meaning of, perhaps, 'person', 'reflect', 'things', 'reference'; even words such as 'and', 'upon', 'to' are significant enough to deserve discussion for Locke and Leibniz.

for philosophical enquiry. It is not possible simply to invent a new vocabulary and hope that people will come round to forgetting all about that bad old tradition.

Now as we saw, Jenkins was quite excited about this idea; and why shouldn't he be? If there was a promise of finding justification for leaving behind all those questions of 'objectivity', 'accuracy to the evidence', 'true narratives', and so forth, why would we not do, from Jenkins' view? The point is not being made merely so that Jenkins should go back to augment his arguments with some historical background; rather, his disposition comes through at several points in his text. He is fond of asking his reader 'when has it ever been any different?' Here is one instance: 'Historians respond favourably to the postmodern condition if they care nought for the foundational certainties of modernity, feeling that they can effectively construct something on the "basis" of nothing (for when—in fact—was it ever different?)'<sup>5</sup>. The question reveals a fundamental problem in his argumentation. For, indeed, things have been different: very different. It was once acceptable to argue from evidence ('data') and to hold that a narrative constructed on such 'facts' was 'true'. Whilst this may no longer be the case (except in the most strained of situations), it is pure folly, based on the very system Jenkins is embracing, to deny because we see it this way now, that it has never been any different. Rorty's position is built on his argument that our vocabulary is always limited. So to construct a position that claims to view the situation from such a transcendent point that it can be held that the situation is now seen so clearly that it could not ever *really* have been different than it is right now in this particular vocabulary, is nonsensical when held against the view that all vocabulary is contingent: every point of view is historicist. Jenkins' confidence is unquestionably out of place in Rorty's philosophy.

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<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., *On 'What is History?'*, 38; note also the very curious sentence at 103: 'By now I think we should have no problem in understanding why Rorty is able to formulate *the only plausible* conception of truth *which there arguably is*', italics mine.

## Freeing ourselves from the tradition: the problem of unarbitrability

Taylor terms Rorty's claim that we can free ourselves from the questions that have been central to Western philosophy, that is, about the nature of human beings, 'about the truly valid ethical standards, about truth in science, and the like', a 'great leap into non-realism'. 'Where there have hitherto been thought to be facts- or truths-of-the-matter, there turn out to be only rival languages, between which we end up plumping, if we do, because in some way one works better for us than others'. Taylor's protest here is that Rorty's non-realism is 'itself one of the recurrently generated *aporiai* of the tradition we both condemn. To get free of it is to come to an uncompromising realism'<sup>6</sup>. This is the type of accusation these two philosophers hurl at each other: they neither of them appear to be able to accept the other's arguments because each eats from the trough of the Tradition.

We turn now to making explicit the problematic implications of this unarbitrability doctrine held by Rorty. A first problem, and here we draw on Taylor, is that the issue of adjudicating this matter between Rorty and Taylor should, in Rorty's view, fall under 'his non-realist regime....so that there is no truth of the matter between us on the question whether there is a truth of the matter between views of human nature, ethics, etc.'<sup>7</sup>. Taylor marshals evidence against a claim that he believes 'verges on incoherence': Rorty 'repudiates the claim that certain contemporary philosophers whose work he agrees with "have demonstrated that the philosophers of the past were mistaken". Rather they "provide us with redescriptions which, taken together, buttress" an alternative way of describing a predicament'<sup>8</sup>. The idea that Rorty finds difficult is that there might be some way of describing the world in language that would prove superior because it actually 'fits the world'; it is something that seems to be 'stigmatised in his work as something that is difficult to *believe*, and not just as a view which is distasteful or gets in the way of some important project'<sup>9</sup>. But Taylor argues that one's own beliefs cannot be manipulated consciously for any other reason than that they seem

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<sup>6</sup> Taylor, 'Rorty', 258.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis his.

true to us. Taylor also points out that there are places in Rorty's work in which he seems to say that his conclusions are hard to stomach, but that there really is no reason not to do. For example, when the secret police or torturers violate the innocent, there is not an essence in themselves that they are betraying; they are merely 'embodying practices of totalitarian society': there is nothing beyond these practices by which they are condemned.<sup>10</sup> Hard to stomach. However, this position does not just imply a 'consequence of pragmatism'; 'it is inseparably linked to the whole position. You cannot get in and out of these world-views like a cab, as Weber caustically put it'<sup>11</sup>: it is all or nothing, which means that consistency is a 'truth-constraint'.

To say this is to return to my brief introductory point above using the perhaps awkward metaphor of the upside-down Egyptian pyramid. It is not possible to choose one point on which to rest an entire structure without being willing to bear the consequences of its collapse due to imbalance. That is to say that the exportation of the view of knowledge as endlessly interpretative, though with assertions that one view can be judged better than another by 'definite, assignable reasons' may seem a strong, even unquestionable move. Of course, it would be affirmed, in Jenkins' terms, that such a judgement would only place one view over another in a 'small-letter' sense: the safe position is maintained in that no ultimate claims have been made.

But, Taylor argues, Rorty's idea is, in fact, that arbitrage cannot occur between world-views by arguments 'invoking reason and truth' and this 'must itself repose on a strong doctrine about the self-contained nature of these world-views'<sup>12</sup>. Thus it is not possible to take Rorty's system and reject its ethical consequences. Additionally, it is not possible, in this way of seeing things, for interlocutors to accept (or be convinced that they cannot reject) things in common which fit one world-view better than another.<sup>13</sup> These systems of seeing things are thus impossible to refute because they can always redescribe or reinterpret evidence put forward as contrary data: each world-view is a complete 'global system'. Taylor posits that the only way one could know that reason would not solve these dilemmas is by trying to

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<sup>10</sup> Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, xliii.

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, 'Rorty', 259.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

reason them out with an interest in knowing the truth. Otherwise, the only way that this could be known in general is by holding some theory of knowledge that says that certain ways of arguing or certain appeals to external points-of-reference are inappropriate; these are 'the bad old ways'. Rorty, Taylor contends, holds a 'meta-issue' that asserts that it is not possible for their views (or anyone's for that matter) to be arbitrated (this is a 'non-realist reading of world-views')<sup>14</sup>.

In any normal attempt at arbitrage, anyone can clear herself of formal contradictions but still leave her interlocutor unsatisfied that the issue has really been addressed. Another challenge can be made, but is there any way, Taylor asks, to prove that, for example, a torturer is wrong, 'objectively wrong'?<sup>15</sup> Disagreements regarding consistency do exist (a point for Rorty), but because these disagreements are 'localised', they sometimes arise and sometimes do not. There is no '*a priori* doctrine available about them'<sup>16</sup>: each dispute must be examined to see if such a disagreement exists particularly. Where they do not arise, pictures of closed world-views are not relevant because obviously some elements are held in common.

The problems with Jenkins' position in this regard (at the level of 'meta-view') suggest themselves readily. It is not possible to say that 'all history is interpretation', or, to move away from that apparently pedestrian Carrigan description to White's own more radical one, that 'there is no narrative without the historian as storyteller', and that *this* is the final word regarding the inability for one historian to hold his interpretation as superior to another. For this appeals to a point that is itself not interpretative: there lies behind it an *ex ante* belief that ultimately it is impossible to arbitrate between interpretations, between stories. It may be possible to argue that an historical reconstruction is coherent as a global system, and to refute any disagreements regarding the consistency of such a little world by simply redefining terms or redescribing what is going on. Why is it necessary to assert that such disagreements *must* arise, as the idea that 'all history is interpretation' must? It must precisely because the point of the statement, or especially of the more radical framings of it that Jenkins and other so-called postmodernists advocate, is to claim that no one view can be held as authoritative over

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

another; that is to say that there is not one external point by which interpretations may be arbitrated. But the point obscured by this statement is the meta-view that all history is interpretation, and thus that arbitrage is not possible. What appears to be a harmless, pragmatic ('it is just the way things work') description turns out to be an arbiter of historical reality, an epistemological high-point by which disputes might be adjudicated.

Now Rorty could respond, as Taylor points out, that he does not need an *a priori* argument: the failure of philosophy to find adequate arbitrage over two-thousand five-hundred years is argument enough. This seems to Taylor inadequate, which leads us to the second problematic implication of unarbitrability, that the tradition shows a failure to arbitrate it is not true: there are some issues which have been settled.<sup>17</sup> Galileo and Newton 'buried' Aristotle on the idea that inanimate nature could be explained in terms of realisation of corresponding Forms. Still, Rorty argues that the world does not 'decide' as a matter of will between one set of terms and another. Rather, one description of things seems better than another at a particular time and that is then the commonly accepted view. Enter Kuhn's theory of value-laden science. What is now interpreted as seeming self-evident to everyone who must have considered it at the time (pragmatism), was actually interpreted rationally.<sup>18</sup> Rorty's view, Taylor posits, takes Kuhn's paradigms (wrongly, in his view) as *closed pictures*, so that a person accepts one over another, so that 'there cannot be a rationally justified path from Aristotle to Newton'<sup>19</sup>. Here Taylor asserts that Rorty's non-realist reading of Kuhn obtrudes again as a (forbidden) 'Big Picture'.<sup>20</sup>

What is being touched on here is of great importance and points to a third problem: a strange conception of human understanding. The metaphor of taxi cabs does not only apply to ethical consequences, but to the broader intellectual fallout of these views. For instance, the implication of the idea of unarbitrability, is that different world-views, different periods of history, different cultures (the analogical applications seem to be multitudinous), are to a great extent using different 'languages' which cannot be understood by another similar denomination; that is to say that they cannot be reasoned, one

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*; see 274n15.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis his.

<sup>20</sup> For the differences between Rorty's deconstruction of epistemology and that of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, *ibid.*, 264-65.

to another, but are accepted wholesale, as it were. Now, of course, we have seen that to attempt to put similar concepts into the same language is characteristic of 'epistemology', and that the Rortian hermeneutical approach would be to 'pick up the jargon of the interlocutor'. Of course, we might ask whether simply using language without any attempt to see how it compares at least linguistically to potentially parallel concepts within one's own framework understanding, which, it seems to me, is at least one element involved in understanding, will get us anywhere in a 'discussion'.

The assumption here, moreover, is that there is no common understanding with which to begin, which is a fourth point. The idea apparently is that at some point, one system breaks and another begins; perhaps one understanding of a word drops out of common knowledge and another comes in, or one architectural style passes away and another replaces it, or one musical style ends and another takes its place, or one dramatic telling of a story makes obsolete that of another playwright, or one novelist's retelling 'out-innovates' another. To push the point this far may make it appear absurd, but this is exactly what I contend this radical formulation of closed paradigmatic representation of the Western tradition is.

Let us pursue this generative example of the artistic tradition further, taking as an example the notion put forward by the novelist, playwright, and theologian Dorothy L Sayers who has argued that an artist's use of the same materials does not make obsolete an older expression.<sup>21</sup> An apparent paradox emerges that may already have presented itself to the reader. Sayers compares the scientist to the artist and suggests that whilst for science, one theory can indeed eclipse another, the artist's understanding has no place for this view. The extent to which it does (and here I am pushing her argument further) probably reveals something about the artist's inappropriate relation to the field of science. Now we said above that Rorty's point regarding the inability of the Western tradition rationally to arbitrate disputes is proof that he need not hold an *a priori* view regarding unarbitrability, is not correct, that indeed some issues have been settled. Thus what we are advocating is not endless redescription, but some move forward, the potentiality for arbitrage.)

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<sup>21</sup> *Mind of the Maker* (London: Meuthen, 1941), 32-4, esp 33: 'The later in date leaves the earlier achievement unconquered and unchanged; that which was at the summit remains at the summit until the end of time.' Sayers here is comparing scientists to artists by noting that in the case of science, some theories obviate others, as we noted with Taylor's argument above.

And this idea of arbitrating issues would seem to imply that one view leaves behind another, and thus that my taking of examples from artistic expression (in this case my suggestion of Sayers' view) seems to support Rorty's claim that we simply redescribe using new vocabularies; philosophers do not prove other philosophers wrong, they simply happen upon new ways of saying things that strike the public as more appropriate than another way (to pick up Sayers' phrase in terms of art: one work does not supersede another). But, agreeing with Taylor, we said this view verges on incoherence.

But this would be to misunderstand the heart of my invocation of Sayers' point, that one artist does not simply ignore another and create an entirely new set of creative principles, criteria for new artistic styles, and so on, but takes up those of a predecessor and has the potentiality to do something new *in response*. Again we are affirming the need for tradition, the need for reference to the deposits of history. This gets at the point above of Rorty's doctrine of unarbitrability in that it points to the need for this 'meta-issue' to repose on the idea of closed systems. It is true that the artist sees some way of working with her medium that seems better or more appropriate to her than, say, that of another period. This creative act may indeed involve a critical judgement on another work or another period, as George Steiner points out in his *Real Presences*.<sup>22</sup> To say this is precisely not to say, first of all, that there is no 'rational' line of thought between one style and the next, nor, secondly, that one is simply left behind. Indeed, 'arbitrage' in the artist's estimation may involve a judgement about another artist's work or approach, though, of course, it need not invoke the idea of one superseding another. The point is not that one view replaces another, as Sayers suggests of science, but the degree to which that view is still important to understanding intellectual history, or culture, or the human condition, and so forth.<sup>23</sup> With the idea of replacement vocabularies and the meta-issue of unarbitrability, there simply is no room for the appreciation of historical development, which is the point of this discussion: a former idea or way of putting a problem, is simply obsolete: the philosopher should leave behind questions of the Western tradition and begin using new vocabulary so that another generation will take this up and forget about the bad old tradition. It is actually a

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<sup>22</sup> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 11-21.

<sup>23</sup> This is not simply as a 'museum piece', as it were, but as an active member of a tradition; cf. Rorty, *Philosophy*, 346.

scientific paradigm; put more precisely, it is a construal of a particular presentation of the history of the philosophy of science as a series of discrete views, with each successive view 'lucking out' with the public and thus being given the title 'true', which is the tautological definition of truth discussed above, as a paradigm for human knowledge generally. What I am suggesting here is that the metaphor of art is a helpful amendment for our understanding of the problem of arbitrage: just as an artist (of whatever medium) responds to that which has come before and *creates* something new of it, so human beings, philosophers, or whoever they may be, can listen to and respond to one another with the confidence that there might be found some way to move forward, some way of arbitrating issues. This is to say that James Joyce does not do away with our need to read Homer<sup>24</sup>, but he offers yet another contemplative creation which we might enjoy and by which we experience something of human life, temporally situated as it is. Thus, *ipso facto* that new work's fullest understanding must include references to 'tradition'. In short, then, unarbitrability necessitates the closedness of world-views, and this discreteness is precisely the problem if we follow it out in other fields, particularly as we have seen here with reference to art.

I am thus not suggesting that tradition within artistic expression be *the* model for human knowledge, especially with regard to the issue of arbitrability with which we are here concerned, but that the nature of one artist's response to a tradition issuing in a new creation, is a helpful and perhaps new metaphor by which we may see a way ahead from the idea of closed-worlds that Taylor (rightly in my view) points out Rorty's meta-issue requires. We therefore hold in tension, in a sense beyond the arguments of both Rorty and Taylor, the scientist who does believe one 'picture' of the universe to have been superseded by another, and the artist whose relation to a creative tradition is essential (in every sense of this potent word) to her new creation, in so far as this critiques the idea of closed systems.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> An implication of the same example used by Steiner, *Real Presences*, 13; he puts it in terms of Joyce's 'answerability' to Homer as Joyce 'reads Homer with us'; for Steiner's notion of answerability as central to the argument of that entire essay, 7-11, and its outworkings, 137-232, provocatively put in analogical terms as of living between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, in *Saturday*, esp. 229.

<sup>25</sup> For Sayers' own differentiation between science and art and its relation to the life of the 'common man', which she puts in terms of 'problem pictures' versus creativity, *Mind of the Maker*, 146-75, esp. 151-2.

A fifth problematic implication of the idea of unarbitrability which picks up on a point made by Taylor regarding Rorty's response about the apparent unarbitrability of the history of Western philosophy, is that, simply given that certain issues remain in dispute (even for a long time), it does not follow that these issues are unarbitrable.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, by virtue of the fact that Rorty asserts the contingency of vocabularies, it seems premature to conclude that something is unarbitrable. We are supposedly perpetually redescribing, so how could an issue be closed? Surely, though Rorty may hold that the Copernican view does not adequately describe the world, he would certainly hold that it is a better view of things than the one Cardinal Bellarmine defended, no matter what he may say about error and description. Thus, the issue may not be 'solved' in the sense that, for Rorty, the world can always be redescribed as vocabulary is *improved*, but it certainly seems to make sense of our situation more than its predecessor. So arbitrage, even by degree, seems to be in some sense possible.

The point behind the argument for unarbitrability is to stress that arbitrage does not occur because it cannot; and it cannot because there is nothing by which one world-view, to take Taylor's terms, might be decided as superior to another: they are both caught up in the language-games of their own self-enclosed systems. So though Rorty rejects that he holds this *ex ante*, Taylor says that it is neither valid for him to hold it by experiential proof.

This summary of things makes sense of Jenkins' unfaltering view that a foundationalist historiography cannot represent one interpretation as 'true' because it would have to do so at the expense of another's claim to this title, in the upper-case sense. All well and good: we will simply have several historiographies coexisting together. But the point here in all this discussion of Rorty is that it is claimed that one cannot hold to a foundationalist epistemology. Rorty says we are left to arbitrate disputes by tautological descriptions of truth. The point Taylor raises is that Rorty takes a foundationalist view that disputes are unarbitrable. So, by definition, because this is not a valid move for Rorty, it neither is for Jenkins. One historiographical world-view holds that we can settle disputes between historians by discerning whether historical reasoning is sound or whether it has referred itself correctly to external data, that is whether it has rightly

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.



interpreted the evidence. Another view posits that nothing can be decided—we may, to some vague, limited extent, be able to settle disputes between historical accounts with ‘good reasons’, but we can never call one interpretation ‘true’, ‘accurate’, ‘verifiable’. (Of course, Jenkins would probably respond that this is true in the ‘upper-case’ and untrue in the ‘lower-case’; in other words, one coheres within this closed system (and is labelled ‘true’), as another does in another.) But what if it becomes important to arbitrate between them? The views of one find this completely acceptable, whilst the views of the other have no way to make sense of such a desire because its inhabitants left such naïveté behind long ago.

I submit that we must find a way beyond this apparent impasse as I believe, with Taylor, that this idea of unarbitrability is an *ex ante* meta-issue that represents a non-realist view of the world; moreover, the way leading away from an idealist picture of the mind as the ‘mirror of nature’ is not this representation of an hermeneutical model of human understanding that holds all views as unarbitrable, one which is able not to step outside the hermeneutical circle by an external reference point (which, for Rorty, is the meta-issue we have been discussing), but is able to spiral out for greater understanding; how this will work out will become much clearer in the next chapter. However, there remains an hugely significant issue which we have been bumping into above, especially with references to ‘truth’, and that we must face if the discussion is to make any way forward, which is that of ‘correspondence’, and it is to this that we now turn.

### The abyss between correspondence and relativism

The first problem with Rorty here, and it is one that Jenkins and the postmodern history guild clearly share, is that the only concept of ‘truth’ that can be valid, beside that of ‘agreement’, is in terms of correspondence. Tautologous definitions aside, if truth is not correspondence, then truth is not a valid category. Even if we allow that that upon which we agree can be dubbed ‘true’, this reveals that either we are of the same closed world so that what we accept as true is such because it is familiar to us and has been given that title, or that there is some common ground so that arbitrage is possible.

At any rate, Taylor observes, in addition to my first point (which he makes as well but that is quite evident when reading Jenkins or Rorty), correspondence is understood in a 'rather simple-minded way'<sup>27</sup>. It is relatively 'plausible' to say that sentences such as 'Jupiter has moons' can be analysed as true in the sense that it is 'arranged in ways isomorphic to the parts of the world'<sup>28</sup>. But when one moves much beyond this to something like 'The earth moves round the sun' or 'There is no such thing as natural motion', the likelihood of plausibility falls off fast, until it is not existent in such as 'The universe is infinite'.<sup>29</sup> Apparently the problem is that scientific laws about the way it is 'out there' cannot be inferred from such simple 'pictures' that correspond to how things 'really are'. And besides, how can one *really* picture the universe as infinite (in the way that Locke does, for example<sup>30</sup>, or (certainly not) in the way Descartes thought of it<sup>31</sup>)? If we take the example of 'the cat is on the mat' above, it is quite easy to imagine that this would either be the case or it would not be, because I can picture it to be so very simply. But if I said 'the cat is not on the mat', things get more difficult: how can I picture nonexistence?<sup>32</sup> But it will probably be granted that I am not tempted to deny its falsity for this reason. The problem comes in more complex pictures with the desire to explain an event by connecting the law of gravity and the movement of a body 'in terms of natural places'.<sup>33</sup> A different (non-corresponding) explanatory account will still attempt to come to terms with the way things are, and certainly it will be considered by Rorty to be superior as a way of describing the way things are than that of corresponding pictures.

Taylor argues that Rorty sees pictures of correspondence falling into two 'traps': either they are an emphatic way of saying that these claims are accepted as valid (a category now easily guessed), or they attempt to paint a bad old metaphysical picture, such as Kant's thing-in-itself.<sup>34</sup> Seeing an

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>28</sup> Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*; Taylor, 'Rorty', 269.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: Penguin, 1997), II.xvii.1-4.

<sup>31</sup> 'It is enough that I understand [though he cannot fully grasp] the infinite, and that I judge that all the attributes which I clearly perceive and know to imply some perfection—and perhaps countless others of which I am ignorant—are present in God either formally or eminently. This is enough to make the idea that I have of God the truest and most clear and distinct of all my ideas', *Meditations of First Philosophy in Descartes, Selected Philosophical Writings*, J. Cottingham et al., tr. (Cambridge: CUP, 1988), 3.46.

<sup>32</sup> Taylor, 'Rorty', 269.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

appearance or representation creates 'the space in which we can suppose, are even invited to suppose, something like a thing-in-itself. We are then forced to define it as something which by definition we can have no experience of'<sup>35</sup>.

Kant himself saw that, though we are in the world of appearances, we

cannot but operate on the understanding, which frames and shapes all our perception and scientific views, that we are dealing with a world of objects independent of us. Our entire framework understanding of our place in this world construes our representations of it as true or false by correspondences. This is the insight by which idealism is refuted.<sup>36</sup>

Taylor, of course, instances Heidegger who held that insofar as he is being-in-the-world, a human apprehends a world of things independent of himself which as 'pre-understanding' is not itself a representation of one's place in the world: it is the background on which all such representations are framed. By this framing, *Dasein* perceives which things are true and which are false.<sup>37</sup> With this kind of framework, there is not a problem with accepting that reality independent of my representation makes those representations true or false. To have a problem with this, Taylor contends, is to be in the old epistemology; that is to say that where 'representations constitute our entire understanding, and are as it were our only route to contact with the "outside world"', that this kind of talk takes on a metaphysical flavour<sup>38</sup>. Taylor calls this move a 'post-epistemological, intra-framework notion of truth as correspondence'. But Rorty would probably respond that this is simply truth in the sense of (essentially meaningless) 'agreement'.

There is, however, another kind of truth, Taylor argues, that is beyond this idea of correspondence, a different domain for truth, and that is 'self-understanding'<sup>39</sup>. Because we are partly construed by our self-understandings, 'we cannot construe them as of independent objects'. When I believe something about myself or view myself in a certain way that perhaps is not entirely true to a situation (such as that I am a 'cool loner' when I am really involved in relationships), then when I see my involvement in relationships, I am altered in my description of myself; that is to say that I am

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> See F. A. Olafson, 'The Unity of Heidegger's Thought', *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, 106-108; truth is the presence of entities in their 'be-ing' and is prepredicative and prelogical in that it is prior to language (which represents it) and judgement: it is always 'an entity as such and such' so that it is 'as be-ing such and such that it is understood'.

<sup>38</sup> 'Rorty', 271.

shaped by the view I hold. The point is, however, that the view that I held that was untrue was part of the reality it described, rather than simply lying in relation between representation and reality. And this is a sense of truth for which correspondence does not account.

Let me work this out in an attempt to illuminate my point with another example from a different angle, one of particular interest for this thesis, namely one way of thinking about the relation between history and art. Insofar as history is art, it might prove insightful to consider the way in which one historian or group of historians picks up and develops the histories of another. This might prove especially interesting in the field of ancient history. Of course, one ancient historian's account of an event or a biography is often weighed against another; but this is often in terms of comparing 'facts' so as to determine 'which is right', which is often only another way of saying 'which account corresponds with the way things *really were*'. What I am suggesting is that perhaps considering the way in which one historian develops history as a craft would be a far more fruitful exercise, not least because it approximates the way in which ancient historians intended their works to be received. So-called propagandistic history for the Roman emperor or in defence of Jewish religion would thus be appreciated for what it is, rather than being deemed as nearly 'useless' because its 'facts' about decisive issues are skewed by authorial bias. Think of the Jewish historian Josephus as an example; we might let questions regarding how accurately he represents events fall to the side (not as unimportant or never to be taken up again, but as temporarily inhibitive, which is to steer a middle course between historiography as correspondence with history-as-actual-past-event and historiography alone as over against history-as-actual-past-event), and take up questions regarding the extent to which his literary art reflects other literature of the time, or holding in mind the audience for whom Josephus was writing, we might ask what it reflects about the aesthetic sensibilities of people of its time with regard to a particular religious or national purpose. Considering these and other such things, it might be discovered, place other concerns in their proper place. Again, the fruit of such enquiry would not be helpful in answer to the question 'what really happened?', but perhaps it would tell us far more than the straight facts of correspondence would, as we

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 271-73.

would be encouraged to think along the same lines as the historian or his readers, insofar as that may be possible at all. This example finds no place in the polar options of correspondence or untruth.<sup>40</sup>

Thus it will not do to hold only a one-dimensional view of truth as simple 'correspondence' that is the arbiter of a dispute, the result of which will be truth or no-truth-at-all. This objection is registered, too, by Merold Westphal.<sup>41</sup> Westphal observes that what Rorty repudiates as epistemology is strongly associated (by Rorty himself) with Descartes, Locke, and Kant, all of whom, Westphal observes, do attempt to define the limits of human knowledge; these are the limits that Rorty associates with 'constraint' and 'confrontation'. Westphal identifies the same or similar problems Taylor sees: the notion of knowledge only as 'accurate representation, as correspondence'; justificational certainty; epistemology as 'neutral, a priori tribunal whose task is to show how to achieve the desired apodicticity of accurate representation'; and that certain 'privileged representations' are to provide the 'foundations' of knowledge so construed.<sup>42</sup> Now it seems that very few today would accept these unfashionable arguments as unproblematic.<sup>43</sup> Of course, Rorty wants to reject these notions of things as well; the problem comes when he says that this is the only way that things can be understood; the only way, that is, if we do not accept his pragmatic alternative.

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<sup>40</sup> We might even say that this is the case because it gets at the self-understanding of the historian or an historical work itself, its own embeddedness, and therefore does not make up a separate element of an historical work as often seems to be the belief behind questions regarding literary criticism and history (especially with the Synoptic Gospels), as if we could take certain elements of a literary work out and analyse them separately; this is to suppose that 'historical facts' can be separated from their artistic form, a belief with which I vehemently disagree. For a similar line of argument regarding quite a different issue, see D. Brown's discussion of Grünewald's Crucifixion, *Tradition and Imagination*, 351-2; discussion of the work itself is at Plate 8 in the same volume.

<sup>41</sup> 'Hermeneutics as Epistemology', *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, J. Greco and E. Sosa, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 415-435.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 416.

<sup>43</sup> For a very up-to-date example, M. Williams, *Problems of Knowledge*; regarding certainty, see his discussion of the 'content problem', 100-104; for correspondence, see his presentation of the problems with theories of truth, including deflationary and coherence (117-137) and

## The problem of polarities: falling back into epistemology

The problem with a lack of nuanced views of such things is that it leads to outright rejection, but leaves one with very few options for recourse. The option Rorty takes is hermeneutics. This is not, he stresses again and again, a 'successor' epistemology. As we have seen above, it is not intended to be an epistemology at all because Rorty has rejected (or walked away from) such questions. It is, rather, a way of 'coping' with the world.<sup>44</sup> We have already summarised the differences Rorty sees between this and epistemology. Westphal points out, however, that this might just be exactly what Rorty does not intend it to be:

Hermeneutics, so conceived, is a reflection on the nature and limits of human knowledge; for it is no longer limited to the interpretation of texts but interprets all cognition as interpretation. In terms of the nature of knowledge, it emphasises the embeddedness of knowledge in historically particular and contingent vocabularies...; in terms of the limits of knowledge, it emphasises our inability to transcend that embeddedness in order to become pure reason or absolute knowledge or rigorous science. (In other words, *hermeneutics is epistemology*, generically construed.) It is a species diametrically opposed to foundationalist epistemologies, but it belongs to the same genus precisely because like them it is a meta-theory about how we should understand the cognitive claims of common sense, of the natural and social sciences, and even of metaphysics and theology. By failing to distinguish the generic epistemological task from the specifically modern foundationalist projects, Rorty obscures the fact that hermeneutics is not the replacement of epistemology as such but the replacement of one type of epistemology with another.<sup>45</sup>

This is precisely where Taylor and Rorty part ways in the 'conversation' above. Taylor argues that the Cartesian tradition of foundational epistemology should be deconstructed, in the careful manner in which Heidegger and Wittgenstein went about it. What we might call 'epistemology' other than as a reference to that particular way of seeing things we associate with foundationalism (Epistemology as such), is not ruled

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verification, 117-44; for a repudiation of the epistemological tradition based on the erroneous priority of experience, e.g., 196-99.

<sup>44</sup> For Williams' view of 'coping' over against the goal of inquiry as representing reality correctly, as 'idle and empty as believing truly', *Problems*, 250.

<sup>45</sup> Westphal, 'Epistemology', 416.

out. But this is a very different way of conceiving of things. Taylor describes this way thus:

Through a clarification of the conditions of intentionality, we come to a better understanding of what we are as knowing agents—and hence also as language beings—and thereby gain insight into some of the crucial anthropological questions that underpin our moral and spiritual beliefs.

For all its radical break with the tradition, this kind of philosophy would in one respect be in continuity with it. It would be carrying further the demand for self-clarity about our nature as knowing agents, by adopting a better and more critically defensible notion of what this entails. Instead of searching for an impossible foundational justification of knowledge or hoping to achieve total reflexive clarity about the bases of our beliefs, we would now conceive this self-understanding as awareness about the limits and conditions of our knowing, an awareness that would help us to overcome illusions of disengagement and atomic individuality that are constantly being generated by a civilization founded on mobility and instrumental reason.<sup>46</sup>

This is completely in line with Heidegger's critique in the sense that the 'knower' is inescapably caught up in the conditions of the world (thrownness), and thus brings pre-understandings to any attempts to represent the world. Thus the Baconian, Cartesian notion of the disengaged knowing subject, is inadequate to explain our situation. However, in rejecting this, we have done so on some basis, and that is the continuation of the tradition that Taylor notes. So it seems that Rorty's position is ultimately self-defeating, not only formally (as the style of narrative is predicated upon history, as argued above) but also logically in the sense that because he rejects the questions in order to propose 'new vocabularies', he misses the *deepening* of questions. Heidegger shifts the question 'What is philosophy?', which normally invokes answers such as a foundationalist might give, to 'What is this *whatness* that is philosophy?'<sup>47</sup>

Obviously these questions reach far beyond the particular mode of discourse that is history. To say this is to imply that they are somehow under its net, however. Just as Jenkins does not want historians to go about with the idea that they can 'just do history' without taking postmodern historiography into consideration, so we cannot 'just adopt postmodern positions' without

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<sup>46</sup> C. Taylor, 'Overcoming Epistemology', *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 14.

taking their larger questions along with us. That is to say that where Rorty falls under fire as it were, so will Jenkins. I will not embark, therefore, to draw correspondence (to use an unfortunate word) between these general epistemological enquiries and their specific historiographical applications, any more than I already have generally. This is beyond my purpose, which is to raise the questions to demonstrate that the matter is not so simple as adopting a philosophical position of 'truth' that seems to fit well for its uses in a particular area, whilst avoiding its oversights, and more generally to point up the problem of assuming this polar view of historical knowledge. To use Taylor's (Weber's) metaphor, we cannot take these 'world-views' like cabs, getting in and out whenever we please.

The way I have construed the problem leads us inevitably to hermeneutical theory. But it is not only by my construal that this has happened. It seems to be the way the philosophical discussion is moving generally, directing us toward it, like the roots and branches of Tolkien's Old Forest near the Shire directed the hobbits down to the Withywindle. It is to a working out of this as a 'third way' that is before us now, but we summarise first the overall flow of our argument before our concluding sections of chapter five.

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<sup>47</sup> I think this is captured well in Steiner, *Heidegger*, 19ff.; unfortunately we do not have the space here to enter into a discussion of Heidegger's 'revolutionary' work.

## The fair revisited: Conclusion and theological reflections

### Summation of argument

INSOFAR as the postmodern condition is an attempt to move beyond the meta-discourse that is characteristic of foundationalist epistemology, we are apparently left with a choice, one that Rorty makes quite clear. We may choose, first, a correspondence theory of truth, in which discourse conforms to some universal language by which we can judge the adequacy of particular representations of the way things 'are' ('epistemology'), or second, we can choose a way of theorising that purports to transcend this entire problem altogether by a way which we saw requires the notion of unarbitrability ('hermeneutics').

This second way is one that has dogged our steps throughout this thesis in different ways. In the first chapter, it was set out in terms of the overall 'disease' of so-called postmodern historians with the construal of the relation between history and science. As we saw (and could see still more), there have been many dispositions toward science, from 'history as science' (raising objectivist hopes) to 'history as the creation of the historian' (dashing objectivist hopes). We saw it raised in an issue inextricably linked with the question of science, namely that of history and epistemology: there are historians who have a 'disdain for truth' (and demonstrate it by 'playing language games'), and there are those who are concerned to discover the true record which can most adequately account for the evidential data. Put in another way, it is raised in relation to 'the historian and his facts', to use Carr's phrase: does the historian merely reconstruct the past by accurate assemblage of evidence, or does the past rely on her own 'reenactment' of that past, a term that inevitably raises issues about the pervasive role of the historian's mind in the process of history writing, even going so far, in the case of Hayden White, of resting the inescapable subjectivity of history writing on the claim that stories do not exist in history, but only in the mind

of the historian. This points up the further nuance given in the first chapter between history as 'the Past' and historiography as interpretations of it. The point here in terms of the distinction between correspondence and unarbitrability is that whilst one historian, in line with the former epistemology, holds that historiography is the attempt to create a contemporary narrative that is an accurate representation of the Past, the other (postmodern) one holds that the Past as such does not exist, but that all that does exist is historiography. It is also raised in relation to questions of language: either historical substance rests on the infrastructure of materials that make up sources, or upon 'mental protocols', which are foundationally linguistic. Thus we can see that this dichotomy permeates much postmodern historiographical discourse, as I have summarised it in this thesis.

In the second chapter, we saw this distinction in truth terms: in particular, does Thucydides in his speeches give his readers a report of what was 'actually said', or are they completely (or for all practical purposes) fictional, in the sense that they cannot be good representations of the past itself? There I attempted to give the discussion some nuance in terms of the interpretations of cyclicism and progressivism by raising the question as to whether Thucydides was not himself genuinely undecided about matters of human nature and social form, and whether, in light of this, he was attempting in his speeches to do more than give the 'literal account', the 'straight truth', the 'facts', by showing his readers something of his own diffidence about the whole matter of war and democracy by means of demonstrating what was rhetorically appealing to, say, the Athenians at any given point. I raised the question whether, in light of this, Thucydides, by his shrewd historical judgement and artistic rhetorical finesse, was giving us something greater than a literal account could. What I was alluding to was disclosed more fully in terms of the third chapter.

In that chapter, I explicitly raised the issue of Keith Jenkins' own adoption of Richard Rorty's construal of the epistemological problem, peregrine to most 'hard historians', as between confrontation and conversation, between constraint and freedom, between correspondence and unarbitrable closed systems of discourse, in sum, in Rorty's usage, between epistemology and hermeneutics. I appealed in part to Charles Taylor to demonstrate that issues were not so clear as between truth as internal

consistency, and correspondence. Indeed, the very distinction, which implies the unarbitrability of 'truths', itself implies a 'meta-issue' and, moreover, fails to recognise a greater domain for truth beyond correspondence, that of self-understanding and of the value of 'aesthetic' inquiry relative to the purposes of ancient historians.

It seems to me, then, that it has been demonstrated, if only provisionally, that this clear dichotomy, which cuts across the historiographical, historical, and philosophical discussion presented here, between correspondence and what we have called unarbitrability, and in terms of 'truth' which we called 'tautology' (that is truth as what is defined as true within a particular discourse domain), is not adequate to deal with the problems that face us in our 'postmodern situation'. I suggest we consider the arbitrable discourse of hermeneutical theory or interpretative understanding as an alternative, and it is this issue that we now take up as a way forward.

## Conclusion

*Hermeneutics as a theory extending beyond texts, to human understanding*

The influence of the twentieth century philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer has been extensive. His work is important for many reasons, not least of which is his extension of the idea of hermeneutics beyond the notion of explicating texts, and as a post-Heideggerian way of conceiving of human understanding as embedded within a particular horizon.<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally, of course, hermeneutics has been seen to concern itself with the interpretation of texts (and the interest in the topic today among biblical scholars seems largely orientated toward this understanding). Gadamer traces this movement from both Aristotelian rhetorical theory that took as its starting point Plato's belief that rhetoric was the task of the philosopher by which he mastered the faculty of speaking in order effectively to persuade an audience by his arguments, always in a way appropriate to

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<sup>1</sup> For Taylor's affinity with Gadamer's work, e.g., Taylor, 'Comparison, History, Truth', *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass and London: Harvard UP), 149. Not unimportantly, note also Rorty's reliance on Gadamer *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 11, 357-65, ; in general, see Westphal, 'Hermeneutics as epistemology'.

the receptivity of the souls to which he addressed himself;<sup>2</sup> and the ancients' interest in the 'genuine art of understanding', including Nestor and Odysseus, the Sophists, and Socrates.<sup>3</sup> Gadamer characterises the emergence of the 'hermeneutical problem' as the concern that something '*distant* be brought close, a certain strangeness overcome, a bridge built between the once and the now'<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, Gadamer posits that hermeneutics 'came into its own in modern times' when there came to be an awareness of the temporal distance from antiquity and 'of the relativity of life-worlds of different cultural traditions'<sup>5</sup>. This unfolded in the Reformation (with the interest in *sola scriptura* biblical exegesis), but most fully with the arising of 'historical consciousness' in the Enlightenment, and 'matured in the romantic period to establish a relationship (however broken) to our entire inheritance from the past'<sup>6</sup>. This orientating oneself or one's period of history to the past led to the fundamental understanding of hermeneutical theory as concerned with texts. Rhetoric, whilst concerning itself with speaking, also entered into the picture through interest in the efficacy of the written word, and a mediating position was found in orally read speech, where the art of speaking was based on good writing. 'Thus begins the transformation into poetics, whose linguistic objects are so wholly and completely art that their transformation from the oral sphere into writing and back is accomplished without loss or damage'<sup>7</sup>. A problem arises with the distance of the author, so that the reader's vocation is less like that of an auditor of a speech, in which good rhetoric will persuade him, but rather 'takes on something of the character of an independent productive act, one that resembles the art of the orator than the process of mere listening'; so, Gadamer observes, the dependence of hermeneutics upon rhetoric<sup>8</sup>.

It is precisely this relation between hermeneutical theory and rhetoric that Gadamer uses to distinguish hermeneutics from natural science, for whilst science is concerned with testing theories and establishing certainties,

rhetoric from oldest tradition has been the only advocate of a claim to truth that defends the probable, the *eikos* (verisimile),

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<sup>2</sup> Gadamer, 'On the scope and function of hermeneutical reflection', *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, D. E. Linge, tr. and ed. (London: University of California Press, 1976), 19.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 24; 24n7.

and that which is convincing to the ordinary reason....Convincing and persuading, without being able to prove—these are obviously as much the aim and measure of understanding and interpretation as they are the aim and measure of the art of oration and persuasion.<sup>9</sup>

And what, Gadamer would ask us, is not concerned with understanding as rhetoric? Even science is dependent upon rhetoric to the extent that it 'would wish to be of practical usefulness'<sup>10</sup>. Therefore,

[the] lack of immediate understandability of texts handed down to us historically or their proneness to be misunderstood is really only a special case of what is to be met in all human orientation to the world as the *atopon* (the strange), that which does not "fit" into the customary order of our expectation based on experience....The phenomenon of understanding, then, shows the universality of human linguisticity as a limitless medium that carries *everything* within it—not only the "culture" that has been handed down through language, but absolutely everything—because everything (in the world and out of it) is included in the realm of "understandings" and understandability in which we move.<sup>11</sup>

Having established this Gadamerian (Heideggerian<sup>12</sup>) notion of the pervasive nature of hermeneutical theory as that with which philosophers such as Rorty, Taylor, and Derrida are concerned (of course with various results), let us look again very briefly at exactly the problem to which hermeneutical theory is attempting to address itself. We can see the problem clearly by setting 'hermeneutical science' over against natural or empirical science, as Rorty does, as we saw above. The empirical sciences approach a problem with a particular methodology by which observable data are recorded and appealed to in order to deduce a theory which eventually, if it attains a certain status of certainty, may come to be considered a law. If one scientist has a varying interpretation of the evidence, one may be proven correct over the other by serial experimentation. But in a human science, say political science or social geography or economics (all of which arguably may not be 'hermeneutical sciences'), how can one interpretation be considered more valid than another? This is precisely where we ran into problems in

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> For the relation between the natural sciences and hermeneutics, 39-40; and 'Science of the Life-World', 182-197.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., the editor's introduction to *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, xl-lvi; e.g., H. -G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), xviii, 89-90; M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, tr. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 275.

chapter three. For unless we attempt to appropriate scientific methods and standards to the human sciences<sup>13</sup>, we are in a situation something like this: one practitioner observes a set of data (be it an historical source or a poll reported in last Thursday's *Times*) and proffers a plausible explanation. Another practitioner reads the same data and proposes a different theory to account for them. Obviously I am begging the question, but how are we to decide which interpretation is 'correct' or, at least, which is more valid than the other, even whilst proposing our own interpretation? Of course, we can go on arguing over definitions and the logic of argumentation and the relevance of certain data to certain social forms, and so on, but how ultimately do we escape the situation which obviously warrants the name 'hermeneutical circle'? This is precisely the problem, if we have kicked out from under us the supporting legs of empiricist epistemology.

#### *A third way*

In conclusion, then, I would propose, not as a prescriptive solution that might be directly applied to the way in which historians deal with particular data and write narratives, but as a way of reconceiving the problem generally, not as a choice between objectivity and unarbitrability, but as a third, creative way, that arbitrability is essential to human discourse, and therefore that, whilst we cannot and ought not return to foundationalist epistemology, there is a way by which we might conceptually move forward. We turn then to brief explanatory points regarding the necessity of arbitrage; these points answer the problems spelt out above in 'freeing ourselves from the tradition': as more intuitive answers were implied or made explicit with those points above, I simply make a few of them more explicit in brief by way of conclusion.

First, by implying unarbitrability in his argument for 'hermeneutics' over 'epistemology' (as was seen in chapters three and the present one), Rorty is misunderstanding the role of reason in human discourse. It is assumed that if reason or 'truth' are points to which one might appeal to defend one argument over against another, there is an implicit belief that we are back in

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<sup>13</sup> This is the primary alternative to endless tail-chasing proposed by Rorty; note the Hegelian option of grasping the whole in 'thought' to the extent that there is an inner clarity that is in fact 'absolute', as mentioned by Taylor, 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', *Philosophical Papers* 2, 18-19.

the bad Western tradition again. Thus, reason becomes another 'myth' by which we have operated, and that we need to admit we continue to hold and have done with; it is the myth of scientist and philosopher who propose rational arguments. What this fails to recognise, however, is the extent to which reason is the *way* of human discourse.<sup>14</sup> It does not necessitate a foundationalist epistemology, because it is simply the means by which we think at all: 'In our actual practice we can't treat the distinction rational/less rational as a nonhierarchical one, because it defines how we ought to think'<sup>15</sup>. Thus, as far as history is concerned, and in particular our work on Thucydides, whilst we cannot say (without violating our own argument regarding the appropriateness of the deconstruction of the Western epistemological tradition) that we ought then to take an objective, correspondence view of knowledge or truth, we can affirm that there is a place for the question as to what the speakers in his *History* did say on the occasion that the historian records. The reason we referred to the chapter on Thucydides as 'formative' or 'generative', and not merely an 'example' now becomes more apparent: Thucydides himself tells his reader that he has taken into account various reports regarding what was said, but as we argued in chapter two itself, there is more to the speeches than a word-for-word account, particularly with reference to rhetorical artistry. Thus, we should not assume that because Thucydides composed (and did not merely report) his speeches, they are of no use, nor that they are completely arbitrary and 'subjective', for they do make some kind of reference to actual events. We are thus pointing to a greater domain for 'truth', which includes artistic expression relative to historical inquiry in ways the implications of which have yet to be fully realised in the discipline of history.<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, we should briefly be reminded of the point above that arbitrage has occurred in the Western tradition, and that that very fact ought to caution us against too quickly disregarding its place, importance, or potentiality. Thirdly, to stand for unarbitrability is to be possessed of a strange conception of human understanding, particularly the extent to which

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<sup>14</sup> C. Taylor, 'Comparison, History, Truth', *Philosophical Arguments*, 155-6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 156. This, of course, raises questions about the extent to which this necessitates an Hegelian view of history as humanity's evolving along on a single track of human potentiality, in this case toward rationality; for Taylor's treatment of this, 160-4.

<sup>16</sup> Notice Taylor's approach at this point regarding the limit of reason and the relevance of the novel at p. 161.

it involves the idea of 'translation'. In order to understand anything at all, particularly history as a kind of foreign culture, we must realise that we draw on understandings of ourselves as agents, and that these pre-understandings which we bring to any effort at human inquiry shape our judgements. That is to say that we 'translate' our observations into terms by which they can be understood. If we merely 'pick up the jargon of our interlocutor' (as Rorty's (and Jenkins') hermeneutical approach suggests), we are ignoring this fact, ironically so, and thus are making its presence even more illusory. Of course, we are not therefore condemned never to be able to break out of our own understandings, as the hermeneutical circle would suggest; rather, we are obliged to examine, as much as possible, our own pre-understandings so that we might better understand the 'culture' we approach. We do not simply adopt the culture's own self-descriptions, for perhaps they were wrong about the causes to which they attributed some effect, for instance, but neither do we ethnocentrically force our own framework understanding into the 'correction'.<sup>17</sup> Rather, we allow our own understandings to be revised in light of our own perceptions of the culture (historical period, writing, and so on) which we are studying. We are not therefore guaranteed a 'correct' account or interpretation, but we can continue to revise our understandings both of ourselves and of our subject so that we approximate a truer and truer view; that is to say that we never achieve the once-coveted 'view from nowhere', but an account is always presented *from a perspective*.<sup>18</sup> To this extent, Carr's idea regarding history as interpretation is certainly not passé, though its formulations are in light of the burgeoning discourse. What I am suggesting in this small point, then, is an 'interpretative' approach such as Taylor presents in various essays in his second volume of philosophical papers; or, what John R. Hall has called a 'Third Way' that forsakes binary conceptions of sociohistorical research.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of these ideas, C. Taylor, 'Understanding and Ethnocentricity', *Philosophical Papers 2*, 116-133; notice esp. his application regarding revision of 'home understandings' to 'primitive' and modern understandings of magic throughout the essay, esp., e.g., 129.

<sup>18</sup> This point should be emphasised because in careless applications of Gadamerian hermeneutical theory, it is often thought that by acknowledging preunderstandings, we are overcoming them to the extent that we are achieving an original hope for an 'objective' view; biblical scholars, it seems to me, fall into this trap more often than might be admitted.

<sup>19</sup> J. R. Hall, *Cultures of Inquiry: from epistemology to discourse in sociohistorical research* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999); I cannot here discuss Hall's vast treatment of many types of discourse, nor here consider his conclusions, but my argument generally gels with his; see particularly his summary of the problems of the Western tradition and his outline of his proposal for a way ahead which draws on both deconstructive and reconstructive methods of

We can say of Thucydides briefly in a rather simple example that our interest in interpreting him as a medical doctor is probably very much influenced by our bias toward scientific, objective knowledge, which then even affects our views of 'the Greek conception of history', in so far as we perceive Thucydides to have been concerned with 'diagnoses', 'diseases', 'treatments', and so on, as the purpose of his writing. Now, of course, the close relation between intellectual history and historical writing mentioned in chapter two tells us that there is some place for this view; but, we ought only to take such a view very self-critically, as we have said we ought to take any interpretative strategy.

Fourthly, an affirmation of the necessity of arbitrage points to the open boundaries between worldviews. In addition to noting the interactional nature of philosophical discourse, we took the responsiveness of creative, artistic expression to tradition, as instructive. This artistic metaphor is more than incidental. For I think that in addition to being a metaphor, it is particularly incisive in that it gets at something of the nature of discourse itself which *ipso facto* requires an historical sensibility to account for its comparative, responsive nature. Why should historical inquiry, that is historiography, be any different? It could be different only to the extent that it might draw more heavily upon these features, being that they are constitutive of the very fabric of history itself. If we consider our work on Thucydides, we can see then that the history of the interpretation of his *History* to which I alluded a few times becomes very important, though not in the sense that we must subscribe to every view that has been offered. But in considering particular interpretations and translations, we may see something of the appeal of this historian to a particular thinker or historical period that may offer insight on at least three levels. First, it may offer insight regarding Thucydides' history itself, perhaps his speeches, otherwise obscured from view by the accretion of distracting biases in our own 'framework understanding'. This will in turn yield an insight concerning our own horizon, shedding light upon our own self-understandings as interpretative agents. And thirdly, it may reveal something about the particular interpreter

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postmodernism in 'hybrid approaches', roughly coherent, though differing at points, with Lyotard and Foucault, 6-33, 169-261, where he works proposals out in historiographical examples.

in history in question.<sup>20</sup> I submit that this would be the case with many historical works or periods.

Fifthly, and finally, in response to the charge of unarbitrability as a result of the failure through time for arguments to be resolved, we should say in addition to our point above that this leaves the way open for further interpretative efforts. If we acknowledge, with Rorty, the limited viewpoint of our understandings and the perspectival nature of our narratives and interpretations, we are not forced to believe that there is no good in seeking arbitrage. The view I was commending in my third point above affirms this, but does not take the line that we are talking about closed views that we cannot break out of; rather, we argued that we approximate better interpretations, but they are always that, views from somewhere. The implications of our previous point, moreover, ought to caution us not to gripe about this, for there is much richness to be found in the developing of the tradition of interpretation, to yield insights about ourselves as interpreting agents, about periods that have offered other interpretations, and about the historical subject in question in any given inquiry. This panoply of examples and conceptual applications ought to demonstrate clearly that to operate with a binary view of human understanding, forcing a choice between correspondence and unarbitrability or relativism, is to confiscate from the fabric of history the multivalence that ought also to mark the very art that historians should be concerned to craft, as indeed the reticence and artistry of that ancient Greek historian would lead us to think.

### Theological reflections

I will reflect theologically on these matters simply by making three points from among the vast number that may suggest themselves from this study. First, an ethical point; the idea of unarbitrability itself reposes, I suspect, on a notion of 'tolerance' that is popular today in postmodernity. The idea is that if we are sufficiently open and can grit our teeth and bear views with which we

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<sup>20</sup> As an example, if my point is correct, it would be a fruitful study to examine the translation of Thucydides completed by Thomas Hobbes to discern the extent to which he saw a pessimism regarding human nature in the *History*, the extent to which such an interpretation

may vehemently disagree, then we will be able to maintain the multicultural or pluralistic character of society. This is evident in Rorty's oeuvre in which he incessantly polarises objectivity and solidarity: we can either have 'truth' or a good democratic society, as we saw in chapter three; this solidarity was seen by Jenkins to be the motor of Rorty's philosophical writings, and as such it was very attractive to him. However, we ought to question whether a Christian understanding of charity is not a much better one by which to 'get along'. Have we really recognised a person's view point if we have only allowed him to be heard, or have tritely picked up his vocabulary, with little attempt at the hard work of truly understanding a person and loving him as he is, and as we are?

Perhaps a much better critique of the mind as the 'mirror of nature' is the person as the 'mirror of charity'<sup>21</sup>, as reflective of the nature of the Triune character of God who is the ground of human friendship. St Aelred of Rievaulx has observed, that if God is love, then God is friendship in that 'he that abides in friendship, abides in God, and God in him'<sup>22</sup>. There is no room at all to consider the question that arises from my suggestion as to the epistemic primacy of belief in the Triune God<sup>23</sup>, nor whether we are merely assuming such doctrines as new foundations of knowledge. This sort of move toward foundationalism is not a necessity, however, in light of studies regarding the relations between personhood, communion, and truth, so that correspondence again becomes a pale category.<sup>24</sup> This problematic binary picture having been wrested from our hands, it is hoped that several new conceptions of 'truth' can be imagined as possibilities for applications to various fields, including theology and historiography. In fact, I posit that there is a relation between the alternative I suggested to the binary approach of correspondence versus unarbitrability, namely of arbitrage by interpretative or contrastive approaches (whichever name we might choose),

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of Thucydides affected social contract theory, and the implications for such a view on the developing importance of democracy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

<sup>21</sup> The reference is to the twelfth century text by Aelred of Rievaulx, *Mirror of Charity* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990), though I am here doing little more than picking up the phrase; it is the following work of his in which I am more interested for this thesis.

<sup>22</sup> *Spiritual Friendship*, M. E. Laker, tr. (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1974), 66. Here we should note that Aelred states that it is 'unusual' to say that God is friendship, but he also proffers that 'what is true of charity, I surely do not hesitate to grant to friendship.'

<sup>23</sup> For such a discussion, B. D. Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Think, for instance, of J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1985); the whole work discusses the theme, but see esp., e.g., 67-122.

and conceptions of truth as 'personal', 'relational', 'communal', and so on. The idea of arbitrability, though it is oft criticised because it may lead to ethnocentrism or dominating discursive schemas, actually opens the way for listening, truly recognising the other, and so forth, which ought to mean loving persons, cultivating friendship, solidifying society. Indeed, Charles Taylor's philosophical positions have collectively been referred to as 'communitarian' for his very emphasis on shared common goods, and their potentiality as a foundation of human society, as friendship itself is recognised to be.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps what this points to is the necessity of questions of social significance for human knowledge and truth, a point that has become more and more recognised, and that we could pursue much further, had we the space.

Secondly, we consider briefly biblical studies and the present thesis. It is not difficult to establish that the various quests for the so-called historical Jesus have been consumed with the question of knowledge as correspondence. Countless monographs have undertaken, most famously seen in the New (or Second) Quest of which the infamous 'Jesus Seminar' partakes in large part, to undercut or to defend the idea that Jesus actually uttered this logion or did this mighty deed. The Third Quest, led by such as N. T. Wright, has sought to establish, supposedly founded on different historical strategies largely drawing on critical realism (as already noted in chapter two), a whole picture of Jesus as a first century Jew, and then to fit the various pericopae into this larger narrative. It is hardly difficult to notice, however, that members of this enterprise have not given up defending individual logia, assuming that if they can defend that Jesus actually did say this or that, that their picture will be 'right' and that they will have earned the right to place those minutia into their overarching narrative; these tendencies come especially in response to various 'new New Questers' such as Burton Mack and John Dominic Crossan. My criticism here is that it often assumes the same epistemology that we have critiqued in this thesis. That the interpretation of this saying or this deed is affected by the scholar's conception of the whole, and the whole is affected by the interpretation of the individual details ought to warn us of the presence, again, of the hermeneutical circle; this, as we saw, requires very different theoretical bases

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<sup>25</sup> C. Taylor, 'Irreducibly Social Goods', *Philosophical Arguments*, 127-45, esp. here 139.

for human knowledge than the epistemological ones that some biblical scholars seem often to be pining after in seeking the higher ground of scientific certainty and accuracy.

The aforementioned New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright, one of the prominent 'historical Jesus scholars' today and perhaps the most prolific (certainly the most prolix), provides an interesting example of this. Whilst he largely eschews and criticises the use of 'home-made "criteria"' that is characteristic of the New Quest at several points,<sup>26</sup> by this he does not mean that the Gospels should not be used to investigate historical questions regarding Jesus. Precisely to the contrary, Wright argues for the historical reliability of the Gospels, and takes them largely without questioning their integrity, observing that such questions are being 'tacitly bypassed', a trend that he wholly applauds in the 'Third Quest' as he himself termed it. It would seem, then, odd to select Wright's work at this point in my conclusions. I do so precisely because it would seem by his criticisms of previous 'quests' that he would propose a move forward. Now, certainly, it seems to be quite a different matter to take Jesus in his context as a first-century Jewish eschatological prophet, and then to attempt to work particular parables, 'symbolic actions', and so on, into this picture. Many are quite ready to take this strategy as well, not least Jewish scholars, such as Geza Vermes, who are certainly happy to accommodate and reclaim Jesus for Judaism, giving the Gospels a very intriguing interpretation indeed. We might expect, then, that Wright's criticism of previous efforts to locate the historical Jesus would thoroughly take on their methodologies and propose very different ones.

I submit that this is far from the case, however. In the first of a series of what will be five volumes on Christian origins, of which *Jesus and the Victory of God* is the second, that is in *The New Testament and the People of God*, Wright attempts to lay out his own methodology. We, of course, cannot explore it in much detail, but let us briefly examine it. To my mind, an attempt to overcome previous methods that argue over the authenticity of particular sayings (and now actions, as well) of Jesus as they appear in the Gospels, is to take on a movement with a very different philosophical position than that which a new methodologist may desire. Throughout this thesis, we have referred to this as a 'foundationalist epistemology' that is characteristic of the

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<sup>26</sup> N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), e.g., 87, 87 n18.

empirical sciences. I have brought into serious question whether the methods and approaches generated by this epistemology are appropriate to historical inquiries. Indeed, I have implied, drawing on Heidegger, Rorty, and Taylor, that this tradition ought to be overturned, though, of course, in a way different to Rorty's proposal. This is not the move Wright makes, however; nor does he make any similar move. Wright at numerous points criticises 'positivism', though he asserts that it is the 'historian's solemn duty to strive towards intellectual honesty and serve impartiality'<sup>27</sup>.

He proposes, therefore, following Ben Meyer's use of Bernard Lonergan, the position known as 'critical realism'; that is to say, in his definition,

a way of describing the process of "knowing" that acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence, 'realism'), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the known* (hence 'critical').<sup>28</sup>

The problems this formulation raises are legion; I will note a few of them. First, the idea of an 'appropriate dialogue' seems well and good; but a metaphor he proposes for the task is a telephone conversation<sup>29</sup>: when a person picks up the telephone, she begins to formulate 'hypotheses' regarding who is on the other end of the line, and it is only as the other person talks and as the receiver of the call asks questions, that she can determine who it is; this is a nice picture of interaction. Wright sees a problem, though; whereas in a conversation we may ask questions and receive information as answers, when we approach historical texts we are told *stories* that may not necessarily answer our questions. (We will shortly see that this idea of stories is very important for Wright.) The fundamental problem here is, of course, that doing history is nothing like a telephone conversation. First of all, as Wright acknowledges, a telephone conversation involves two people who are speaking the same language and may, or may not be, part of the same culture (though they certainly are of the same time in

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<sup>27</sup> Here he makes brief mention of this as the aim of Thucydides, whom we should follow, *New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 85; my reading of Thucydides' speeches in this thesis brings his interpretation of Thucydidies' conception of the historical task into question.

<sup>28</sup> Wright, *New Testament*, 35; italics his.

<sup>29</sup> Wright, *New Testament*, 86; this is meant by Wright to be an example, but I think the substance of it is far more indicative than might be surmised.

world history), whilst the ancient historian or theologian is doing nothing of the kind as he is speaking with someone who is using a different language and is coming from a sometimes inconceivably 'other' culture. Secondly, the questions posed to the caller on a telephone may be inappropriate, and the caller can respond by telling us so, or by giving us a slightly different answer than we may have expected; in which case, if we fail to understand, we can ask a further question and eventually come to common understanding; this is the 'spiral' to which Wright refers. What this metaphor for a model of historical inquiry fails to recognise, however, is that a text cannot respond in defence of itself: it is largely, if not wholly, at the mercy of the reader.

This is where a second criticism of 'critical realism' may be made, for I contend that it is not 'critical' enough because it does not question the interpretative agent's assumptions nearly enough. The questions I ask of a text are entirely shaped by my own intellectual backdrop, by my philosophical position. So whatever question I ask, it will usually be possible for me to find an answer in the text in question, but that answer will, again, be on my own terms. Here we are once again at the hermeneutical circle and are faced with the problem we referred to above as 'ethnocentrism'. I proposed an arbitrable third way that drew on Charles Taylor's interpretative theory of the social sciences. This theory takes as its philosophical foundation very different assumptions that, I argued, do not partake of the 'objectivism' or 'positivism' characteristic of a foundationalist epistemology. We take our framework understandings under consideration, and open ourselves to the possibility that these will likely need to be revised as we continue to 'converse' with the 'other culture', thus forming understandings that take into account both the self-understandings of the subject, yet move beyond their understandings as they may not understand themselves well enough to describe what actually may be taking place. This is, of course, not to say that we come to a 'right answer' regarding the other, but we continue to revise our understandings with the hope that they become truer and truer pictures. Wright would no doubt agree with all of these things.

But there is a major problem here: Wright has not in any way revised his so-called epistemology from that of those he wishes to critique and whose methods he supposes himself to have left behind. His method of working 'critical realism' out in the field of historical inquiry is to refer to his strategy

as 'hypothesis and verification'. It is troubling first off that he says that 'this is in fact what all historians do anyway'; so one-hundred pages of so-called epistemological discussion notwithstanding, he reverts to the same methodologies as other historians. This point is borne out by one reviewer who, calling into question Wright's attempt at philosophical discussion, states that the pages might be skipped by 'those familiar with such issues' because 'most of this material does not directly impinge on the subsequent pages'.<sup>30</sup> These things would seem to point to the fact that Wright is not really working his 'critical realism' out in his historical 'method' (or that it is not efficacious as an historical model), though I think the criticism to be quite dulled by my criticism above that it is not 'critical' enough anyway; in any case, the method seems to be quite flawed.

Now to the question of his proposal of 'hypothesis and verification': There is an important sense in which historical method is just like all other methods of enquiry. It proceeds by means of 'hypotheses', which stand in need of 'verification'...[;] a better way of putting this (avoiding certain epistemological pitfalls) is to say that human life is lived by means of implicit and explicit stories; that these stories throw up questions; that humans then advance explanatory stories to deal with these questions; that some of these stories attain a degree of success. I shall continue to use the convenient terms 'hypothesis' and 'verification', but shall use them with these overtones.<sup>31</sup>

The 'epistemological pitfalls' being, apparently, positivism, phenomenism, and idealism, it becomes a bit difficult to justify the use of scientific words such as 'hypothesis' and 'verification'. Lest the reader think I am being too quick with my criticism, notice his references to history itself as being like scientific enquiry.<sup>32</sup> We have seen the numerous objections to this understanding of historiography at several points in this thesis. Moreover, what appears throughout this and the subsequent volume as harsh criticism of the 'New Quest' and the 'new New Quest' movements such as the Jesus Seminar, takes on a strange new note on the heels of the invocation of science: indeed, this method, that is hypothesising and verifying, describes 'how it has

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<sup>30</sup> S. Fowl in *Modern Theology* 10: 313-14 (1994): 314; at any rate, if those familiar with the complexity of these issues ought to skip these pages, I cannot imagine how helpful they would be for those who are unaware of the problems.

<sup>31</sup> Wright, *New Testament*, 98.

<sup>32</sup> E.g., the previous quotation referred to history proceeding like 'all other methods of enquiry'; at p. 103, he includes 'microbiology' with this 'anything else' of generalisation.

always been<sup>33</sup>. So far from distancing himself from these movements he apparently opposes, he welcomes them into his own fold (or perhaps unwittingly joins theirs), saying that they were doing the same thing, that is, holding a tacit hypothesis (their own story, such as that the Early Church and Judaism were entirely dissimilar to Jesus) and attempting to verify it by a particular reading of the Gospels. Wright simply disagrees that their pictures of Jesus are better than his own. So how can Wright's work be seen to be any different? His criticism of these movements is that the use of the method of hypothesis and verification has been 'unacknowledged, and so has not operated properly; bad arguments have passed unnoticed because attention was diverted away from danger signs (carelessness about data, or happy acceptance of unnecessary complexity) which would have warned that all was not well'<sup>34</sup>. One is certainly in bewilderment to explain how Wright's 'Third Quest' is really much different if the 'story' that he offers as the one into which his interpretation of the data fits (which he presumably calls his hypothesis, perhaps a meta-hypothesis), is taken in light of the fact that he asserts that those whose method he opposes have done the same thing without acknowledging it. This is further borne out by the fact that, though he says his basic stance toward the Gospels will be to take them as historically trustworthy, he obviously takes much the same stance toward the Fourth Gospel that previous questers have.<sup>35</sup>

In sum, it seems to me that Wright's methodology is not very different from those 'positivists' whom he criticises, nor that he is nearly well enough aware of the current philosophical discourses to make any attempt at situating his method. Thus, for all his criticism of 'positivism' and 'certainty' by his long argumentation regarding the interpretative nature of history, it seems that he has ultimately poorly chosen his foes. Furthermore, his uses of

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<sup>33</sup> Wright, *New Testament*, 104.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*; the way in which he suggests his project is different is that his hypotheses are 'simple', so that there is no unnecessary stretching of the evidence; this seems only to be a matter of personal toleration as far as what is 'stretching'; additionally, it is not clear why 'simplicity' must be a characteristic of first-century Judaism or of the early church.

<sup>35</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, xvi; here he states that the book is too long already and that he is not overly familiar with material on the Fourth Gospel, though he hopes someday to get to it. But if a 'whole picture' of Jesus, even Jesus as a Jew (the Fourth Gospel is now seen by many scholars as thoroughly Jewish, and not Hellenic as it was thought to be seventy years ago), is desired, and a basic disposition of trust is taken toward the Evangelists, it is quite inadequate not to take the Fourth Gospel as a substantial document, especially for a work that attempts to be so revolutionary in its approach.

words throughout his works such as 'hermeneutics'<sup>36</sup>, 'spiral', and so on, are not adequately developed enough to render any difference in his actual work.<sup>37</sup>

It seems to me, then, that insights peregrine to this field of study could be considered by biblical scholars with not a little fecundity. For instance, we could consider, as I have with Thucydides, the communicative purposes of the Evangelists, starting perhaps most easily with the Fourth Gospel, though perhaps its reputation would have to be reconsidered seriously. We could consider the extent to which envisaging the intentions of the Evangelists has involved adopting modern historiographical assumptions, which points to the notion of the revision of our self-understandings as interpretative agents, rather than supposing that we are correcting their disharmonious accounts, as is often the case in Gospel studies. We might even consider, dare I suggest, the richness of the tradition of interpretation, including the oft chastised practice of medieval exegesis at which I hinted at the end of chapter two, as incisive for our understanding today, of ourselves, of the Evangelists and of Jesus, and of the medieval exegetes themselves (other than that they were childish interpreters because they did not utilise the appropriately critical

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<sup>36</sup> Note the sloppy use of the word and idea by his critics as well, C. C. Newman, '(W)righting the history of Jesus: a review essay of *Jesus and the Victory of God*', *Critical Review of Books in Religion* 10 (1997): 121-44, esp. 135; for another attempt by Wright, 'Theology, history, and Jesus: a response to Maurice Casey and Clive Marsh', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 69 (1998):105-12, esp. 105-6.

<sup>37</sup> Two more minor points could be made. First, this critique has only considered Wright's methodology; obviously we do not have the space to consider the actual substance of his work here, though, having read both books, I think the criticisms above would stand for the actual 'historical arguments'.

Secondly, though I have criticised Wright here, it seems that most of his reviewers fail to make any better proposals, and even the ones who see a problem with his 'epistemology' do not see the attending problems very clearly; some accuse him of the idealism he wishes to avoid: C. Marsh, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50 (1997): 127, and positivism, C. Marsh, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 69 (1998), 87-8. There are also unclear references to 'postmodernism' by C. C. Newman, '(W)righting the history', 136, in which he (rightly, in my view) calls Wright's agenda 'modernist', but then says that Wright's 'project begins to feel [a] bit postmodern' because of its 'logical fallacy' (which is really the hermeneutical circle as described in this thesis, and which lead to a variety of supposedly valid interpretations, though, e.g., Wright certainly argues strongly for his interpretation of apocalyptic) and the implication that by 'making hypotheses' an historian 'makes history'; Newman does not seem fully to sort out how this 'modernist agenda' and supposedly 'post-Enlightenment means' work together. For an example of how 'critical realism' can work out into problematic interpretations, A. E. Harvey, review of *Jesus*, *Theology* 100 (July-Aug 1997): 296, on Wright's interpretation of the parable of the Prodigal Son; and J. D. G. Dunn, review of *Jesus*, *Journal of Theological Studies* 49 (1998): 730-731, which is a common reservation about Wright's over-reading of the theme of exile as part of the psyche of first-century Judaism. But I wonder, again, whether the criticisms ultimately make much difference in light of my criticism that Wright's methodologies are really doing anything very different than former ones.

methodologies).<sup>38</sup> But, there would have to be an awful lot of pride laid aside for such inquiries to take place, even if conducted only at an academic level. We should note, too, the critiques of the historical-critical method made by theologians (such as Barth); it would be an interesting topic for further study, to conceptually compare the argument of this thesis with theirs.

I conclude, then, with an application from the brilliant work of Dorothy L Sayers on theology and art, particularly on the doctrine of the Trinity and the creative mind. I briefly discussed her argument in the previous chapter, but much more could be said regarding her suggestion of a 'third way', especially as spelt out in her final chapter, 'Problem picture'. In that chapter she sought to explore the place of art, of creativity, which, Sayers argued, is essential to the 'mind of the maker' and thus to the life of the common person; thus she disagreed that the common use of the idea of creativity as novelty in problem solving is a proper understanding of the concept. Artists do not see the world in terms of 'problems', as scientists do:

the artist does not see life as a problem to be solved, but as a medium for creation. He is asked to settle the common man's affairs for him; but he is well aware that creation settles nothing. The thing that is settled is finished and dead, and his concern is not with death but with life: "that ye may have life and have it more abundantly".<sup>39</sup>

Sayers brilliantly draws this out further with reference to theological themes:

What is obvious here is the firmly implanted notion that all human situations are "problems" like detective problems, capable of a single, necessary, and categorical solution, which must be wholly right, while all others are wholly wrong. But this they cannot be, since human situations are subject to the law of human nature, whose evil is at all times rooted in its good, and whose good can only redeem, but not abolish, its evil. The good that emerges from a conflict of values cannot arise from the total condemnation or destruction of one set of values, but only from the building of a new value, sustained, like an arch, by the tension of the original two. We do not, that is, merely examine the data to disentangle something that was in them already: we use them to construct something that was not there before: neither circumcision or uncircumcision, but a new creature.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Notice, for example, the seminal work of Brown's *Tradition and Imagination*, relevant here as a model for bringing into the interpretative conversation exegete, systematician, and artist.

<sup>39</sup> Dorothy L Sayers, *Mind of the Maker*, 152.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 154-5.

The notion, then, that knowledge and by extension, truth, are much more than an arid land of binary choice, is very much at home in theology, and, indeed, we might even say from Sayers' argument that they find much momentum in various theological topics, not least regarding redemption or sacramental theology. Notice, for instance, Barth's characterisation of Calvin's view of the sacraments over against Luther's or Zwingli's, by which Calvin does not deny the objectivity of the divine element, nor the relational movement or practice emphasis, but, argued Barth, weds the two in a transcending third position.<sup>41</sup> This theological third position argument is not necessarily particularly novel, as it neither is in this thesis; but the parallel lines of argument ought to indicate, thirdly and for now finally, that historians may find water at various wells, not least those of theology and art, to satiate the thirsty historiographical soil found in the regions of both correspondence and unarbitrability, to again experience the rich harvest yet being reaped in Thucydides' own artistic history writing.

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<sup>41</sup> K. Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, G. W. Bromiley, tr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 172-77.

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