

History as Political Therapy

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1. The Gravedigger of the Present

Words have never yet improved the spirit of states in decline. Therefore it is neither the business of history to serve the state, nor the office of the historian to teach and improve the citizens. This tendency, which in Thucydides, although concealed in a higher idea, nevertheless is more apparent than in Herodotus, and later seized hold of almost all ancient historians, is false and alien to history.¹

Is history healthy, for an individual or a society? This is not a question that is regularly asked. Historiography is often taken for granted, as a distinctively Western or European cultural practice inherited from classical Greece whose importance needs no discussion; or, more commonly, it is evaluated in instrumental terms: how far does it offer useful and useable knowledge about the world, compared for example with the knowledge offered by the natural or social sciences? Some historians make claims about the utility of their discipline, if only under pressure from rival disciplines or the funders of their activities; some political theorists and other social scientists debate whether or not a historical perspective is necessary or even essential for developing a proper understanding of political and social life.² The primary product of historiography, by which its utility is to be measured, is seen to be information, which can then be used to understand and hence to act upon the world. Secondly, it may also help develop the mental skills to make productive use of this and other information – though the claims of historians that their subject teaches general critical and other transferable skills, made ever more frequently in the last few decades in the face of instrumentalist arguments against the humanities, always face the problem that such skills could, and arguably should, be developed using subject matter more directly related to the contemporary world.³

Information about the past is seen to be potentially relevant to contemporary society and politics at two levels. The first is that of theory: how far historical knowledge promotes a better understanding of the workings of social and political structures, or indeed is essential for a proper understanding, and hence supports the development of better means of organisation and government, better decision-making and so forth. This has been and

¹ Hermann Ulrici, *Charakteristik der antiken Historiographie* (Berlin, 1833), p. 45.

² For a UK perspective, see for example the volume of essays edited by Jonathan Floyd & Marc Stears, *Political Philosophy versus History* (Cambridge, 2012), the majority of whose contributors reject historical approaches as being too specific and insufficiently relevant to general philosophical arguments.

³ See for example various collections edited by David Cannadine and others in defence of history, in the context of debates about the UK's national curriculum. A brief introduction to such arguments in Neville Morley, *Writing Ancient History* (London, 1999), final chapter.

continues to be debated, above all by political theorists and social scientists considering whether they should take the self-aggrandising claims of historians (and the historical predilections of many of their founding figures) seriously. The second is that of social, national and cultural identity, with the recognition that the past (or a version of the past, albeit incomplete and highly partial) does matter to people, and influences their sense of self and thus their actions. Shared stories about the past (which might reasonably be labelled myths) support a group's sense of community and shape its interpretation of the world, and thus can play a role in political developments; certainly, understanding the historical culture of a society or a group must be part of the process of understanding its constitution and behaviour.⁴

Most discussion in this area has focused on the development and maintenance of national traditions and identities, and contemporary debates on the political role of history and historians have concentrated almost exclusively on their role in proving schoolchildren with the right sort of information, whether with the aim of reaffirming and reinforcing the traditional narrative and national self-image (demands, in the UK, for more teaching of significant constitutional events, battles and Winston Churchill) or with the aim of promoting alternative conceptions of the nation (demands for more inclusion of women and non-white individuals, engagement with the slave trade and the crimes of empire, and so forth).⁵ Each side regards the other as promoting an ideological agenda, perverting true, objective history in the service of a distorted version of the truth about the national past with the aim of intervening in political struggles in the present (it is at this point compulsory to cite Orwell on the importance of controlling the past). Some historians feel uncomfortable about either position, which goes against the 'noble ideal' of historical objectivity and feels too much like state-sponsored propaganda, and instead resort to the ideas that all information about the past is valuable, not just that which supports contemporary self-perceptions and cultural identity, and that the real role of history is to develop the skills and habits of criticism essential for every citizen – which is, of course, to put forward a different but still ideological notion of the citizen, as someone to be taught to be critical rather than simply filled with the correct set of stories about the past to inspire the desired patterns of behaviour.

The role attributed to history in these debates remains that of the provider of information about the past, whether that is seen as an end in itself or as a medium for the development of certain mental skills, and whether it is seen to have positive consequences (offering an account that supports and inculcates a sense of self that is felt to be politically and socially desirable, and consonant with one's chosen values) or negative ones (undermining the development of a coherent national or social identity by questioning its founding narrative, and/or promoting values that go against those identified as politically and socially desirable).⁶ Insofar as history is expected to have any impact on the reader beyond imparting information, it is one of inspiration, in the old classical-humanist tradition of exemplarity: reading about

⁴ The classic work on this theme is of course Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*.

⁵ Some useful examples in the collection edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger on *Invented Traditions*.

⁶ An obvious example here is Thucydides' questioning of the traditional Athenian account of the overthrow of the Peisistratid dynasty, a founding myth of the democracy that he presented in terms of purely personal motives and depicted as a botched, unheroic operation.

heroic (or heroised through their representation) deeds and individuals will inspire pride in one's heritage and perhaps emulation.⁷ In brief, this is Nietzsche's 'monumental' history, in a somewhat crude and unreflective form. That does not make it unimportant – but understanding the role of narratives about the past in shaping individual and collective identity and action in the present is a matter for the sociologist or political scientist rather than the historian. History in these terms is simply one strand in a wider discourse about the past, one source – albeit a source that expressly claims greater authority in establishing truth and adjudicating between different claims – of competing narratives.

Seeing history as a minor aspect of political culture and discourse, and at most a handmaid to social science's efforts to understand and influence the world, may be putting it in its proper place, but I want in this paper to explore the possibility that there are other aspects to its role in the present. Reading history, I wish to argue, is not just a means of obtaining and conveying information about the past; it can be a far more complex and powerful experience, with more significant and far-reaching political and social implications. In other words, we need to focus on the effects – emotional and spiritual as well as intellectual – that reading history has on the reader; on the nature of the desire for history, the nature of the pleasure it can furnish, and the ways in which one might be changed as a result. This is essentially a Nietzschean approach to the subject, following his essay 'Zum Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben' (the second *Unzeitgemässige Betrachtung*) less in substantive content than in the general assumption that the uses and disadvantages of history for life need to be considered in psychological and cultural terms rather than instrumental and intellectual ones. For Nietzsche, the important questions were about the different reasons why people turned to the past, and to different kinds of accounts of the past, and the consequences for their relationship with the present. I've already mentioned his conception of 'monumental' history, but he identified two other conceptions (without suggesting that this was a complete list), and also talked of both healthy and unhealthy manifestations of each of them.

Indeed, one of the inspirations for this paper was precisely the sense that, for a number of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers, history was conceived of as a political and social problem of far greater seriousness and consequence than merely promoting an unrealistically positive view of the British Empire: history was, or could be, unhealthy, for the individual and for society.⁸ 'The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living,' argued Marx, and analysed the tendency even for revolutionaries to 'fearfully conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes, in order to present the new scene of world-history in this time-honoured clothing and with this borrowed language.'⁹ The problem is that such self-deception has its limits, and the adherence to tradition can become an impediment to real change. History interprets the past in terms of the present and thus makes the values and institutions of the present – most obviously capitalism – appear universal, eternal and hence

⁷ Again, this bare analysis applies equally to conservative arguments in favour of more emphasis in the school curriculum on great battles and leading individuals, and left-liberal arguments in favour of more emphasis on ordinary people and their experiences.

⁸ Generally on this theme, Morley, *Antiquity and Modernity* (Oxford & Malden MA, 2009), Chapter 5.

⁹ *Die achtzehnte Brumaire*, 115.

inescapable; it depicts all the occasions when attempts at revolutionary change had failed, as a means of demonstrating the impossibility of any such change. Thus, ‘the social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future... The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead, in order to arrive at its own content.’¹⁰

There are echoes of this conception in Nietzsche’s analysis: he sees historical consciousness as an essential element of being human, and as a source of identity, strength and inspiration – but also, in excess, something that distorts human beings - ‘man braces himself against the great and ever greater weight of the past; this presses him down or pushes him sideways, it impedes his progress as a dark and invisible burden’¹¹ – and undermines their instincts: The man who no longer dares to trust himself but involuntarily asks history for advice on his feelings — ‘How should I feel about this?’ — gradually becomes through his timidity an actor, and plays a role, more often a number of roles, and therefore plays them badly and shallowly.¹² Forgetting is as vital as remembering: ‘the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture’. ‘The dangerous meaning of *art*: as the custodian and galvanizer of dead and dying conceptions. *History*, in so far as it wishes to push us back into feelings which we have overcome. To feel ‘historically’, ‘to be just towards the past’, is only possible if we are already well beyond it. But the danger in the feeling required for this is great: let us leave the dead to bury their dead, so that we do not take on the stench of corpses’.¹³ In brief, human beings are human only insofar as they are historical – but this historical consciousness is a constant threat to their humanity and their ability to become themselves. And we can find similar ideas in Freud: the present self is the product of the past, and all too often its prisoner; study of the past, of the individual or of the culture, may be the key to understanding their problems and neuroses, but it cannot itself serve as a cure for them, only – in ideal circumstances – as a starting-point for self-examination and transformation.

In all these instances, history appears in close association with the problem of *stultitia*, the individual’s tendency to slip back into apathy and disengagement, abandoning proper self-discipline; a constant threat to the cared-for, integrated self in Foucault’s account, and, insofar as the cared-for and self-aware self is an essential basis for a democratic polity, a constant threat to society as a whole.¹⁴ History thus represents a danger, encouraging the individual’s natural inclination to fall away from self-control and self-care – it’s obvious that people cannot change, that no one can sustain such an effort indefinitely, that one’s self-discipline will fail again as it did last time – just as it promotes the apathetic attitude that nothing can change at a societal level and individuals’ efforts are worthless in the face of everyone else’s equal apathy and/or the suprahuman structures that dominate their lives. History offers reasons for accepting the status quo rather than attempting a transformation (of self or society) whose outcome is at best doubtful; and it offers an explanation of present

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹¹ ‘Zum Nutzen und Nachtheil’, 249.

¹² *Ibid.*, 283.

¹³ *Wir Philologen*, 160.

¹⁴ My reading here is heavily indebted to Christine Lee’s account of the political import of Foucault’s ideas.

discontent and unhappiness, as the results of past events and influences that can now no longer be changed, that promotes fatalistic acceptance. In these terms, history is extremely unhealthy; individual and social health depend on escaping it – if only that were possible.

On the face of it, this is a vicious circle: history shows the impossibility of breaking free from the past. To quote Nietzsche again, ‘the historical sense ... uproots the future, because it destroys illusions and robs the things that exist of the atmosphere in which alone they can live’.¹⁵ But this is not the full story, as the first part of that sentence shows: the threat is ‘the historical sense, if it rules *without restraint* and realises all its consequences’. It is not history *per se* but history in excess that is the problem, and history that is conceived as an end in itself rather than as a means for self-understanding in the service of life. Likewise, Freud in no way argued that it would be healthy to do away with the past altogether, and perceived this to be possible only at the cost of ceasing to be oneself; rather, investigation of the past was the means by which one would be able in time to come to terms with it and overcome its effects. In other words, history might be a *pharmakon*, in the ancient Greek sense, as discussed at length by Derrida: both medicine and poison, depending on the quantity imbibed and the way it is taken. The effect of reading history might not always be apathy and disengagement, but quite the opposite: it might actively promote the well-being of the individual, as part of the repertoire of practices of self-care described by Foucault. It might indeed serve as a form of political therapy, precisely as Nietzsche looked back to the Greeks for a cultural cure in the face of all the tendencies towards *stultitia* in his own time:

We will call them the historical men: looking into the past drives them towards the future, fires up their courage to continue to hold on to life and kindles that justice will still be done and that happiness lies behind the hill towards which they are advancing. These historical men believe that the meaning of existence will come more and more to light in the course of its *process*, they look backwards only so that, through consideration of the process so far, they can learn to understand the present and to desire the future more fiercely; they have no idea how unhistorically they think and act, despite all their history, nor how their preoccupation with history stands in the service, not of pure knowledge, but of life.¹⁶

In the remainder of this paper I want to focus on the history of Thucydides. This is the focus of my current research project, but there are more substantial reasons for choosing this example: Thucydides, as has long been recognised, drew upon some of the ideas and language of contemporary medical writers in his approach to the past, so there is a *prima facie* case for considering how far his historical account made claims to some kind of medical or therapeutic function; certainly he makes the strongest and most explicit claim for the usefulness of history, which has been interpreted (in radically different ways, admittedly) as a claim for the usefulness of history in general; and finally, one can read his history as being explicitly concerned with the care of the self, or rather with the political consequences in a society dominated by un-cared-for selves. Of course, even a persuasive reading of Thucydides’ text as an exercise in historical or political therapy cannot establish that all

¹⁵ ‘Zum Nutzen und Nachtheil’, 295.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 255. See Morley, ‘Unhistorical Greeks’, in Paul Bishop, ed., *Nietzsche and Classical Antiquity*.

history is like this (indeed, it seems much more plausible that this is one respect in which Thucydides' work radically differs from most other works of history, ancient and modern); but it would indicate the possibility that it *could* be. Conversely, if even Thucydides' history fails the test of offering anything to posterity beyond information about past events, then it must raise questions about the ability of history ever to promote health.

2. Self-Care and Self-Destruction in Thucydides

I don't have the space here to develop a full reading of key passages in Thucydides in the light of Foucault's ideas; I simply want to indicate some major themes which suggest, I think, a particular concern in his history with what happens to the self in times of war and social conflict – if the self is generally under pressure both from outside and from its own tendencies towards *stultitia*, then it's reasonable to assume that such pressures are greater in difficult times, whether war or economic crisis – and equally with the ways in which the uncared-for, fragmented or apathetic self is itself often the cause of, or at least a significant factor in, the development of war and social conflict.

This is clearest in some of the great set pieces of the work. The plague at Athens, for example: the symptoms (the natural translation for us of Thucydides' vague phrase 'these things') are described in careful detail, drawing on medical terminology and thought, as a guide for those who might encounter such a disease in future. Why, we might ask, is that useful, since Thucydides offers no hope of a cure or of being able to ward off the plague (indeed, his account emphasises the lack of any effective practical response), and expressly leaves it to others to try to explain the causes of the plague and its capacity to produce such devastation? At best, his account enables us to anticipate the likely consequences of such an outbreak – the despair, the loss of self-control, the collapse of traditional familial and social ties, the loss of belief in religion or society, the psychological fragmentation in the face of a terrible, apparently random catastrophe – without any indication of how one might respond. There is no obvious lesson here, beyond instruction in what it is to be human; as Clifford Orwin has noted, physical suffering is a recurring theme in Thucydides' account, with the body appearing as a representation of society at large, fragile, constantly under external threat – perhaps the key quote in this section is that 'no body was *autarkes*', that is to say self-sufficient or immune. Thucydides' focus is not on diagnosis, let alone on any medical remedies, but on the nature of the experience of living through such an event. It is undoubtedly hard to continue to care properly for the self under such an 'occurrence greater than reason'; Thucydides shows us the Athenians entirely failing to do so.

The kinship of the plague description to the depiction of *stasis* at Corcyra in Book III has long been recognised; in this catastrophe, the external factor is less significant (though still not to be discounted entirely; an Athenian fleet plays an important role at key moments, by both action and inaction), and the main theme is the consequences of the collapse of individual and collective self-control and self-government. Individuals cease to be in command of themselves; instead they come to be mastered by war, governed by passions rather than judgement, and the results are terrible – the abandonment of normal social ties and obligations, the reversal of values and unstoppable dynamic of revenge, and the condemnation of those who are still in command of themselves as lacking in the proper

factional loyalties and passions. As in the plague, people live wholly in the moment (abandoning, one might say, the idea of humans as historical animals); there is no thought for the future, oaths cease to be binding beyond the immediate period, and individuals become wholly dominated by short-term interests. The division between public and private, the maintenance of an aspect of the self separate from the wider world and the maintenance of a truly reciprocal relationship between self and city, collapses. The Corcyra episode is, in brief, a nightmare vision of the political consequences of the un-cared-for self, losing its self-discipline, identity, integrity and privacy – all pre-requisites for a stable society. Again, Thucydides suggests no remedies for this situation, but simply depicts the fragility of society, which can so readily fall apart if the normal disciplines of self-hood and social being among its citizens fail, and the limitations of any human capacity – those who trust in their foresight and understanding perish, and only those who act without thinking have any hope of success and survival. As with the plague, there is no obvious answer to the question of how one should respond if caught up in such an event, only the sense that any response is likely to be inadequate. One can draw similar conclusions from many other episodes in Thucydides' work: the destruction of Plataea, the disaster in Sicily.

Thucydides does not depict these events as inevitable features of normal human existence, but as the products, or at any rate symptoms, of the war that is the subject of his work.¹⁷ Reading Thucydides through the prism of Foucault's ideas, it is possible to interpret the outbreak and continuation of the war, and the steady escalation in its savagery, as the results of the failure of self-care. In states founded on deliberative decision-making like those of classical Greece, everything depends on the capacity of the citizens to weigh up arguments with a clear sense of the advantages and disadvantages for themselves and for their society. The integrity and success of this process is always under threat: from the tendency of individual citizens towards *stultitia*, losing control of themselves and becoming subject to emotions like fear, greed and over-ambition; from their capacity for self-delusion and failure to take a clear, unprejudiced view of their own situation; and from the efforts of orators to take advantage of these tendencies, to offer beguiling representations and encourage their listeners to abandon responsibility for caring for themselves and for the polity to others who claim to have better understanding. Thucydides explicitly presents the conditions necessary for proper, considered deliberation – above all in the mouth of Cleon – and shows citizens constantly failing to be sufficiently self-aware and critical to judge speakers and make decisions properly. Cleon's account of the difficulty of deliberation and the dangers of rhetoric reaches both backwards and forwards in the text: it is played out again and again, above all in the speeches that launched the Sicilian expedition and gave it its ultimately disastrous form, but also shedding a new light on the speeches of Pericles – which were not presented with any coherent or persuasive opposition, and so were unstoppable (and hence disastrous) in the absence of a fully aware and engaged citizenry. Cleon, and later Acibiades,

¹⁷ Of course, the *Archaeology* of Book I does present conflict as a consistent element of the history of early Greece, and one might seek to extrapolate from that its inevitability in all human history; but Thucydides explicitly notes that this war is not like the others, and one might equally read his schematic account of historical development as suggesting that war became less prevalent in Greece as the result of the establishment of political institutions, but more destructive when it did break out.

never appear without opposition; the Athenians may make the wrong decision, but at least they make one; earlier, they appear to have abdicated almost all responsibility to Pericles, who takes them into the war that then brings about the further degeneration of the political community and further assaults on the integrity of the individual citizen.

The self in Thucydides is fragile and vulnerable, in need of constant care and attention – and mutual support (no body is *autarkes*). It is threatened equally by the forces of war, by unexpected events like the plague, and by its fellow citizens when the normal ties of society and self-discipline have collapsed – and by the constant temptation to abandon self-care and responsibility, and to allow oneself to be taken up by powerful emotions and persuasive rhetoric. In brief, Thucydides' history can be read as an account of the vital necessity and the great difficulty of self-care as the basis for all human society, with a powerful account of the consequences when this fails – and it is entirely understandable that Hobbes responded to such a work by seeking to devise a political system in which self-care would not be necessary, and individuals would be protected from their tendency towards *stultitia* and self-delusion by the removal of any political rights.

3. The Uses of History

If this reading is at all plausible, what are we to do with this information? How should we interpret Thucydides' concern with the self, and what purpose is his account intended to serve? The starting-point for such a discussion is inevitably his well-known comments on usefulness of history, however these are translated or interpreted.

Perhaps the absence of the element of fable in my work may make it seem less easy on the ear; but it will have served its purpose well enough if it is judged useful by those who want to have a clear view of what happened in the past and what – the human condition being what it is – can be expected to happen again some time in the future in similar or much the same ways. It is composed to be a possession for all time and not just a performance-piece for the moment.¹⁸

Although this claim has been widely quoted over the centuries, especially by historians, it has been understood in quite different ways. From antiquity, and up until the end of the eighteenth century, history was seen above all as a source of *exempla*, exemplary situations, individuals and maxims from which one might learn something useful for the present; however, Thucydides offers remarkably few of these, and certainly not in the easily citable and digestible form in which they are found in a writer like Plutarch, and this may indeed account for his relative neglect by Renaissance and early modern commentators and teachers compared with many other classical historians.¹⁹ The idea of history as exemplary fell into increasing disrepute through the *Sattelzeit* and into the nineteenth century, in the face of an increasingly critical and 'scientific' approach to the study of the past that placed an ever greater emphasis on the differences between past and present – and hence, by implication, the relevance of the past to the present, except as either the earlier stage of an ongoing

¹⁸ I.22, trans Jeremy Mynott.

¹⁹ See Harloe & Morley's introduction to *Thucydides and the Modern World: reception, reinterpretation and influence* (Cambridge, 2012). On exemplarity and its decline, Reinhart Koselleck, '*Historia magistra vitae*' in *Futures Past: on the semantics of historical time* (trans K. Tribe; Chicago, 2004).

development or as a point of contrast. Thucydides was heroised in this new, professionalised approach to historiography, and presented frequently as a model for historical practice; above all in his critical scrutiny of evidence and his objectivity. ‘Objectivity’, however, was understood now as the refusal to pass judgement, rather than impartiality of judgement; an idea that appears as early as Francis Bacon – ‘for it is the true office of History to represent the events themselves, together with the counsels, and to leave the observations, and conclusions thereupon, to the liberty and facultie of every man’s judgement’²⁰ – but which now became dominant, promoting the idea that the historian’s task was simply to gather information about the past as an end in itself. Thucydides’ history is seen as a ‘possession for ever’ above all because it offers a model, an inspiration or at least a heroic ancestor for the modern idea of ‘Geschichte als Wissenschaft’, and as an example of an account driven solely by concern for the truth, not influenced by any external concerns or assumptions.

There were certain writers who understood Thucydides’ claims to usefulness as implying something greater; the German Wilhelm Roscher (an important influence on Nietzsche’s reading of Thucydides) took this as support for his own belief in the need for historians to develop interpretations rather than merely compile facts (contrasting the ‘historical artisan’ with the true historian), while the Frenchman Rene Girard likewise insisted on the importance of analysis and interpretation:

He conceives of history not only as the exact science of facts, but as a new science which, attaching itself to events, discerns in them the secret combinations, determines in them the laws and recognises in them the effects of the intelligence in the dramatic spectacle of the battles and trials of humanity. History, for him, is the work of intelligence examining the world of facts and discovering itself there.²¹

However, while various readers in the historiographical tradition did recognise that Thucydides seemed to have more in mind than a simple recitation of events – and divined a powerful, controlling intelligence behind his text – this was more often than not a source of anxiety. Both Roscher and Girard were at pains to insist that Thucydides was *not* any sort of philosopher, devising elaborate systems and developing abstract principles: insofar as he offered general principles rather than an assortment of disconnected facts, these were never too general and were always firmly grounded in the reality of their historical context. A similar anxiety can be seen among mid-twentieth-century English writers, with R.G. Collingwood denouncing Thucydides’ work as basically unhistorical because of his alleged wish to turn it into abstract philosophy and psychology – ‘Thucydides is not the successor of Herodotus in historical thought but the man in whom the historical thought of Herodotus was overlaid and smothered beneath anti-historical motives’²² – and the more sympathetic Charles N. Cochrane at pains to insist that Thucydides’ ‘scientific’ history was limited to observation and diagnosis, firmly avoiding anything that looks like philosophical or political principles:

²⁰ *Advancement of Learning*, 2D3r.

²¹ *Essai sur Thucydide* (Paris, 1860), p. 11. Roscher, *Leben, Werk und Zeitalter des Thukydides* (Göttingen, 1842), and see Morley, ‘Thucydides, history and historicism in Wilhelm Roscher’, in Harloe & Morley, eds.

²² *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1948), p. 30.

To those whose temperament demands the assurance of an absolute revelation this truth may seem abhorrent; and, repelled by the manifest deficiencies of the world of sense, they will prefer to take refuge in a world of the imagination which they are free to construct for themselves according to the dictates of poetic justice. To those, however, who are content to accept the world as it is, and to walk by faith, the work of Thucydides and of scientists like him will appear anything but useless. Repudiating as false the notion that history teaches nothing, they will nevertheless refrain from any attempt to find in it a manifestation of the workings of Providence, or a realization of the Idea, or any other religious or metaphysical principle. But accepting the postulate of a stable constitution both of man and of nature, and looking for the causes of historical events in modifications of the stimuli to which men are exposed, they will content themselves with formulating such uniformities as they may observe.²³

One reason why Cochrane and Collingwood felt called upon to articulate this position was that Thucydides increasingly *was* being interpreted in such terms, as a kind of philosopher or a political theorist *avant la lettre*, who studied events in order to extract general principles about politics or war. This position is already found in Hobbes, and is developed at length by Roscher (who nevertheless insisted that Thucydides was a historian), but from the First World War onwards it became ever more important in the emerging disciplines of global politics and international relations. This is the approach to Thucydides likely to be most familiar to APSA members: Thucydides the Realist, or Neo-Realist, or Classical Realist, or Constructivist – the ideas that Thucydides supposedly developed and propounded vary widely, as do assumptions about the nature and strength of his supposed claims and their epistemological foundations, but Thucydides is certainly seen as some kind of political theorist, interested in past events not in themselves but as material for theory-building. There is an obvious problem that Thucydides does not in fact bother to explicate or even state these supposed theories explicitly; they have to be extracted and reconstructed by readers who are convinced that they are there to be found because of their particular reading of Thucydides' preface (or perhaps more commonly, because Thucydides has been presented to them in terms which invite the search for such principles).

These two approaches to Thucydides, the historical and the political, have radically different views about the purpose of history (the gathering of information about the past as an end in itself, or the study of the past as a starting-point for something more important), the proper relationship between detail and generalisation, and the significance of historical context. In relation to questions of the care of the self, the historical-historicising approach might regard this as an unwarranted introduction of anachronistic concepts in the reading of the text, but would certainly see the usefulness of such a reading in terms of its illumination of Thucydides' text as an end in itself, and perhaps – more arguably – as shedding light on the nature of ancient Greek politics and political thought. History is useful because it offers knowledge of the past; which is to say, in terms of contemporary political issues it is somewhat useless. The political approach in contrast explicitly seeks to draw useful lessons from the text, and might attempt to identify Thucydides' understanding of the laws or

²³ *Thucydides and the Science of History* (Oxford & London, 1929), p. 168.

principles of self-disintegration, of the relationship between the citizen self, rhetoric and deliberation, or the constitution of society; potentially useful, undoubtedly, but confronted not only with the historicism question (such principles can be generalised from Thucydides and Thucydides' time only by ignoring or explaining away historical difference and making claims about e.g. a universal human nature that historical studies claim to be implausible) but also with the difficulty of identifying any clear or consistent principles in Thucydides, except by taking a particular episode (e.g. the Corcyrean civil war) as exemplary of all social breakdown. Such readings of a complex text are always open to criticism and replacement by other, equally speculative and subjective, readings.²⁴

4. Therapeutic History

These two very different approaches share the view that, insofar as Thucydides' history is indeed in some way useful, this usefulness is to be understood in terms of the information it imparts, whether this is knowledge of detailed events in the past or understanding of general political principles that are equally relevant to the present. I want to suggest instead that Thucydides' work can be understood as a means of therapy rather than just diagnosis; that is, reading this work is intended to promote health and to nurture the self, rather than simply providing information about how one might nurture the self or the consequences of failing to do so. It can be used as part of the regimen of self-care described by Foucault: as well as the health regimens and physical exercises, 'there are the meditations, the readings, the notes that one takes on books or on the conversations one has heard, notes that one reads again later, the recollection of truths that one knows already but that need to be more fully adapted to one's own life'.²⁵ Most importantly, there is the constant task of screening one's representations, evaluating and thinking through the relationship between the self and the external world as well as between the self and its self-image: 'To keep constant watch over one's representations . . . is to assess the relationship between oneself and that which is represented, so as to accept in the relation to the self only that which can depend on the subject's free and rational choice'.²⁶ This is not just a matter of reflecting on one's own personal past as the source of one's present condition, but also of considering the past of one's own society as the source of one's social and cultural identity – and constantly evaluating both of these, rather than accepting them or their implications as a given. Further, it involves reading and thinking about other humans, their beliefs and their actions, both as a means of enhancing one's knowledge of humanity and thus assisting the watch over one's representations, but also of developing the skills and habits of self-care, self-evaluation and empathy.

The reading of history is not just about the acquisition of information but about vicarious experience, an immersion in the lives and suffering of others. This is a key aspect of the power of Thucydides' text, as recognised by Hobbes:

He filleth his narrations with that choice of matter, and ordereth them with that judgement, and with such perspicuity and efficacy expresseth himself, that, as Plutarch

²⁴ See e.g. the discussions of political readings of Thucydides by Ned Lebow and Geoffrey Hawthorn in Harloe & Morley.

²⁵ *History of Sexuality Vol. III: the care of the self* (trans Robert Hurley; Harmondsworth, 1988), p. 51.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

saith, he maketh his auditor a spectator. For he setteth his reader in the assemblies of the people and in the senate, at their debating; in the streets, at their seditions; and in the field, at their battles. So that look how much a man of understanding might have added to his experience, if he had then lived a beholder of their proceedings, and familiar with the man and business of the time: so much almost may he profit now, by attentive reading of the same here written. He may from the narrations draw out lessons to himself, and of himself be able to trace the drifts and counsels of the actors to their seat.²⁷

However, Hobbes makes the critical error of believing that Thucydides makes his reader a spectator, rather than a participant, and hence concludes that the the useful result of the reading is lessons and knowledge, rather than vicarious experience. In fact, the reader is thrust into the middle of events, invited not merely to watch but to identify, to imagine herself in the position of those who actually lived through them.

This is clearest in Thucydides' use of speeches, the most controversial and for many readers the most problematic aspect of the entire work. Here the reader is directly confronted with the arguments and persuasive techniques of the speakers, not through a paraphrase with critical commentary but (apparently) with the exact words as they were heard in the assembly or on the battlefield; she is directly confronted with the question of how one should react to or weigh up such arguments, as indeed Cleon explicitly demands of his audience. How would one vote? How would one resolve the very real dilemmas and impossible choices with which one finds oneself confronted? Although this is history, and the end result is both pre-determined and known to the reader, Thucydides constantly emphasises contingency; the reader is made aware of the possibility that things could have been different – and is put into the place of the people making the decisions that might have gone differently and perhaps then produced different outcomes. The same is true on the battlefield. Other episodes offer other experiences: fear, triumph, suffering, death. The reader gradually develops, rather than being taught, a recognition of the vulnerability of the self in the face of different external pressures and internal emotions, and the vulnerability of society; of the basic dependency of all humans on one another, their insecurity in the face of a hostile and unpredictable world, and the frequent, devastating impact of unpredictability and contingency, of events that are beyond any possibility of human control – and is required to consider how she might have reacted in such situations, even while seeing how she is in Thucydides' view most likely to have reacted.

One of the most famous critiques of history and its usefulness – ranking with Henry Ford's claim that history is simply bunk – is that of Aristotle: that, in contrast to the universal import of tragedy and its archetypal figures and conflicts, history simply relates what Alcibiades did and what he suffered. Social scientists might indeed offer a similar criticism, that history offers only context-dependent details rather than anything more general. There is room for debate about whether historical events should be considered less universal simply because

²⁷ 'To the Readers', in *Eight Books of the Peloponnesian Warre Written by Thucydides the sonne of Olorus: Interpreted with faith and diligence immediately out of the Greeke by Thomas Hobbes Secretary to the late Earl of Devonshire* (London, 1629), p. viii.

they're specific (though modern historicists tend to end up agreeing with Aristotle, or at least ducking the question). However, a more significant misreading by Aristotle is that Thucydides' work really is not about Alcibiades' suffering in the slightest – and not just in the sense that Aristotle should rather have named Nicias, who does indeed suffer in the book, but rather that Thucydides' focus is much more on the suffering of the ordinary men, women and children in many different contexts and from different causes. The reader is not asked solely to identify with a few great men, but with a whole range of humanity. Further, as has often been remarked of Thucydides under the heading of his *Unparteilichkeit*, he shows no preference for one side in the war rather than another, and does not seek to make his reader develop any such allegiance; rather, but our sympathies are engaged for all sides, for all those suffering as a result of the war – even for those to some extent responsible for it.

Thucydides challenges his readers to come to terms with the complexity of events and the absence of simply answers or clear choices. We are challenged to recognise the logic of the Athenian position at Melos even as we feel we must reject its implications, to see the attractiveness of Cleon's arguments and to recognise his good fortune and daring, and perhaps even his courage, even while acknowledging his reputation as a pantomime villain and recognising the reasons why such a judgement might have its merits. Everything is presented in terms of complexity, ambiguity, ambivalence; this is not, as it has sometimes been understood, a failed attempt at developing clear general principles out of confused and contradictory information, but an end in itself. Thucydides' own comments about people's tendency to accept the first story they hear and not to enquire closely about stories, even those vital to their own sense of self and cultural identity, applies not only to his characters but, potentially, to his readers, with their own tendencies to lapse into *stultitia*, apathy and complacency; his history is intended to lead his reader to question all stories, to recognise the complexity of human existence and the mixture of motives, and to develop a sensibility and a habit of critical practice. This is not a work intended to impart information or to teach principles or skills; it aims to take the reader outside herself and, in the imagination, into the lives and feelings of others, and to provide the emotional and mental experiences that can be drawn upon in the care of the self, and thus help the reader face the future.

This is not, it is safe to say, the usual way in which history is conceived; if historians are suspicious of attempts to use the past as a source of lessons or principles, both they and social scientists are equally suspicious of rhetoric, and the idea of having an emotional effect on their readers in any way other than providing information and ideas in the most sober, unrheterical manner possible. The only substantial discussion of the emotional appeal and effect of history, of the psychological desires which history can meet (which also implies its capacity to create different desires and perceptions) is, as has already been mentioned, that of Nietzsche, scarcely a mainstream historical figure or a comfortable guide. Some relevant comments come also from an equally problematic historical commentator:

One can, without rhetorical exaggeration, merely with the correct putting-together of misfortune, establish the most fearful image of that development which the most splendid nations and states as well as private virtues have experienced, and with this arouse feelings of the deepest, most desperate sadness, which no consoling outcome is

sufficient to counterbalance and against which we can strengthen ourselves or try to escape it only by thinking: it turned out like that once; it is fate; nothing can change it now — and then, by returning out of the boredom which this reflection of sadness could produce in us, back into our feeling for life, the present of our aims and interests, in short, into selfishness, which stands on a peaceful shore and enjoys from a position of safety the distant spectacle of the confused mass of wreckage. But even as we look upon history as this slaughter-bench on which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states and the virtue of individuals are sacrificed, so the question also of necessity comes to mind, for whom or for what final purpose these innumerable victims were offered up... Out of this we have determined that the events which present that picture for our dark feelings and thoughtful reflections upon them are the field in which we see only the means for what we maintain is the substantive purpose, the absolute final purpose or, what is the same thing, the true result of world-history.²⁸

Hegel recognises the ability of the historian, through the way that he presents the past, to manipulate the emotions of his reader; the capacity for the reader to lapse into *stultitia*, faced with the apparent senselessness and futility of past events and the inevitability of all developments – but also the capacity for the reader to be drawn instead into the process of reflecting upon their representations, questioning themselves and their relation to the world. Hegel had a specific idea of what conclusions the reader should then draw, recognising history as a coherent and directed process of the development of reason; from a Foucauldian perspective, that is yet another representation that needs to be properly evaluated and monitored. What is significant for the purposes of this essay is that here too the reading of history, or of a certain sort of history, is seen as a means for self-reflection and self-care.

The common response of historians to discussion of the emotional effects of historiography is that this brings things dangerously close to fiction – and talk of providing vicarious experience and opportunities for identification with other characters might lead one to suggest, along with a Saki character, that the professional purveyors of fiction do these things so much better. The basic distinction is that history is real, or at least more real, or at least has a different (and more formal) relationship to reality. This idea is normally understood as the basis for the eschewal of excessive imagination in historiography (historians are not allowed to make stuff up, or only within certain limits) and the eschewal of rhetoric and literary techniques (historians should avoid manipulation of the reader, and just offer the facts). This explains a great deal about the literary form and quality of most historiography, which seeks to defend its claim to offer reliable and useful knowledge, comparable with the sciences, in the face of certain worrying resemblances to fiction which might discredit such claims, by differentiating itself as far as possible from anything resembling fiction. But if we focus instead on emotional and psychological effect as the *aim* of history, then its relation to fiction becomes a question of effectiveness, and it is the reality of what history describes that makes it powerful; that these things actually happened to real people.

²⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophie der Geschichte* (Berlin, 1840), p. 35.

Genuine emotional engagement with fictional characters, reacting to their actions, triumphs and above all sufferings as if they were real, is not generally seen as socially or politically productive; it appears as a testament to the power of the writer, certainly, but perhaps also to the character flaws or lack of self-control and self-knowledge of the reader. Confusion between fiction and reality is mocked by writers from Austen onwards – and also explicitly marked as a female trait, hence excluded from and unwanted in the public sphere. It is only if the reader then intuits and acts upon a connection to reality – if the story of Jean Valjean inspires, as Hugo clearly intended it to do, a different attitude to the poor of society and the operations of the justice system – that the reader's emotional engagement comes to be seen as politically and socially productive, rather than just a matter individual cultural and character development. But as has often been recognised, self-consciously political and didactic novels often lose their emotional and rhetorical power insofar as they appear as political and didactic to their reader; books that attempt to inspire and change their readers frequently fail precisely because this is too obviously their aim.

Historical events, on the other hand, really happened in some form; people really did suffer and die, and an emotional engagement with their suffering is not intrinsically absurd. Of course time creates distance, as Hegel recognised; it is necessary to make an imaginative leap to identify with people who died several thousand years ago – but it is by no means impossible. And this identification is by no means exclusively or even primarily a female trait; on the contrary, engagement with the history of war is thoroughly masculine, albeit sometimes pursued in an archetypal masculine way by focusing solely on the technology and tactics rather than human consequences. The right kind of military (and perhaps political) history offers a means of introducing characteristics of empathy and self-reflection into the male, public arena. Thucydides' work is scarcely feminist, but it could be seen as deliberately feminising in a positive sense, aiming precisely to undermine the conventional masculine (and anti-social) convictions of absolute independence and self-reliance.

History is powerful because it is real. Is this true of all history? That is at best arguable. The choice of subject matter clearly makes a difference; those histories that concern themselves less with human factors and actions are less likely to promote such sympathy, and show a greater emphasis on the lesser goal of imparting knowledge and understanding. Ecological history in manner of Fernand Braudel can perhaps nurture a different perspective on the world, a new sensibility, helping its reader to see humans in a much wider and longer-term context; most histories of technology, on the other hand, encourage entirely the wrong sort of attitude, even if they are 'brought to life' and personalised with cameos of inventors, insofar as they heroise technological progress unquestioningly and ignore its impact on ordinary lives. However, this is also a matter of historian's intent and technique. Accounts of lives in the past always offer a potential for identification and self-reflection, but this may require more or less of a self-generated imaginative leap depending on how far the historian seeks to promote it and has the skills to do this properly. There are in historiography limits to the appropriate employment of rhetoric, both moral (compare Friedländer and LaCapra on depictions of the Holocaust) and practical (as obvious rhetoric may undermine the reality effect on which historical identification depends), determined by the expectations of the readership rather than any intrinsic or eternal laws of history – and current expectations are

not favourable to the attempt. Few contemporary historians seek to achieve an emotional effect, or conceive of their task as promoting self-care and self-reflection; few, arguably, have the skills to do this successfully.

This is, however, what we do find in Thucydides; the master, as a number of readers have recognised, of the art of apparent artlessness, presenting his own insights and interpretations of events as the events themselves, immersing his readers in past experience while at the same time subtly prompting them to reflect on and examine this experience. His work helps his reader reflect and hone the skills of reflection; enrich her sense of self by recognising all the pressures that bear down on the self; screen representations and question them while, as Nietzsche would argue, recognising the unavoidable necessity of such representations. We can recognise the importance of the past for the present, both individual and social, without seeing it as determined or determining. Of course the past tends to yield up the sorts of truths we're looking for – but not only that.

It is not the past that does this for most people, but history in the sense of historiography: the representation of the past by the historian who has done the detailed work of engaging with and scrutinising the past. Whether history is healthy for the historian is questionable; but in the same way that one does not require novelists or tragedians to be healthy, good or even nice people for their works to be powerful and moving, so even neurotic, obsessive and anti-social historians may be capable of echoing the powerful humanistic and humane vision of a writer like Thucydides, whose work can indeed promote the cared-for political self.