

THUCYDIDES AND THE IRRATIONAL: SUNDRY PASSAGES

STEWART IRVIN OOST

PERHAPS the concept least likely to come into the mind of the modern reader of Thucydides is "irrationalism."¹ Modern scholars speak repeatedly of Thucydides' "rationalism," or "intellectualism," or "realism," words presumably implying much the same characteristic.² What seems primarily to be meant is Thucydides' concept of human history as guided by human reason, or at least human behavior, that is, by human actions as opposed to divine, or supernatural, or "irrational" interventions in human affairs.³ Accordingly, it is also a commonplace to hold that, despite their nearness in time, a vast gulf separated Thucydides from Herodotus, for the latter obviously and frequently admitted the interference of the gods in human affairs.⁴ On purely a priori grounds such a verdict, while not impossible, is surprising. Many statements in Thucydides' own work indicate the men of his day regularly accepted oracles and portents and calamities

as coming from the gods. A recent monograph, using Occam's razor, successfully argued, against the rationalism of many nineteenth-century historians, that the simpler interpretation of men's obedience in wars during the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. to the will of the gods, as they understood it, was merely their sincere belief in those gods, and not Machiavellian manipulation of religion for secular purposes and profit.⁵ It would seem quite a rare thing for Thucydides completely and absolutely to emancipate himself from such a frame of mind, which is still manifest in the history written only a few years before by Herodotus, whose credentials as a critical historian must not be undervalued,⁶ and who had profited from the critical, philosophical, scientific, and even historiographical advances made by his Ionian predecessors. "One cannot escape history," that is, the society which has molded one, but itself has been molded by history; experience proves the maxim

1. The name of Thucydides does not occur in the index to E. R. Dodds's important book, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, 1951).

2. Probably the best concise statement of this basically correct analysis of Thucydides is still P. Shorey, "On the Implicit Ethics and Psychology of Thucydides," *TAPA*, XXIV (1893), 66-88. See also, e.g., J. H. Finley, *Three Essays on Thucydides* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), pp. 1-54, 56, 89, 100-101; *idem*, *Thucydides* (Ann Arbor, 1963 = Cambridge Mass., 1942), pp. 4, 18, 19, 37, 59, 144-45, 222, 310; C. N. Cochrane, *Thucydides and the Science of History* (New York, 1965 = London, 1929), pp. 1-2; F. M. Cornford, *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (London, 1907), pp. 69, 72; K. von Fritz, *Die griechische Geschichtsschreibung*, I.1 (Berlin, 1967), 779-823; R. W. Macan, "Herodotus and Thucydides," *CAH*, V, 398-419, at 405; S. Mazzarino, *Il pensiero storico classico*, I (Bari, 1966), 265-67; H. W. Parke and D. E. W. Wormell, *The Delphic Oracle* (Oxford, 1956), I, 180; J. de Romilly, *Histoire et raison chez Thucydide* (Paris, 1967), pp. 296, 300, 302; H.-P. Stahl, *Thukydides: Die Stellung des Menschen im geschichtlichen Prozess* (Munich, 1966), pp. 12-13; H. Strasburger, "Die Entdeckung der politischen Geschichte durch Thukydides," *Saeculum*, V (1954), 395-428, at 417-18.

3. Cf. esp. F. E. Adcock, *Thucydides and His History* (Cambridge, 1963), p. 56; M. I. Finley, "Thucydides the Moralizer," in *Aspects of Antiquity* (New York, 1968), pp. 44-57, at 49. Note especially the latter's statement that Thuc. "decided" that this was the case.

4. E.g., J. B. Bury, *The Ancient Greek Historians* (New York, 1958 = New York, 1909), p. 76; Cochrane, pp. 14-17; M. I. Finley, p. 49; G. B. Grundy, *Thucydides and the History of His Age*, II (Oxford, 1948), 35; Macan, *CAH*, V, 410; R. Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire* (Oxford, 1972), p. 287; Strasburger, *Saeculum*, V (1954), 403, 406-407.

5. H. Popp, *Die Einwirkung von Vorzeichen, Opfern und Festen auf die Kriegführung der Griechen im 5. und 4. Jahrhundert v. Chr.* (Diss. Erlangen, 1957); cf. Grundy, II, xiv, 81-92. J. H. Finley, *Thucydides*, p. 223, observes that Sophocles' extant plays are commonly connected with the fulfillment of prophecy. Socrates in most areas was a thoroughly rational man, yet apart from his *daemon* he believed in omens (Xen. *Mem.* I. 1. 2-4; cf. Cornford, pp. 104-105).

6. Cf. esp. and recently, H. Verdin, *De historisch-kritische methode van Herodotus* (Brussels, 1971).

generally true. But these are only a priori considerations and must be tested by the evidence. It may be stated at this point that there is every reason to believe that in general the common opinion of scholars as briefly described here is to be upheld. This study will merely try to show that, while there is indeed a vast intellectual distance between Herodotus and Thucydides, that distance seems not to be quite as great as the common generalizations on the subject would appear to make it.

Investigating the mind of Thucydides is not a facile undertaking, for only upon fairly uncommon occasions does he give us an insight into the workings of his mentality—as almost all his readers have repeatedly noted. And when he does, the glimpse is more often than not implicit rather than direct.⁷

(A) 1. 23. 3: “Stories of occurrences handed down by tradition, but scantily confirmed by experience, suddenly ceased to be incredible (οὐκ ἄπιστα) [in this war]; there were earthquakes of unparalleled extent and violence; eclipses of the sun occurred with a frequency unrecorded in previous history; there were great droughts in sundry places, and consequent famines, and that most calamitous and awfully fatal visitation, the plague.” This passage has been immediately preceded by a listing of the disasters of war occasioned by the activities of the combatants. Thucydides continues: “All this came upon them at the same time with this war (ταῦτα

γὰρ πάντα μετὰ τοῦδε τοῦ πολέμου ἅμα ξυνεπέθετο).”

The prime question is the reference of ταῦτα . . . πάντα. Does it refer to the whole catalogue of disasters, human and non-human in origin, which begins with the chapter, or only to those of nonhuman origin listed in this section? If “all this” refers only to this section, then Thucydides is merely remarking upon the temporal coincidence with the war of various extraneous horrors.⁸ This seems to be the common explanation of the passage. Gomme⁹ is more cautious: “Whether Thucydides himself thought there might be some connexion between such natural events and human actions is not clear; from the statement that eclipses were more frequent . . . it would seem that he did.” Kurt von Fritz¹⁰ draws a similar conclusion, but holds that the passage discussed in (J) below argues against it. For the present it seems sufficient to observe that the most natural reading of the passage taken with its preceding context seems to indicate some connection. It is not clear what the connection is, whether the natural phenomena are the cause of the human, or the human the cause of the natural, or whether there is any etiological relation at all. The implication, however, is strong that Thucydides saw some relationship, unspecified but more than merely temporal.¹¹ On the other hand, from this passage one gathers no necessary implication of a divine intervention in human affairs in Herodotean fashion. To take that additional and broad step is to go

7. The translations that follow are partly Crawley's (frequently modified), partly the present writer's. Note that all statements in speeches (or in the Melian dialogue) or in documents are excluded from consideration; the latter because they are not Thucydides', the former because we cannot be sure what represents Thucydides' thought and what represents the speakers'. Some of the passages have a bearing upon the problem of the order and method of Thucydides' composition of his work; fortunately it has been necessary here to walk only very cautiously into the outskirts of this bottomless bog of conflicting interpretations and analyses.

8. So Stahl, pp. 34, 80; Poppo-Stahl, *ad loc.*; O. Luschkat, *s.v.* “Thukydides der Historiker,” *RE*, Suppl. XII (1970), 1085–1354, at 1202, cf. 1142; Cornford, pp. 102–103. J. H. Finley, *Thuc.*, p. 311, says that Thuc. “obviously” intended to indicate no causal relationship, although Finley has just pointed to reminiscences of Hippocratic writing in specifying the causes of disease.

9. *Ad. loc.*, I, 151.

10. I.1, 542.

11. Cf. *ibid.*

beyond the passage by utilizing what is known or believed about the credences of Thucydides or his age.¹²

(B₁) 1. 118. 3 (cf. scholium): The Delphic god, "as it is said," promised the Lacedaemonians his aid in the war. And in fact the war brought the great plague to Athens, but not to the Peloponnese (and Apollo is of course a god of pestilence; cf. *Iliad* 1). Obviously Thucydides is cautious about the veracity or authenticity of the oracle he reports.¹³

(B₂) 2. 54. 4–5: Thucydides goes on to say that the plague struck the most populous places, thus implying some further doubt about the propriety of seeing the effect of the god's promise in the workings of the plague.¹⁴ It may not be amiss, however, to note that disbelief in *an* oracle, or in many oracles, does not necessarily constitute disbelief in oracles in general. The Roman church today believes in contemporary miracles, but apparently rejects most reports of such, i.e., those which cannot withstand the most rigorous investigations of their validity.

(C) 2. 17. 1–2: A Delphic oracle forbade the occupation of the Pelargikon. "And it seems to me [Thucydides] that the oracle came to pass in a way opposite to that expected." Thucydides then goes on to explain his reasoning on this point, including the words "the war . . . which, although not specifying, the oracle foresaw (προήδει) . . ." As the (Oxford) text stands, it is the correct interpretation of the oracle

which Thucydides questions, not the oracle itself; quite the contrary, since he says that the oracle "foresaw" something, he is beyond doubt accepting the veracity and, further, the authenticity of the oracle. It is stating the obvious to remark that, in ancient Greek belief, oracles were statements from the gods.¹⁵ Nevertheless, modern scholars are reluctant to face this obvious conclusion. Gomme, in some perplexity, temporizes. Thucydides "seems to have accepted the view that the oracle could, to some degree, know the future."¹⁶ It would seem that to reject the obvious, presumably because of preconceptions about what Thucydides could or could not have thought, is to place the objectors in a very vulnerable position.¹⁷

(D) 2. 21. 3: "Oracles of the most various import were recited by the collectors (*chresmologoi*), and found eager listeners in one or other of the disputants." Obviously Thucydides implies his contempt for *chresmologoi* (cf., e.g., 8. 1. 1), but, if we take the passage by itself without reference to any other, he says nothing here about his attitude toward oracles themselves on principle.

(E) 2. 47. 4: In dealing with the ravages of the great plague, the skill of physicians was of no avail, "nor did any human art succeed any better. Supplications in the temples, divinations, and so forth, all were useless." This statement shows nothing about the belief or unbelief of Thucydides. Compare (in the New English Bible translation) the following examples:

12. Cf. Classen–Steup *ad loc.*, I, 83.

13. Parke and Wormell, I, 189; E. C. Marchant's school ed. of Thuc. (London, 1891 ff.), II, 196.

14. Cf. Classen–Steup on the second passage, II, 149.

15. Thus Crawley technically mistranslates by referring to the god rather than his oracle.

16. *Ad loc.*, II, 66; see here also Gomme's discussion of the attempt by Hude and Steup to emend this sense away in accord with a conjecture of Cobet, on the general ground

that Thuc. simply could not have written this. Gomme finally concludes that "it does not of course require much foresight . . ." On the attempt to emend the text for these *a priori* reasons, see also Classen–Steup, *ad loc.*, II, 51.

17. De Romilly in the Budé ed. of Thuc., *ad loc.*, II, 92, thinks that the emphasis that Thuc. lays on this oracle was owing to its being used as a weapon against Pericles; this may be true, but also does not affect the avowal of Thuc.'s belief here stated.

I Kings 9:3: "I have heard the prayer and supplication which you have offered Me"; and Isaiah 1:15: "Though you offer countless prayers, I will not listen." It seems very doubtful that either of the writers of these statements was an unbeliever—even though the appeal was to a different authority.

(F) 2. 54. 1–3: An ancient *epos*, the old men said, ran, "A Dorian war will come and with it *loimos*." There was strife (*eris*) about whether *limos* had not actually been the word used instead of *loimos*. The latter won out as the correct word, "for the people made their recollection fit in with their sufferings. I fancy, however, that if another Dorian war should ever afterwards come upon us, and a famine (*limos*) should happen to accompany it, the verse will probably be read accordingly." Note once again that Thucydides is not disputing oracles, but pointing to their common ambiguity, possibly with implied sarcasm, but quite possibly merely stating the fact that people try to make them fit their current circumstances. Gomme¹⁸ decides on irony (in Thucydides, and in his own reference to a learned dispute on ancient Greek pronunciation among modern scholars). Thucydides goes on to refer for the second time to the oracle purportedly given the Lacedaemonians by Apollo; see (B₂) above.

(G) 3. 82. 6: During the domestic *staseis* that accompanied the war in various Greek states, notably Corcyra, "the confidence [of the factions' members] in themselves was strengthened not by divine *nomos*, but rather by their transgression of

nomos in common" (Crawley: "complicity in crime"). If one presses the meaning closely, as one should, one cannot conclude that Thucydides is necessarily referring here to what he personally accepts as divine *nomos*, something ordained by the gods, rather than to moral principles established among the Greeks in general and regarded by them as of divine origin.¹⁹ Classen–Steup²⁰ deduce, primarily from this passage, that Thucydides was no atheist, but they observe that his belief in the existence of the gods did not hinder him from taking a free position (*freien Standpunkt*) concerning oracles, and indeed from disbelieving in them, presumably on principle (on which see the comments in this paper on the oracle passages). Actually, a mere reference to "divine law" no more suggests "theism" than does a modern atheist's saying "By God!" or "Go to hell!"²¹

(H) 4. 133. 2–3: Chrysis, the priestess of Hera at Argos, fell asleep in the temple after placing her torch near the garlands. The latter caught fire and the temple burned down. That very night Chrysis fled to Phlius, in fear of the Argives. Conformably to the law the Argives appointed Phaeinis in her place. At the time of her flight Chrysis had been priestess during eight and a half years of the war. In the celebrated "dating passage" for the beginning of the war (2. 2. 1), the forty-eighth year of her tenure of office was specified. This passage in Book 4 has occasioned some little discussion among students of Thucydides' work, especially recently.

The reasons for Thucydides' inclusion

18. *Ad loc.*, II, 160.

19. Cf. Luschkat, *RE*, Suppl. XII (1970), 1251, rightly, as against, e.g., F. Weber in a review of the Loeb ed. of Herodian, *AC*, XLI (1972), 280.

20. I, lxi.

21. Marchant, *ad loc.*, III, 191, pedantically observes

(although the matter in any case is doubtful) that it was not god-witnessed oaths which bound the *stasiotai* when they exchanged pledges. If they are at all religious, men regularly and illogically believe their gods are with them, however immoral their undertaking may appear to outsiders.

of this account of the misadventures of Chrysis and the temple of Hera are hardly clear.²² Classen–Steup²³ thought that Thucydides' reason was chronological, in presumptive connection with the "dating passage" in the second book. But this will not do. If his purpose were chronological, we would expect references to the years of the eponymous archons of Athens and of the ephors of Sparta subsequent to 2. 2. 1, and no such references are found.²⁴ Again, for chronological purposes there would be no reason to specify the circumstances of the succession of Phaeinis to Chrysis. It is true that Thucydides can date by an Olympiad (3. 8. 1, 5. 49. 1—but in these cases he is chronicling events which occurred in specific connection with the relevant celebration) or by a Spartan month and day (4. 119. 1). Although there is no agreement among scholars about the relevance of "raw" documents to the degree of "finish" which any given section of Thucydides' work may have attained, it is nevertheless worthwhile to point out that Book 5 (as we now number the books) contains several such "raw" documents and that Book 4 at 118–19 also contains documents, i.e., before the Chrysis narrative; the dating by Spartan month also occurs in a "raw" document. If "raw" documents are a sign of a stage of narrative before final revision (as the present writer believes, but cannot prove), then the Chrysis narrative and the last part of Book 4, as well as Book 5, presumably as far as the ("finished"?) Melian dialogue,

belong to a relatively early stage of Thucydides' work.

However that may be, such considerations offer no reason for Thucydides' inclusion of the Chrysis episode even in an early stage of his writing, for the anecdote has no easily discernible connection with the course of the Peloponnesian War. And Thucydides' concentration on his subject, the war itself, to the common exclusion of matters he deemed irrelevant, has too frequently been noted by scholars to require further discussion here.²⁵ Obviously, whether we guess that the story of Chrysis might or might not have been stricken from a finished Thucydidean narrative, at least when Thucydides made this note he must have had some purpose in doing so. It has been suggested that the anecdote was inserted "when there was not much else to record,"²⁶ but it is hard to take seriously even for a moment the implication that Thucydides was writing, putting things into his history, merely for the sake of writing something, of filling up space.²⁷ It has also been suggested that the notice was taken from Hellanicus' work on the priestesses of Hera, or inserted, in effect, in order to "continue" or correct that work.²⁸

But apart from any presumptive—and unproved—interest in the work of Hellanicus, why did Thucydides insert this anecdote in his history of the Great Peloponnesian War? This question calls for an answer, whether or not we choose to guess (and it is an "unauthorized" guess at

22. The question of whether Chrysis fled to Phlius or to Tegea (so Paus. 2. 17. 7; cf. 3. 5. 6) is irrelevant to the present discussion.

23. *Ad loc.*, IV, 262; likewise in effect Sir R. Syme, "Thucydides," *PBA*, XLVIII (1960), 39–56, at 41.

24. Cf. 5. 20. 2, where dating by magistracies or positions of honor (for the course of the war) is explicitly rejected. At 5. 24. 2–25. 1 Thuc. dates the end of the Ten Years' (i.e., Archidamian) War by an archon-ephor reference, but neither Phaeinis nor any possible successor is mentioned. This is *not* dating of events of the war or its course, but a means of fixing its "relative" by "absolute" chronology.

25. See, e.g., recently De Romilly, *Histoire*, pp. 47, 83.

26. Gomme, *ad loc.*, III, 624–25.

27. G. L. Cawkwell, *CR*, LXXXV (1971), 359, points out that Thuc. does not even condescend to chronicle the presumed deaths of Phormio or of Archidamus because of "his sense of relevance."

28. K. J. Dover, "La colonizzazione della Sicilia in Tucidide," *Maia*, VI (1953), 1–20, at 4; see also n. 26 above. For criticism of the whole matter, Luschkat, *RE*, Suppl. XII (1970), 1136–37.

best) that he might well have deleted it later, if he had lived long enough (and still possessed his mental faculties). If we discard the notion that some chronological motive could have figured in his thinking, we are seemingly left with two possibilities: the anecdote has considerable human interest, and it deals with an event of immediate relevance primarily to religion. Possibly for one of these two reasons Thucydides made this note in the first place and inserted it in his narrative where it *might* later have been deleted. This writer thinks that religious interest is a slightly more plausible motive than human interest. But we are in the realm of veriest conjecture and nothing can be built upon it. The fact remains that we have in the text of Thucydides, as it now stands, a note relating to the history of religion rather than of war, and it seems impossible to go beyond that fact.

(I) 5. 26. 3-4: "As far as those who take strength from oracles are concerned, this one alone (μόνον δῆ) certainly came to pass. For I at least (ἐγὼ γάρ) remember all along, even from the beginning of the war and until it ended, that many declared it must go on for thrice nine years."²⁹

Von Fritz³⁰ thinks that this passage would show some trace of a supernatural connection (*verborgene metaphysische Zusammenhänge*) made in Thucydides' mind, except for the remark in (J) below (*q.v.*). Apart from that possible qualification, Thucydides is clearly saying that this one oracle certainly came true. It is relevant to note that this passage occurs in a context where it is argued that the whole chain of events from 431 to 404 B.C., including the time the Peace of Nicias was theoretically

in effect, was one single war. Under the circumstances, particularly if the passage is taken by itself and isolated from the series of references discussed here, one might argue that the historian at best thought that this instance was "the exception that proves the rule" that oracles are not to be trusted. Less attractive in view of the implications for the intellectual honesty of Thucydides, and much less probable for even the casual reader of his account in general, is the assumption that in his eagerness to prove that the hostilities from 431 to 404 B.C. constituted a single war, Thucydides was willing to resort to an argument based on something he disbelieved in order to convince the superstitious among his opponents.

One thing seems clearly implied in this passage. Thucydides has some degree of interest in oracles, and specifically in determining their accuracy, i.e., in determining whether things happen as the prophecy foretells or not. De Romilly³¹ says that Thucydides regularly takes an opportunity to remark on the "vain and often dangerous character of oracles." That generalization seems to go far beyond the implications of this passage, which she cites. She also cites (F), (B₁), and (J), on which see the discussions above, as well as 8. 1 (which deals with oracle-mongers rather than oracles). Gomme³² is somewhat perplexed about this passage: Thucydides normally scorns oracles (and portents), "yet does seem to attach more weight to this than, simply as a curiosity, it deserved." May one be forgiven for suggesting that reluctant admissions such as this one, or that of Von Fritz (as well as of others), may show an unwillingness, due perhaps to preconceived notions

29. De Romilly (Budé ed., III, 120) renders, "pour ceux qui se fondent sur les oracles, on trouvera là le seul cas sûr les confirmant." Similarly Jowett.

30. I.1, 542; see also (A).

31. *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism* (New York, 1963), p. 292.

32. IV, 12, with reference also to (D), (F), and (J), this last a portent.

about Thucydides' thinking, to admit what seem to be plain implications that the historian was not always the complete and perfect rationalist?

Classen–Steup³³ are also a bit at a loss, and suggest that this is a passage that required revision which it did not receive. As a matter of fact, something in Thucydides' work does probably require revision on this point; at best, he must have changed his mind about the validity of this oracle at least once. If it be true, as is generally thought, that Thucydides originally concluded that what we usually call the Archidamian War was one phenomenon and the Sicilian Expedition another, then by 404 (and this passage was obviously written then or later) he must also have revised his opinion of the validity of this oracle. He remembered the oracle from 431 B.C. onward; originally, apparently, he must have disbelieved it. Again, the suggestion obtrudes itself that he had an interest in determining whether oracles came true, and if so, how frequently. Besides, he has forgotten here the language in which he dealt with the oracle about the Pelargikon (C), where he seemed to accept the oracle, but interpreted it in a way different from the common explanation. There may also be some implicit contradiction of what he had written about the *loimos* / *limos* oracle (F), where he questioned not so much the oracle itself as the prevailing understanding of its text. But there should really be no surprise to find that, like Homer, Thucydides was subject to human changes of mind and resultant self-contradiction, as over a space of more than twenty-seven years he put his work together.

33. On this passage, V, 69.

34. LSJ, specifically citing this passage, define *θειασμός* as meaning "superstition"; but K. J. Dover, *ap. Gomme, Commentary*, IV, 429, *ad loc.*, says the word means "utterance which claims to reveal through a human medium the intentions of the gods"; in other words, divination. The scholium glosses *εὐχῇ καὶ μαντεία*. If LSJ's definition is taken

(J) 7. 50. 4: The story is well known that, when the Athenians were about to retreat from Syracuse, there was an eclipse of the moon. The seers (*μάντεις*) prescribed that the army must therefore remain where it was for thrice nine days (note again the mystic number; cf. [I]). Most of the men urged the generals to delay. Nicias, the senior Athenian commander, obviously sharing the beliefs of the men, refused to budge (a decision which turned out to be disastrous). For Nicias "was somewhat excessively given to divination (*τι καὶ ἄγαν θειασμῷ . . . προσκείμενος* ³⁴) and that kind of thing."

The important words here are "somewhat excessively." If Nicias was excessively devoted to divination, the presumptive implication is that Thucydides had a conception of a degree of devotion which is *not* excessive; hence there exists a degree of devotion to *theiasmos* and the like which is acceptable to the historian. If one is excessively devoted to honesty, for example, then it could easily be excessive to tell the ugly girl that she is unattractive and that one thinks there is nothing she can do about it. Or to command the dying man in the desert to refrain from eating bread and water that he finds because they do not belong to him, and he would be stealing. Nevertheless, one might very well argue that Thucydides was not perfectly logical in expressing himself, and by "excessively" merely indicated his disapprobation of Nicias' religiosity. But this argument misses the force of "somewhat" (*τι*), which further qualifies and weakens Thucydides' reproach. His implication is that there is an acceptable degree (or degrees) of devotion

(= *deisidaimonia* in the pejorative sense), the results are only slightly less favorable to the argument here presented. The qualifiers to the expression, shortly to be discussed, still diminish much of its reproach. In the Budé ed. L. Bodin and J. de Romilly translate, "Nicias, qui s'adonnait, non sans quelque excès, à la divination . . ."

to *theiasmos*, to the supernatural, or, bluntly, to the gods or godly matters—acceptable degrees of religious belief.³⁵ One might guess that devotion is to be reprobated when, contrary to common sense (hence the possibility of error; cf. [C] and [F]), it will by all human reckoning endanger not only a great undertaking but the welfare and the very lives of a multitude of human beings. One should, of course, not forget that Thucydides writes almost certainly with the aid of hindsight. This is a rebuke to Nicias, and it is certainly an adverse judgment, but it is a qualified adverse judgment. One has only to compare 7. 86. 5 for Thucydides' generally favorable verdict on Nicias, a verdict which one might think shows a compassionate judgment that the latter's error after the eclipse was comprehensible.

Hence it seems difficult to see how this passage nullifies the effect of (A) and (I) as Von Fritz³⁶ would have it. Other scholars have been more disturbed about the implication to be drawn from this text. Apparently De Romilly would discount it as an indication of Thucydides' partiality for Nicias.³⁷ Dover³⁸ seems to opine that the fault attributed to Nicias in the present passage may approximate the interpretation offered here: "he should have paid less attention to seers," as an educated man under the circumstances.

In the past scholars have resorted to more drastic measures to obviate what they perceived as a problem in this passage. Under the impression that "somewhat" must be wrong (although it only reinforces "excessively"), they would expel *τε* from the text entirely.³⁹ Crawley translates

"somewhat," but Sir R. W. Livingstone in his abbreviated version of Crawley (in the Oxford "World Classics" series) suppresses the word, as does J. H. Finley in his translation of the passage.⁴⁰

A final objection to the interpretation of the passage offered here is that Thucydides' tone might well be ironical. The praise of Nicias in 7. 86. 5, however, is hardly consonant with such a belief; more importantly, the passage should not be considered by itself but in the light of most of the other passages here discussed. It would strain credibility far too much to argue that all these other passages are ironical too.

To summarize the foregoing: Thucydides is certainly interested in oracles, or rather in rationally, or "scientifically," testing them. More of the foregoing passages deal with oracles than with any other subject. Note in (B) his qualification, "it is said," and the discussion of the incidence of the plague, which implies some question whether the plague proceeded from natural or supernatural causes. If the plague occurred only in those areas where we might expect it, then perhaps it was only of natural origin, despite the statement of the oracle.⁴¹ This rational interest in the supernatural or irrational seems to be clearly evident in (C), where Thucydides apparently accepts the oracle, but questions its interpretation. Again, in (F) Thucydides in effect applies principles of external textual criticism to an oracle which was ambiguous (*loimos* / *limos*) because of the close resemblance between two Greek words. If there is sarcasm involved, it is

35. If Thuc. had wished to deliver himself of an unqualified condemnation of Nicias' behavior, he could simply have written to the effect that the latter, unfortunately for all concerned, was very superstitious.

36. I.1, 542.

37. *Imperialism*, p. 181, n. 5. Von Fritz, I.1, 806, thinks the praise of Nicias is *bedingtes*; and Bury, p. 119, thinks it is malicious. Cf. Stahl, p. 168.

38. *Ap. Gomme*, IV, 428–29.

39. See Poppo–Stahl, *ad loc.*, for an emphatic defense of the text, quoting English translations reading "somewhat."

40. *Thucydides*, p. 241.

41. Presumably it had not occurred to anyone that the gods might be so powerful that they could work their will without recourse to the overtly supernatural.

directed against the too ready credulity of people in general, rather than against the oracle itself. In (I) Thucydides seems clearly to reveal an interest in the “scientific” investigation of whether oracles really “work.” (It is no objection that he implicitly contradicts in some degree what he elsewhere writes about oracles.) The story is told that a theology student once suggested to his dean a controlled experiment. Throughout the state alternate counties should pray for rain, the rest should not (the control). Then it would be evident whether God answered prayer or not. The story concludes that the student, expelled (for *asebeia*, no doubt), went on to become a distinguished scientist. The young man was naïve; it would be historically wrong to say that Thucydides or his contemporaries were naïve in a similar way. They had not realized that rational methods cannot be used to test the irrational. On the other hand, Thucydides had little regard for *chresmologoi*; but even Herodotus (7. 6. 3–4) was aware that a collection of oracles could be contaminated, although he accepted oracles implicitly.⁴² Contempt for oracle-mongers and their collections cannot be taken of itself to imply contempt for oracles (genuine oracles, that is) themselves.

Thucydides also exhibits an interest in portents (or calamities functioning as such). (A) shows, not certainly, that he connected all the evils of the war, human and ultrahuman in origin, with the war itself as an integral aspect. He *could* have believed in such a connection, as Gomme hesitantly ventures he might have. If (J) is taken together with (A), then, despite Von Fritz, the argument for Thucydides’ belief in a supernatural connection is fairly strong. (J) also deals with Nicias’ “somewhat excessive” reaction to a portent as interpreted by *manteis*. Once again,

Thucydides does not reject all *theiasmos* and things of that kind, and that may include the mantic interpretation of eclipses as portents in other instances (cf. [A]).

As regards Thucydides’ reaction to the supernatural on a more general level, (E) shows that the gods did not help the victims of the plague any better than human endeavor did. As pointed out above, this view does not imply that the gods never help, that is, interfere. In (G) the historian may or may not imply that he believes in a divine *nomos*. At the very least, however, in the whole context he does seem to imply a preference for what men are bound to do by the divine *nomos* as usually interpreted. (H) may very well show Thucydides’ interest in a religious matter for its own sake, since it has little relation to the subject of his history (this interpretation would hold, even if he is for some reason narrating a matter connected with what Hellanicus did or did not chronicle).

The most important passage of all seems to be (J). Thucydides expressly rejects only the excessive acceptance of *theiasmos* (divination or prophecy). But both in meaning and in etymology *theiasmos* implies belief in the gods, and hence in Greek religion in general, even though it may be a questioning belief in Thucydides’ case.

Thus Thucydides apparently accepts Greek religion in a general way with at least two reservations. First, he is doubtful about oracles and is engaged in testing their validity and authenticity: he found one that turned out to be precisely accurate; presumably he could not be absolutely sure about the others. As noted above, this indicates a certain contradiction in his thinking, but that a man investigating such things might change from a given degree of opinion (and even

42. See Verdin, pp. 64–72 on Hdt. and oracles, and esp. pp. 67–68, 227, on contamination of collections of oracles.

back again) is to be taken as natural rather than unnatural. Secondly, he rejects religion when it is carried to excess, when its commands contravene, or are interpreted as contravening, common sense and common reason. When that happens, something is wrong. Furthermore, according to (A), he may have accepted a connection of some sort between human calamities and supernatural calamities and portents.

It has been suggested that Thucydides, like many a Hellenistic or Roman writer, sometimes saw the workings of an agency called "Fortune" in men's affairs,⁴³ yet one cannot be sure of this. If physicists are the most "rational" and "intellectual" of modern scientists, they can nevertheless refer to "chance" as affecting their experiments, yet not believe in it in any real sense as an agency that makes things go wrong or (occasionally) right. The foregoing analysis has held, contrary to the prevailing general view, that Thucydides had enough belief in oracles to try to test their veracity. Yet we are commonly told that the historian condemned oracles as signs of superstition.⁴⁴ And in general it is held either that Thucydides had no religion, or that there are no passages in his work which permit us, even partially, to determine the point one way or the other. Perhaps the best concise summary of the argument made in this paper would be that Thucydides was an agnostic in the literal sense; that he had an interest in religion, particularly its external mani-

festations; but that with some fluctuations in opinion he was investigating the authenticity of those manifestations.

If this last is true, then Thucydides was not unlike, but perhaps a bit "beyond," Sir Isaac Newton. As the co-inventor of the calculus and the discoverer of the laws of motion and of the movements of the heavenly bodies, Newton is perhaps the most characteristic representative of the modern Age of Reason and Enlightenment,⁴⁵ as Thucydides may also be for the intellectual movements of Greece and especially Athens in the fifth century B.C. (which have also been called the Greek "Enlightenment" by analogy with the later European development). It is not so commonly known that Newton, rather like Thucydides if the present discussion is correct, trained upon religion the same logical and rational talent that had (at least for a time) solved the riddles of the physical universe. Much of his life was spent in this attempt to rationalize what many persons would call irrational or at least beyond the analyses of reason.⁴⁶ Apparently he ended as a religious man, but a very heterodox one. Perhaps this example from comparative history may make it easier for some to accept a Thucydides who tried to use rational methods to understand the irrational. R. W. Macan⁴⁷ puts the position and its intellectual consequences thus: Provided it is not introduced among secondary causes, "such a conception [of the supernatural or the

43. Cornford, p. 97. It is generally accepted today, as Shorey, *TAPA*, XXIV (1893), 86, pointed out, that Thuc. largely disregards morality as a factor in causation.

44. See, e.g., Grundy, II, 33; J. H. Finley, *Thuc.*, pp. 222, 310-11 (extending Thuc.'s presumed contempt to portents also); Meiggs, pp. 288 and n. 4 (but specifying [C] as an "interesting exception"); 304; Cornford, p. 216, however, seems correct when he limits this contempt to oracle-mongering. On religion in Thuc. see also Adcock, pp. 55-56; De Romilly, *Imperialism*, p. 292; J. H. Finley, *Thucydides*, p. 312; Von Fritz, I.1, 542-43 (Thuc. never speaks of religion in his own person); Strasburger, *Saeculum*, V (1954), 408-409, 417.

45. Note that Pope in his famous lines intended for Newton's epitaph symbolized the latter's union of faith and reason: "God said, Let Newton be! and all was light."

46. For a concise and interesting statement of Newton's activities in this area, see J. M. Keynes, "Newton the Man," in *Essays and Sketches in Biography* (New York, 1956), pp. 280-90. Lord Keynes's language (p. 281) describing Newton's fear of self-exposure or of revealing his beliefs is curiously reminiscent of the language that modern students of Thuc. have used in describing the latter's reticence. Of course, Newton, apart from any presumptive quirk in his personality, had good practical reason: his religious beliefs were heterodox and physically dangerous in his time and place. Presumably this would not have been true of Thuc., since he, also presumably, was not corrupting the youth, etc.

47. *CAH*, V, 407.

irrational in history] is even today not alien either to the sincerest religious feeling or to the profoundest philosophy of history." In the ultimate terms of metaphysics, the problem of whether the universe was created by an agent or created itself is insoluble by rational means, but that has never stopped minds of every stature and caliber from trying to solve it by such means.

To recapitulate the argument of this

paper in one sentence: Thucydides had a varying degree of belief in the effect of the supernatural on history, and he investigated and tried to test this category of phenomena, like any other, when he encountered it in the course of his researches and his analyses of historical phenomena in general.⁴⁸

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

48. Or: modern scholars seem somewhat excessively devoted to belief in the absolute rationalism of Thucydides.