I have written this draft in the hope of stimulating discussion of some controversial issues I welcome criticisms, corrections, challenge.

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D R A F T

On Living without a 'Factual Mind-Set'

Some Perspective from Thucydides 1. 1 -- 24

Well into writing about the way ancient Greeks thought I came across an article by a Stanford anthropologist entitled "Faith vs. Facts". It summarizes some recent scholarship exploring the distinction between a factual mind-set and a religious mind-set. The first comprises such things as epidemiological studies of the effects of vaccination, and governmental policies on health care and climate change. The second includes religiously based opposition to such policies and, apparently all other religiously influenced attitudes. That mind-set is a vortex, obviously to be avoid. One minute you are reading Milton, the next your children are dying for want of a vaccination. There seems not much ground in between these two "mind-sets," and no overlap. It's either one or the other.

Facts! Those hard, incontrovertible bits of knowledge are the way to acquire the "factual mind-set," or to do any kind of think, at least if you're an old school empiricist. Get enough of them, and they fall into place, form clear patterns from which you can develop a mind-set, and thereby make good decisions, formulate an effective policy, or figure out how to live a life.

But what about the Greeks? Did they have a "factual mind-set"? I realized to my embarrassment that in thinking about how the Greeks had thought I had paid little attention to their views about "facts." There was a reason for that: ancient Greeks, at least for some centuries, seemed not to talk about facts. So when I tried my usual thought-experiment of translating contemporary terms into ancient Greek I bloodied my nose against a stone wall. I couldn't figure out how to say "fact" in ancient Greek. Embarrassing, but the English-Greek lexicon showed that I wasn't the only one who found it difficult.

What's a "fact," anyway? Etymologically the English words is derived from the Latin verb *facere*, to do, to act. It came into English in the sixteenth century to refer to completed actions (especially evil ones). So the closest Greek equivalent should be ergon, which can mea *act* or *deed*. It's cognate with English 'work', and indeed that's its specific meaning most of the time in

Greek: *work, esp. work in war*, or *labor on a farm. S*ometimes too it can mean *accomplishment,* and by extension what happens in *practice.* Thucydides uses it that way when he says (2.65.10) that the Athenian government under Pericles was in word (logõi) a democracy, but in fact (ergõi) the rule of the preeminent man. We cantranslate the phrase as "in fact," if we want, but here's the funny thing: ergon approaches the meaning of English *fact* only when it's contrasted to *word*, *name, story* or some other aspect of speech.

But if in ancient Greek ergon could not do the work necessary for a modern 'factual mind-set', one might expect that someone among the Greeks would have invented another word and a concept up to the task.

Close, but not quite what happened.

The Greeks invented not the fact, but the feather in the wind. In the late sixth or fifth century before our era they began to speak of tekmēria, not 'facts' as we use the word, but, as J. Enoch Powell phrased it in his Lexicon to Herodotus, "pieces of evidence." We can see them at work in Thucydides' treatment of early Greek history at the beginning of his history of the Peloponnesian war. He saw the problems unverified story-telling posed, and challenged the prevailing view of the greatness of the remote past of Greece and the authority of the much venerated singer of tales, Homer.

> *For though the events of remote antiquity, and even those that more immediately preceded the war, could not from lapse of time be clearly ascertained, yet the evidence (tekmēriōn) which an inquiry carried as far back as was practicable leads me to trust, all point to the conclusion that there was nothing on a great scale, either in war or other matters. (*1.1.1, trans. Crawley)

He does not claim that solid facts demonstrate that his conclusion is right. The past is too obscure for such confidence. There are, however, *pieces of evidence*, tekmēria, which Thucydides believes he can trust, and these point to the conclusion he sets forth in the nest twenty chapters. In them he uses small bits of evidence, including some from Homer himself to challenge existing views. For example, in arguing that for a long time there was no singe name for Greece, merely tribal or regional identifications, he writes:

> *Homer in particular provides the evidence (tekmēriōi). Born long after the Trojan War, he nowhere calls all of them by that name, nor indeed any of them except the followers of Achilles from Phthiotis, who were the original Hellenes: in his poems they are called Danaans, Argives and Achaeans.* (1.3.3, trans. Crawley, modified)

The evidence does not consist of a "fact," so much as in a pattern of speech which Thucydides assumes must have prevailed in ordinary usage as well as in the Homeric poems. And so it goes through his whole reconstruction of the remote past: a probable picture inferred from plausible but by no means unchallengeable evidence.

When Thucydides has completed his inquiry into the remote past he rounds it off by echoing what he said at the outset:

> *I found that early times were of this sort, though I grant that it is not easy to feel confidence in every indicator, one after another*, *(panti hexēs tekmēriōi). The way that most men deal with oral traditions (akoas), even traditions of their own country, is to receive them all alike as they are delivered, without ever subjecting them to torture.* (1.20.1, trans. Crawley, modified)

Thucydides does not claim that the pieces of evidence that he found were incontrovertible, or that the picture that emerges was more that "of this sort" (toiauta not tauta). But he feels confident in the approximation that has resulted from his inquiry and from "subjecting to torture" various accounts that circulated. What he meant by that vivid phraseology comes clear a few chapters later when he explains how he went about constructing his narrative of the actions (erga) in the Peloponnesian war: "*I did not think it correct to write about them on the basis of questioning a stray informant, nor* on my own impressions, but rather both for those at which I was myself present and those *I learned about from others, going through them with as much attention to detail (akribeia) as possible" (1.22.2).*

In examining both the early history of Greece and the war in which he himself took part Thucydides is concerned about how to assess information that is already in story form. He does not believe that incontrovertible "facts" will produce an indisputable conclusion. There is no such thing, we might infer, as an incontrovertible fact; each detail, one by one, has to be rigorously examined to assess it plausibility. So for Thucydides (and some other critically minded writers of the classical period) there were no facts "speak for themselves," only probabilities that could be detected and evaluated by "indicators" (tekmēria) and carefully detailed examination, and produce not definitive truth but something useful, nonetheless, (1.22.4). That approach opened the door to thoughts and arguments based on a kind of probability (eikos) at which the Greeks came to excel It was not based on statistics but on a keen sense of how human beings act.

The result, he knew, would not please those of his contemporaries who loved above all else a good story, nor will it match the expectations of the "factual mind-set" of today. It is hard for us to imagine thinking without indisputable facts, incontrovertible scientific evidence, big data sets crunched by infallible algorithms. But the emphasis on "indicators" and the technique of detailed observation and critical examination (akribeia) opened a door for the study of persuasion, healing, botany and other branches of knowledge that flourished in Greek antiquity. They should not be scorned even today; living with probabilities is better than subscribing to one or another rampant and conflicting certainty.

Some Reading:

Gregory Crane, *The Blinded Eye: Thucydides and the New Written Word* (Lanham MD, Rowman and Littlefield, 1996) (on akribeia).

Anna Pavord The Naming of Names (London, Bloomsbury, 2005) (On close observation and naming of plants),

Louise H. Pratt, Lying and Poetry from Homer to Pindar: Falsehood and Deception in Archaic Greek Poetics (Michigan Monographs in Classical Antiquity, Ann Arbor, 1993).

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