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Did Thucydides Invent Historical Time?¹

I should say something about my interest in this problem. The point may have already occurred to those of my colleagues here who know that I am not professionally an historian of classical Greece or an historian of ideas but a philosopher. The problem interests me as part of trying to answer a philosophical question, and I should like to say something about how that can be so.

My project is defined by a notable feature of the present time: that there is in our culture an intense commitment to truthfulness, at least in the negative form of a pervasive suspiciousness, a powerful readiness against being fooled, an eagerness to see behind appearances, in particular respectable appearances, to the real structures and motives that lie behind them. This is evident, in different forms, in politics, in historical understanding, within the social sciences and also as directed against them, and even in interpretations of the natural sciences. However, together with this need for truthfulness (or, to put it less positively, this reflex against deceptiveness), there is an equally pervasive scepticism about truth itself; or at least — and here a large philosophical agenda comes into view — against "objective" truth or "absolute" truth or, let us say, truth *period* or *überhaupt*.

These two things, the devotion to truthfulness and a scepticism about objective truth, are of course connected with one other: the critical questioning which is inspired by truthfulness works to weaken the assurances associated with the idea of a secure, accessible and unqualifiedly stateable truth. But the fact that the two phenomena are intelligibly connected does not mean that they can happily co-exist or that the situation is stable. For if you do not believe in the existence of the truth, what is the passion for truthfulness a passion for? Or — as we might also put it — in pursuing truthfulness what are you supposedly being true to? This is not an abstract difficulty, or just a paradox; it signals a very real danger that our intellectual activities, particularly in the humanities, may tear themselves to pieces. It leads to my question. It is not the ques-

¹ This is a shortened version of a lecture given at the Wissenschaftskolleg on March 20, 1997.

tion of how this situation came about. That, I myself believe, has (very broadly speaking) already been answered by Nietzsche, who was the first to recognize this situation and also foresaw to a remarkable degree how it would develop. The question is how, at least at an intellectual if not at a social level, we should address this situation.² Can the notions of truth and of truthfulness, *Wahrheit* and *Wahrhaftigkeit*, be intellectually stabilised, in such a way that what we understand about objective truth and our chances of arriving at it can be made to fit with our need for truthfulness and our demands, more generally, on the virtues of truth?

Philosophers are professionally interested in the universal and the invariant — more than that, in what must be invariant, the necessary. They tend to forget that ideas about truth, and conceptions of the virtues of truth, have — in important respects, but not in all — varied from time to time and from place to place. Philosophers do have various ways of thinking about the relation of the necessary to what is contingent, local and variable, but none of them, in a case like this, is altogether satisfactory.

I am sure that there are *some* ideas related to truth that we can say *a priori* are shared universally by human beings, in virtue of the facts that they live in groups under norms, learn a language, get to know about their environment, divide the labour of doing so, and share their information. In virtue of these facts alone, we can conclude that human beings everywhere will have beliefs, and they will recognise that others have beliefs; they will have a conception of true belief, and of how best to find the truth about some matters, and of when it is a good idea to tell the truth. But these *a priori* assurances, such as they are, enormously underdetermine the form that these various conceptions will take in the actual world. These conceptions, virtues, values, and structures of belief may differ greatly and unpredictably from one place or time to another. As in any other form of natural history, you do not know what you will find, and what you find may well be something you would never have dreamed of. So it is with human thoughts. This is all the more so because human cultures are specially prone to secondary elaboration, under which practices take on a developmental life of their own. This applies to our own values. Some of the virtues of truth that may seem to us most important, such as certain ideals of authenticity, not only have a history but are quite recent. We shall never come to understand these values or

² Nietzsche had less of an answer to this question, though more of one than is supposed by those who identify him simply with "perspectivism" or, worse, a total nihilism about truth.

their importance to us by ethical and philosophical argument alone, without knowing something of their history.

In addition, one often cannot even come to see what is universal and what is local simply by arguing about it. In some cases, only anthropological studies, perhaps, or, again, history, can make it clear how things that seem necessarily to go together may fail to do so. Our present subject, time, offers an example of this. Everyone everywhere has some idea of the past. At a certain age the child can recognise that the grown-up has just gone out; at a later age, that she went out a while ago; later still, that she went away yesterday. These are constants of cognitive and developmental psychology, and we can see why they should be. For us, in addition, the time series is straightforwardly recursive, in the mathematical sense. Those who are old enough to remember Giancarlo Menotti's opera *The Consul* will recall a character who went around singing "yesterday, and the day before yesterday...", and we know that he could have gone on indefinitely with that formula. So long at least as there have been days (and there were days, certainly, a long time before there were human beings), each day has had a day before it. Moreover, everything that has really happened to a human being happened on one or more of those days. So we tend to think that anyone who can think about yesterday at all — and that is, probably, every relatively mature and capable human being — must share those conceptions. But is that so? Perhaps history can help.

The crucial text I want to consider is a passage of Herodotus [3.122.2]. He is talking about Polycrates, ruler of Samos (who died in fact in 522/521 BC), about whom he says that he was

the first of whom we know to have aimed at control of the sea; apart from Minos the Cretan or someone earlier than him who may have ruled the seas. But out of what is called the human race, Polycrates was the first.

The question about this passage is what is meant by the strange phrase (*iês de anthrôpêiês legomenês geneês*) which I have translated as "what is called the human race"; and the point of asking this question is to determine what it is about Minos which means that, whether he had a fleet or not, for Herodotus he does not count. What was the matter with Minos?

In what is now the standard treatment, the phrase is not translated as I have rendered it, but in terms of time. A recent writer, fairly typically, offers, first, "the `human epoch", and later " `the properly denominated age of men' "; fifty pages later it has become `in ordinary human

history'.³ But there is no reason to think that it can mean any such thing. The expression that Herodotus uses here really can only mean "the human race". But then it is quite unclear what is being done by *legomenês*, a form which standardly refers to what something is "called" or "is said to be", when either there a doubt whether it should be so called, or the name in question is something like a title or nickname. Why should Herodotus find anything at all questionable or notable about calling the human race "the human race"?

Minos, king of Crete, is of course the figure who has given his name to the Minoan culture. There was a doubt even in antiquity whether he was supposed to be merely human or not. He was standardly said to be the son of Zeus and a mortal woman, Europa, and so semi-divine, but a verse ascribed to Hesiod calls him "the most kingly of mortal kings".⁴ It remains controversial whether there is an historical basis to the stories about him. After a long discussion, the most authoritative reference work judiciously concludes:⁵

So erscheint nichts von allen bedeutsamen Zügen im Bilde des Minos (Königtum, Meeresherrschaft, Gesetzgebung und staatliche Ordnung, Feldzüge) so phantastisch, dass dem nicht Historisches zugrunde liegen könnte.

But whatever exactly he was, Herodotus takes him to have been earlier than Polycrates. Elsewhere he assigns him to "the old days", to "ancient times", and once gets nearer to locating him in time, saying that the Trojan War happened in the third generation after him.⁶

So if Minos was semi-divine, there was an earlier time when there were such figures on earth. However, Herodotus has no clear idea of when this was, and if he is pressed he seems to contradict himself. He was, famously, impressed by the antiquity of Egypt, and by the records of its kings, which suggested that between the first king and his own time 11,340 years had elapsed: "in all of which time, they said, they had had no king who was a god in human form", though gods did rule Egypt before men did [2.144]. Herodotus certainly regards the chronology of Egypt and of Greece as forming one system, and he is very interested in connections between their histories. He has an elaborate argument to

³ Donald Lateiner, *The Historical Method of Herodotus* (University of Toronto Press, 1989), pp 17, 63, 118.

⁴ Hes. frg 103 Rz, from ps-Plato *Minos*, 320.

⁵ Pauly-Wissowa-Kroll *Reallexikon* vol XV-2, p 1926.

⁶ 1.171.2; 1.173.1; the Trojan War, 7.171.

suggest that the Greeks are wrong in thinking that certain of their gods were recent: if they did arrive relatively recently, they were probably human beings who were named for old gods from Egypt. There is also a lot of material, in relation to the more recent history of Egypt, about the Trojan war. If you put all his calculations together, it looks as though Herodotus is committed to thinking that three generations before the Trojan war, when Minos was supposedly around, the world had for a very long time been exclusively in the hands of human beings.

The scholar I have already mentioned in connection with the translation of Herodotus' phrase says, to quote him more fully:⁷

Herodotus... does not consider the legendary histories of most of the Greek city states worthy of inclusion, nor does he tarry over stories about the gods, because they and semi-legendary beings such as Minos are beyond the evidence that history can deliver or explain. They are generally obscure in their workings and not part of the "human epoch"...

This is, to put it bluntly, a confusion. It runs together what are for us now two different answers to the question about what was wrong with Minos: on the one hand, that he was legendary, which is a matter of the status possessed by him and the stories about him; on the other hand, that it is merely too obscure what we can assert about him, because it was too long ago, which is a matter of our possible knowledge. Of course, the second matter can extend to the first: we may know so little that we do not even know whether a given figure was legendary, and that is indeed the case with Minos. Nevertheless, these are two very different considerations. There are thousands of people in classical antiquity whose names we know, and who are certainly not legendary, but about whom we can assert very little; there are others who are legendary and about whom we can assert a great deal, such as Zeus. Since these are, for us, two different matters, to run them together, as this scholar does, is, for us, a muddle. But Herodotus himself did not make this muddle, because it was not yet possible to do so. In his outlook, there was, rather, a certain kind of indeterminacy about the past, an indeterminacy which we should try to describe without ascribing the muddle to him, or falling into it ourselves.

The question of what we can know is certainly connected with time, and particularly so for Herodotus. He relies on oral evidence when it is not a matter of things that he has seen himself, and he makes a continu-

⁷ Lateiner op. cit. pp 16-17.

ous display of this. He puts more trust in matters for which there is a reliable oral tradition, and in relation to the past, he typically relies more on testimony about events that occurred in the century or so before his investigation. Time has been thought to be involved also in the other idea, that the trouble with Minos is not his obscurity but his legendary status. This suggestion, in relation to Herodotus' words, goes back at least to Ph.-E. Legrand, who wrote in 1932: "Les générations `que l'on appelle humaines' s'opposent aux générations mythiques, les événements `humains'... aux événements fabuleux." It has been deployed by many subsequent scholars, for instance Moses Finley:⁸

Effectively, Greek thinking divided the past into two parts, two compartments, the heroic age and the post-heroic (or the time of gods and the time of men).

Those last words consciously echo a famous phrase that Pierre Vidal-Nacquet used as the title of an article in 1960, "temps des dieux et temps des hommes".⁹ This way of putting it implies that the legendary or fabulous figures are gods, or closely related to the gods, and this is, strictly speaking, a further step, since there can be myths or legends with no divine content, but in the present context that does not matter. The world of Greek myths was certainly full of gods, and if Minos was legendary he was, as we have seen, semi-divine.

Vidal-Nacquet's formulation is misleading, in more than one way. It encourages one to think of the difference between human beings, on the one hand, and divine or semi-divine beings, on the other, too exclusively in terms of eras; Vidal-Nacquet is indeed prominent among those who mistranslate Herodotus' reference to the human race as a reference to time.¹⁰ It might suggest, too, (though this is not what Vidal-Nacquet intends) that the two classes of beings were separate from one another in time, but of course the world in which the gods still acted and revealed themselves was also a world of human beings, and this is shown by the presence of figures with one divine and one human parent: even in those old days, copulation required some degree of simultaneity. Moreover, those semi-divine beings, and the shifting stories about the status

⁸ Legrand, *Hérodote: Introduction* (Paris 1932), p 39; cited by Virginia Hunter, *Past and Process in Herodotus and Thucydides* (Princeton U.P. 1982), p. 19. — M.I. Finley, "Myth, Memory and History", *History and Theory* 4 (1965), p 294.

⁹ *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 157 (1960). Reprinted in *Le Chasseur Noir* (Paris: Maspero, 1981).

"...du temps qu'on appelle le temps des hommes", op. cit. p 67.

of a figure such as Minos, remind us that while there were some who were purely gods, and some who were purely human, there others who were in many varying degrees connected by birth with the gods; and, significantly, Minos and those like him were often divine in some contexts and not at all so in others.

Another recent writer, influenced by Vidal-Nacquet, has said:¹¹

Herodotus found himself able [sc. on the basis of his work in Egypt] to extend backwards by thousands of years *le temps des hommes* to a period when gods mingled with men, a time so remote from the present as to be unimaginable, and one that challenged *le temps des dieux* accepted by the Greeks.

There is something in this, but I think that it also expresses a misconception implicit in this approach, a misconception which goes deep. Such formulations make Herodotus' work sound like an exercise in palaeontology — as though another type of hominid, *homo semi-divinus*, had walked the earth at one time, and it was a question of dating the era when it did so. But this scholar herself reveals in the phrase, "so remote as to be unimaginable", that she is uneasy with this way of relating time and the mythical. Once again, we are seeing signs of a tension between two different answers to the question of what was wrong with Minos, our ignorance or his status; there are signs, equally, of an anxiety about the way in which those two answers are supposed to be related to time. I suggest that the words of Herodotus which we are considering show that he was beginning to be anxious about it himself.

There is, certainly, a sense in which Herodotus, above all in his work on the Egyptians, extended backwards the territory of history, in the sense of what could be asserted as true on the basis of reliable testimony. But it is a misconception to think that Herodotus had a point of view from which, in Finley's words, he "divided the past into two parts, two compartments". This is precisely to read into this earlier mode of thought the kind of abstract and unsituated classification schema which does not suit it at all. Herodotus does not think in terms of a boundary between two worlds, the world of history and the world of myth, related to which there are two times, historical times and what play-scripts and libretti used to call "legendary times". In order to think of such a boundary, and to think of himself as having moved it backwards, he would require a view of both sides of it, and there is no place from which he could have had such a view. He and most of his contemporar-

¹¹ Hunter op. cit. p 74.

ies, and the generations before them who told these stories about gods and men, essentially started from where they were, and, to understand them, we should do the same.

In Herodotus' time, many things were said, many tales were told. Of some, many of them relating to recent times, he had good reason to say that they were simply true, in the sense in which all human beings everywhere have understood that some statements about what has recently happened (for instance, what has *just* happened) are true. Other stories, in similar terms, were simply false. As the stories went back in time, they became vaguely related to each other; there was little known about how they came to be told; they rarely referred to any determinate past time. Their times were merely earlier, a long time ago, the old days. Moreover, many of them did have, relative to the present, a rather strange content: they were stories about gods, heroes, monsters. That all such stories, or nearly all, were about the past was a feature of the Greek world, and of course does not apply to all myths elsewhere: the Greek gods were supposed to have gone away, which is why the "time of the gods" has come into the discussion at all.

About such stories, people could say that they were told, and they might tell them themselves. They could compare them, even try to reconcile them. It could be important to ask whether a given version of a story was the story that was usually told, or told by the most respected story-tellers, and this gave a sense to "is this version correct?" But, fundamentally, the question, "Is this a story we should tell?" had the force "Is this a story to be told now, to these people? Would they like it? If they would not like it, might there still be a reason for telling it?" — as, indeed, there are many reasons for telling myths. There is nothing in those people's practice to make us say that they asked about such a story, as a further and independent question, "Is it true?"¹² That is a

¹² The question asked in the title of Paul Veyne's well-known book, *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes?* (Paris, Editions de Seuil, 1986) is not altogether a good question, a point that he recognises himself. He substitutes (p 11) another inquiry, which implies an extravagant relativism about truth, or worse: (p 137) "Cela fait d'abord un drôle d'effet, de penser que rien n'est vrai ni faux, mais on s'y habitue rapidement. Et pour cause: la valeur de vérité est inutile... la vérité est le nom que nous donnons à nos options, dont nous ne demordrions pas... Nous aurions pu leur [se. aux nazis] retorqueur qu'ils se trompaient, mais à quoi bon? Ils n'étaient pas sur la même longueur d'onde que nous..." The many interesting ideas in the book are independent of this rhetoric. On the present issue, cf p 28: "Ces mondes de légende étaient crus vrais, en ce sens qu'on n'en doutait pas, mais on n'y croyait pas comme on croit aux réalités qui nous entourent."

question which indeed arises, everywhere, in relation to what is familiar and recent; relatedly, everywhere it is one possible reason for not telling some stories to some people that one knows that they are not true. But those considerations did not press on those stories about the old days, with their strange content and their indeterminate temporal remoteness.

Such a practice is not inherently unstable; it can last for long periods of time. But it becomes unstable if the kind of question that is appropriate to here, now, and the very recent begins to encroach on the stories about the old days, and there ceases to be a natural and unreflective way of moving from one way of taking or offering a story to the other. This began to happen in Herodotus' time. In the traditional practice, within which he still for the most part moved, the fact that a story related to a long time ago was enough to separate it, in a spontaneous and unreflective way, from questions that certainly arose about what was done yesterday by the woman next door; but his own and other people's inquiries, in particular, his researches in Egypt, made it increasingly awkward to continue that practice. A story is offered, and it is said to be about the old days, but now, for the first time, the question "What difference is that supposed to make?" begins to need an answer. Herodotus does not formulate that question. But it is the next question after many he has formulated, and the ground that supports the old practice which is still his practice, one in which that question does not present itself, is moving under his feet. I think that this is what explains the strange phrase, "What is called the human race". The question is to hand, "What excludes Μῖνος?",¹³ and if Herodotus were to face it, he would not have an answer.

13 There are two questions that preoccupy the literature on such transformations: what causes them, and what relation they have to "rationality". On the first question, I have nothing to add to the view that the connection with the spread of literacy must be fundamental, with the opportunities it provides for side-by-side comparison of statements, and the fixity of transmission. See Jack Goody and I.P. Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy", *Comparative Studies in History and Society* 5 (1963); and Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge U.P. 1977). (Goody, ch 5, on lists, is very relevant to Herodotus and the Egyptian kings.)

On the second question, the basic point is that it has no clear and comprehensive sense. The question in the case of each supposedly "pre-rational" practice is: given the best description of the practice, what must we understand as the epistemic limitations of these people? In the present case, it is certainly true that there are whole classes of things that this concept of time would not enable people to explain. What we should not say is that they believed something necessarily false, that the difference between the real and the mythical is a difference in time.

Near the beginning of his own history, Thucydides also considers the question of Minos and his fleet. He briskly says (1.4), "Minos was the earliest among those of whom we know by hearsay... who ruled over most of what is now the Hellenic sea." "Of whom we know by hearsay" (*hôn akoëi ismen*) is a Herodotean phrase, and Herodotus' editors¹⁴ say that Thucydides is probably "by implication correcting Herodotus". They add: "Herodotus for once is more truly critical than Thucydides." But this misses the point. It may be that Thucydides should not have unqualifiedly asserted the existence of Minos's sea power. But Herodotus did not assert it qualifiedly, or decline to assert it, either: as we have seen, he did not *count* it, for reasons which, in our perspective, are inherently unclear. Our perspective is already Thucydides' perspective. For him, as for us, there is a fact of the matter whether some given years ago there were or were not ships controlling a certain area of sea, and similarly that there was or was not a real person that number of years ago corresponding to the Minos of whom the tales were told — someone possibly, though not necessarily, called "Minos". If it is said that Minos was a legendary or mythical figure, then Thucydides will say that you may of course tell a story about him, but you cannot tell that story in just the way you assert what happened yesterday; the story is a myth or legend, and if you merely assert it, you assert something untrue. Thucydides, unlike Herodotus, understood this perfectly well, and unless someone earlier than either of them had the same thoughts, which is unlikely, in coming to understand it Thucydides invented historical time.

Historical time provides a rigid and determinate structure for the past. Of any two real events in the past, it must be the case either that one of them happened before the other or that they were simultaneous.¹⁵ This does not hold for the mythical, or, more generally, for the fictional or the imagined. Just as there is no answer to the question of how many children Lady Macbeth had (and yet it is not correct, either, to say

¹⁴ How and Wells, ad Herod. loc cit.

¹⁵ Of course, the exact temporal ordering of happenings is constrained by vagueness: historical events do not happen at instants. But this is not a point about history; in understanding what an event of a certain kind is, whenever it happens, we understand this. (In addition, the account is confined to terrestrial events: no questions of relativity theory apply.)

I assume that historical time is, in the implied sense, linear, but I do not take this to be the same sense as that in which "linear" is contrasted, in many discussions of Greek ideas, with "cyclical" time. That distinction concerns the content of (happenings in) time, not its structure: if there are "cycles", then each is a distinct item in a succession of cycles.

that she is a Shakespearian character with a vicious temperament and an indeterminate number of children), so, of many events in myth or legend, there is nothing to be said about when they are supposed to have happened. For this reason, there is an intimate relation between historical time and the idea of historical truth. To say that a statement about an event is historically true is to imply that it is determinately located in the temporal structure; if it is not, historical time leaves it nowhere to go, except out of history altogether, into myth, or into mere error.

When someone — I think it was Thucydides — for the first time worked clear-headedly and confidently within this outlook, it was not that he introduced a new definition or theory of truth. In the first instance, what he did, as I have already suggested, was to insist that one should put just the same questions to stories about the remoter past as people put in everyday life to stories about the immediate past: Is it true? Is it just a story? Everybody everywhere already has a concept of truth; indeed, in a certain sense, they all have the same concept of truth. (The fact that they may have very different theories of truth just shows how much people's theories of truth misrepresent their grasp of the concept.) However, they do not all have the same ways of applying the concept of truth to the past, or at least to the remoter past: to the extent that they do not, we may say that while everyone everywhere has some concept of the past, they do not all have the same concept of the past. Thucydides imposed a new conception of the past, by insisting that people should extend to the remoter past a practice they already had in relation to the immediate past, of treating what was said about it as, seriously, true or false.

But what is involved in this new practice? Here it is essential that there is more to it than merely a change in the way people talk. It is not just that they now use words translatable as "true" and "false" of statements about the remoter past, including stories about the gods. They may very well have done that before, and nothing I say is intended to deny it. What matters is the force of such words, what the practice was. Correspondingly, the present question is, what has to happen to people's practice when they acquire the concept of historical time? What responsibilities does one take on by telling a tale in what, at this stage, we may call the mode of truth rather than in the mode of myth?

Those responsibilities are entirely clear to Thucydides. In the famous two chapters near the beginning of his book in which he declares his methods (1.21-22, the so-called "preface") in Greek which is characteristically knotted and unlovely, he uses the notion of the "mythical" (*to muthôdes*). He contrasts the account he has already given of the earlier

times with those given by poets, and also with those of the so-called logographers (who, we can take it, include Herodotus), "who, aiming more at attracting their audience than getting at the truth, have put their accounts together from materials which cannot be checked and which, in many cases, owing to the distance in time, command no belief and are consigned to the status of myth" [21.1]. What this implies comes out in the next chapter [22.4], where he says of his own account that the fact that the mythical is absent from it may make it seem less pleasant to a listener, but that it will be good enough if it is of interest to people who want to have a clear view of these events.¹⁶ And in the unforgettable words which have indeed made themselves true: "It has been composed not as a competition piece for the moment, but as a possession for ever."

These sentences do not just offer a comment on his style and a boast about his purposes. They help us to understand what the mythical is. A myth, or at least a Greek myth, is, among many other things, a good story, one that can be enjoyed as a story. This does not mean that the subject matter of every myth is pleasant, or that every true story is about something unpleasant: not even Thucydides thought that. But it implies that in the mode of myth, the question whether the story should be told is just the question whether the story is appropriately directed to its audience, in particular whether it will please them. Truth, as I said earlier, is a different matter, and in the mode of truth, there are always two questions possible about whether the story should be told: in the practice of the logographers, Thucydides says, you could not count on there being more than one.

Truth is not audience-relative. In particular, the truth of a statement has nothing to do with whether a given audience will be pleased to hear it.¹⁷ This is a special case of something that everyone implicitly and pre-theoretically understands about truth (even if their behaviour, quite often, does not make this very obvious.) Everywhere, there are wishes, and, among them, unfulfilled wishes; it is the pathos of the unfulfilled wish, in fact, that makes wishes obvious, and it registers the gap between wishes and truth. Just because the gap can be so painful, true belief has to be protected against subversion by the wish, and this is why the

¹⁶ And of any similar events that occur in the future. I agree with those who take this to mean the future relative to Thucydides, not the future relative to his future readers: he is not offering his history as a predictive handbook.

¹⁷ There are boring counter-examples ("You will be pleased to hear this..."), just as truth can be audience-relative (in a sense) in the case of indexical sentences, but such cases are irrelevant to the argument.

virtues of truth typically include defences against the pleasure principle, whether it is a matter of finding out the truth, and the protection is against such things as laziness and self-deception, or one is concerned, as we are at this point, with the announcement or rehearsal of the truth, and the defences must be against such things as cowardice, ambition and the desire to be loved. The fact that Thucydides starts his history in such terms represents one way in which he gave substance to the distinction between the mode of myth and the mode of truth.

There is a second way in which Thucydides does not just announce, but enforces, a difference between the mode of myth and the mode of truth, and in doing so makes clear the kind of responsibility that the mode of truth brings with it. If someone is going to be taken seriously, by himself as much as by others, as wanting to tell the truth about the past, he has to have some reason to believe that a certain thing happened rather than not. He will have such a reason only if it makes sense, in terms of the evidence he has and the other things he believes about the past, that it should have happened. But there is no way in which it can make sense unless, at some level of generality, that *sort* of thing makes sense. If we are to place events in the framework of the past, on the strength of present evidence, then we must be able to relate them to each other and to ourselves in terms that make them intelligible. In virtue of that, we can, often, explain them; and if we cannot explain them, then at least we have to explain why certain evidence exists, and why it gives us reason to think that this inexplicable thing happened. This general requirement is interpreted in very different ways by various historians and in different styles of history, but the fact that there is some such requirement follows simply from two substantive demands on telling a story about the past in the mode of truth. They are demands which are entirely transparent in themselves and, yet again, they are familiar to everyone everywhere with regard to statements about the recent past: you cannot just make the story up, and it is not necessarily a good enough reason for telling it that someone else has told it.

Thucydides himself interprets the explanatory requirement in a very strong way. In the chapters about the earliest times, he addresses the most famous of all Greek stories, the *Iliad*, and makes some tough military, economic, and geopolitical assessments of what must have gone on in the Trojan war. What is claimed to have really happened in the past must make explanatory sense, and at some level of generality, the explanations must be the same as they are of things now. Thucydides in fact tends to favour, though by no means exclusively, explanations of social and political happenings in terms of power, but the principle he is using is not restricted to these. If a happening in past time is explained by a

person's having a certain intention, then we should be able to understand such an intention operating in our own time; or, if not, then we need an explanation of that, for instance that our situation is culturally different from theirs. We ourselves are much more impressed by the importance of cultural variation than most people were before the 19th century, but the basic idea of what is implied by the commitments of the mode of truth is that of a unified system or network of explanations, and the question of how specifically similar the explanations may be between different times and cultures is secondary to the idea that at some level the world is explanatorily homogeneous.

But once we allow the world to be importantly different between different times, and do not require the explanations of actions and events to be always very specifically similar: might there not after all have been a time of the gods? Just as a general theory of evolution by natural selection which applies at all times allows us to believe that at one time there were dinosaurs and there are no dinosaurs now, so perhaps our explanations should, in principle, allow us to think that it is at least possible that gods once walked the earth, and now do not. Perhaps there is some very abstract and airless level of principle at which that might be right, but in fact it is not so. Those gods are given to us through those stories, and once we accept the idea of historical time, it is quite clear that the gods are essentially indeterminate, in many respects, and could have no fixed or clear relations to it. Once the structure of historical time is in place, the gods will eventually bow out. Of course, they do not disappear altogether, because the stories about them become fully acknowledged myth, and in myth they have a hold on our thoughts and feelings; but myth is not a time or place.

I have suggested that in the transition from Herodotus to Thucydides, at a certain point in the fifth century BC, one can see a significant change take place, the invention of historical time. In trying to give an account of that moment, as you will have seen, I have helped myself to a range of philosophical materials. But I hope that I may have encouraged you to think that through such a study history can give something to philosophy. Reading these writers and trying to understand their world gives one a grasp of what it was that was invented, and what difference it made. In particular, it may help one to understand something which philosophers sometimes find it hard to believe: that human beings can live without the idea of historical time; but, equally, it may remind cultural relativists that there are reasons why such an idea should emerge, and that when a certain number of questions have been asked, it becomes inevitable that human beings should, in this respect, come to see the world as Thucydides saw it.

In addition to all that, a proper account of historical time makes it moderately clear how we can know some things that happened in it. This could give us some confidence in the face of our contemporary more extreme sceptics, to assert what is in fact entirely obvious, that we know a great deal about the past. A proper account, nourished by history, should get rid of the bad idea that we have to be some kind of gross positivist to make that assertion; conversely, it can reassure us that, although the idea of historical time has a history, this does not mean that it is simply on the same level as mythical constructions of the past. Indeed, as I hope to have suggested, the history shows exactly the opposite.