

# Thucydides on Aetiology and Methodology and Some Links with the Philosophy of Heraclitus

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## Abstract

An analysis of Thucydides' most famous statements on the origins of the war between Athens and Sparta (1.23.4-6) and on the methodology of research of the facts (1.22.2. Cf. 1.20-21) shows a philosophical approach to history and historical research. A critically assessed comparison with some of Heraclitus of Ephesus' statements also suggests that Thucydides' own knowledge of early ancient philosophy helped him to shape his view on fundamental issues of historical research.

Thucydides appears to have introduced himself in a similar way as one might expect a philosopher would have done. Besides the rhetoric of self-presentation and self-definition, Thucydides was indeed a philosopher: he conceived his own political science as a hidden *sophia* which showed the invisible forces that, by reciprocal interaction, shaped historical development.

## Keywords

Thucydides – aetiology – methodology – Heraclitus – Greek historiography – Ancient philosophy

Thucydides' intellectual milieu is very hard to define because of both its extent and its intrinsic complexity. Thucydides consciously used the methods, language and narrative techniques of the sophistic movement, of ancient

medicine and of poetry for his own purposes;<sup>1</sup> and since much of this knowledge is deeply rooted in ancient philosophy, one may wonder whether Thucydides paid heed to early Greek philosophers too.<sup>2</sup>

It is the aim of this paper to show that there was indeed a very strong link between Thucydides and ancient philosophy. An analysis of Thucydides' most famous statements on the origins of the war between Athens and Sparta (1.23.4-6) and on the methodology of research of the facts (1.22.2. Cf. 1.20-21) shows a philosophical approach to history and historical research. A critically assessed comparison with some of Heraclitus of Ephesus' statements also suggests that Thucydides' own knowledge of early ancient philosophy helped him to shape his view on fundamental issues of historical research.

## 1 Aetiology

This is Thucydides' famous statement on the origins of the war of 431 BC:

ἤρξαντο δὲ αὐτοῦ Ἀθηναῖοι καὶ Πελοποννήσιοι λύσαντες τὰς τριακοντούτεις σπονδὰς αἰ' αὐτοῖς ἐγένοντο μετὰ Εὐβοίας ἄλωσιν. διότι δ' ἔλυσαν, τὰς αἰτίας προύγραψα πρῶτον καὶ τὰς διαφοράς, τοῦ μὴ τινα ζητήσαι ποτε ἐξ ὅτου τοσοῦτος πόλεμος τοῖς Ἑλλησι κατέστη. τὴν μὲν γὰρ ἀληθεστάτην πρόφασιν, ἀφανεστάτην δὲ λόγῳ, τοὺς Ἀθηναίους ἡγοῦμαι μεγάλους γιγνομένους καὶ φόβον παρέχοντας τοῖς Λακεδαιμονίοις ἀναγκάσαι ἐς τὸ πολεμεῖν· αἰ' δ' ἐς τὸ φανερόν λεγόμεναι αἰτίαι αἰδ' ἦσαν ἑκατέρων, ἀφ' ὧν λύσαντες τὰς σπονδὰς ἐς τὸν πόλεμον κατέστησαν.<sup>3</sup>

The Athenians and Peloponnesians began the war by breaking the Thirty Years' Peace reached after the conquest of Euboeia. As for the reason why they broke the peace, I have written first the αἰτίαι and differences, so that no one should ever have to enquire into the origin of such a great war for the Greeks. To be sure, I regard the truest πρόφασις, which was least apparent in word (or speech), as this: the fact that the Athenians, becoming great, aroused fear in the Spartans, made the war inevitable. The openly expressed αἰτίαι on each side, however, on the basis of which

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1 See especially Hornblower 2004; Thomas 2006; Corcella 2006.

2 On Thucydides and Presocratic thinkers, see especially Hussey 1985 (on Thucydides and Democritus); Shanske 2007, 134ff. in particular, for an attempt at reading Thucydides' work in light of Heraclitus' metaphysics.

3 Th. 1.23.4-6.

the peace was broken and fighting begun, were the following. (1.23.4-6, trans. T. Rood, modified)

Scholars often maintain that Thucydides drew a distinction here between ‘superficial/immediate causes’ (the ἐς τὸ φανερόν λεγόμεναί αιτίαι, i.e. the facts of Corcyra and Potidaea, dated at 435 BC and ff.) and a ‘profound/remote cause’ (the ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις, ἀφανεστάτη δὲ λόγῳ, i.e. the growing political tension between Sparta and Athens from 478 BC), a distinction implying that the former were less important—or less true—than the latter.<sup>4</sup>

It is indisputable that, in Thucydides’ view, the ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις was more important than the αιτίαι καὶ διαφοραὶ for proper understanding of the origins of the war. However, a degree of clarification is needed. By saying τοῦ μή τινα ζητήσαι ποτε ἐξ ὅτου τοσοῦτος πόλεμος τοῖς Ἑλληνισι κατέστη, ‘so that no one should ever have to enquire into the origin of such a great war for the Greeks’, Thucydides made clear that he considered the facts of Corcyra and Potidaea (the αιτίαι καὶ διαφοραὶ) to be the causes of the war in 431 BC.<sup>5</sup> As for the process represented by the growing power of Athens arousing fear in Sparta (the ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις), it focuses on the concept of necessity (ἀναγκάσαι ἐς τὸ πολεμεῖν),<sup>6</sup> and explains why a war between Sparta and Athens could not be avoided. In other words, Thucydides stated that the war broke out in 431 BC because of the events of Corcyra and Potidaea; and he pointed out that, even if such facts had not happened, a conflict between Sparta and Athens would have broken out anyway, if not in 431 BC then at another time.

While the facts of Corcyra and Potidaea explained why the war arose in 431 BC, the process of the growing power of Athens arousing fear in Sparta explained why a war between Sparta and Athens was unavoidable.

Thucydides, as we see, distinguished between ‘historical causes’ on the one hand and a ‘philosophical cause’ on the other. With the former, he answered the historical question, “Why did the war break out in 431 BC?”; with the latter, he answered the historical-philosophical question, “Could a conflict between Sparta and Athens be avoided?” By implicitly asking such a question, and by

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4 See especially de Romilly 1963, 18; Kagan 1969, 345; Hornblower 2003, 65; Zagorin 2005, 42-43.

5 Thus the facts of Corcyra and Potidaea were not mere pretexts, *pace* de Ste. Croix 1972, 52-56. See Heath 1986, 104, and cf. Hornblower 2003, 65; Rood 1998, 208-209; Fantasia 2011, particularly 33-35; Parmeggiani 2014, 116-117.

6 Note that the object of ἀναγκάσαι is not explicitly stated. Cf. schol. on Th. 1.23.6: τὰ ὀνόματα ῥήματα ἐποίησεν (sc. Thucydides). βούλεται γὰρ δηλοῦν ὅτι μεγάλοι γινόμενοι οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι ἀνάγκην παρέσχον τοῦ πολέμου. This detail, and also the fact that Thucydides says that *both* Athenians and Spartans started war (1.23.4 and 6), suggest that Thucydides is elusive on the issue of the responsibility for the war. On ἀνάγκη, see Ostwald 1988.

explicitly answering it, Thucydides conceived the historical development in terms of contingency and necessity, i.e. he approached history through philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

Thucydides was probably the first to approach historical aetiology from a philosophical point of view. Some of his lexical choices are, in this regard, quite symptomatic. Thucydides described the process of the growing power of Athens arousing fear in Sparta with the label *πρόφασις*; he did not use the label *αἰτία* because he wanted to make clear to his reader that that process had an aetiological function which was different from that of the *αἰτίαι καὶ διαφοραί*; and since the term *πρόφασις*, taken as it is, can also mean ‘pretext’, he was forced to disambiguate it by adding the adjective *ἀληθεστάτη*. So Thucydides made his reader aware that the process of the growing power of Athens arousing fear in Sparta was not intended to explain why the war between Sparta and Athens arose in 431 BC but why a war between Sparta and Athens was doomed to arise: the conflict between Sparta and Athens was immanent and the facts of Corcyra and Potidaea were the contingencies that, in 431 BC, made it a historical fact.<sup>8</sup> So Thucydides initiated his readers to his philosophy of history.<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, both definitions, *ἐς τὸ φανερόν λεγόμεναι* (‘openly expressed’) and *ἀφανεστάτη δὲ λόγῳ* (lit. ‘least apparent in word [or speech]’), have to do with discourse, i.e., what was publicly said by the two sides before and after the war

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7 In Tucker 2009, a collection of papers on philosophy of history and historiography, Ben-Menahem 2009, 120, starts his inquiry on ‘historical necessity and contingency’ as follows: “Historians and non-historians alike are often occupied with questions concerning the evitability or inevitability of certain events: was the war (inflation, urbanization, divorce, medical procedure, etc.) inescapable, or could it have been avoided?” Thucydides is not mentioned, but this was his point in 1.23.4-6: by his *ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις*, Thucydides tried a ‘new’ approach to the past, which did not rest on a mere description of events; he (re)thought the historical development in terms of ‘necessity’ and ‘contingency’, and in so doing, he entered the realm of ‘philosophy of history’.

8 Sparta’s decision to go to war (see 1.88 and 1.18.1-2) depended on the circumstances of Corcyra and Potidaea, and is to be regarded as the junction point between the war as immanence and the war as contingency.

9 See Parmeggiani 2014, 115-117. The meaning of *πρόφασις* in 1.23.6 has given rise to much controversy among modern scholars: see Rawlings 1975, especially 61-81, suggesting ‘explanation’ in a medical sense, i.e. reappearance of a phenomenon (from *προφάνω*, cf. Robert 1976, 334-336); Heubeck 1980, 232-235, and Richardson 1990, suggesting instead ‘reason given’ (from *πρόφημι*). As Hornblower 2003, 65 rightly points out, “whatever its etymology”, *πρόφασις* in 1.23.6 means ‘cause’. Cf. Vattuone 2007, 150. Shanske 2007, 37 ff. and 158 ff., maintains that *ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις* means “the most revealing pretext”, but he is too confident in dismissing ‘(actual/ real) cause’ as a possible meaning for the Greek *πρόφασις*, especially with the adjective *ἀληθής* (see *LSJ*, 1539, s.v. *πρόφασις*).

started. Now we know that the facts of Corcyra and Potidaea were publicly debated—therefore ‘openly expressed’—in 432 BC, as Thucydides makes clear with the speeches by the Corinthians, Athenians and Spartans at the congress of Sparta in Book 1.<sup>10</sup> The Spartans’ fear of Athens’ increasing power, however, does not appear in such speeches,<sup>11</sup> but here—and also elsewhere in Book 1—one may find hints about the inevitability of the war, i.e. the concept which mostly identifies the ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις, which is said by Thucydides to be ἀφανεστάτη δὲ λόγῳ, ‘least apparent in word (or speech)’.<sup>12</sup> Should we therefore conclude that Thucydides contradicted himself?<sup>13</sup>

Another text may help to solve this problem. We read in Heraclitus of Ephesus, 22 B 1 D.-K.:

τοῦ δὲ λόγου τοῦδ’ ἐόντος αἰεὶ ἀξύνετοι γίνονται ἄνθρωποι, καὶ πρόσθεν ἢ ἀκοῦσαι, καὶ ἀκούσαντες τὸ πρῶτον.<sup>14</sup>

Of this Word’s being forever do men prove to be uncomprehending, both before they hear and once they have heard it.

Furthermore, we read in 22 B 17 D.-K.:

οὐ γὰρ φρονέουσι τοιαῦτα πολλοί, ὀκόσοι ἐγκυρεῦσιν, οὐδὲ μαθόντες γινώσκουσιν, ἔωυτοῖσι δὲ δοκέουσι.<sup>15</sup>

10 Th. 1.67-87.

11 See Porciani 1999, 135 n. 71, and Hornblower 2003, 66.

12 See, for example, the Corcyraeans in 1.33.3, the Athenians in 1.44.2 and Pericles in 1.144.3.

13 This problem has been variously approached by modern critics: see Andrewes 1959, 237-238; de Ste. Croix 1972, 56-58; Rawlings 1975, 80; Gomme-Andrewes-Dover 1981, 420-421; Heath 1986; Rhodes 1987, 160; Richardson 1990, 158; Rood 1998, 209; Hornblower 2003, 66; Fantasia 2011, 37. Scholars tend to think that the ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις was ἀφανεστάτη δὲ λόγῳ inasmuch it was less spoken than the αἰτίαι (e.g. Andrewes 1959, 237-238), or remained unspoken (so the full process of the growing power of Athens arousing fear in Sparta: see Rood 1998, 209). This is not Thucydides’ point, in my view: see below.

14 S.E. M. 7.132 = Heraclit. 22 B 1 D.-K. All translations of Heraclitean fragments are from Graham 2010. On the meaning of *logos* (‘word’, but also ‘reason’ in Heraclitean fragments), see Diano-Serra 1994, 89-109; Hussey 1999, 91-93; Graham 2008, 176 ff.; Hülsz 2013.

15 Clem.Al. *Strom.* II 8 = Heraclit. 22 B 17 D.-K. On this fragment, see Diano-Serra 1994, 109-110; Graham 2008, 177, and 2013, 307; Dilcher 2013, 278.

Many do not understand such things as they encounter, nor do they learn from their experience, but they think they do.

Truth—said Heraclitus—is announced by discourse and men can hear it; but this does not imply that listeners really *understand* it. To put things in Thucydidean words: the concept of the inevitability of a war between Sparta and Athens (the most distinctive feature of the ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις) was touched upon by the politicians and speakers who spoke before the war but it was never properly examined, nor was it rationally understood by listeners, since both its historical roots and its historical development were in the *aphanes*, i.e. were unapparent to common people.<sup>16</sup> This is the reason why Thucydides built up the demonstration which is known to us under the name of *Pentecontaetia* (1.89-117): he wanted to make his readers rationally conscious of the true historical process which necessarily resulted in the war between Sparta and Athens.

Heraclitus' *logos* was intended to make the reader aware of a hidden *aletheia*, as was Thucydides' Book 1 on the roots of the war of 431 BC. A subtle analogy between Thucydides and Heraclitus is detectable, and one should not be surprised by this. Heraclitus said:

φύσις (...) κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ.<sup>17</sup>

Nature is hidden. (22 B 123 D.-K., transl. slightly revised)

He also observed:

ἄρμονίη ἀφανῆς φανερῆς κρείττων.<sup>18</sup>

The invisible structure is greater than the visible. (22 B 54 D.-K.)

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16 As Rhodes 1987, 160, rightly states: "Thucydides is taking pleasure in showing that he knows better than popular opinion." Cf. Hornblower 2003, 66. In my opinion, there is much of Heraclitus in such an attitude of Thucydides. As Graham 2008, 176, points out, Heraclitus seems to have seen the fact that people are unable to grasp an underlying message as an obstacle to human understanding (22 B 1 D.-K.). I think Thucydides stated quite the same thing by saying ἀφανεστάτην δὲ λόγῳ. Cf. Parmeggiani 2014, 117.

17 Them. Or. 5, p. 69 = Heraclit. 22 B 123 D.-K. On this fragment, see Diano-Serra 1994, 137-138; Huffman 2013, 122; Long 2013, 219; Hülsz 2013, 288.

18 Hippol. 9.9.5 = Heraclit. 22 B 54 D.-K. On this fragment, see Diano-Serra 1994, 137; Huffman 2013, 123 and 141; Long 2013, 219; Dilcher 2013, 265-266 and 270.

Those who aim to fully understand both nature and the laws of change—Heraclitus taught—must look deeper.<sup>19</sup> More importantly, Heraclitus conceived such hidden *aletheia* as an ongoing contrast between interacting opposites, as we read in Diogenes Laertius' summary of Heraclitus' doctrine in 22 A 1 D.-K.:

... πάντα δὲ γίνεσθαι καθ' εἰμαρμένην καὶ διὰ τῆς ἐναντιοτροπῆς ἡρμόσθαι τὰ ὄντα...<sup>20</sup>

... all things happen by fate, and through change of contraries existing things are connected...

To put things in Heraclitus' own words:

εἰδέναι δὲ χρὴ τὸν πόλεμον ἐόντα ξυνόν, καὶ δίκην ἔριν, καὶ γινόμενα πάντα κατ' ἔριν καὶ χρεών.<sup>21</sup>

We must recognize that war is common, strife is justice, and all things happen according to strife and necessity. (22 B 80 D.-K.)

Quite analogously, the process which Thucydides labelled as ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις and said to be ἀφανεστάτη δὲ λόγῳ, consisted of a dynamic interaction or contrast between opposing forces in Greek history: the aggressively emerging Athens on the one side and the reacting Sparta on the other side (τοὺς Ἀθηναίους... μεγάλους γιγνομένους καὶ φόβον παρέχοντας τοῖς Λακεδαιμονίοις). It is noteworthy that Thucydides, conforming to such a view, developed a 'scheme by oppositions' in the whole narrative of Book 1: looking at the distant past in the *Archaeology* (1.2-19), he set the Athenians' luxury in opposition to Spartan simplicity;<sup>22</sup> moving to the history after the Persian Wars, he opposed Athenian hegemony over the sea to Spartan hegemony over the land<sup>23</sup> and also

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19 This is a widespread idea among Presocratics (see, for example, Anaxag. 59 A 20c D.-K.; Democr. 68 B 9 and 17 D.-K.), and therefore should not be considered evidence of an exclusive link between Heraclitus and Thucydides. But see below.

20 D.L. 9.7 = Heraclit. 22 A 1 D.-K. Cf. 22 B 54 D.-K. (above).

21 Origenes *Cels.* 6.42 = Heraclit. 22 B 80 D.-K. Cf. 22 B 53 D.-K. On B 80, see Diano-Serra 1994, 121.

22 Th. 1.6.

23 Th. 1.18.2.

Athens' hegemonic politics over allies to that of the Spartans.<sup>24</sup> Later in the narrative, moving to contemporary matters (1.24 ff.), he made ὀξύτης ('quickness', which stands in opposition to βραδυτής) the national character of the Athenians and βραδυτής ('sluggishness', which stands in opposition to ὀξύτης) the national character of the Spartans.<sup>25</sup>

All Greek history, in Thucydides' view, was ultimately focused on the contemporary opposition between Athens and Sparta. And the reader of Book 1 is meant to look at the past as a whole as a preparation for the contemporary war and at the coming conflict between Athens and Sparta as an ultimate duel between two 'heroes', whose nature, identity and practice are reciprocally opposing.

Sparta and Athens therefore seem to work, in Thucydides' view of Greek history and particularly that of the fifth century BC, in the same manner as the opposites in Heraclitus' theory of change and development. They are like two reagents in the very same chemical compound: when 'mixed together', Sparta and Athens produce war by necessity (ἀναγκάσαι ἐς τὸ πολεμεῖν). This too conforms to Heraclitus' scheme, for it was Heraclitus who—as we have already seen—theorised *ananke* as the real force which persistently works in the *aphanes* and leads to things being as they are.<sup>26</sup>

Taking all this into consideration, we should perhaps not be surprised by Thucydides' abstract definition of the war between Sparta and Athens as *kinesis*:

κίνησις γὰρ αὕτη μεγίστη δὴ τοῖς Ἕλλησιν ἐγένετο καὶ μέρει τινὶ τῶν βαρβάρων, ὡς δὲ εἰπεῖν καὶ ἐπὶ πλείστον ἀνθρώπων.<sup>27</sup>

For this was the greatest movement that had ever stirred the Hellenes, extending also to some of the Barbarians, one might say even to a very large part of mankind. (1.1.2, trans. Forster Smith)

The war of 431 BC was the κίνησις μεγίστη (i.e. far more intense and far wider than all previous *kineseis* in Greek history), according to Thucydides. And this very war was generated by *ananke*, as we have seen in 1.23.4-6. Both concepts of *kinesis* ('change' resulting by *ananke*) and *ananke* ('necessity' generating *kinesis*) are at the core of Heraclitus' philosophical theory.<sup>28</sup> And one should

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24 Th. 1.19.

25 See especially the Corinthians' speech at the Congress of Sparta in 432 BC: Th. 1.68-71.

26 Cf. Heraclit. 22 A 1 D.-K. (καθ' εἰμαρμένην), 22 B 80 D.-K. (κατὰ χρεῶν) and *passim*.

27 Th. 1.1.2.

28 See Heraclit. 22 A 1 D.-K. and 22 B 80 D.-K. quoted above.



notice that the verb which, in Heraclitus' theory, means 'to change' (γίνεσθαι) is at the very roots of the Thucydidean ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις in 1.23.6: τοὺς Ἀθηναίους...μεγάλους γιγνομένους. Here the present participle is highly significant: the growth of Athens is depicted as an ongoing process, without any apparent starting point.<sup>29</sup> The overall message is thus clear: the *kinesis* of the war of 431 BC resulted from the opposition between Athens and Sparta in the years before, which was itself a *kinesis*; within this process, the growth of Athens was also a *kinesis*, an ongoing, dynamic process that no one was responsible for and nothing could stop, until Athens itself collapsed. All this was embraced by Thucydides with only one definition: *kinesis megiste*. So the philosophy of history meets tragedy.<sup>30</sup>

## 2 Methodology

Let's now examine what Thucydides says about his methodology of research into the facts:

τὰ δ' ἔργα τῶν πραχθέντων ἐν τῷ πολέμῳ οὐκ ἐκ τοῦ παρατυχόντος πυνθανόμενος ἤξιωσα γράφειν, οὐδ' ὡς ἐμοὶ ἐδόκει, ἀλλ' οἷς τε αὐτὸς παρήν καὶ παρὰ τῶν ἄλλων ὅσον δυνατὸν ἀκριβεῖα περὶ ἐκάστου ἐπεξεληθῶν.<sup>31</sup>

As to the facts of the occurrences of the war, I have thought it my duty to give them, not inquiring by chance nor as seemed to me probable, but only after investigating with the greatest possible accuracy each detail, in the case both of the events in which I myself participated and of those regarding which I got my information from others.<sup>32</sup> (1.22.2, trans. Forster Smith, modified.)

29 Again (cf. n. 6 above), the issue of responsibility is cut off.

30 As we see, one should not conceive Thucydides' *kinesis megiste* as referring only to the war itself and the suffering it implied (e.g. Price 2001, 207 ff., 361) or to preparatives before conflict (i.e. παρασκευή of both Athens and Sparta, and ξύστασις of the other Greeks: e.g. Hammond 1952, 130-133; Tsakmakis 1995, 30-32). On this problem, see also Hornblower 2003, 6. *Kinesis* is more than 'upheaval' or 'disturbance' (nor does it mean only 'mobilisation' of men or other resources for war, as maintained by Rusten 2015). It is 'movement' as 'change', with all the dramatic consequences that such a concept implies. See also Parmeggiani 2003, 279 n. 90.

31 Th. 1.22.2.

32 On the meaning of ἐκ τοῦ παρατυχόντος, see Egermann 1972, 586 ff.

Thucydides claimed that his inquiry rested on direct investigation and consisted of a critical approach to selected information. But this is not all. Thucydides wanted to check *both* what his informants saw with their eyes and what he himself saw with his own eyes (οἷς τε αὐτὸς παρήν καὶ παρὰ τῶν ἄλλων ὅσον δυνατὸν ἀκριβεῖα περὶ ἐκάστου ἐπεξεληθῶν): in other words, he also cross-checked facts for which he had first-hand evidence.<sup>33</sup> Far from celebrating the uncontested superiority of autopsy, Thucydides proved to be sceptical about *opsis* as an independent means for gaining truth (*aletheia*).

We should link this statement in 1.22.2 with that in 1.10, where Thucydides advised his reader on the risks of making inferences from *opsis* alone:

καὶ ὅτι μὲν Μυκῆναι μικρὸν ἦν, ἢ εἴ τι τῶν τότε πόλισμα νῦν μὴ ἀξιόχρεων δοκεῖ εἶναι, οὐκ ἀκριβεῖ ἂν τις σημείω χρώμενος ἀπιστοίη μὴ γενέσθαι τὸν στόλον τοσοῦτον ὅσον οἷ τε ποιηταὶ εἰρήκασι καὶ ὁ λόγος κατέχει. . . Ἀθηναίων δὲ τὸ αὐτὸ τοῦτο παθόντων διπλασίαν ἂν τὴν δύναμιν εἰκάζεσθαι ἀπὸ τῆς φανεράς ὄψεως τῆς πόλεως ἢ ἔστιν. οὐκ οὐκ ἀπιστεῖν εἰκός, οὐδὲ τὰς ὄψεις τῶν πόλεων μᾶλλον σκοπεῖν ἢ τὰς δυνάμεις. . .<sup>34</sup>

And because Mycenae was only a small place, or if any particular town of that time seems now to be insignificant, it would not be right for me to treat this as an exact piece of evidence and refuse to believe that the expedition against Troy was as great as the poets have asserted and as tradition still maintains. . . If Athens should suffer the same fate (sc. of Sparta), its power would, I think, from what appeared of the city's ruins, be conjectured double what it is. The reasonable course, therefore, is not to be incredulous or to regard the appearance of cities rather than their power. . . (Trans. Forster Smith)

More generally, Thucydides' critical attitude to *opsis* appears to be rooted in his awareness of truth as something which is naturally *aphanes* and, as such, should be detected by means of a careful use of all senses as instruments (*opsis* included). Anyone searching for truth should not accept evidence as it is, but should critically examine it.

Thucydides' message is not so far from—it is indeed very close to—that of Heraclitus who, besides claiming the superiority of *opsis* over *akoe* (as is

33 See especially Schepens 1980, 113ff.

34 Th. 1.10.1-3. On this passage, see Vattuone 2007, 150, and in general, 149 ff., on Thucydides' critical approach to *opsis*.

recalled by Polybius in his polemic against Timaeus: 22 B 101a D.-K.<sup>35</sup>), also observed in 22 B 107 D.-K.:

κακοὶ μάρτυρες ἀνθρώποισιν ὀφθαλμοὶ καὶ ὠτα βαρβάρους ψυχὰς ἐχόντων.<sup>36</sup>

Poor witnesses for men are the eyes and ears of those who have barbarian souls.

Men who have ‘barbarian souls’—Sextus Empiricus explains—are those who, while using perception, are not provided with, or do not make any use of, reason.<sup>37</sup>

*Aletheia* cannot be discovered by the senses alone, i.e. without the use of reason, as we read in 22 B 34 D.-K.:

ἄξύνετοι ἀκούσαντες κωφοῖσιν εἰκόασι· φάτις αὐτοῖσιν μαρτυρεῖ παρεόντας ἀπεῖναι.<sup>38</sup>

Having heard without comprehension they are like the deaf; this saying bears witness to them: present they are absent.

As a consequence, the inquirer must use both *opsis* and *akoe* by putting them *simultaneously* under the control of reason, as is perhaps suggested by 22 B 55 D.-K.:

ὄσων ὄψις ἀκοή μάθησις, ταῦτα ἐγὼ προτιμέω.<sup>39</sup>

The things of which there is sight, hearing, experience, I prefer.

The inquirer must be wary of his initial perception and should therefore take due caution in reasoning—thus also in selecting information—while inquiring into the most important things:

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35 Plb. 12.27, 1.

36 S.E. *M.* 7.126 = Heraclit. 22 B 107 D.-K. On this fragment, see Graham 2008, 176; Huffman 2013, 123; Hülsz 2013, 292.

37 S.E. *M.* 7.126 = Heraclit. 22 A 16 D.-K: ὅπερ ἴσον ἦν τῷ ‘βαρβάρων ἐστὶ ψυχῶν ταῖς ἀλόγοις αἰσθήσεσι πιστεύειν’.

38 Clem.Al. *Strom.* 5.115,3 = Heraclit. 22 B 34 D.-K. See Graham 2008, 176.

39 Hippol. 9.9.5 = Heraclit. 22 B 55 D.-K. See Graham 2008, 176. Both the content of the fragment and the absence of conjunctions in ὄψις ἀκοή μάθησις, in my opinion, suggest a simultaneous use of senses as instruments for research.

μη εἰκῆ περι τῶν μεγίστων συμβαλλώμεθα.<sup>40</sup>

Let us not reason casually about the most important matters. (22 B 47 D.-K.)

And this is reminiscent of Thucydides' own advice in 1.22.2:

... οὐκ ἐκ τοῦ παρατυχόντος πυθθανόμενος ἤξιωσα γράφειν, οὐδ' ὡς ἐμοὶ ἐδόκει, ...<sup>41</sup>

... I have thought it my duty to give them, not inquiring by chance nor as seemed to me probable, ...

Heraclitus' polemic against the senses, and the information they provide, is obviously linked with his polemic against *phanera* (22 B 54 D.-K., see above). Not surprisingly, such a position gives rise to objections against conventional wisdom, as represented by rhetoricians (22 B 81 D.-K.), poets and mythographers. We read in 22 A 23 D.-K., a quotation from Polybius:

οὐκ ἂν ἔτι πρέπον εἴη ποιηταῖς καὶ μυθογράφοις χρῆσθαι μάρτυσι περι τῶν ἀγνοουμένων, ὅπερ οἱ πρό ἡμῶν περι τῶν πλείστων, ἀπίστους ἀμφισβητουμένων παρεχόμενοι βεβαιωτὰς κατὰ τὸν Ἡράκλειτον.<sup>42</sup>

It would no longer be fitting to appeal to poets and mythologists as witnesses for what we do not know, which our predecessors did for most things, thus taking unreliable sources as authorities for controversial questions, according to Heraclitus.

We also read in 22 B 40 D.-K.:

πολυμαθὴ νόον ἔχειν οὐ διδάσκει. Ἡσίοδον γὰρ ἂν ἐδίδαξε καὶ Πυθαγόρην, αὐτίς τε Ξενοφάνεά τε καὶ Ἑκαταῖον.<sup>43</sup>

Learning many things does not teach understanding. Else it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, as well as Xenophanes and Hecataeus.

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40 D.L. 9.73 = Heraclit. 22 B 47 D.-K.

41 Th. 1.22.2.

42 Plb. 4.40 = Heraclit. 22 A 23 D.-K.

43 D.L. 9.1 = Heraclit. 22 B 40 D.-K. On this fragment, see Diano-Serra 1994, 172; Graham 2008, 176-177, 181.

In Heraclitus' view, Homer was a victim of *apate* ('deception') because, like ordinary people, he only paid heed to *phanera* and not to *aphanes*:

ἐξαπάτηνται, φησίν, οἱ ἄνθρωποι πρὸς τὴν γνῶσιν τῶν φανερῶν παραπλησίως Ὀμήρω, ὃς ἐγένετο τῶν Ἑλλήνων σοφώτερος πάντων. ἐκείνόν τε γὰρ παίδες φθειράς κατακτείνοντες ἐξηπάτησαν εἰπόντες· ὅσα εἶδομεν καὶ ἐλάβομεν, ταῦτα ἀπολείπομεν, ὅσα δὲ οὔτε εἶδομεν καὶ οὔτ' ἐλάβομεν, ταῦτα φέρομεν.<sup>44</sup>

Men are deceived in the knowledge of appearances like Homer, who was considered the wisest of all Greeks. For children who had killed some lice deceived him with a riddle: What we saw and caught, we leave; what we did not see and catch, we carry with us. (22 B 56 D.-K.)

Moreover, we read in 22 B 104 D.-K.:

τίς γὰρ αὐτῶν νόος ἢ φρήν; δῆμων ἀοιδοῖσι πείθονται καὶ διδασκάλῳ χρείωνται ὀμίλῳ οὐκ εἰδότες ὅτι οἱ πολλοὶ κακοί, ὀλίγοι δὲ ἀγαθοί.<sup>45</sup>

What intelligence or understanding do they have? They follow popular bards and treat the crowd as their instructor, not realizing that the many are base, while the few are noble.

Criticism towards poets is obviously also found in philosophers other than Heraclitus.<sup>46</sup> One should remember that polemizing with others was expedient to self-definition and, as such, it was common practice among ancient philosophers, as well as ancient historians, since the time of Hecataeus.<sup>47</sup> Yet we see Heraclitus engaging in polemic with almost everyone (not only poets but also rhetors, philosophers and historians: A 23, B 40, 56 and 81 D.-K.) and, at the same time, tackling issues as performance and audience, thus also stigmatising the uncritical way in which ordinary people passively accept both common knowledge and poetic *vulgata* (B 104 D.-K.). The tone of such multi-criticism unmistakably recalls that of Thucydides in 1.20-22, who criticizes popular opinions as well as the way both poets and logographers (i.e. writers of poems

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44 Hippol. 9.9.6 = Heraclit. 22 B 56 D.-K. On this fragment, see Diano-Serra 1994, 172-173; Dilcher 2013, 266 ff.

45 Procl. *In Alc.* 1.117 = Heraclit. 22 B 104 D.-K. On this fragment, see Diano-Serra 1994, 169-170.

46 See, for example, Xenoph. 21 B 11 and 12 D.-K.

47 See especially Marincola 1997, 218-221; Thomas 2000, 218-219; Wękowski 2004; Corcella 2006, 53.

and writers of prose respectively) deal with tradition: they do not criticize the information they have, but prefer to rely on τὰ ἐτοῖμα (i.e. information which is immediately available) for their aim is not to search for the truth, but to seduce their audience by means of an appealing performance:

οὕτως ἀταλαίπωρος τοῖς πολλοῖς ἢ ζήτησις τῆς ἀληθείας, καὶ ἐπὶ τὰ ἐτοῖμα μάλλον τρέπονται. ἐκ δὲ τῶν εἰρημένων τεκμηρίων ὅμως τοιαῦτα ἂν τις νομίζων μάλιστα ἃ διήλθον οὐχ ἄμαρτάνοι, καὶ οὔτε ὡς ποιηταὶ ὑμνήκασιν περὶ αὐτῶν ἐπὶ τὸ μείζον κοσμοῦντες μάλλον πιστεύων, οὔτε ὡς λογογράφοι ξυνέθεσαν ἐπὶ τὸ προσαγωγότερον τῇ ἀκροάσει ἢ ἀληθέστερον, ὄντα ἀνεξέλεγκτα καὶ τὰ πολλὰ ὑπὸ χρόνου αὐτῶν ἀπίστως ἐπὶ τὸ μυθῶδες ἐκνευικηκότα, ἠύρησθαι δὲ ἡγησάμενος ἐκ τῶν ἐπιφανεστάτων σημείων ὡς παλαιὰ εἶναι ἀποχρώντως . . . ἐπιπόνως δὲ ἠύρισκετο, . . . καὶ ἐς μὲν ἀκρόασιν ἴσως τὸ μὴ μυθῶδες αὐτῶν ἀτερπέστερον φανεῖται· ὅσοι δὲ βουλῆσονται τῶν τε γενομένων τὸ σαφές σκοπεῖν καὶ τῶν μελλόντων ποτὲ αὐθις κατὰ τὸ ἀνθρώπινον τοιοῦτων καὶ παραπλησίων ἔσεσθαι, ὠφέλιμα κρίνειν αὐτὰ ἀρκούντως ἔξει. κτῆμά τε ἐς αἰεὶ μάλλον ἢ ἀγώνισμα ἐς τὸ παραχρήμα ἀκούειν ζύγκειται.<sup>48</sup>

So averse to taking pains are most men in the search for the truth, and so prone are they to turn to what lies ready at hand. Still, from the evidence that has been given, no one would err who should hold the view that the state of affairs in antiquity was pretty nearly such as I have described it, not giving greater credence to the accounts, on the one hand, which the poets have put into song, adorning and amplifying their theme, and, on the other, which the prose writers have composed with a view rather of pleasing the ear than of telling the truth, since the stories they tell have not been tested and most of them have from lapse of time won their way into the region of the fabulous so as to be incredible . . . And the endeavour to ascertain these facts was a laborious task, . . . And it may well be that the absence of the fabulous from my narrative will seem less pleasing to ear; but whoever shall wish to have a clear view both of the events which have happened and of those which will some day happen again—in the same or similar way, because of the human nature—for these to adjudge my history profitable will be enough for me. And, indeed, it has been composed, not as a prize-essay to be heard for the moment, but as a possession for all time.<sup>49</sup> (Trans. Forster Smith, modified)

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48 Th. 1.20.3-22.4.

49 On the meaning of ὄντα ἀνεξέλεγκτα, see Parmeggiani 2003.

One may say that like Heraclitus, Thucydides too criticized the conventional wisdom because it neglected *aphanes* (the truth which is detectable only by means of painstaking research) and preferred *phanera* (what is immediately accessible to the senses and therefore simple to find) and thereby sacrificed truth for spectacular performance. The *σαφές σκοπεῖν* which Thucydides aimed at, a detailed representation of the facts as they really happened, was indeed the result of a critical approach to evidence: Thucydides wanted to provide his reader with a ‘new sight’ which, replacing the older one, brought the *aphanes*—i.e. what is unapparent to common people—to light.

### 3 Conclusion

Our knowledge of Presocratic philosophy is limited by fragmentary evidence. From the little we have, it is clear that issues as the process of discovery, the conception of truth as something unapparent, the polemic with tradition and so on, were not exclusive to Heraclitus. Thucydides, by presenting himself as a kind of *mantis* whose knowledge, covering both the past and the future (1.22.4), showed the *aphanes*, was certainly in good company with more than one philosopher. Still, the connections we have found with Heraclitus seem to be rather peculiar, involving crucial points of Thucydides’ theory, both his approach to aetiology and his historical method of research. One may therefore conclude that Thucydides was well aware of ancient philosophical thought—of Heraclitus especially—and that he intentionally conveyed some of its patterns to build up his own thought. This should not surprise us. As well as being a politician and a general, Thucydides was, first and foremost, a thinker. In his time, professional historians did not exist and historiography as a *genos* had yet to be defined—this happened in the fourth century BC, to be precise, with a strong contribution from Thucydides himself.

The philosophical overtones in Thucydides’ narrative were easily detectable by contemporary readers: they provided Thucydides’ arguments with an ‘archaic flavour’, so that the reader felt as if he was being initiated to an authentic *sophia*.<sup>50</sup> Thucydides seems to have introduced himself in a similar way as one would expect from a philosopher. Besides the rhetoric of self-presentation and self-definition, Thucydides *was* indeed a philosopher: he conceived his

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50 The reader of Thucydides was reminded of the ancient *sophia* of the Presocratic thinkers (hence I say ‘archaic flavour’). Obviously this involves also style and choice of words. Thucydides uses a very complex style, which was sometimes judged by ancient critics to be not less cryptic than Heraclitus’ style (see also below).

own political science as a hidden *sophia* which showed the invisible forces that, by reciprocal interaction, shaped the historical development.

One may think that Heraclitus, however 'obscure' he may have been, was not so obscure that he could not be understood by Thucydides, who was himself to be remembered by later critics as 'obscure' for his complex style.<sup>51</sup> Nor were Heraclitus' teachings to be forgotten by later historians, as some of Polybius' quotations demonstrate.<sup>52</sup> At the very least, the links we have detected between Heraclitus and Thucydides allow us to reflect upon the enduring contribution which the ancient philosophers, and the so called *physiologoi* among them, still after the time of Hecataeus and Herodotus, may have given to the foundation of both Greek historiographical genre and Greek historiographical thought.<sup>53</sup>

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51 See, for example, D.H. *Th.* 46, where a passage from Thucydides' text is said to be more obscure than Heraclitus' dark sayings.

52 Plb. 4.40 (Heraclit. 22 A 23 D.-K.); 12.27.1 (Heraclit. 22 B 101a D.-K.). See above.

53 I thank Walter Lapini and the anonymous readers of *Mnemosyne* for their helpful suggestions.



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