

## WHAT DOES THUCYDIDES CLAIM FOR HIS SPEECHES?

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THE CENTRAL TEXT (1.22.1–2) has been minutely analysed. My excuse for following such a well-beaten track is partly that many of the analyses and interpretations seem to me more obscure than the text itself: partly that, in seeing our way through some of these, certain points emerge that suggest—more or less unequivocally, as I claim—one particular interpretation.

Καὶ ὅσα μὲν λόγῳ εἶπον ἕκαστοι ἢ μέλλοντες πολεμήσειν ἢ ἐν αὐτῷ ἤδη ὄντες, χαλεπὸν τὴν ἀκρίβειαν αὐτὴν τῶν λεχθέντων διαμνημονεῦσαι ἢν ἐμοὶ τε ὦν αὐτὸς ἤκουσα καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοθεν ποθεν ἐμοὶ ἀπαγγέλλουσιν· ὡς δ' ἂν ἐδόκουν ἐμοὶ ἕκαστοι περὶ τῶν αἰεὶ παρόντων τὰ δέοντα μάλιστα εἰπεῖν, ἐχομένῳ ὅτι ἐγγύτατα τῆς ξυμπάσης γνώμης τῶν ἀληθῶς λεχθέντων, οὕτως εἴρηται. τὰ δ' ἔργα τῶν πραχθέντων ἐν τῷ πολέμῳ οὐκ ἐκ τοῦ παρατυχόντος πυνθανόμενος ἤξιωσα γράφειν, οὐδ' ὡς ἐμοὶ ἐδόκει, ἀλλ' οἷς τε αὐτὸς παρῆν καὶ παρὰ τῶν ἄλλων ὅσον δυνατόν ἀκριβεῖα περὶ ἐκάστου ἐπεξελθών.

To begin with the most obvious point: the general context and structure of the passage themselves make a strong *prima facie* case for a certain kind of sense. Clearly he is trying to say throughout “I have been as accurate as I can:” this is reinforced in 22.3–4, in which he speaks of the considerable labour involved and disclaims any interest in romance or myth (*μυθῶδες*, 22.4). He has something to say, to this general effect, about (1) the speeches on the one hand (*ὅσα μὲν λόγῳ εἶπον*), and something else to say about (2) the deeds on the other (*τὰ δ' ἔργα*). He begins (1) by remarking that it was hard for him and others to remember exactly what was said: so his principle has been—and now follows *ὡς δ' ἂν . . . μάλιστα εἰπεῖν . . .* What would the reader expect here? What should we insert, if the crucial passage was missing from the mss? He continues, after this passage, in the same vein, with a clause that must mean something like “keeping as close as possible to the whole intent of what was actually said.” There is nothing (that bears any relation to the Greek) that we can insert in the middle except words to the effect of “my principle has been to put down what each of them, in my judgement, would most likely have said.” *Prima facie*, then, any translation of the crucial passage which saddles Thucydides with the claim to have written what the speakers *ought to* or *should* have said would appear ludicrous. Essentially the paraphrase would be: “I want to be as accurate as I can, and to stick as closely as possible to what was actually said: and so I have put down what ought to have been said.” Anyone who believes that Thucydides wrote to that effect, one is tempted to say, will believe anything of him.

Some scholars nevertheless seem happy to accept a translation which preserves this contradiction. Thus in Finley's introduction to a translation of Thucydides we read:<sup>1</sup>

... so my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation.

There is no way to get round the incompatibility of the two parts of that statement. If all speakers said what, in Thucydides' opinion, the situation called for, the remark becomes meaningless. But if they did not always say what was called for, then, insofar as Thucydides attributed such sentiments to them, he could not have been 'keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words used'.

Just so: and that means the translation must be wrong.

Other translations attempt compatibility by rendering the *ὡς δ' αὖν* clause (as the above does not) in a way which will square it with the *ἐχομένῳ* clause. De Ste. Croix, perhaps their most lucid representative, gives "... for the most part what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions" (from Crawley's translation), "what in my opinion the situation called for," and "what in my opinion was most appropriate in the situation" for (part of) the latter;<sup>2</sup> and takes *τῆς ξυμπάσης γνώμης* in the (in my view, too narrow) sense of "main thesis."<sup>3</sup> It is not clear, in fact, that this does achieve compatibility: de Ste. Croix says that "... what seemed to Thucydides the most appropriate sentiments on a given occasion (*ta deonta*) might be very different from those which would have seemed appropriate to most people—including the actual speaker and his audience."<sup>4</sup> But in that case even the "main thesis" of the speaker might be, in Thucydides' eyes, inappropriate; and the conflict remains. The only way of saving this view would be to take *δέοντα* as "appropriate (*sc.* to somebody putting forward a particular thesis)."<sup>5</sup> In any case, it is not clear how the idea of "what was, in my opinion, appropriate" is supposed to emerge from the Greek. *ἐδόκουν ἐμοὶ* has no syntactical connection with *τὰ δέοντα*: its connections are with *ἐκαστοι* and *εἰπεῖν*. The phrase must mean "As, in my opinion, each of them would have spoken ... ."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>M. I. Finley, in Rex Warner's translation of Thucydides (Harmondsworth 1972) 26. The translation in this passage is however almost identical with Rex Warner's translation of it in the main text (47), though this latter has "... the general sense of the words that were actually used."

<sup>2</sup>G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (London 1972) 8. Cf. D. Proctor, *The Experience of Thucydides* (Warminster 1980) 150 ff.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.*, 10.

<sup>4</sup>*ibid.*, 12.

<sup>5</sup>Brevity has compelled me in this section to do less than full justice to de Ste. Croix' views. I am uncertain about the views of Gomme, which may be similar to my own (see note 8 below), though I doubt it.

Dover gets this right in his translation:

The speeches have been given as I thought each speaker would have said what was required . . .;<sup>6</sup>

but he supports this by an unsatisfactory argument:

By τὰ δέοντα μάλιστα, literally 'what was necessary, more than anything', he cannot mean 'what I, Thucydides, perceive [?perceived?] the situation to have required', because on some occasions two speakers disagree. He must therefore mean the arguments which the speaker needed for the purpose of persuading his hearers, given his (and their) situation, interests and intentions.<sup>7</sup>

But that might well be represented by Dover's own phrase, "what I, Thucydides, perceive the situation to have required." The crucial ambiguity is whether Thucydides tells us (a) what the speaker *ought* to have said, the arguments which he really needed (or would have used if he was sensible, because they were the best arguments): or whether he tells us (b) what it was most *likely* that he actually did say. It makes no difference to this ambiguity whether we mean by "what the speaker ought to have said" (1) "an ideally rational judgement on the situation," or (2) "an ideally effective presentation of a particular case in a particular context." ("The arguments which the speaker needed" simply retains the ambiguity.) In fact it is surely a knock-down argument against (a) that ἐδόκουν is paralleled by ἐδόκει in 22.2, and that the latter cannot possibly mean "seemed the best thing:" it must mean "seemed likely." Nobody believes that in describing what was done, rather than said, Thucydides would have even thought of setting down what he thought the agents ought to have done or "what the situation required" them to do. So the phrase must mean "In the way it seemed to me likely that each of them would speak," the ὡς being picked up by the later οὕτως.<sup>8</sup>

Turning now to τῆς ξυμπάσης γνώμης, we have to distinguish a question about *how much* of whatever Thucydides means by γνώμη he gives us on the one hand, and the *nature* of γνώμη (or what he does actually mean by γνώμη) on the other: though of course these are connected. (a) The first question turns on the meaning of ξυμπάσης here; and despite valiant attempts on all sides, I do not see that it can be definitively settled on purely linguistic grounds. De Ste. Croix relies on uses of ξυμπας to suggest that it "refers to something that can be expressed *in a single sentence*" and "signifies the whole *as distinct from its parts*" (his italics),<sup>9</sup> but to this

<sup>6</sup>K. J. Dover, *Thucydides* (Oxford 1973) 21 (in the series *Greece and Rome*, no. 7).  
<sup>7</sup>*ibid.*, 22.

<sup>8</sup>Gomme (*A Historical Commentary on Thucydides* [Oxford 1945– ] ) may have this argument in mind in his remarks on page 140 (Vol. 1). But parts of his translation—particularly the phrase "would have said what *they had to say*" (my italics)—are ambiguous, and much of his note extremely unclear.

<sup>9</sup>De Ste. Croix 9.

it can be objected that in most of his examples τὸ ξύμπαν stands alone, without qualifying a noun. Dover quotes ἡ ξύμπασα ὁδός (7.80.2) to the same effect: it “denotes a journey with reference to its ultimate destination, as distinct from the separate parts of it.”<sup>10</sup> But there are many cases where Thucydides uses ξύμπας with an accompanying noun quite straightforwardly to mean “the complete amount (number) of such-and-such” (e.g., 6.43.1, ξύμπασιν meaning “taken all together”). Dover’s example is in fact of this kind: in the context, ἡ ξύμπασα ὁδός means “the full length of the road” (i.e. not just the bit of it which the Athenians travelled, but the whole road when completely travelled by somebody going in its natural direction: as one might say that the full length of the M4 from London led to Bristol and points further west, even if a traveller came off it at Heathrow). On balance the evidence from usage is that the sense of ξυμπάσης is more likely to be of this kind: but we need first to look at the other question. (b) A great many scholars (e.g., Andrewes)<sup>11</sup> think that γνώμη must in practice amount to the speaker’s *arguments*: and this, of course, would allow extremist views like that of de Ste. Croix, who thinks that the γνώμη is a “main thesis” that can be very briefly summarised. Dover argues against this only on the *a priori* grounds that too brief a γνώμη (e.g., “Do not massacre the Mytilenians”)<sup>12</sup> would not square with Thucydides’ intention of “keeping as close as possible to it:” “the speaker’s γνώμη occupies some point on a scale between the bare imperative from which the speaker argues and the total sequence of argument which he employs.”<sup>13</sup>

Now most, but not all, of the Thucydidean speeches are (unsurprisingly) designed to generate a certain decision. But (i) even in these a lot is said (and not what we should naturally call “argument”) which can by no means be incorporated into any single “main thesis,” and (ii) there are not a few speeches where the idea of a “main thesis,” or even of “argument,” seems inappropriate (unless these terms are used very loosely). Consider for instance speeches of generals encouraging their men: they have of course various points to make, but their only “thesis” is that the men should fight bravely, not be downhearted, and so on—hardly a “thesis” at all. Again, and even more obviously, what is supposed to be the “thesis” or “arguments” of Pericles’ Funeral Speech? In what single sentence would de Ste. Croix sum up its γνώμη? It seems quite

<sup>10</sup>Dover 22; “. . . as distinct from the separate parts of it” seems to me wrong, if not actually meaningless.

<sup>11</sup>In “The Mytilene Debate: Thucydides 3.36–49,” *Phoenix* 16 (1962) 64–85.

<sup>12</sup>Dover 22.

<sup>13</sup>*ibid.* Dover is bewitched by the idea that “The γνώμη of a speaker is his ‘proposal’ . . .” (*ibid.*). But for reasons given here, not all speeches have a γνώμη in *that* sense: so the sense must be wider.

clear that any idea of a *single* or *overall* thesis, argument, idea, point, or purpose in these speeches is out of place. Any adequate précis of them would have to be a fairly long one. The Funeral Speech has no "general point" in the required sense; and there is not always a "bare imperative for which the speaker argues."

Two conclusions follow. First, γνώμη must mean something wider than "thesis;" and second, τῆς ξυμπάσης γνώμης cannot mean "main thesis" or "whole (as distinct from its parts)," since the parts are often too heterogeneous to be summarised into a single γνώμη. ξυμπάσης must mean "complete" or "total"—that is, something which takes account of each and every part of the whole. The precise meaning of γνώμη is hard to specify. It means, I think, something like "the points made in" or "the ideas behind" the speech (*sententiae*). For Thucydides this may chiefly include *propositions* advanced and argued for, but not only those: γνώμη may also appear in other sorts of speech-acts, such as the issuing of imperatives, promises, verdicts, hopes, and so forth. Nevertheless, γνώμη has its limits: most obviously, perhaps, the speaker's style is not part of it, and we should feel no surprise that Thucydides is unconcerned to reproduce the style.

The taking of ξυμπάσης γνώμης as "main thesis" or "general drift" goes along with a common translation of ἐχομένω, one which either does or might imply that Thucydides claims to *reproduce* the γνώμη: usually by some such phrase as "keeping as closely as possible to." Given this implication, "main thesis" is much more plausible: for Thucydides could not and in fact does not give us *every part* of the γνώμη of every speech (particularly in the briefly-summarised *oratio obliqua* speeches: see below), whereas he could reasonably claim to reproduce a "main thesis." But this implication is not necessary, and gives far too specific a sense to the middle voice of ἔχω, which has the very general meaning of "hold onto," "hang onto," "cling to," or "keep to" (but not necessarily in the sense of "follow"). What Thucydides claims here is not to *give* us all the γνώμη: he claims that what he gives us is consonant with, indeed partly the result of, his keeping all the γνώμη in mind and sticking to it as closely as possible. In every case, that is, he took the complete γνώμη into account and based what he actually made the speakers say on that. Such a procedure is very different from the attempt to summarise a "main thesis," though in brief reportage it may amount to the same thing.

These distinctions are important but fine, and perhaps an example will help to clarify them. Suppose I am trying to write a history of the Second World War and need to put down what Churchill and other British parliamentarians said on this or that occasion. I do not have the *ipsissima verba* (τὴν ἀκριβείαν αὐτὴν τῶν λεχθέντων), but I do have the points they made or ideas they put forward (γνώμης): so that I can put appropriate

words (δέοντα) into their mouths. Now I can (1) make them say (in my own words and style) *everything* that they said: or (2) make them give a sort of summary of what they said, the “main thesis” or “general drift” of the speech. But I can also be selective, and (3) make them say *some* of the things they said, not all of the things: choosing, of course, those things that were in keeping with the whole content of the speech. For instance, if Churchill spoke for an hour on Britain’s military position, it would very likely be far too lengthy if I (1) tried to reproduce every point he made; yet in a wide-ranging speech (and in the oral culture of 5th-century Athens speeches are likely to have been very wide-ranging and lengthy) I could hardly hope (2) to summarise any “main thesis.” So it would be wholly reasonable of me (3) to select some of the points Churchill made, and represent him as making these points in the way which seemed to me most likely and appropriate for him (ἐδόκουν, δέοντα). I might include, for instance, his judgement that the English Channel would protect Britain from invasion and that the British air force would cope adequately with German raids, but exclude a long tirade against Hitler and Mussolini, an attack on his political opponents and predecessors in office, and a spirited appeal to the British people—even though these might have occupied most of the speech. My selected points would need to be consistent with all the other points he made in at least two ways. First, there would have to be nothing in the selected points which conflicted with what he said in any other (unreported) point; and secondly, the selected points would have to be fairly representative, or at least not grossly unrepresentative, of all the points made. In this sense I should stick as closely as possible to the whole or total content.

It is not clear exactly what logical force resides in the participle ἐχομένῳ: but the most natural interpretation is, in any case, that the clause lays down a principle of some kind that guides or moderates the previous clause. Many translators take the force as concessive or adversative: roughly, “I have put down what I thought likely, *but* have tried to stick to . . .” or “. . . *whilst* at the same time trying to stick to . . .” But it is at least possible, and I think it more likely, that Thucydides did not intend any concessions or oppositions here. The clause may mean “*by* (or, *in*) sticking as closely as possible to all the points made.” In other words, where he was uncertain about what was actually said (as he self-confessedly often was), he asked himself the question “What would so-and-so have thought appropriate to say in this situation, bearing in mind that the kinds of considerations he was trying to advance and the various points in his speech were such-and-such?” We have to be clear that this procedure was still in fact based on what was actually said, and not (as I have argued) on what it would have been right for the speakers to say: but based, as it were, at one remove. Thucydides *started* with what was

actually said, so far as he could remember or learn this: that gave him the total content or γνώμη: and in the light of that content he filled in the gaps in his memory and knowledge by attributing appropriate remarks (τὰ δεόντα) to the speakers.

We translate, then along the lines of: "And so far as what various parties said is concerned, on the one hand, either when they were about to make war or when they were already at war, it has been difficult for me to remember accurately everything that was said (of the speeches I myself heard), and equally difficult for the various people who informed me of other speeches: but as it seemed likely to me—keeping as closely as possible to all the points made in what was actually said—that each party would have appropriately spoken about the various situations, so I have written. As to the deeds that were actually performed in the war, on the other hand, I have not thought it proper to write down information received from just anybody, nor what seemed to me likely, but only those events at which I myself was present," etc.

In considering the historicity of Thucydides' reportage of speeches, we have to take into account the point (too briefly made by Dover),<sup>14</sup> obvious enough in itself but commonly overlooked, that ὅσα λόγῳ εἶπον does not refer only to what we call the "set speeches." It means, presumably, what it says; and there are a great many passages in which Thucydides reports what was said without giving it the form of a set speech. The chief criterion here seems to be clarity: and in general, this may mean that a long speech will be reported in *oratio recta*, a short one in *oratio obliqua*. That is not the only criterion: for instance, what the Corcyreans say in 1.28 is reported in *obliqua*, though longer than the speeches of the Athenians and Corinthians reported in *recta* in 1.53. In this case, and perhaps in some others, dramatic appropriateness may play a part: arguably the tense situation in 1.53 called more naturally for direct speech. But however that may be, there is a striking lack of criticism directed against Thucydides' *obliqua* reportage. Nobody (that I know of) seriously complains that the indirect speeches are "unhistorical;" and that is, I suspect, because nobody seriously doubts that Thucydides reports accurately the substance (at least in part) of what was said. Of course it might be maintained that there are special reasons why inaccuracy should afflict the *recta* speeches but not the *obliqua* (for instance, that the former gave much more opportunity for Thucydides' own reflections); but a case would at least have to be made to that effect. *Prima facie* the same criticisms should apply to both, since Thucydides himself does not distinguish in 1.22 between them.

To pursue this a little further: if Thucydides did not report the substance of what was actually said (rather than what ought to have been said, or

<sup>14</sup>Dover 23.

“what the situation called for”) even in the brief *obliqua* passages, then he is guilty of very grave inaccuracy indeed. For the words in the passages, we might reasonably feel, are much more like deeds than are the words of lengthy set speeches: they are themselves facts in a much stronger sense. Either (for instance) the Corcyreans hinted at bringing in Athens as an ally, or they did not (1.28.3): either Nicostratus agreed to a Corcyrean proposal to exchange five of his ships, or there was no such proposal and agreement (3.75.2–3). All such reportage—threats, demands, agreements, suggestions, formal edicts and so on—comes under *ὅσα λόγῳ εἶπον*: and if Thucydides got these wrong by deliberately putting down what he thought the speakers ought to have said (in effect, ought to have done), he can hardly be trusted at all. But nobody, as I say, seriously entertains this view—despite the facts that he must have omitted and abbreviated a great deal, exercised some selectivity, and made no attempt to reproduce the speakers’ individual styles. Why then—one might ask—should these facts be held against him in the *recta* speeches? My suspicion is that we tend to be bewitched by the idea that anything in this format (anything in inverted commas or “quotes,” as it were) must set out to reproduce photographically, rather than to give the general sense. That may be a modern convention, but (like inverted commas themselves) not an ancient one.

Indeed, there is a *reductio ad absurdum* which may fairly be brought to bear against those who translate *τὰ δεόντα* as “what the situation called for” or “what they ought to have said.” If Thucydides actually did this in his brief *obliqua* passages, absurdity would result: for it would produce impossible clashes between the speech-acts and the deeds. A situation might “call for” acceptance when in fact there was rejection, or for agreement when in fact there was discord. In describing (for instance) the Corcyrean suggestions and demands, together with the responses they met with from Epidamnus and Corinth (1.26–28), there is plenty of room for claiming that “the situation called for” *different* speech-acts. Not all of them were reasonable, even in terms of the self-interest of the various parties. Yet they generated deeds: so that a reporter would have to accept the speech-acts (however uncalled-for) along with the deeds. Otherwise there would be such clashes as “The Corinthians said that the Corcyrean proposals were quite reasonable, and that they would submit to arbitration: so they at once despatched an armada against Corcyra.” The same holds, though perhaps a little less obviously, for the set speeches. “What the situation called for” will not always be in line with what actually happened: and since the happenings were often caused by (to a greater or lesser extent) what was said, Thucydides must either have tampered with what happened (to make it fit with a speech containing what X or Y ought to have said) or else reported the speeches essentially



as they were made, so that (unsurprisingly) they were in line with what happened. It might be held that what Thucydides did was to concoct speeches which fitted subsequent happenings: this would get round the objection just made. But that is already to give up the idea of *τὰ δέοντα* as "what was called for."

If this interpretation is correct, what sort of latitude does Thucydides grant himself in terms of his own prescription in 1.22? This is not the same as the question of what latitude he in fact made use of: that question can only be answered by a careful examination of all the actual speeches (*obliqua* as well as *recta*)—something I have not seen done, and which it would in any case be premature to attempt before getting a clearer understanding of what to look for. I am asking here what kinds of moves his self-imposed rules allowed (whether or not he made them). Among these kinds—I do not claim an exhaustive list—are:

1. Reportage in his own style and not in the speaker's.
2. Selecting from a number of speeches actually made.
3. Selecting some of the *γνώμη* (not reproducing it all).
4. Not reporting anything which does not count as *γνώμη*.
5. Adding words to make the *γνώμη* clearer.
6. Abbreviating or expanding (so long as the *γνώμη* is clear).
7. Casting the *γνώμη* (without changing its general force) in terms which might serve his particular purposes: for instance, the "pairing" of remarks in two different speeches (e.g. 1.69 and 144), or even the arrangement into a formal dialogue (5.84–113).

These allowable categories do, I think, cater for most if not all of the objections which have been raised against the "historicity" of the speeches. My case is that they are indeed objections to the photographic, Hansard-like reportage which is one form of "historicity" or accuracy; but not objections to the kind of correct reportage which Thucydides in fact claims.