‘The Society That Separates Its Scholars From Its Keyboard Warriors…’: Tracking Thucydides on Twitter

Neville Morley

1. Introduction

Thucydides has been discussed and invoked as a key ancient authority over the last two centuries, in multiple fields of intellectual activity. In historiography, most obviously, he appears as one of the founders of the discipline, with an especially strong association with the values of truth and objectivity – leading lights of self-consciously critical historiography in the mid-nineteenth century identified him as the one classical writer who had anticipated their own approach, and this view has persisted.[1] In International Relations theory, he has had a still more important role as a founding figure – certainly he is far more regularly cited in contemporary disciplinary debates here than in history – seen as a thinker who sought to move beyond mere chronicles of events in order to understand their underlying dynamics and causes, and to establish normative principles of inter-state relations.[2] He has given his name to the most widely-recognised theory of current global politics, originally applied to US-China relations and now extended to other rivalries, the Thucydides Trap (however arguable that the theory is as an actual representation of Thucydides’ ideas).[3] In war studies and strategic studies, he is likewise identified as effectively a colleague, surprisingly contemporary in his views and approach, offering important accounts of individual battles and establishing general principles of strategy, as well as playing a crucial role in military education and in the commemoration of the war dead.[4]

These readings are clearly based on very different conceptions of Thucydides and different assumptions about the nature and basis of his authoritative status. Some emphasise his historical or political-theoretical methodology and the explicit statements offered in Book 1.20-22 (however these are interpreted), some focus more on his status as eye-witness to events and contemporary reporter, on his expertise and experience in war and (allegedly) politics, and even on claims about

[1] Morley 2014.
[2] Keene 2015; Ruback 2015.
[3] Allison 2017; Jaffe 2017.
[4] Morley 2018, 2021.

his character and the way his biography 'made' him a historian. One thing they have in common is a tendency to neglect much of the text, cherry-picking passages that are most readily assimilated to their specific modern perspective – note the frequent reliance on speeches rather than narrative sections, and the recurrence of a limited set of speeches – and to ignore critical aspects of it, above all its literary and rhetorical nature. Above all, there is the habit of attributing the statements and ideas of his characters to Thucydides himself, not least because, if one is looking for something that resembles a normative political principle in his text, that is for the most part where they can be found. Finally, we can note the way that the existence of contradictory interpretations of Thucydides – is he a theorist of a bipolar world or a multipolar one? a defender of superpower dominance or an advocate of justice and ethics? a determinist or someone whose world-view emphasises chance and contingency? – never seems to put into question the idea that he is a figure of authority whose ideas can help us understand the present. Belief in Thucydides, founded to a great extent on accepting one or other of the established traditions of belief in Thucydides, then motivates the search for examples of his prescience and understanding.

This impression is not confined to academic discussions – or to the attempted popularisation and dissemination of those discussions by the academics concerned, as in the Thucydides Trap.[5] Thucydides appears in a range of other contexts in the modern world, again in the role of authority, sage and visionary: in discussions of politics and democracy (given credit for words that he puts in the mouth of Pericles), in accounts of plague (real and metaphorical), and in dark warnings about the rise of autocracy and war ('exiled Thucydides know', as W.H. Auden's poem *1 September 1939* noted, a theme which has recurred with the renewed popularity of the poem after 9/11 and now the Russian invasion of Ukraine). Thucydides is quoted in video games, on t-shirts, and in newspaper articles; even more than in academic discussions, this involves a limited range of quotations, above all from the funeral oration and the Melian Dialogue, returning time and again to the same basic themes of politics and war; the persistent assumption is that this is a name one might be expected to know and respect, if you want to be taken seriously as a commentator

[5] See for example https://www.belfercenter.org/project/applied-history-project, and especially https://www.belfercenter.org/thucydides-trap/book/wonder-woman, together with https://thesphinxblog.com/2017/06/04/talk-thucydides-to-me/.

on contemporary events – especially if you want to be taken seriously as someone who sees the world as it really is (Friedrich Nietzsche's reading of Thucydides as the anti-Plato and man without illusions has proved widely influential).

All this is both reflected in and reinforced in social media such as Twitter. Despite its apparent triviality, with the idea that its strict character limit is incompatible with any serious thought, over the last ten years such 'microblogging' has become increasingly important as a space where perceptions of antiquity, including its contemporary relevance, are shaped and disseminated.[6] Sometimes this involves interaction between traditional forms of scholarly authority and wider publics – the expectation that academics should publicise their work, not only writing more popular pieces in non-academic publications but also disseminating these and engaging with non-academic readers – and even here we can see the emergence of new discursive styles, debates about the appropriate behaviour and forms of interaction for an academic on Twitter, with which tweeting academics may not be wholly comfortable. Failure to recognise that this is a different sort of space, where academic authority is not necessarily discounted but might certainly be valued differently, and where expectations and norms continue to develop, regularly leads to pile-ons, complaints and accusations.[7] That is to say, academic authority is still recognised in this sphere, at least partially, but there are questions about how it should be used, how those possessing it should behave, and what limits might be set on it, especially as this tends to intersect with issues of hierarchy, exclusion, gender, race and power. Twitter, it is suggested, offers 'an egalitarian format that creates equivalence, real or not', where every opinion is valid; this is not always a comfortable space for experts.[8] The invocation of Thucydides, but still more an insistence on a complex, ambiguous or rhetorical Thucydides, is not always welcome.

But there are also many areas of social media where the academic voice is largely or entirely absent, and authority is constructed in different ways, arguably but not definitively more democratic and less hierarchical – or, at any rate, subject to different kinds of hierarchy and discursive power. This chapter explores Twitter references to and discussions of Thucydides as a case study, that reflects on issues

[6] On anxieties about the ever-reducing amount of text and obsession with 'likes', see Derakhshan 2015.
[7] See e.g. Bateman 2017.
[8] Appleby 2021.

of authority in relation to classical material in multiple ways. Many citations of Thucydides reflect existing assumptions about his authority; invocation of his name and (alleged) ideas gives credibility to claims and statements, as well as potentially lending weight to the poster as someone who possesses such knowledge and expertise. Some users even incorporate this into their own online identity, by using Thucydides' name as part of their own Twitter ID and/or name (e.g. 'General Thucydides', @GeneralThucydides), using an image of him as their own avatar or as a background image, or including a quotation or alleged quotation as part of their Twitter biography. At the same time, the cumulative effect of such citations and discussions shapes the image of Thucydides for those who have little or, most commonly, no prior knowledge of him and his work, which then in turn shapes the reception of future references to him. I seek to explore how Thucydides is used, for what purposes, what this implies about perceptions of him and his authority – and what happens when these discursive spaces encounter, or are invaded, by more traditional forms of academic authority, offering corrections to the 'popular' image.

2. Patterns of Thucydides References

On average, Thucydides is mentioned in tweets about thirty to forty times a day (excluding those where the word occurs in a user's ID or name – which can lead to dramatic increases in the number of search results when one of those users gets into a discussion of argument.[9] This is a trivial amount compared with a topic like #BlackLivesMatter, #StopAsianHate or #TaylorSwift, but comparable to Plato, Aristotle or Herodotus. Typically, at least a quarter of these tweets are quotations or misattributed quotations without any further comment (somewhere between half and a third normally being falsely attributed to Thucydides), and a quarter students discussing their studies or people talking about their reading of the text; the rest are made up of retweets of articles which mention Thucydides (most often relating to the Thucydides Trap), and jokes and discussions of different topics in which Thucydides is alleged to have something relevant to contribute, these latter two categories both

[9] This section is based on the analysis of relevant tweets from the same periods each year (16th-22nd of January, April, July and October, from 2010 to 2021), identified through the Twitter search engine and organised into a series of categories: genuine quote, fake quote, retweet of article, study discussion, topic discussion etc., as well as identifying the specific quotes and references deployed.

implying (or being intended to imply) that the poster has some knowledge of Thucydides and his ideas. These topics are highly various; every day, at least a few people – besides students and those with a professional interest – will attempt to relate Thucydides to contemporary events or issues, but there is little consistency in what events or issues will be considered. As discussed below, certain key events spark off dramatic increases in the invocation of Thucydides and then dominate the conversation for weeks or months, many of which then die away again. However, a few topics do recur, featuring in at least one of the sampled weeks in every year since 2010: US-China relations, sport, finance, the ethnic identity of Macedonia, and the nature of democracy. If the sample had included the second week of November (this was avoided deliberately), it would also have observed an annual wave of Thucydides references, mixing quotes from the funeral oration and those commenting on military duty, related to Veterans Day, ANZAC Day and Armistice Day. But one cannot predict the most likely theme for any other time of year.

The most predictable element is quotation: not just the proportion of tweets in any given week that are quotations, but the dominance of a limited selection of these. Between 2010 and 2017, at least half of all genuine quotations were the line from the funeral oration, 'the secret of happiness is freedom and the secret of freedom is courage'; only from 2018 was this matched by 'the strong do what they want, the weak suffer what they must' from the Melian Dialogue. In third place over this period is the misattributed W.F. Butler quotation, 'the society that separates its scholars from its warriors…', though this became really popular only from 2013.[10] Otherwise the pattern is of a very long tail; there are twelve genuine quotations that feature at least once in the sampled weeks from every year, and three misattributed ones, then another eight genuine and six misattributed ones that appear at least once every three years. The majority of these quotations are presented with no other information, either comment or hashtags.

[10] On this and other fake Thucydides quotations, see Morley 2013.

What lies behind this practice? One significant element is the construction of an online persona as a form of brand management. ‘Social media provides more than just a channel for disseminating personal brand content: it provides the content itself. In fact, it is possible to develop a social media presence without expressing a single original idea, simply by re-posting content created by others’.[11] In the case of ‘social jukebox’ apps and other paid-for means of having an online presence created for you, the result is simply a rolling programme of ‘meaningful quotes’ with no obvious relevance to the account’s interests or business activities; these receive little engagement, except from other automated accounts, and one might seriously wonder whether it’s worth the money. Other users either have paid more for a more bespoke service, or are actively managing their accounts to tweet and retweet relevant content; this can be seen most clearly in the close association of the ‘secret of happiness is freedom…’ quote – usually also pasted into a stock image of people in sports clothing running, jumping or standing on a rocky outcrop looking out across the landscape, sunsets, birds escaping from cages and the like – with individuals and businesses in the field of personal training, meditation, ‘wellness’ and leadership development. The underlying process here is clearly the harvesting of quotation websites for lines tagged with terms like ‘freedom’. Thucydides simply happens to be the author of one such inspirational line, rather than playing any role in its selection or the reception of the sentiment; there is no concern with context (let alone the tension between the original context, a call to arms, and the themes of peace and harmony). Similarly, the Melian Dialogue line seems to be taken from collections of ‘quotes about strength’ without any concern for its original meaning.

Both these lines are commonly found in published collections of quotations; their prevalence on Twitter reflects a general tendency to reduce Thucydides to the funeral oration and the Melian Dialogue, associates him further with ideas of freedom and power, and perhaps introduces his name into unexpected new circles. More striking is the large number of quotes that appear only intermittently, a much larger range than features in any published collection, and still more the proliferation of misattributions; a few of the latter have a relatively long history, but the majority – especially ‘scholars and warriors’ – are creatures of the internet. They have been nurtured by websites that gather content with no concern for quality control (the

[11] Geva, Oestreicher-Singer & Saar-Tsechansky 2019.

majority of which simply ignore requests to remove or relabel misattributed material); by the growth of user-generated content and the drive for engagement (Goodreads, which is treated as authoritative by many users, refuses in the majority of cases to relabel or delete any quotations that have been liked by enough people, and claim that 'While we do have quotes on the site, we consider them to be community-owned content and therefore we have strict rules regarding removing them')[12]; and by Twitter itself, as new misattributions can quickly take hold as they are liked and retweeted by real people as well as bots. The reposting of these fake quotations reinforces the idea that Thucydides wrote them, and hence promotes the idea of him as the sort of author who wrote such things – though at the same time, the majority of these misattributions seem plausible because they conform to the pre-existing image of Thucydides and his areas of expertise.

The most obvious and striking determinant of changes in this regular background of Thucydides reference is external events; things happen that cause a greater than usual number of people to think of Thucydides and his ideas. Some of these events are relatively minor and short-term, but just happen to coincide with one of the sampled weeks (for example, the then Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull making a reference to Thucydides in a speech in January 2016); a full survey of a given year would doubtless identify more short-term bursts of activity. Others, however, reverberate and prompt Thucydides references throughout the year and beyond, and these are easily guessed: the 2014 Russian occupation of Crimea, the Brexit vote and election of Donald Trump in 2016 (both of these persisted for years), and COVID in 2020; the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022 seems overwhelmingly likely to join them. There are three main facets to the response. Firstly, newspaper and magazine articles which mention Thucydides in relation to current events are retweeted or quoted, often with no further comment; for example, a series of pieces on the 'Thucydides Trap', a January 2016 *Atlantic* article on 'Trump and New York values', the July 2017 *Atlantic* piece by Kori Schake on misreadings of Thucydides in the White House, and a February 2022 *New York Times* essay suggesting that Putin's world was defined by Thucydides' 'the strong do what they want'. That is, Twitter amplifies an invocation of Thucydides as some kind

[12] Correspondence on the Goodreads' chat, 25/06/18. This attitude – the idea that the authenticity of quotations may be established by the number of upvotes – can plausibly be compared with the 'market epistemology' discussed by Mirowski 2017.

of authority by a conventional pundit, often offering a very conventional view, rather than adding anything new.

However, there are plenty of examples of the second facet, where Twitter users invoke Thucydides in their own words to support a wide variety of positions. on war, foreign affairs and politics. To offer just a small selection of examples: 'T. predicted over 2500 years ago the future of the Eurozone; he would want out of the EU' (2016); 'T. basically describing what is happening in America' (2017); 'Under no circumstances should young people be exposed to T., or they might understand what's happening here' (2017, on US politics); 'Reading T. with care: essential. Reducing T. to a bumper sticker: recipe for disaster' (2018); 'History is just syndicated T. in perpetual re-runs' (2019). The nature of Thucydides' authority is rarely explained, but taken for granted, perhaps because the user assumes his audience will share this perspective; he is rarely identified as a particular sort of thinker, but simply presented as someone whose views are worth taking seriously. There is a recurrent emphasis on his absolute prescience, the fact that his work perfectly anticipates events 2500 years later – this is a particular theme in discussions of politics, especially in the post-2016 United States, whereas comments on foreign policy tend rather to emphasise that he had correctly identified the universal and unchanging principles of state and/or human behaviour. As with the use of Thucydides as an authority in academic discussions, there is no consensus about how those principles should be understood, or how one should respond to them. To take the most recent and powerful example: the first two months of 2022 saw a dramatic upsurge in references to the Melian Dialogue, but commentators were roughly evenly divided as to whether 'the strong do what they must…' is a true statement about the nature of the world, implying the need for the weak to acquiesce, or a characterisation of the mentality of the powerful, demanding firm resistance.[13] Thucydides' authority is not questioned – just what it is used to support.

Thirdly, there are the tweets that simply quote Thucydides with an appropriate hashtag to link it to current events. Sometimes, the meaning is obvious: '"The strong do what they want…" #BlackLivesMatter' is straightforward to interpret. Sometime it is not; the same quote with the hashtag #Ukraine could be understood in either of

[13] In contrast, the vast majority of tweets citing the Thucydides Trap in this context, mostly treated as a neutral description of the world rather than an idea associated with Thucydides, used it to blame the United States and NATO for the outbreak of hostilities.

the senses just discussed, and one must imagine that either the user thought it would be obvious, or they had no clear intent but felt that Thucydides nevertheless must have something to contribute to the conversation. This does raise the possibility that at least some quotes *without* hashtags, posted during such events, are also intended as interventions in the discussion and interpretation of events – that one might see them as a kind of subtweeting, a comment on current affairs that those in the know will immediately recognise even if the casual reader might fail to grasp. Given his established reputation, mentioning Thucydides without any context is itself a substantive statement.

3. Who Wants To Be Thucydides?

At last count (March 2022) there were nearly two hundred individual Twitter accounts (not all of them active, and some currently suspended) that included some reference to Thucydides in their online identity, not including those who mention him in their biography (quotations, expression of interests) but do not in any way present themselves as Thucydides, and not including the limited number of accounts where the owner is clearly genuinely called Thucydides.[14] Just over fifty of these named him just in their Twitter ID, often with a lengthy number (@Thucydides12345); this is sometimes a sign of a bot or fake account, but can also indicate someone struggling to come up with a unique username; in the one case where the number might be interpreted as having political significance (e.g. the way '18' in the name of the neo-Nazi terrorist organisation Combat 18 represents the first and eighth letters of the alphabet, A and H, meaning Adolf Hitler), the user insisted that this was not the case. Other than suggesting a certain awareness of 'Thucydides' as a memorable name that might not be too common, it's not obvious that there is much to be inferred from this data. However, forty-five accounts include 'Thucydides' in their user name, a field which is more easily modified and where Twitter's requirement for uniqueness does not apply, and over a hundred have it in both their ID and their name. A few of these accounts were set up explicitly to tweet Thucydides' history line by line, or with

[14] Please see the appendix on the way this research was conducted, especially in relation to the use of personal data and the identification of individuals. A project to collect and analyse the data more systematically, to be combined with issuing an invitation to all identified accounts to complete a questionnaire on their knowledge of and attitudes towards Thucydides, is currently under review by a research ethics committee.

the apparent intention of tweeting in the voice of Thucydides (these experiments don't seem to have been followed through); the majority appear to be personal accounts, or set up as such, where the aim is apparently rather self-presentation through association with Thucydides. Some are humourous (variations on @ThucydidesTrapped), some purport to indicate location (e.g. @ThucydidesNYC) and a few incorporate political statements (e.g. @ThucydidesTrump). Just over forty accounts use a picture of Thucydides as their avatar, in the majority of cases an image of the bust that appears on the Wikipedia page and as the top search result on Google, occasionally modified with e.g. the addition of sunglasses. Ten or so include a Thucydides quote, or fake quote (the ubiquitous 'scholars and warriors' line is most common) as part of their biography. Clearly the more ways in which an account has sought to evoke Thucydides, the more likely it us that he has some significance for them, and/or that his authority is in some way being borrowed.

In the absence of a full-scale investigation – the success of which will depend heavily on the willingness of those accounts that are still active to respond to questions – I can at best offer only tentative impressions, based on online exchanges over the years. None of the accounts claimed any great expertise; they had encountered the name of Thucydides on history podcasts, or in reading about international relations ('I wanted to focus on foreign policy and Thucydides is the father of foreign policy'), or in Bob Dylan's autobiography, or articles about the Thucydides Trap. Two emphasised the importance of Realism in their conception of him – 'the strong do what they can…' – while another insisted on the need for the modern world to value philosophy and not forget great thinkers. In one case, it was clearly the association of Thucydides with opposition to compulsory vaccination during the COVID crisis that inspired the choice, combined with the quotation 'The secret of happiness is freedom'.

An alternative approach would be to analyse systematically the tweets of these accounts, or at any rate a sample of the most active ones, to seek to identify whether there are any consistent patterns. At this point in the research, the findings are again provisional and speculative. Where geographical location is indicated by subject matter, especially when this seems to be corroborated by the account's claimed location, the clear impression is that many of these accounts are US-based. Some, as one might expect, are especially interested in foreign affairs and war, though I have seen no evidence so far that many of these accounts have a direct

connection to military service, something which I must admit I had thought I would encounter. Several are heavily engaged in online debates about politics, but for the moment I detect no obvious patterns, if only because the sample size is so small: there are several unmistakable partisans of Donald Trump, but also at least one avowed liberal (in US terms) and a supporter of Jeremy Corbyn.

More systematic research may yield more significant results – but it is nevertheless still interesting to eliminate, or at any rate question, hypotheses such as the idea that Thucydides people might show a consistent tendency to adopt right-wing positions or insist on a hard-nosed Melian Dialogue Realism. For those who have responded to casual questions, Thucydides clearly is/was a relevant part of their online self-presentation and expression of values – though with none of the passion or vehemence sometimes encountered in those who identify strongly with particular sentiments attributed to Thucydides (see the next section). Is there a sense in which they are also borrowing his authority to support their own views? Certainly their names and/or avatars are sometimes perceived as relevant by people disagreeing with them, with the suggestion that their ideas or quality of argument are not worthy of Thucydides. For the moment, however, the overall impression is that the adoption of Thucydides as part of an online persona is a personal preference rather than a clear assertion of group membership or values, and that it reflects broader conceptions of him rather than making a distinct contribution.

4. Correcting Thucydiocies

In July 2015, the Thucydides Bot account (@Thucydiocy) was born, with the biography: 'Historian, political theorist, philosopher, whatever. Stickler for accuracy. Did NOT say that thing you think I said'. The account has since tweeted over 8,500 times and amassed 1700 followers – somewhat surprisingly, given that the vast majority of those tweets are very similar: it corrects misattributed Thucydides quotes, and since just a couple of examples make up the vast majority of such misattributed quotes, it offers the same corrections time and again.[15] My original aim in creating this account was twofold: to dissuade other accounts from repeating such

[15] This relentless seriousness of purpose is relieved only on rare occasions, most obviously at Christmas, when for the last few years the account has tweeted out The Twelve Days of Thucydides as a commentary on patterns of Thucydides references over the previous twelve months.

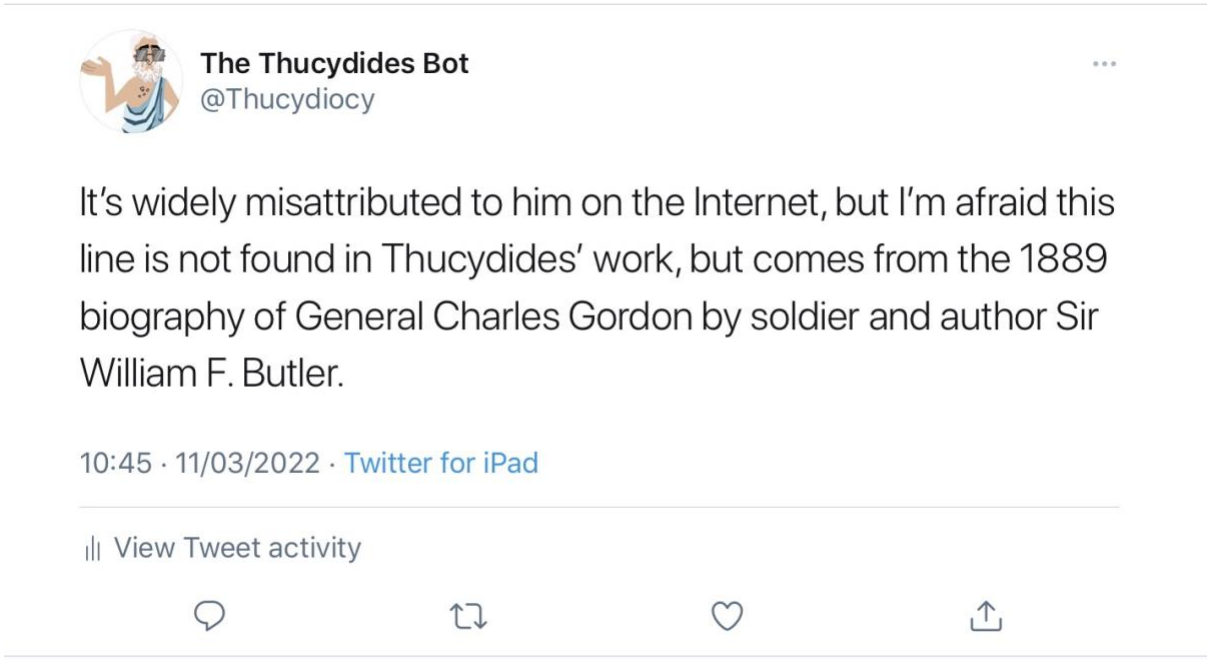
misattributions, in the forlorn hope of driving them off the internet, and to ensure that misattributions are essectively labelled as such, so that other readers are made aware that the quotation is not genuine even if the original account ignores or rejects corrections. This latter aim is especially relevant here because many of these accounts are bots or social jukebox accounts which take every response as evidence of engagement regardless of its nature or intention; they pay no attention to attempts at correction and, although many of their followers are also bot accounts, their sometimes high numbers of followers and retweets might persuade the Twitter algorithms to give them greater prominence in people's feeds.

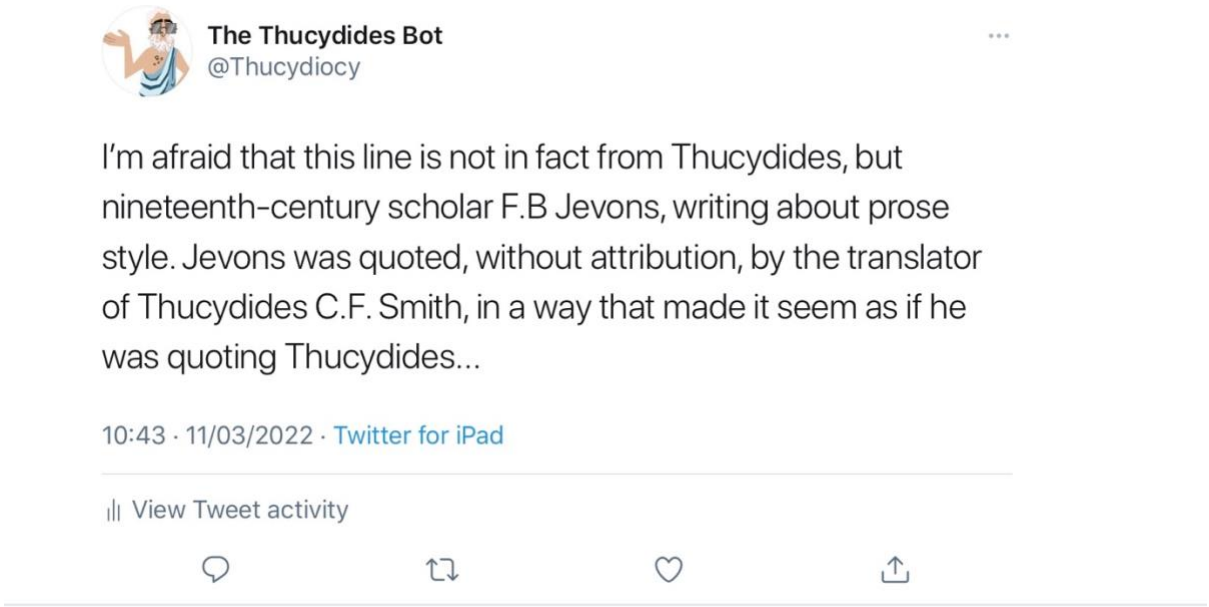
Over time, as a result of the experience of engaging with other Twitter users about the authenticity of 'Thucydides' quotations and of reading more widely in the scholarly literature on internet misinformation (that is: false information that is shared in good faith, rather than deliberately disseminated disinformation), I have justifed the time spent every week on this activity through two additional aims. Firstly, these interactions provide a certain amount of further evidence for popular perceptions of Thucydides (including early warning of the appearance of new misattributions) and, perhaps more importantly, personal engagement with him; at least for some people, it genuinely matters that a quotation is associated with this specific author. Secondly, perhaps optimistically, I hope to enhance the level of critical and historical understanding on Twitter through opening up discussions of the problems of misattribution and the dynamics of mis- and dis-information on social media.[16] In recent years, especially in the aftermath of the 2016 Brexit vote and US election which gave rise to widespread anxieties about 'fake news', there has been extensive research into the heuristics of credibility and trust of information in digital networked environments, the question of why people believe and disseminate false information on social media and how (and how far) they can be persuaded to change their minds.[17] The Thucydiocy Bot is a means, within a very limited field, of attempting to motivate other users to evaluate information and sources of information, in part by highlighting the heuristics they may have been employing that led them to accept an inauthentic quote as genuine 'Thucydides'; it seeks to promote 'epistemic vigilance' more generally through concrete examples rather than vague exhortations.[18]

[16] See Wu et al. 2019; Ecker et al 2022.
[17] Excellent summary of the literature in Metzger & Flanagin 2013.
[18] On 'epistemic vigilance' see Sperber et al. 2010.

The account was originally conceived as a genuine bot, that would perform the task of correcting different misattributions automatically, inspired by examples such as @hegeltweets that engage with specific content (e.g. mentions of Hegel) by retweeting, liking or responding. This task proved well beyond my coding abilities and supply of time to develop them, so the process is automated only to the extent that I have a permanent column within Tweetdeck searching for Thucydides references and a set of pre-written responses to all known misattributions that can simply be posted into reply tweets. The retention of 'Bot' in the name was a deliberate decision, on the basis that people might be less alarmed or offended at a strange account muscling into their conversations if it appeared at first glance to be an automated response. Further, I was concerned that the immediate invocation of academic authority through using my personal account might set up precisely the wrong dynamic – the aim is to make the (entirely true) point that evaluating the authenticity of a quotation is generally not a matter of specialised academic knowledge but simply the application of basic critical thinking (asking the question whether this is actually Thucydides) and some simple research procedures (evaluating the source of information, looking for a specific reference to the text rather than just accepting a non-specific attribution). Only a few interlocutors have ever shown any interest in the question of whether the account is really a bot, and I have then been happy to explain how it works.[19]

[19] One of the most entertaining comments, from a Turkish account, was: 'Like Voldemort, the man has set up a trap in Thucydides' name, catching up when his name is mentioned. Even tweets in Turkish do not escape his eyes.'





The style and content of the Thucydides Bot's replies have changed over time, through a process of trial and error and further research on how people respond to different sorts of corrections online. In particular, the standard opening has shifted from 'This is not in fact Thucydides, but X' to 'I'm afraid this is not in fact Thucydides, but X', recognising that I may be asking people to revise a firm belief, something which could be experienced as a personal attack, and certainly am intruding into their conversations without invitation (Twitter may be a public forum for everyone who does not deliberately lock their account, but users don't necessarily think of this in practice). Further, the response now includes more detail about the identity of X

and his text, with the aim of showing that this is a well-founded alternative rather than just a contrary opinion, and where space allows I also add information suggesting why Thucydides is not really a plausible source and/or reassurance that the misattribution is widespread and therefore the error is not a culpable one.

Clearly the Bot is not a known or trusted 'person', so it is necessary to emphasise other means of persuasion, anticipating the most likely responses and grounds for resistance. Inevitably, the result is that it sounds very like a formal version of my usual style – but research into the linguistic cues for expertise and authority suggests that this style ought to be reasonably effective: number of words used (uncertainty reduction), avoidance of I-pronouns and anxiety-related words, and use of longer words and more negatives (cognitive complexity) are all taken, according to studies of the users of medical advice websites, as indicators of expertise and trustworthiness.[20] Having 1700 followers might also be taken as a sign of credibility; research has shown more popular accounts have their tweets shared more, not only in absolute terms but proportionate to their number of followers, but it is unclear what the threshold is for such an authority effect, beyond the vague perception that accounts with only a few followers (less than 100?) are unlikely to be trustworthy in the absence of other indicators.[21]

Responses to these corrections are evidence both for the possible impact of this strategy and for the thinking of those tweeting misattributed quotations. The majority of accounts engaged with in this manner do not reply at all, though my impression is that accounts that are run by real humans, as opposed to the social jukebox bots, are then less likely to become repeat offenders, occasionally deleting the tweets in question (and in one instance, modifying subsequent references to the missattributed line to '(not Thucydides)', which is better than nothing). Of the rest, roughly half answer with thanks, occasionally noting that they have looked into the matter and see that the Bot is correct (without indicating where they found this information, but the Wikiquote page seems a reasonable assumption for the majority); one can only guess whether the others have done similar research, or have simply accepted the Bot's correction. Roughly a quarter of the accounts which respond positively in some way to corrections then also follow the Bot, and one or

[20] Sparks & Areni 2008; Toma & D'Angelo 2015.
[21] Weismueller et al. 2021.

two have taken to correcting the same misattribution themselves, or summoning @Thucydiocy when they encounter it.

From the perspective of understanding both people's image of and feelings towards Thucydides and the dynamics of misinformation and credibility, the most interesting cases are those that push back against the correction, at least initially. There is no single pattern of response, but over the years the same forms of argument have recurred, advanced with varying degrees of conviction and annoyance. (1) Citing the authority of the source of the quotation (most often, collections of military quotations or accounts of contemporary military life, and prominent figures such as the late General Colin Powell or the journalist Chris Hedges), or its prevalence in Google search results: 'many attributions to Thucydides online'; 'Goodreads says you're wrong'; 'it's there on a Greek government website'. (2) Questioning the authority of the Bot – 'who do we believe? Show us proof!' – and of the Wikiquote page to which I sometimes refer people to find links to supporting material. (3) Claims that the quote clearly reflects Thucydides' character or ideas (this may of course reflect the fact that impressions of key themes in his work are increasingly shaped by such quotations): 'Thucydides throughout his work examines history's dependence on human character'; 'it doesn't seem to contradict the main themes of Thucydides'; 'in multiple places Thucydides tells us about the life of the warrior'. (4) Evocation of general principles of critical thought: 'the attribution isn't necessarily not authentic if it isn't proved so by later research'; 'lack of evidence is not evidence of lacking'; 'the sentiment is general enough that both could have independently said the same thing. Both. Do better research'. (5) Often in conjunction with the previous, a particular insistence on chronological primacy, often on the reasonable grounds that the modern author could have been quoting Thucydides – 'are you sure he didn't just paraphrase Thucydides? He was around thousands of years earlier'; 'maybe he was quoting Thucydides and forgot to give proper credit'; 'Thucydides came before Butler!'; 'Butler ripped off Thucydides!' – but sometimes in the absurd form that, because a version of the quote exists translated into Greek, it must be authentically ancient: ''Translated to ancient Greek from English? Greek 1400 BC. English 700 AD. English didn't exist back then. You just proved you have no academic credentials'.

Such responses open up the possibility of a continuing conversation, which allows more detailed description of the process by which the quote in question came

to be misattributed (at the same time showing how this therefore makes it entirely understandable that people might believe in its authenticity) and further discussion of questions of authority and critical analysis. I can (1) provide detailed information and sources to establish the Bot's knowledge, pointing to the absence of textual references or any other details on quotation webpages); (2) acknowledge issues with Wikiquote (emphasising that I mention it solely as a place to find links to sources and an academic discussion, namely Morley 2013); (3) acknowledge the real issues involved in proving a negative (not claiming to possess more knowledge than is actually possible, while emphasising that no published translation of Thucydides includes the phrase in question and evoking the principle of the balance of probabilities); and (4) broaden the discussion to consider wider contexts and issues of anachronism (the fact that a distinction between scholars and warriors makes little sense in a classical Greek polis where every citizen was expected to fight for the city, and the fact that Thucydides' account breaks off before the end of the war so he could not have commented on the rule of the Thirty Tyrants).

As far as possible, this effective resort to academic authority (reference to published research, demonstration of detailed knowledge of ancient history) is framed in terms of the exploration of these issues as interesting in themselves, rather than an attack on the person who tweeted the misattribution, to create a safe space for acknowledging error. Perhaps half the time this works, and the conclusion of the conversation is thanks, albeit sometimes rueful: 'I stand corrected. Damned interwebs are full of this. I feel like I just learnt that Santa isn't real…'. Otherwise, the conversation ends when the original account decides to ignore or block the Bot, most often after I have invited them to prove it wrong by offering a specific reference in Thucydides' text. The positive outcome is that once again these accounts rarely repeat the misattribution (the main exception is an account who insists that their former professor's paraphrase/interpretation should be counted as a valid quotation); perhaps they have accepted the correction but are unwilling to admit this in public, or are simply reluctant to be accosted if they tweet it again.

It is striking how often those who push back against the Bot do so on the basis of claims of knowledge and expertise, of Thucydides' work and/or of principles of critical analysis; their perception of themselves seems to be that they are critical and informed and therefore would not have been taken in by a fake, so the quote they have accepted needs to be defended against criticism. Still more striking is the

pattern of which quotes are most likely to be defended in this manner. With many relatively common misattributions, such as ‘justice will not come to Athens until those who are not injured are as outraged as those who are’, the correction is accepted without a qualm, although these are often put forward in the context of emotive political issues (such as Black Lives Matter) and so one might have anticipated greater emotional investment; most likely because it really is the sentiment that matters, and perhaps also because it still has the authority of a classical origin (Solon). ‘History is philosophy teaching by examples’ is much more often defended, with claims about it being a reasonable summary of Thucydides’ methodology (despite him not using the term ‘history’); perhaps because it is an ancient misattribution, long since established in general accounts of historiography and its mission, and perhaps because its real source – ‘a third-century Ars Rhetorica falsely attributed to Dionysius of Halicarnassus’ – does indeed lack authority.

The misattribution that is most often defended is, predictably, William F. Butler’s ‘The society that separates its scholars from its warriors…’; not only, I would suggest, because it is the most common, but also because it appears to be personally meaningful for at least three of the informal communities within which it regularly circulates: military and veteran circles for whom it seems to epitomise a philosophy of military life (the ‘warrior ethos’ – combined on occasion with an explicit disparagement of those who are merely civilians and intellectuals), right-wing groups for whom it expresses the decadence of contemporary ‘civilised’ society, and, in the last two years, weight-lifters (‘every intellectual needs to lift; every gym bro needs to read’).[22] Questioning the authenticity of the attribution seems at times to be experienced as a questioning of the validity of the whole idea, but in addition the association with Thucydides, as an authoritative soldier-strategist-analyst figure who is seen to epitomise the philosophy of the statement, is clearly important to many, still more when it is attributed to ‘a Spartan king’ being quoted by Thucydides – William F. Butler is neither familiar, nor ancient, nor authoritative enough. This interpretation is perhaps supported by the fact that the other misattribution most vehemently (if less frequently) defended in recent years has been ‘who dares wins’ or ‘fortune favours the brave’, as a sentiment prized by admirers of specific military

[22] On the ‘warrior ethos’, Noordally 2020, and more generally (with reference to the role of the classical tradition) Kaurin 2014. On the construction of community through the retweeting of appropriate memes, as an assertion of common knowledge and values, see Peck 2017.

units and their ethos; the conviction that this *must* be Thucydides, on the basis both of prior conceptions of his views and of sense of the importance of this identification, is striking.

5. Conclusion

The Thucydides encountered on Twitter is in most respects a familiar figure – even if he is associated with a range of ideas that are not actually found in his text, they reinforce rather than contradict his established image as an authority on war, politics and power, who offers a clear and illusionless view of the world as it really is. It is a received perspective that has been shaped by scholarly receptions, above all the traditions of international relations theory, but it does not habitually appeal to academic authority. It is not that academic authority is rejected, for the most part – it can be the successful final gambit in debates about the authenticity of 'Thucydides' quotations – but for the most part the quotes and ideas are assumed to speak for themselves, even to the point of powerful emotional identification with them, and Thucydides' authority is taken as read.

Appendix: On Social Media Research

A critical issue for the quality and integrity of this project is the fact that the study of social media is a relatively young field, and there are not yet agreed protocols for many aspects; for example, debate continues as to whether posts on social media can be assumed to have been consciously 'published' in a public forum, hence free for researchers to use without any further concerns – the prevalent assumption in the early years – or whether there are continuing ethical obligations to the users. This is clearly a significant point when it comes to detailed qualitative analysis of the contents of tweets, with the aim of drawing inferences about the authors and their beliefs or commenting on their styles of argument and (self-)representation. Even attributing the tweet to the author's online identity creates the possibility that they might be identifiable, and hence the view among reseachers is increasingly that social media posts should be treated as personal data, and hence research in this field requires ethical oversight: see Golder et al. (2017), Townsend & Wallace 2018, and the guidance developed at the University of St Andrews (https://www.st-

andrews.ac.uk/research/integrity-ethics/humans/ethical-guidance/social-media-research/).

The approach adopted in this project has been shaped above all by the ideas of best practice set out in Williams et al. (2017), and through ongoing discussion with the College of Humanities Ethics Committee. All social media posts are treated as personal data rather than regarded as effectively public domain; the authors are not identified (the discussion of accounts that adopt Thucydides as part of their online persona enumerates types of user IDs rather than actual examples), and as far as possible material which would easily be identified through a search engine is paraphrased rather than directly quoted, except where this would significantly undermine the analysis.

Thucydides on Twitter: References

Allison, G. (2017) *Destined for War: can America and China escape Thucydides's Trap?*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Appleby, L. (2021) 'Academics and Social Media Hostility: should we give up or do more?', *British Medical Journal Opinion* 23/08/2021: https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2021/08/23/academics-and-social-media-hostility-should-we-give-up-or-do-more/

Bateman, O. (2017) 'The Young Academic's Twitter Conundrum', *The Atlantic* 10/05/2017: https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/05/the-young-academics-twitter-conundrum/525924/

Derakhshan, H. (2015) 'The Web We Have To Save', *Medium* 14/07/2015. https://medium.com/matter/the-web-we-have-to-save-2eb1fe15a426

Ecker, U.K.H., S. Lewandowsky, J. Cook, P. Schmid, L.K. Fazio, N. Brashier, P. Kendeou, E.K. Vraga & M.A. Amazeen (2022) 'The Psychological Drivers of Misinformation Belief and its Resistance to Correction', *Nature Reviews Psychology* 1: 13–29. https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-021-00006-y

Farrell, H.J. & R. Perlstein (2018) 'Our Hackable Political Future', *New York Times* 04/02/2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/04/opinion/hacking-politics-future.html

Geva, H., G. Oestreicher-Singer & M. Saar-Tsechansky, Maytal (2019) 'Using Retweets When Shaping Our Online Persona: Topic Modeling Approach', *MIS Quarterly* 43.2: 501-524. https://doi.org/10.25300/MISQ/2019/14346

Golder, S., S. Ahmed, G. Norman & A. Booth (2017) 'Attitudes toward the ethics of research using social media: a systematic review', *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 19.6. https://doi.org/10.2196/jmir.7082

Jaffe, S.N. (2017) 'The Risks and Rewards of Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War', *War on the Rocks* 06/07/2017 https://warontherocks.com/2017/07/the-risks-and-rewards-of-thucydides-history-of-the-peloponnesian-war/

Kaurin, P.M. (2014) *The Warrior, Military Ethics and Contemporary Warfare: Achilles goes asymmetrical*, London & New York: Routledge.

Keene, E. (2015) 'The Reception of Thucydides in the History of International Relations', in Lee & Morley eds., 355-72.

Lee, C. & N. Morley, eds. (2015) *A Handbook to the Reception of Thucydides,* Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Metzger, M.J. & A. Flanagin (2013) 'Credibility and trust of information', *Journal of Pragmatics* 59: 210-20. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2013.07.012

Mirowski, P. (2019) 'Hell is Truth Seen Too Late', *Boundary 2* 46.1: 1-53. https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-7271327

Morley, N. (2013) 'Thucydides Quote Unquote', *Arion* 20.3: 9-36.

Morley, N. (2014) *Thucydides and the Idea of History*, London: I.B. Tauris.

Morley, N. (2018) 'Legitimising War and Defending Peace: Thucydides in WWI and After', *Classical Receptions Journal* 10.4: 415-434

Morley, N. (2021) 'Thucydides' Legacy in Grand Strategy', in T. Balzacq & R.R. Krebs, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 41-56. https://www.doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198840299.013.2

Noordally, B. (2020) 'On the Toxicity of the 'Warrior' Ethos', *The Wavell Room* 28/04/2020: https://wavellroom.com/2020/04/28/on-the-toxicity-of-the-warrior-ethos/

Nyhan, B. & J. Reifler (2015) 'When Corrections Fail: the persistence of political misconceptions', *Political Behavior* 32:303-30. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-010-9112-2

Peck, A. (2017) 'The Memetic Vernacular: everyday argument in the digital age,' PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin at Madison. https://www.proquest.com/docview/1900219332?accountid=10792

Ruback, T. (2015) 'Thucydides Our Father, Thucydides Our Shibboleth', in Lee & Morley, eds., 406-24.

Sloan, L., J. Morgan, W. Housley, M. Williams, A. Edwards, P. Burnap & O. Rana (2013) 'Knowing the Tweeters: deriving sociologically relevant demographics from Twitter', *Sociological Research Online* 18.3: 74-84. https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.3001

Sparks, J.R. & C.S. Areni (2008) 'Style versus substance: multiple roles of language power in persuasion', *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 38.1: 37-60

Sperber, D., F. Clément, C. Heintz, O. Mascaro, H. Mercier, G. Origgi & D. Wilson, (2010) 'Epistemic vigilance', *Mind Language* 25: 359-393. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0017.2010.01394.x

Toma, C.L. & J.D. D'Angelo (2015) 'Tell-tale words: linguistic cues used to infer the expertise of online medical advice', *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 34.1: 25-45

Townsend, L. & C. Wallace (2018) *Social Media Research: a guide to ethics*, Aberdeen. https://www.bolton.ac.uk/assets/Uploads/Social-media-ethics-study-Aberdeen-2018.pdf

Weismueller, J., P. Harrigan, K. Coussement & T. Tessitore (2021) 'What Makes People Share Political Content on Social Media? The role of emotion, authority and ideology', in *Computers in Human Behavior* 129. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.107150

Williams, M.L., P. Burnap, L. Sloan, C. Jessop, & H. Lepps (2017), 'Users' Views of Ethics in Social Media Research: Informed Consent, Anonymity, and Harm', in K. Woodfield, ed., *The Ethics of Online Research (Advances in Research Ethics and Integrity, Vol. 2)*, Emerald Publishing Limited, Bingley, 27-52. https://doi.org/10.1108/S2398-601820180000002002

Wu, L., Morstatter, F., Carley, K.M. & Liu, H. (2019) ‘Misinformation in Social Media: definition, manipulation, and detection’, *ACM SIGKDD Explorations Newsletter* 21.2: 80-90.