

Thucydides as a Borderline, High-functioning Autistic
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Part of the fascination of reading Thucydides is our intimate engagement with his powerful, almost compulsively intellectual mind, what Paul Shorey calls “a subtle and consistent, if one sided, philosophy of life.” Shorey’s, 1893 *TAPA* article (“On the Implicit Ethics and Psychology of Thucydides”) deserves attention because the noted Platonist does not, in fact, admire Thucydides and is even repelled by what he regards as his sourly distorted view of the world. The present paper attempts to explain this distortion — if such it is — through cautious application of contemporary psychotherapeutic language. We are not claiming that Thucydides definitely suffers from a particular mental illness. Nevertheless, some of his mental habits have remarkable parallels with the so-called disease of autism, or rather its milder twin, Asperger’s syndrome.

Scholars of history and literature tend to disdain psychology out of fear of falling into biographical fallacy. Humanists often find that, among the social sciences, psychology is particularly tainted by the need to show that the art of understanding the human psyche can be reduced to numbers, jargon, and formulas. In fact, mental health professionals do acknowledge complexity and ambiguity, and their researches are based on examination of scores of thousands of humans with odd behaviors. This paper attempts to study a case where psychological findings can increase our understanding of a celebrated but puzzling work.

Thucydides sees the Peloponnesian war in abstract terms as conflicts of power. He predicts that Athens, with its money walls and ships, will defeat Sparta, with none of these attributes of power. He expects the war to proceed *kata logon*, “according to reason.” Large parts of his narrative present a cool account of events in which the war indeed proceeds as he had predicted. There are long catalogs of numbers of ships and the names of obscure generals. As it happens, however, the war is unpredictable, Sparta wins, and Thucydides’ narrative turns from cold to hot. The historian resorts to pathos, exaggeration, and even hints at supernatural intervention. This pattern of cold reserve repeatedly interrupted by hot emotionalism, results in a jagged narrative texture never adequately explained. This pattern, however, remarkably follows the career of the fictional hero of a recent novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* (Mark Haddon, 2004). Aply described by Haddon, Christopher, a 15-year-old autistic, attempts to shield himself from life’s complicated moments by doing mathematical calculations in his head. Similarly, Thucydides attempts to take refuge in the factual minutiae of the war, especially numbers and names, even where they are of no special significance.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR)* presents an account of Asperger’s that eerily describes some aspects of Thucydides’ mind set: “restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests and activities. . . . Often these are primarily manifest in the development of encompassing preoccupations about a circumscribed topic or interest, about which the individual can amass a great deal of facts and information. These interests are pursued with great intensity, often to the exclusion of other activities” (p. 80). Of particular interest are *DSM*’s remarks about the Asperger’s sufferer’s speech: “Language may be unusual in terms of the individual’s preoccupation with certain topics and his or her verbosity” (p. 81). In addition, the tone of voice may be stilted and unnatural. Here we may find plausible explanations (if not excuses) for some aspects of Thucydidean style that Shorey finds so tiresome, particularly the historian’s obsession with breaking every topic into complicated, and notoriously difficult to translate, strings of nested or interlaced antitheses.