

LESSONS OF FEAR: A READING OF THUCYDIDES

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IT IS PERHAPS a truism that “reason is the slave of the passions” and that dispassionate deliberation can often only serve some deeper, preverbal desire or intuition. Despite this, modern historiography and political science have until recently tended to stress the role of impersonal forces like geography, the market, or intellectual precedent upon individual and communal decision making. In more recent years, however, historians have paid increasing attention to the emotions, attention that is reflected also in Classical historiography.¹ Of the ancient historians, Thucydides would seem closest to a “modern,” impersonal perspective: he dismisses Herodotean-style dramatic history for a greater emphasis on quantifiable facts such as chronology of events, material resources, money, equipment, troop numbers, casualties, and the like; national character has an overriding influence on individual initiative that only truly exceptional statesmen can resist. And yet, despite Thucydides’ own dispassionate style, his *History* documents a war that stirred the most vehement passions in both individuals and larger groups. Careful reading of his work detects a long and considered observation of how the emotions pervade and sometimes even dominate political life.²

In particular, the *History* is from one angle a meditation upon fear—its varieties, ubiquity, potency, and even rational necessity. With regard to this aspect of Thucydides, previous studies have focused on Thucydides’ vocabulary and semantics of fear, or on fear and desire as the cardinal passions of his psychology.³ This article will treat fear as one crucial ingredient in Thucydides’ implicit political theory. Thucydides, of course, was not a philosopher but a historian, seeking to document who did what, when, and why. Yet, this

1. Some recent scholarship on the emotions in the ancient world includes Champlin 1991, Nussbaum 1994, Morton Braund and Gill 1997, Sihvola and Engberg-Pedersen 1998, and Harris 2001. In the following, all translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. All dates are B.C.E.

2. This reading, then, will tend to steer closer to a “postmodern” interpretation of Thucydides. The term was used by Connor to distinguish his own approach from a “modern” reading, represented by Cochrane (1929) and those who see Thucydides primarily as a “scientific” historian reporting material facts (1984, 289–98). For a survey of literature based on this distinction, see Ostwald 1988, 2 and p. 33, n. 1; for a more general survey of modern historiography, see Iggers 1997, 5. On national character and the leadership of Pericles and Archidamus, see Luginbill 1999, *passim* and esp. 189–91, 203–8.

3. De Romilly 1956a and Huart 1968, 114–41. Luginbill (1999, 65–81) argues that for Thucydides hope and fear are “omnipresent” as “the two basic psychological states affecting historical activity”: fear more typifies the Spartan character, hope, the Athenian. For general remarks on fear in Thucydides, see Proctor 1980, 177–91.

last, analytical “why”—without which a history can hardly rise above mere chronicle—inevitably involves a writer in larger, more theoretical questions that Thucydides’ abstract, concise style seems actively to invite. What forces form and maintain communities? Can the multiplicity of political phenomena be reduced to a few overriding principles of human nature? Are people motivated more by self-interest or love of others, greed or patriotism, calculation or enthusiasm? What are the purposes of communal and state action? Can events be fully known and controlled, or does chance play a perennial role?

Thucydides does not answer such questions directly, yet his speeches, narrative structure, and own comments can be taken as reflecting a set of responses that understand fear to be one of the dominant forces shaping political events. In discussions of Thucydides as “philosopher” or political theorist, this aspect of the *History* has been rather neglected. Reality for Thucydides is inherently dangerous, and so fear pervades human societies at every stage of development, from the earliest to the most sophisticated communities. As we will see, he treats fear as a basic cause of the instability and poverty of primitive times; it lies at the origin of military alliances and even the formation of political states. Stable and unified societies make determined efforts to banish fear from daily civic life, and yet this effort usually enjoys only partial success, as fear of others’ unknown intentions continues to disturb internal politics, as well as to foment wars between states. Thucydides is exceptionally sensitive to the complexity of political phenomena, and the changing mix of factors that can influence or determine any one event. Hence, there is rarely one “right” response to political situations, and war is particularly complex. Yet this awareness of complexity informs what may be Thucydides’ most characteristic “lesson” for political action: one possible reading of the *History* is that it tacitly advocates a prudent, rational fear: the lessons of the war, with its surprising outcome and many twists of chance, as well as the recognition of individual ignorance and weakness, should humble expectations, and prompt one to adopt caution as the best *general* policy in the political arena. This leads to a rather unorthodox reading of the *History*: not so much a veiled encomium of Periclean Athens or a tragic history of its failed glory, nor a scientific work articulating general “laws” about human nature, nor a book advocating enlightened imperialism or Machiavellian realism, the *History* is from this vantage point a skeptical and pessimistic work, which above power and confident ambition advocates circumspection and self-doubt as the best stance toward a dangerous, dimly understood reality.⁴ Fear of failure is the beginning of wisdom.

1. WORDS FOR FEAR

The acute attention that Thucydides devotes to phenomena of fear is evident first in his diction. Thucydides’ vocabulary for fear comprises mainly three

4. My conclusions will resemble those of Connor, though from a more concentrated vantage point. See especially Connor’s conclusion: “From our heightened awareness derives the true utility of the work. . . . *History* does not teach us how to control human events . . . but it reminds us how easily men move from the illusion of control over events to being controlled by them—from action to pathos” (Connor 1984, 247).

word groups, centered on the nouns δέος, φόβος, and ἔκπληξις. The last is the most vehement—"terror, consternation, panic"—with the implication of being beside oneself, struck out of one's wits with fear. Concerning the former two, Ammonius writes that φόβος is more forceful than δέος; it represents the terror of something immediate, as opposed to the anticipation or suspicion (ὑπόνοια) of evil.⁵ Ammonius' definition of φόβος accurately fits many instances of the word in Thucydides, as Pierre Huart (1968) has shown in detail. Nevertheless, despite his careful style, Thucydides does not define his terms or use them with mathematical consistency; like other fifth- and fourth-century writers, he can use the two words as near synonyms.⁶

2. THE ROLE OF FEAR IN VARIOUS SPHERES OF POLITICAL HISTORY: WAR, PRIMITIVE TIMES, AND THE ORIGIN OF STATES

The critical deviation from Huart's overly neat distinction is Thucydides' appeal to φόβος as the "truest cause" of the Peloponnesian War: "For I consider the truest cause, though the least apparent in speech, was that the growing power of the Athenians alarmed the Lacedaemonians and forced them into war."⁷ This analysis is repeated after the debates in Sparta, Thucydides writing that the Spartans voted for war "not so much for the words of the confederates, as for fear (φοβούμενοι) that Athenian greatness would still increase" (1.88; cf. 1.118.2). Thus, the various αἰτίαι καὶ διαφοραὶ (1.23.5; cf. 1.23.5, 1.55.2, 1.56.1, 1.146) are only immediate precedents of the war. They dominate the diplomatic speeches at Athens and Sparta (1.24–66), and to some less perceptive contemporaries may have seemed to be the primary cause. But Thucydides' Pentecontaetia demonstrates how Spartan fears of Athenian expansionism intensified through the fifth century.⁸ First, in 479, just after the Persians' defeat, the Spartans feared the triumphant Athenian navy and the Athenian daring shown at Salamis and elsewhere (1.90.1). Next, the Spartans were disturbed by the Athenians' quick reconstruction of their walls, though they concealed this fact (1.90.2, 1.92).

5. For a detailed discussion, see Huart (1968, 124), who, in arguing that φόβος and δέος differ as "crainte soudaine-frayeur" and "crainte raisonnée-apprehension," essentially draws out the implications of Ammonius' definitions: δέος . . . κακοῦ ὑπόνοια, φόβος δὲ ἢ παρατύκτα πτόησις. Aristotle restricts the objects of fear to things immediate and particular (*Rhet.* 2.5 1382a), but Thucydides is more inclusive, like his later admirer Hobbes, who writes in *De cive* 1.2: "neither do I conceive flight the sole property of fear, but to distrust, suspect, take heed, provide so that they may not fear, is also incident to the fearful" (1991, 113).

6. For instances that fit Ammonius' formulae, see 1.49.4, 1.124.2, 3.112.7, 4.63.1, and 7.69. But in 2.65.9 Pericles' oratory can inspire ἔκπληξις, δέος, and φόβος alike. For δέος and φόβος used as near synonyms, see 4.126, 4.82.2 with 4.88.1, 6.49.1–2, 6.91.6; cf. Hdt. 4.115, Lys. 20.8, and Dem. 21.124, 23.103; cf. Huart 1968, 138–40.

7. 1.23.6; cf. 1.33.3. Again, Thucydides does not define or use his terms like a mathematician. As with δέος and φόβος, the words αἰτία and πρόφασις can be used interchangeably, as in 1.146; elsewhere, πρόφασις has its more typical meaning of "pretext" (1.118.1, 5.31.3, 5.80.3, 6.8.4, 6.76.2). Cf. Pearson 1952.

8. An "explanatory" γάρ thus introduces 1.89, linking Spartan fear with its root cause, the growth of Athenian power and τόλμα after the Persian Wars. For discussions see Stahl 1966, 41; Rhodes 1987; Ostwald 1988, 2–4; Luginbill 1999, 106–7; Hornblower 1991, 133 ("We can add that he surely aims to give particular coverage to those events which most alarmed the Spartans"); and Rood 1998, 225–48, for a narratological perspective. The purpose of this "digression" is not always readily recognized, however: see, e.g., Williams 1998, 79.

A generation later, in 454, when Cimon brought troops to assist against the Messenian revolt (1.102.3), the Spartans grew apprehensive of the “daring and revolutionary tendencies of the Athenians” (δείσαντες τῶν Ἀθηναίων τὸ τολμηρὸν καὶ τὴν νεωτεροποιΐαν) and dismissed them, alone of the allies, without explanation. Thus over the fifty years between 480 and 431, Spartan fears were “least apparent in speech,” yet gave the greatest impetus to war.

Distinctions between levels of causation, or between a “cold war” or Hobbesian “will to contend” and open conflict are relatively commonplace now, but one should not forget that Thucydides was among the first to use them deliberately.⁹ This distinction enables him to bypass partisan attempts to blame the other side. Did the war begin because of the Megarian decrees? Or the siege of Potidaea? Or the *διαφοραὶ* between Corcyra and Corinth? Did the Aeginetans or Corinthians exert secret but decisive influence over Sparta? Did Pericles want a war? Did he not refuse to accept the Spartan demands? But did not the Spartans initiate the war by avoiding arbitration as stipulated under the treaty? Amid such contentions, Thucydides’ judgment is remarkably even-handed—or perhaps noncommittal. He does not blame either side, yet faults both at once: the phrase Ἀθηναίους μεγάλους γιγνομένους may faintly echo the typical idiom for hubris, μέγала φρονεῖν. The Spartans did begin the war, yet were driven to it by φόβος of Athenian expansion. Similar tensions characterize the combination of the vocabulary of impersonal, dispassionate science (πρόφασις, ἀνάγκη) with a focus on the passions, so personal and unpredictable. Thucydides’ considered judgment (ἡγοῦμαι), then, is neither hackneyed nor trivial. He sees the war both as the result of *la longue durée*, and as a very personal affair. The trajectories of two power blocs meet in an inevitable clash; but contributing to that inevitability are the passions—ambitions, envies, hatreds, and especially fears—of the two communities involved. Thus, the war speeches of Book 1 play largely upon Athenian and especially Spartan fears: Corcyreans speak of the inevitability of war in order to scare the Athenians into a new alliance; Corinthians and others exacerbate long-standing Spartan fears (παροξύναι, 1.67.5) by hearkening back to the growth of Athenian power after the Persian Wars, the rebuilding of its walls (1.69.1), and the Athenian policy of slow encroachment (1.69.3).

In this way, Thucydides’ use of fear as the “deepest explanation” is his lasting contribution to understanding the war as a result of fifth-century development as a whole. It is also the prime example of one effect of fear in political life: fear is the great divisive force in human relations, discouraging free interaction, ruining trade and social harmony, bringing poverty, lawlessness, and even violence in its wake.¹⁰ These effects are apparent at all

9. For the notion of a “cold war,” see esp. 5.26 on the uneasy truce between 421 and 416. Cf. Hornblower 1991, 65 (“The explicit formulation of a distinction between profound and superficial causes is arguably Th.’s greatest single contribution to later history-writing”). For a recent defense of Thucydides’ “truest explanation,” see Cawkwell 1997, 20–40.

10. Cf. Williams’ occasional distinction between “good” and “bad” fear in Thucydides: “fear in its positive sense is . . . equated with foresight, [and] becomes the very basis for wisdom and justice” (1998, 57); “bad” fear fosters factionalism and timidity (e.g., 78–79).

major stages of political development, from Archaic times to the breakdown of civilization in war and civil strife. First, in Thucydides' Archaeology, the primitive condition is one of constant fear and low-intensity war. In ancient times (Thucydides reasons), people built their cities inland or on isthmuses, for fear of unpredictable invasions by more powerful groups (1.2.1). Isolated in small, weak tribes, they "did not mingle fearlessly with each other" (1.2.2);¹¹ travel by land or sea was dangerous, and carrying weapons was common (1.5.1). In such times, the poverty of Attica brought a certain security (τὸ βέβαιον, ἀσφάλεια), in turn promoting greater immigration and "mixing" of peoples—an unprecedented development that foreshadowed the relative tolerance of the Periclean democracy (1.2.5–6).

Athens' exceptional place in the Archaeology illustrates Thucydides' views on the organic growth of states. Perhaps reflecting current speculation about law and government as a contract between individuals or parties, Thucydides writes under the assumption that fear is the most important incentive to the formation of treaties, alliances, states, and eventually empires. Thus, in the Archaeology, the insecurity of the state of nature, and fear of "more numerous others" (1.2.1) compel disparate individuals or groups to coalesce into a single military or political entity. The Mycenaean's fear (φόβος) of the returning Sons of Heracles, for instance, prompts them to crown Atreus as their protector (1.9.2). The alliance that sailed to Troy to recover Helen was convened not by the suitors' oaths or χάρις (Thucydides reasons), but by fear (φόβος) of Agamemnon's naval power (1.9.1, 1.9.3). Fear was a necessary precedent to Attic συνοικισμός (2.15.1). The Delian League and later Athenian Empire were the largest and most complex political organizations in Classical Greece, and the Athenian diplomats and envoys in the *History* repeatedly assert that there were three fundamental motives for their creation—fear, honor, and profit: fear of the Persian Empire was chronologically first in the formation of the League; later, mutual fear remained the primary force binding the Athenian Empire, that is, Athens' fear of her subjects and of Sparta, and her subjects' fear of her as a πόλις τύραννος.¹² Fear of Athenian power gave impetus also to the consolidation of the Peloponnesian League, notably when the Corinthians led the campaign to terrify Sparta into war.¹³ The third great alliance of the *History*, that of Sicilian cities against Athens, is motivated by a complex of competing fears—notably of Athens' unparalleled power and of Syracuse's proximity.¹⁴

11. οὐδ' ἐπιμειγνύντες ἀδεῶς ἀλλήλοις (1.2.2); cf. primitive ἀμειξία, 1.3.4.

12. 1.75.3, 1.76.2; cf. 1.96.1, 6.82.4, 3.11–12, esp. 3.11.2; cf. 2.8.5. For the proposition that the wartime empire was held together by fear, see esp. 3.37.2 and the application of Cleon's "policy of calculated terror" towards rebellious Scione (4.122.6) and Torone (5.3.4). The phrase is from Kagan 1975, 88.

13. 1.23.6, 1.33.3, 1.86.5, 1.88; cf. 1.123.1, 2.8.5, 4.63.1, 6.78.2.

14. E.g., 6.21.1 (Nicias), 4.63, 6.33.5, 6.34.1, 6.78.1 (Hermocrates), 6.90–92 (Alcibiades). Note Connor's discussion of Hermocrates' speech at Gela: "the surest means of security is not ingenuity and speed in plotting nor a rational means of control but a recognition of the limits of knowledge in a world that cannot totally be predicted or controlled. These are striking and original ideas . . . provocative and highly significant in the context of the work as a whole. They stand in tension with the confidence in prediction that characterizes both the Archaeology and the Periclean analysis of the war. But the view of the future expressed by this speech is very close . . . to that implicit in much of the *Histories*" (1984, 124–25).

Indeed, so prevalent is the thought in Thucydidean political analysis that his speakers can even venture the generalization that “mutual fear is the only trustworthy basis of an alliance.”¹⁵

This is in marked contrast with other roughly contemporary views that would locate the origin of states in some form of love (e.g., friendship, kinship), need, shared history, or ideals. Thucydides gives scant attention to these rival notions.¹⁶ Instinctively closer to current sophistic ideas, Thucydides appeals to fear in ways analogous to an Antiphon, Lycophron, Callicles, or Glaucon: political associations are a kind of contract, formed by weak parties fearful of “more numerous others.”¹⁷

In keeping with the original foundational motive of self-defense, one general feature of established alliances and communities is the banishment of fear. Although Thucydides does not envisage a world-state, a “perpetual peace” abroad, or the internal “withering away” of competing factions, many of his speakers do celebrate the fearlessness that characterizes established communities. The continuous apprehension and ἀμειξία of primitive times yields to freer associations; no longer feeling isolated and vulnerable, the individual is absorbed into the larger existence of the community whose structures protect him from day to day. Therefore an array of speakers in a variety of diverse situations—the Corinthians, Pericles, Cleon, Brasidas, Alcibiades—fix on the lack of fear between citizens as a prominent norm of civilized life.¹⁸ One application of this principle is to democratic politics: here, Thucydides’ speakers associate fearlessness with παρρησία and hence make it a bulwark of individual freedom against an intimidating majority. Diodotus, for instance, condemns Cleon for using scare tactics in his speech against the Mytilenians: to frighten another with a veiled accusation of bribery will rob the city of her best counselors and is contrary to the equality inherent in citizenship (3.42.4, 3.44.5).¹⁹

15. 3.11.2: τὸ δὲ ἀντίπαλον δέος μόνον πιστὸν ἐς ξυμμαχίαν (Mytilenians).

16. See 1.124, 3.10, 6.33.5. The dominance of fear appears in Thucydides’ discussion of the rival alliances of Syracuse and Athens, formed not so much due to right and kinship, as by expediency and compulsion (7.57.1): unusual are the Acharnians, who join out of friendship towards the Athenians and goodwill towards Demosthenes (7.57.10). In political situations other than the formation of states, Thucydides does touch upon themes of family, *genos*, and kinship: see Crane 1996, 75–161. But Thucydides does not assume Socrates’ view in Plato’s *Republic*, that states and associations are firstly economic entities that arise to feed, clothe, and house individuals efficiently. Instead, the state is primarily a military organization designed for mutual self-defense.

17. For late-fifth-century versions of a contract theory of law and the state, see Arist. *Pol.* 1280b10–11 (Lycophron); Pl. *Grg.* 483b4–c5 (Callicles), *Resp.* 358e3–359b5 (Glaucon); and Antiphon’s description of *nomos* as a δέσμο τῆς φύσεως (frag. 44a DK). Was Thucydides influenced on this point by his reputed “teacher” (assuming that “Antiphon” was both the sophist and orator)? In any case, the notion of law as συνθήκη was a pervasive one in sophistic circles; cf. Sinclair 1967, 71–97.

18. 1.68.1 (Corinthians), 2.37.2–3 (Pericles), 3.37.2 (Cleon). Cf. 4.114.1 (Brasidas promising the citizens of Torone that they can “associate as citizens without fear, ἀδεῶς”), 6.50.4 (trust between allied states), 6.92.4 (Alcibiades appealing to common association of citizenship with fearlessness: τὸ τε φιλόπολι οὐκ ἐν ᾧ ἀδικούμαι ἔχω, ἀλλ’ ἐν ᾧ ἀσφαλῶς ἐπολιτεύθην).

19. Nicias encourages his supporters not to be afraid to speak out against the Sicilian expedition, but in 6.24.4, the vehement assembly does indeed terrify them into silence. Similar scare tactics are used and condemned in the Syracusan assembly (6.36, 6.38.2). Nicias, fearing the fickle Athenian voters (7.14.4, 7.48.3–4), refuses to retreat from Syracuse; for fear of the Athenian δῆμος, cf. 3.98.5, 4.65.3, Rood 1998, 142–45.

3. FEARLESSNESS AND THE SICILIAN EXPEDITION

Yet, while a community may flourish when its members do not fear each other, Thucydides is decidedly ambivalent about a condition of *utter* fearlessness: fear of the law and fear of foreigners may in fact be necessary and beneficial. This principle is illustrated in various incidents throughout the *History*, some minor, others major. First, in the most advanced states, fear is not so much eradicated as sublimated: fear of one's neighbor becomes the more abstract fear of the law. Thus, Pericles' Funeral Oration may celebrate Athenian self-confidence in almost jingoistic tones,²⁰ but Pericles notes that in domestic politics, at least, Athenian fearlessness is not unqualified: citizens' fears of others are replaced by fear of the law (2.37.3), the shared fear that makes like-minded citizens of competitive individuals. Civil war and the Athenian plague offer images of how easily this civilizing fear of the law can dissolve. With regard to rebellion and crime, Diodotus sounds the loudest warning that fears of death, of power, and of the law's δεινότης (3.46.4) are not absolute: desire and hope of unlawful gain can trump fears of even the most severe punishments (3.45.4), so that some criminals might not be deterred even by death. The Corcyrean *stasis* becomes emblematic of what can happen when fear of the law vanishes, when class-based hopes and desires reign unchecked: then all sides covet political office as a prize to be won for selfish gain; consequently, trust between groups and even between individuals is lost, while promises, oaths, and familial loyalties lose their force.²¹ Paradoxically, then, fearlessness before the law and mindless confidence in one's own party reduces society to a state of constant fear, a Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes*.²² The law also loses its authority during the time of plague at Athens, for different reasons. Here, the constant expectation of death by disease trivializes human laws, customs, and punishments. Many Athenians were so broken by despair that they feared nothing—dishonor, the law, the gods—and degenerated into a shocking ἀνομία (2.52.4–2.53).

Second, Thucydides often notes how disastrous the fearlessness of civil life can be when it is extended to international relations. The most compelling proof of this is the massacre at Mycalessus: its primary cause was the Mycalessians' ἄδεια, for trusting in their inland isolation, they did not maintain and man their walls or lock their gates.²³ The lesson of Mycalessus thus lurks in the background when speaker after speaker attempts to jar his

20. To paraphrase 2.41.3–4, for instance: in battle we alone surpass expectation; those we defeat are not chagrined by defeat, because we are truly superior; those we rule acquiesce before our superiority; our power has many proofs and witness; we inspire astonishment in men now and in the future; we do not need a Homer to praise us; we have forced open every land and sea, setting eternal monuments of good and evil everywhere. Concerning Athenian fearlessness abroad, cf. 2.42.4 (on the battlefield, the patriotic dead did not postpone the final "terrible" moment, τὸ δεινόν, but died at the height of fame rather than fear) and 2.40.5 (Athens gives ἄδεως and freely to others, not out of scheming calculation).

21. Office as a prize: 3.82.8. Promises, oaths: 3.82.7. Familial ties: 3.81.5, 3.82.6.

22. See the fears of one's fellow citizens in other revolutionary situations—after the mutilation of the herms in 416 (6.27, 6.60), and in the oligarchic coup of 411 (8.66.2–5); cf. Pouncey's discussion of Book 8 in which the war becomes "one of every man for himself against everyone else" (1980, 143).

23. πῶλον ἅμα διὰ τὴν ἄδειαν ἀνεφγμένον (7.29.3).

hearers out of their domestic complacency: confidence (τὸ πιστόν) and absence of fear are normal among citizens, but they are utterly inappropriate for international politics.²⁴ What is beneficial at home is folly abroad; in changed situations, virtues become vices, and the significance of words shifts, as when the Corinthians praise the Spartans' trust amongst each other (τὸ πιστόν) as the cause of their famed σωφροσύνη, but in the same breath condemn it as stupidity (ἄμαθία) in the international arena.²⁵ So, too, the Athenians congratulate the Melians on their "freedom from suffering" (τὸ ἀπειρόκακον), but would not envy the mindlessness (τὸ ἄφρον) that this can bring.²⁶ Indeed, the Melians become symbolic of communities that neglect the wisdom of a prudent fear. The Athenians rightly depict them as ruined by "expensive" hope (5.103): all their hopes—in Athenian humanity, Spartan aid, the gods, τύχη, the staying power of a 700-year-old state—are successively denied, first in debate, then in the subsequent siege.²⁷

The Melian dialogue precedes and seems almost to introduce the Sicilian expedition, and many readers have interpreted this as a deliberate juxtaposition, a dramatic device to illustrate how "pride precedeth the fall." In the present reading, the dialogue does indeed offer crucial analysis on events that follow: together, Melos and the Sicilian expedition illustrate how disastrous a fearlessness that has lost touch with reality can be. The Melian dialogue strikes the keynote by insisting upon the necessity of rational fear. On the one hand, with their various hopes, the Melians remain unchastened by the terrible forces moving to besiege them.²⁸ On the other side are the Athenian representatives, invincible, and speaking with unparalleled bravado. They do not fear the gods' justice (5.105). They do not fear the Lacedaemonians (5.91, 105). They have no fear of ultimate defeat: let it come if it will (5.91). They do not fear any islanders (5.97). Fear never yet forced them to raise a siege (5.111). These last two are ominous boasts, for soon in Sicily all these fears will overtake the Athenians—as when Nicias' superstitious fears of an eclipse prevent the terrified Athenians from lifting the siege of Syracuse (7.50). Why would such an "artful reporter" as Thucydides, to use Virginia Hunter's phrase, lavish his most concentrated Greek upon the minor event of Melos' fall? His point may be less to vilify the Athenians (as Dionysius of Halicarnassus thought), to illustrate the conventional moral that "hubris engenders ἄτη," to deflate unrealistic beliefs in ideal entities like justice or piety, or to illustrate the "natural law" that human beings "rule where they can" (5.105.2). Instead, the purpose of the Melian dialogue may be more to depict the fatal fearlessness that caused Athens' imperial overstretch, and thus her eventual defeat.

24. See n.18 above for references. Orwin (1994, 133–39) calls attention to the fact that the narrative of the Sicilian expedition is interrupted only by the Mycalessus incident; this may illustrate Thucydides' "humanity" and his pity for the innocent, or it may reinforce his "lessons" of fear.

25. See esp. 1.68.1 (Corinthians to the Spartans), and 3.37.1 (Cleon to the Athenians).

26. μακαρίσαντες τὸ ὑμῶν ἀπειρόκακον, οὐ ζηλοῦμεν τὸ ἄφρον (5.105.3).

27. For foreshadowings of the assertion that Sparta reneges on her promises to suppliants, see 1.69.5, 1.101 (siege of Thasos).

28. For other approaches to the Melian dialogue that emphasize ἐλλίς, ὕβρις, ἔρως, τύχη, or τὸ παράλογον, see Cornford 1971, 174–87; Avery 1973, 1–6; Edmunds 1975, 186–87; Luginbill 1999, p. 61, n. 15.

Ostensibly, of course, it is imperialistic *ἔρως* that dominates Book 6 and the beginning of the Sicilian expedition. As a result, the role of fear and fearlessness in Books 6 and 7 is generally overlooked. But desire and fear can be seen as opposites, or at least as contrasting passions: where fear causes one to avoid an object, desire impels one to possess and master it. An opposition of this sort between fear and desire structures the *History* as a whole: the conflict between democracies and oligarchies, and between sea power and land power, is also a clash between two basic types of disposition—the innovative, daring, and ambitious character represented best by the Athenians, and the slow, cautious, and unimaginative nature of the Spartans; thus a complex of words associated with optimistic daring (*ἐλπίς*, *ἔρως*, *θάρσος*, *τόλμα*, *πολυπραγμοσύνη*, *πλεονεξία*, *προθυμία*, *κινδυνεύτης*, *ἐπιχειρητής*, *φιλονικία*, *νεωτεροποιία*, *τὸ ὄξύ*, *ταχύτης*) is contrasted with another complex conveying a pessimistic risk aversion (*φόβος*, *ἄτολμοι*, *ἀσφάλεια*, *σωφροσύνη*, *ἀπραγμοσύνη*, *βραδύτης*, *ἀναβολή*, *διατριβή*, *μέλλησις*, *ὄκνος*, *σχολαιότης*).²⁹

This structural polarity of emotional types also informs Thucydides' implied contrast between the war as a whole and its most significant episode in Sicily. Thus, both the Peloponnesian War as a whole and the Sicilian expedition are introduced by "archaeologies" of primitive times that serve several similar purposes: they describe the confusion and *μεταναστάσεις* of ancient times, they indirectly demonstrate the momentous nature of the wars being started and together illustrate the widespread ignorance of which Thucydides accuses mankind in general and Alcibiades' Athenians in particular.³⁰ Furthermore, Thucydides analyzes both wars with the same deliberate distinction between immediate precedents and a deeper *πρόφασις*. The *αἰτίαι* of Book 1 (Corcyra, Potidaea, and so on) are matched by the *αἰτίαι* involving Eggesta and Selinus (6.6); so too, the diplomatic speeches in Books 1 and 6 have some striking thematic parallels. Moreover, Thucydides himself seems to compare the two wars when he focuses on their respective "true causes."³¹ In Book One, this *ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις* is given unambiguously as Spartan *φόβος*, brooded over for generations. Less obvious is the deeper motivation for the Sicilian expedition. Yet here too Thucydides' analysis is clear: he

29. This contrast is introduced in a programmatic way by the Corinthians (1.70) and explicitly confirmed later by Thucydides himself (8.96.5); on this celebrated theme in Thucydides, Luginbill is most comprehensive (1999, 82–215). For a similar list of antonyms describing Athens and Sparta, see Luginbill 1999, 87–94. For some examples of how the contrast informs Thucydides' presentation of individuals, strategy, tactics, and even his narrative style, see Edmunds 1975, 40–41, 89–90, 97–99; Luginbill 1999, 105–72; Rood 1998, 225–48.

30. General ignorance: 1.20, esp. 1.20.3, 6.54.1. Athenian ignorance of the size of Sicily and its population: 6.1.1, cf. 6.6.1 (*τοσαῦτα ἔθνη . . . Σικελίαν ἔκει*). Ignorance of the Eggestaeans' trickery: 6.6.3, 6.8, and cf. 6.9 (Nicias' generally unshared doubts). Such ignorance, according to Thucydides, contributed to the false glorification of the Trojan War, the false myths of Harmodius and Aristogeiton (which influenced the recall of Alcibiades, 6.60.1; cf. 1.20.2), and the false hopes that caused the Syracusan debacle.

31. Rawlings gives a multifaceted comparison of Books 1 and 6, and Thucydides' presentation of the Archidamian and Decelean Wars (see esp. 1981, 5–6, 62–84). Concerning the uniquely Thucydidean phrase *ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις*, Rawlings writes (1981, 68–69): "It is difficult to overemphasize the significance of this parallelism of language. . . . With the phrase *alethestate prophasis* he [Thucydides] is, as it were, holding up a sign for the reader saying 'Recall if you will, the real reason for the outbreak of the first ten-year war. Compare the causes of the two wars.'" Cf. Hunter 1973, 127–35, 145–48.

repeatedly states that the Athenians' true desire was to conquer all Sicily, for which the Egestaeans' requests formed only a convenient pretext.³² With regard to such ambitions, Thucydides repeatedly uses strong language.³³ Most emphatic of all is Thucydides' evocation of the atmosphere at the war assembly, when after Nicias has given his last speech, "Desire fell upon all those there, and all wanted to sail to Sicily." The vehemence of the phrase ἔρωσ ἐνέπεσε τοῖς πᾶσιν recalls other crucial moments in the war when rational deliberation yielded to momentary passion.³⁴ Moreover, the passage has all the concentrated force of the first introduction in which fear "forced" the Spartans into war (1.23.6); yet, significantly, it lacks the ambiguity of the first assessment. National character drove each side to their respective actions, but while the Spartans took years to act upon fears that had festered for generations after the Persian Wars, the Athenians needed little incitement—merely the Egestaeans' specious show of wealth, Alcibiades' charisma, and the excitement of the gathered assembly—to launch themselves into an enterprise almost as significant as the great war with the Peloponnesians (6.1.1, 6.36.4). Thus, the pervasive opposition of Athenian daring and Spartan caution also informs Thucydides' implicit comparison of the two wars. Nor is the comparison flattering to imperialistic Athens: if φόβος was the "truest cause" of the Peloponnesians' essentially defensive actions with regard to their nearby colonies and allies, ἔρωσ threw the Athenians into an unprovoked war upon neutral, distant Sicilians. The Spartans were embarrassed for having technically started the first war; but the Athenians began the second for no compelling reason, and with a prevailing lack of moral scruple or legal caution.³⁵

The Sicilian expedition thus contrasts an ἔρωσ attended by ignorance and hysteria with Spartan fears that crystallized over half a century in response to the very obvious growth of Athenian power. Yet, even in the triumph of ἔρωσ, Thucydides still notes the continued operation of fear, in particular the paradoxical employment of scare tactics for imperialistic ends. First, the Egestaeans hazard all sorts of appeals but dwell particularly (καὶ κεφάλαιον) on the (remote) possibility that a Syracusan victory at Egesta will consolidate a pan-Sicilian alliance, which will in turn lead to a pan-Dorian alliance that will in turn overthrow the Athenian empire. It would be "prudent" (σῶφρον), therefore, for the Athenians to aid Egesta and their last remaining allies and cut off this dreaded chain of events (6.6). Alcibiades later uses similar scare tactics: "we did not take them [the Egestaeans] into alliance to have them to help us in Hellas, but that they might so annoy our enemies in Sicily as to prevent them from coming over here and attacking us. . . . Men do not

32. 6.6, 6.8, 6.33, 6.76, cf. 4.60.1, 4.65.2–3, 3.86, cf. 7.64.1, 7.66, 7.68.1–2.

33. This includes ἔρωσ (6.13.1, 6.24.3), ἐφίεσθαι (6.6.1, 6.8.4, 6.11.5), ὀρέγεσθαι (6.10.5, 6.16.6), δυσέροτας τῶν ἀπόντων (6.13.1), ὀρμάω (6.6.1, 6.9.3, 6.24.2), ἐπιθυμία (6.13.3, 6.24.2, 6.24.4, 6.33.2). Cf. Luginbill 1999, 156.

34. Similar phrases with an aorist of πίπτω are used for the outbreak of plague in Athens (2.48.2) and στάσις in Corcyra (3.82.2), and of the sudden (and, to Thucydides, irrational) impulse to fortify Pylos (4.4.1). Cf. the unexpected disaster that "fell upon" Mycalessus (7.29.5); or the Spartans' sudden fear before the battle at Naupactus (2.91.3).

35. 7.18 (reporting Spartan attitudes); cf. 7.68.

rest content with parrying the attacks of a superior, but often strike the first blow to prevent the attack being made" (6.18.2; trans. Crawley). Furthermore (Alcibiades warns), unless the Athenians continue to undertake ambitious projects and remain faithful to their traditional πολυπραγμοσύνη, their power will begin to fade. Merely to be maintained, power must be exercised and increased; if the Athenians do not rule others, they will be ruled themselves.³⁶

Such arguments, while plausible, represent the subordination of prudence and rational fear to imperialistic ambition; it is sophistic to contend that against a conservative enemy like Sparta, the Athenians needed to conquer Sicily in order just to protect Attica and their empire. But in an atmosphere receptive to such arguments, even Nicias' prudence is perverted to serve expansionist ends. Thus, Nicias' counsel of cautious preparation only further inflames the excited assembly; his formidable list of resources only emboldens the Athenians, with their habitual faith in γνώμη, τέχνη, and παρασκευή, and their past success in controlling circumstances. But here all such rational planning and technology become only the means for what in Thucydides' mind was essentially a mad enterprise.³⁷ In the end, only defeat proves that Nicias' fears were justified. The emotional περιπέτεια in Book 7 parallel the material reversals. Of the many that sailed, only a few returned alive (7.87.6). So too, on the psychological plane, Athenian ἔρωσ and fearlessness gradually metamorphose into despair and terror: the proud adventurers of the mid-summer of 415 (6.31) are reduced to terror during the last sea battles and final retreat (7.55, 7.71, 7.75.7, 7.80.3). The Athenian δῆμος, wild with enthusiasm in 6.24.3, are thrown into panic and consternation when they learn of the disaster.³⁸

One common claim is that Thucydides, deeply shaped by the sophistic movement and the Periclean circle, absorbed such "Enlightenment" ideals as free thought, clear expression, progressive science, the all-round education of individuals, and the gradual improvement of society. Thucydides celebrated Periclean Athens for its bold, self-confident humanism—an "education" for Greece and others, even if it lost the war. A corollary of this interpretation makes the Sicilian expedition an indirect encomium of "Athenian" γνώμη and τέχνη: Athens is defeated, but her better qualities of innovation and optimistic energy live on in democratic Syracuse, with its Periclean Hermocrates and enthusiastic people, or even in a Sparta galvanized to unprecedented daring by Alcibiades' influence. Post-Periclean Athens, on the other hand, was defeated because she was led by Nicias, with his typically "Spartan" anxieties, superstitions, and plodding ἀπραγμοσύνη. There is certainly truth in this view, and Thucydides himself states that the Syracusans were "most like the Athenians in character."³⁹ Yet one should not overstate the case. Despite

36. See the similar reasoning of Euphemos, Athenian ambassador to Catane (6.82–83, esp. 3.83.2–4, 6.86.1).

37. For the sake of brevity, I omit discussing Thucydides' remarks in 2.65, which seem wholly incompatible with the general aura of doom attending Athenian ambitions in Books 6–7 (e.g., forebodings in 6.31.1).

38. 8.1.2: φόβος τε καὶ κατάπληξις μεγίστη δῆ; cf. 6.31.1.

39. 8.96.5; cf. 7.55.2, 6.20.3.

Nicias' leadership, Thucydides does not speak of a general failure of Athenian nerve. On the contrary, Lamachus and Demosthenes remain energetic leaders (e.g., 7.28, 7.42–7.42.5), and their men struggle on until the very end. The continued tenacity of the Athenians for ten years after the Sicilian debacle astonished the Greek world, and perhaps Thucydides too.⁴⁰ Nor is Thucydides' description of Syracusan innovation unambiguously laudatory. The Syracusans innovate by strengthening their ships' rams and front ends (7.36); they stretch hides across the bows to prevent grappling hooks from holding.⁴¹ But such "advances" are paradoxically regressive, for in adopting them the Syracusans simply refit their ships for an old-style sea battle, that is, hand-to-hand fighting from ship to ship.⁴² The Athenians do not follow suit, presumably because they do not have the space, timber, supplies, or facilities to do so. Hermocrates is an exceptional leader, but so is Gylippus. And for all their "Athenian" dynamism, the Syracusans cannot fully transcend regressive "Dorian" piety: after the Athenian naval defeat in the Great Harbor, the Syracusans throw themselves into celebrating a festival, thereby almost allowing the Athenians to escape.⁴³ Given such observations, Thucydides hardly points to a shift of the true Athenian spirit to Syracuse; the Sicilian expedition is not a "thematic vindication" of Athenian τόλμα and γνώμη.⁴⁴

4. THE TERRORS OF REALITY: WAR, CHANCE, HUMAN NATURE

Rather, the "lesson" of the Sicilian expedition is that fearless confidence and ἔρως are potentially catastrophic. The Athenians ignored Nicias' counsel of rational fear and self-doubt; fear itself was distorted to promote an imperialistic ἔρως. In the Sicilian expedition, Pericles' greatest fears concerning the war and Athenian national character (1.44.1) are realized. Like Melos and Mycalessus, Athens suffers the consequences of underestimating the contingencies and dangers of war, international relations, and domestic politics. Nor is it unfair to compare a great state like Athens with remote Melos and Mycalessus. All suffer from being insular, and from seeing themselves as physically or temperamentally separated from other states. In particular, great powers, even an open democracy like Athens, can become "insular" when they overestimate themselves as exceptional—a tendency typical of the Athenians, according to Thucydides' Corinthians (1.70.3; cf. 2.39.2–4, 2.41.3–4). For such overconfidence and neglect of external dangers, the Athenians suffer their terrible defeat in Syracuse.

Thucydides, however, would not let the careful reader underestimate these dangers. War is a "violent teacher" (3.82.2) and the written *History* gives a

40. 7.28; on Book 8, cf. Luginbill 1999, 152–61.

41. 7.62.3, 7.65.2. De Romilly (1956b, 151–61) and Hunter (1973, 85–94) discuss the battle at length, but do not emphasize the unexpected event of the whole Athenian navy being defeated at sea by the use of land tactics—a paradox Thucydides suggests by his invitation to compare Pylos and Syracuse (see 7.71.7 with 4.12.3).

42. 7.36.5 ("what before seemed due to the helmsmen's lack of skill—to clash prow with prow—was especially employed by the Syracusans"); cf. 7.62.

43. 7.73. Edmunds (1975, 93) assimilates this passage to his contrast of the "Spartan love of peace and tranquillity" and Athenian restlessness, as presented by the Corinthians (1.70.8).

44. See Edmunds 1975, 29, 122–23, and 140–45, for the phrase and argument.

vicarious experience of war in order to point to the ubiquity of danger. In Thucydides' presentation, fear pervades the war more than any other emotion, even grief. Thus, in the fragmented political landscape of Greece, each state might fear almost every other—allies, subjects, and enemy.⁴⁵ The events of war are full of terror: the unexpected appearance of the Thracian mercenaries in Mycalessus (7.29); the Theban troops' sudden appearance within the walls of Plataea (2.3.1); the Spartans' surprise attack on the Piraeus early in the war (2.94.1); the Spartans' alarm at Athenian successes in Pylos and Cythera (4.55); the hysteria attending the acts of the Hermocopidae in 415 (6.27–29, 6.53); some Syracusans' fear at rumors of an Athenian armada (6.33–40, cf. 6.49.1–2, 6.76.1); the confusion in Athenian ranks at the night battle at Epipolae (7.44); the panic in Athens when they learned of the loss of Amphipolis or of Euboea (4.108.1, 8.95–96).⁴⁶ In addition to such various happenings, Thucydides includes a wide array of miscellaneous fears: fear of invasion, fear of losing one's harvest to invaders, fear of rebellion, fear of death before and in battle, democrats' fears of aristocratic ambition, politicians' fears of their people's ambition, fears for the integrity of officers abroad, fear of eclipse, fear of thunder, fear of disease—in short, fear almost everywhere, pervading the war, political life, and perhaps even the human condition itself.⁴⁷

Nor are all the objects of fear definite and determinable: chance too must be feared, and is, although in different ways. A “chance” event may be understood either as an objective fact, or due to subjective ignorance. According to the first view, reality itself is not thoroughly intelligible: disorder, randomness, and chance are objective forces that cannot be rationally penetrated. Others see “chance” events as ones that may be unintended or unpredicted, but that theoretically remain susceptible to prediction and rational analysis.

45. Sparta, Aegina (1.67.2), the many allies of the Delian League (1.77, 3.13.1), Syracuse and other Sicilian cities (4.1.2), and perhaps even Carthage (6.34.2) all fear Athens. Amphissians fear the Phocians (3.101.2), Corcyreans the Corinthians (1.31.2, 3.80.1), Athenians a Corcyrean alliance (1.36), Sicilians the Syracusans (6.85–86). Athens fears its subjects (e.g., 4.108.1, 5.14). All were in awe of the legendary invincibility of the Spartan hoplites until their defeat at Sphacteria (4.34, 4.40). This list is far from exhaustive.

46. In the later siege, the Plataeans panic when the Spartans capture part of their outer wall (2.76.4). Phormio is alarmed that the city of Naupactus lies undefended (2.90.3). The Spartans' Alcidas fears the pursuit of Athenian triremes (3.33.1). The Ionians dread that Alcidas might attack their unfortified cities (3.33.2). Partisans of Syracuse in Catane are terrified when Athenian soldiers suddenly appear within the city (5.51). The Syracusans are alarmed by Athenian military efficiency (6.98.2). The Athenians fear the Spartan fortification of Decelea (6.91.6).

47. Invasion: 2.94.1, 3.80.1, 6.34.2, 6.63.2. Fear for the harvest, livestock, or land: 2.5.5, 2.21.2, 4.84.2, 4.88.1, et al.; the Athenians in 480–479 and again during the Peloponnesian War are exceptional for fearlessly abandoning their land (1.74.2, 2.62.3, 6.83, et al.). Fear of rebellion: 1.56, 3.1, 3.3, 3.54.5, 4.41.3, 4.55.1, 4.80.2–3, 4.108.1. Fear of violent death: 1.26.2, 1.49.4; 1.51.5, 1.60, 1.64.1, 1.67.1, 1.119, 2.86.5–2.87.1, 2.91.4, 3.112.7; 3.32.1, 3.80.1, 3.79.3, 3.77.1, 3.78.1, 3.79.4, 3.93.1–2, 3.105.4, 3.107.3, 4.126.1, 6.91.6, 6.98.2, 6.101.5, 7.69.2. Fear of the flamboyant Alcibiades: 6.15.4, 6.92.5, 7.79.3. Pericles' fears of the Athenian people's impetuosity: 1.144.1. Spartans' fears of their officers' venality abroad: 1.95.7. Fear of thunder and an eclipse: 6.70.1, 7.50, 7.79.3. Fear of disease (2.57.1, 2.60.4). My list is by no means exhaustive but it helps to illustrate Pouncey's remark that “The climate of war and the spirit of suspicion and the fear it produces can be traced through the whole work from the beginning to the end” (1980, 145). For a fuller discussion of instances, see Huart, who notes that “φοβῆν-φοβείσθαι—plus encore que φόβος-φοβερός et les composés de φοβῆν—sont particulièrement nombreux dans l'œuvre . . . on ne compte que 23 exemples de φοβῆν-φοβείσθαι chez Hérodote, contre un peu plus de 100 chez Thucydide; la disproportion est flagrante et révèle la place importante tenue dans l'œuvre par ce sentiment” (1968, 123).

Lowell Edmunds argues that the latter, subjective stance is more typical of the Athenians: for Pericles and others, chance can be mastered by γνώμη, and “chance” events are due simply to inadequate preparations or insight. Archidamus, on the other hand, articulates the “Peloponnesian view” that “the chances that befall one cannot be analyzed by reason”;⁴⁸ human intelligence is inevitably limited by an element of unpredictability in events. With regard to this philosophical issue, Thucydides’ views are difficult to pinpoint. As Edmunds has argued, Thucydides himself seems to accept the view of chance as a name for subjective ignorance. Thus, Thucydides’ actors make their decisions with incomplete information, and for them chance operates as if it were an objective, independent power. In contrast, the historian operates with the knowledge of hindsight, and the rationalist’s faith in the full intelligibility of past events. The *History* will be “useful” (ὠφέλιμος) because in a determined universe, knowledge of the typical patterns and forces in the past can help informed actors to accurately predict the future.

Edmunds, thus, sees a divide between Thucydides’ pessimistic *History*—which narrates the triumph of Sparta and the ostensible defeat of Periclean γνώμη—and Thucydides the optimistic historian, who hoped for a deeper understanding of the natural and political worlds.⁴⁹ Yet, that Thucydides’ pessimism overshadows his own rational faith is evident not only in aspects of his narrative, but more importantly in his near-explicit assessment of human nature. First, events so often outrun calculation, and Edmunds himself notes how the Spartan concept of an objective τύχη always (with one exception) proves more realistic.⁵⁰ A pessimist, then, could read the *History* as a chronicle of failure, as even the most insightful leaders overestimate their abilities and fail to predict crucial developments.⁵¹ Thus, for all his γνώμη, Themistocles did not foresee his own exile, learning Persian as a client of the Great King. Pericles’ insight into the nature of the war was superb (2.65), and yet he did not see the train of events that would contribute to Athens’ defeat—the plague, his own death, the rise of less honorable or able politicians like Alcibiades, Alcibiades’ recall and exile, Sparta’s reentry into the war, the reinforcement of the Syracusans, the fortification of Decelea (7.27–28), and the construction of a more formidable Peloponnesian fleet. For all the Athenians’ preparations and Nicias’ caution, no one guessed that ethnic pride (for instance) would play an important role in the war and even in actual combat.⁵² It is difficult to see how studying the particulars of the past would be “useful” for predicting “chance” particulars in the future. Rather, it seems that Thucydides would insist on the practical limits of intelligence:

48. 1.84.3 (τὰς προσπιπτούσας τύχας οὐ λόγῳ διαιρετάς). See Edmunds 1975, *passim*, but especially 15–22 and 80–81 (the “Peloponnesian principle” or “the archaic view,” i.e., pessimism with regard to human weakness, especially vis-à-vis the gods). For τύχη, see 1.78.1–2, 1.82.6, 1.84.4, 1.120.5, 1.122.1, 1.140, 2.11.4, 2.91.4, 4.18.3–4, 5.16, 5.75.3, 7.77.1–4, et al.

49. See Edmunds 1975, 205–14; cf. Luginbill, 1999, 18.

50. See Edmunds 1995, 180–89.

51. For this, see especially Stahl 1966.

52. See, e.g., 6.80.3, 6.80.2, 7.5.4; the singing of the paean by Dorians on both sides at the battle of Epipolae contributed to the Athenian defeat, despite Demosthenes’ boldness and reinforcements (7.44.6).

chance is an indeterminate variable; its influence is quite real and should be feared as such.

Potentially even more terrible than chance is human nature itself. It is a curious fact that Thucydides will speak of "human nature" and τὸ ἀνθρώπινον generally on the outbreak of some horror—a war, a plague, civil war, atrocity—or when ruthless public men articulate their creed of *machtpolitik*.⁵³ It is as if Thucydides were interested primarily in power, its manifestations, and even more, the effects of its gain and loss on human beings. Thus, he is quick to note which war, fleet, army, alliance, fire was the largest.⁵⁴ The psychology of unrestrained power is explored in the Spartans' decision regarding Plataea, or Athenian actions at Mytilene, Scione, and Melos. Abject powerlessness, on the other hand, is the focus when accounts of the plague in Athens, cannibalism in Potidaea, or *stasis* in Corcyra offer images of societies *in extremis*. More, Thucydides' understanding of human nature is a bleak one: νόμος and civilized morality are a veneer that can so easily be stripped away to reveal man beneath, the worse-than-animal.⁵⁵ Thucydides' "realism" is less doctrinaire than that of more abstract thinkers like Callicles, Thrasymachus, Machiavelli, or Hobbes (with whom he is often associated): he notes the possibility of voluntary moderation in the use of power (1.76.3–4, 5.111.4), or of altruism and love in the direst of circumstances (2.51.5), but these are alluded to as exceptional.

Nor are these exceptions buoyed by any firm affirmation of a *telos* higher than amoral power; the depths of human nature are not matched in Thucydides' narrative by any zeniths of secular or religious genius. For unlike modern writers who (rightly) depict the Peloponnesian War as one between the *Kulturstadt* of imperial Athens and a benighted, militaristic Sparta, Thucydides does not graft this polarity onto the others (land/sea, oligarchy/democracy, conservatism/innovation, fear/desire) that structure his *History*. The main hint that the war affected people like Sophocles, Aristophanes, Socrates, or Phidias is Pericles' quick reference to festivals, beautiful buildings, and trade (2.38). But, contrary to many humanistically minded commentators, this short chapter would be a meager one if it were intended as a "hymn" to the glories of golden-age Athens. The statement that "we cultivate refinement without extravagance and knowledge without effeminacy" (2.40.1) adds little; in fact, it tacitly accuses art and intellectual life of too often being expensive

53. 1.22.4 (on war); 2.50.1 (Athenian plague overpowering human nature); 3.82.2 (Corcyra); 1.76.2, 5.105.1–2 (Athenian appeals to the "law of the stronger"). Thus, Cogan's explication of τὸ ἀνθρώπινον as "that process of deliberation which all men undertake in initiating action" (1981, 237) seems overly abstract, divorced from the actual contexts in which Thucydides tends to use the word or its equivalent. Far truer to the pessimism of the *History* is Shorey's exploration of a "Thucydidean criticism of life" (1893, 66–68): "a writer would need great naïveté or the support of a transcendental faith in order to retain any moral illusions while chronicling the affairs of Melos, Plataea, and Corcyra, the butcheries of Mycalessus, Mytilene, Scione. . . . And there is little evidence of any such triumphant faith in Thucydides" (85–86).

54. 1.2, 2.31.2, 2.77.4, 5.60.3, 6.31, 7.56.4; cf. 2.64.3, Macleod 1983, 153.

55. Cf. Arist. *Pol.* 1253a30–35 ("For just as mankind, when it reaches its *telos*, is the best of animals, so it becomes the worst of all when removed from law and justice"), though unlike Aristotle, Thucydides does not emphasize the human capacity for extreme good, perhaps because like Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*), Golding (*Lord of the Flies*), and others, he found it less compelling than its opposite.

and enervating. Cultivated readers, then, can overemphasize the artistic and liberal values in Pericles' speech, forgetting that his ἐπιτάφιος, true to the genre and the demands of the occasion, is primarily in praise of the military traditions of the city. Pericles praises the power of the city: everything is secondary to this central fact—the generations of men, customs, democratic constitution, and dispositions that increased the city's power,⁵⁶ the artistic flowering that shows the superfluity of its strength. Athens is indeed an "education for Greece," but the lesson is that democratic universalism creates the most powerful states.⁵⁷ As in 2.38, throughout the *History*, Thucydides refers to temples and festivals (the locus for Classical art) only when relevant to political and military developments (e.g., 2.15–16): in particular, Athens' aesthetic splendor should not fool one into overestimating her real power (1.10.2).

Again, Thucydides is interested almost exclusively in power, how it is gained and lost. All is subordinated to this: wars, armies, and armadas gain most significance in his eyes as they exhibit extraordinary concentrations of power; defeats, plagues, chance events, the outburst of passions like fear or desire show how the loss of power shakes communities or individual lives. Amid the ebb and flow of power, Thucydides never himself pauses to affirm that this individual, that accomplishment or revelation somehow redeemed so much "sound and fury." His "human nature" shines forth in the powerlessness of the plague-struck Athenians, the *stasis* at Corcyra, or when the Athenians land in their omnipotence at Melos. About other aspects of humanity—the Aristophanic ability to laugh through the worst, for instance, or a Platonic aspiration for an absolute beyond κίνησις—Thucydides is silent.

There are other ways in which Thucydides might warn his readers to fear human nature, how in difficult circumstances it can swing between extremes of self-confidence and self-doubt, arrogance and paralyzing anxiety. First, one should fear the general tendency not to think, plan, and study. In the style of an intellectual elitist, Thucydides repeatedly voices his exasperation with the ignorance and lack of curiosity evident among his peers. Again, he seems to have been particularly irritated by the Athenians' veneration of Harmodius and Aristogeiton, whom Thucydides debunks as having in fact only exacerbated Hippias' tyranny.⁵⁸ Similarly, he instinctively knows the dynamics of "groupthink": the energy and excitement of the crowd can infect each individual with a false sense of power, luring him into fearless confidence and

56. 2.36.4 (ἐπιτηδεύσεις, πολιτεία, τρόποι), 2.41.2.

57. On the phrase τῆς Ἑλλάδος παιδεύσις (2.41.1), cf. Crane 1998, 315 ("Athens is the school of Hellas because it has more power than any other state"). Of the tendency to romanticize Thucydides' judgment of Athens on the basis of a few decontextualized passages, Parry is representative. For him, Periclean Athens is the moving force and τέλος of Thucydides' *History*; hence "because Athens under Pericles remains an ineffaceable image in the mind, the city is truly invincible, and to fix this image is precisely the purpose of Thucydides' account" (1972, 59–61). In a similar vein, Edmunds writes that the Funeral Oration is an expression of the "exuberance of Athenian rationality and a celebration of the rational freedom which Pericles regards as the prime characteristic of the Athenian character" (1975, 44). For more examples of this tendency, see Ziolkowski 1981, 197–99, and Rood 1998, 292. But Chambers adds welcome cautionary remarks against "modern 'Pericleanism' inspired by the Funeral Oration" (1957, 80–81).

58. See n. 30 above for references.

a fatal neglect of the many dangers at home and abroad.⁵⁹ In all such cases, the human being tends to be dominated by the immediately given (τὸ παρόν, τὰ ἐτοῖμα).⁶⁰ Accepted notions and traditions, present circumstances, the contagious emotion of the group can all “enslave the mind” (2.61.3) and make it a prey to changing contingencies. A leader is exceptional, then, when he can resist passions or whims of the moment to articulate a larger vision and can inspire his followers similarly to rise above the present.⁶¹ In other generalizing comments, Thucydides himself notes the human tendency to be fired by irrational hopes—as the Sicilian expedition most dramatically illustrates.⁶²

On the other hand is the extreme of excessive deliberation. A striking observation is made of developments during the Corcyrean civil war, in which

the blunter wits were most successful. Apprehensive of their own deficiencies and of the cleverness of their antagonists, they feared to be worsted in debate and to be surprised by the combinations of their more versatile opponents, and so at once boldly had recourse to action: while their adversaries, arrogantly thinking that they should know in time, and that it was unnecessary to secure by action what policy afforded, often fell victims to their want of precaution. (3.83.3–4; trans. Crawley)

That “the race is not always to the swift” is a truism recognized by figures as various as Aesop, the author of *Ecclesiastes*, and Hobbes.⁶³ So too, Thucydides himself sometimes corroborates the principle, and attributes variations of it to speakers as diverse as Archidamus the Spartan king and Cleon “the tanner.”⁶⁴ There is a time for everything, and a plurality of situations demands a plurality of responses. While Thucydides with his interest in ἀντιλογία would hardly deprecate debate per se, there are nevertheless situations in which blunt action is more “intelligent” than intelligent deliberation. Thus, Cleon’s criticism of ζύνεσις is operative during the Melian dialogue as the Melians ponder one distant possibility after another, under the eyes of the Athenian army. The Sicilian expedition, Thucydides implies, took on such significance because of Nicias’ excessive cogitation: here ζύνεσις and rational planning only worsened the defeat. Similarly, when the armada is nearing

59. See esp. 4.28, 6.24; cf. 6.35.1 (of the arrogant Syracusan δῆμος, ὀλίγον δ’ ἦν τὸ . . . φοβούμενον τὸ μέλλον). This may explain why demagogues like Cleon and Athenagoras, who incite the assembly’s sense of power, are “most persuasive with the commons” (3.36.6, 6.35.2); and Thucydides’ own comment that large imperial cities can make serious strategic mistakes like the Sicilian expedition (2.65.11). Cf. regular dismissive comments concerning the fickle “many”: 2.65.4, 6.63.2 (οἶον δὲ ὄχλος φιλεῖ θαρσύνειν ποιεῖν), 8.1.4.

60. See esp. 3.82.2; cf. 1.21.2, 2.22.1, 2.54.1–3, 2.59.2, 2.61.3, 2.65.1, 6.83.4 for similar thoughts and even wording. Cf. Luginbill, who argues that for Thucydides, γνώμη is generally the slave of the passions (ὀργή): “truly objective thought is a rare commodity in the *History*. . . . With few exceptions, therefore, *gnome* is a weak force in the *History*” (1999, 60).

61. Pericles (2.59.3–2.65.1; cf. 2.13.6, 2.65.9) was remarkable in this respect. Less successful were Archidamus (1.80–85), Hermocrates (6.33–34), and Nicias (6.20–23). Demagogues like Sthenelaidas and Athenagoras, on the other hand, make easy appeals to τὰ ἐτοῖμα—justice, the gods, Dorian pride, or Athenagoras’ party slanders (1.88, 6.38–39).

62. Cf. 4.108.4 (εἰωθότες οἱ ἄνθρωποι οὐ μὲν ἐπιθυμοῦσιν ἐλπίδι ἀπερισκέπτῃ δίδοναι . . .) and Diodorus 3.84.5.

63. *Ecclesiastes* 9:11. In Chapter 11 of *Leviathan* (1952), Hobbes borrows directly from Thucydides 3.83.3.

64. 1.84.3 (Archidamus), 2.37.3–4 (Cleon). Cf. Hornblower 1991, 125–26 (citing Zahn 1934), on how Thucydides praises ζύνεσις only when conjoined with moral qualities like σωφροσύνη.

Sicily, it is clearly too late for further debate. Of the three generals' proposals, Alcibiades' counsel of further delay may have been the worst possible (6.48); likewise, Nicias' later procrastination appears almost criminal in contrast with Demosthenes' alacrity (7.42, 7.47–49).

5. THE "LESSONS" OF HISTORY:
RATIONAL FEAR, PRUDENCE, AND COURAGE

The events of war, the many definite sources of fear, the force of chance, the evil of human nature—Thucydides' reality is filled with dangers of which the statesman and responsible citizen should be mindful: that caution, prudence, and self-doubt are the best general policy in such an environment has its greatest proof in the fact the Sparta won the war, despite Athens' initially immense material advantages.⁶⁵ And yet, Thucydides, former general and man of action, hardly recommends a craven timidity before the myriad dangers, determinate and indeterminate, that beset individuals or states. Other approaches are possible, yet their success is often dependent on the ubiquitous potency of fear and the right manipulation of the enemies' pre-existent fears. First, it is in this context that one might best place the initial success but ultimate failure of Athenian τόλμα. Daring can be successful against opponents made weak either by habitual timidity, unpreparedness, ignorance, or lack of understanding.⁶⁶ Thus, Nicias reminds the Athenians that *omne ignotum pro magnifico*: the reputation of Athenian power may be more efficacious than its actual use.⁶⁷ On similar psychological principles, Lamachus advises an immediate attack, while the Syracusans are in greatest dread of the much-bruited Athenian armada.⁶⁸ Alcibiades rightly praises the strategy of attacking an enemy's weak point, where their greatest fears are concentrated.⁶⁹ In a larger arena, Thucydides estimates that the slow, strategically timid Spartans were ideal opponents for the daring Athenians; against the Syracusans, a people more like themselves in character and resources, the Athenians failed (7.55, 8.96.5; cf. 7.21.3–5). Nevertheless, Thucydides does not romanticize what one writer has termed "the dash and daring" typical of the Athenians: τόλμα is most effective against weak opponents, but in the wrong conditions can be disastrous.

65. Cf. Archidamus' maxim at 2.11.4: "often the smaller, apprehensive group has warded off their numerical superiors" (πολλάκις τε τὸ ἔλασσον πλήθος δεδιὸς ἄμεινον ἡμίνατο τοὺς πλέονας).

66. For the notion that daring tactics thrive on enemies' ignorance, see 2.3.4 (Plataean night attack). Cf. Clausewitz 1968, 259: "As often as boldness encounters hesitation, the probability of the result is of necessity in its favour, because the very state of hesitation implies a loss of equilibrium already. It is only when it encounters cautious foresight . . . that it is at a disadvantage; such cases, however, rarely occur. Out of the whole multitude of prudent men in the world, the great majority are so from timidity." By the same principle, Hermocrates' initial counsel of τόλμα against the fresh Athenian armada (6.34) was probably inopportune; but later, when setbacks had thrown the Athenians into a "state of hesitation," similar advice proves effective (7.21).

67. 6.11.4.

68. τὸ γὰρ πρῶτον πᾶν στρατεύμα δεινότερον εἶναι (6.49.2). Similar is Thucydides' analysis in 6.63.2 and Demosthenes' reasoning in 7.42.3; cf. Hunter 1973, 95–99; Rood 1998, 169–70.

69. 6.91.6. So in fact the Spartans' fortification of Decelea was very successful (6.27–28)—as was the Athenian fortification of Pylos with its encouragement to the Messenians to revolt (4.41.3, 4.55.1; cf. 3.54.5).

Thucydides would seem to reserve greatest praise, therefore, for those who combine mindful prudence with determined action. Here, then, he would seem to make an indirect contribution to contemporary sophistic discussions about courage, and its relation to fear and confidence.⁷⁰ Is courage akin to the reckless, fearless τόλμα shown by some on the battlefield? Or is courage a kind of knowledge of evil, combined with the ability not to flee before it? Thucydides' admiration for Pericles and Archidamus would seem to ally him with the latter view. These were both statesmen and soldiers, who combined cautious awareness of the most manifold dangers with determined action in the field;⁷¹ they exemplify Thucydides' view that prudence need not be an excuse for cowardice—a thought that seems true only when desperate circumstances rob people's better senses.⁷² In accordance with this view of courage, the best statesmen and generals can allay their followers' fears, even when these are justified.⁷³ Furthermore, it is within the all-inclusive context of fear that one might appreciate Thucydides' admiration for leaders like Pericles and Archidamus: both recognized the multitude of dangers in war and political life, and attempted to account for as many variables and factors as possible, without letting calculation impair their capacity for resolute action. Ideal courage for Thucydides, then, transcends any λόγος/ἔργον dichotomy: courage reconciles the awareness of danger and τὸ φοβερὸν with the determination not to be cowed by it. Courage mediates between total fearlessness and a fearfulness too intense for action.

Easily enunciated, these “lessons” are harder to put into practice. Fear may figure so prominently in Thucydides' narrative, analysis, and speeches because he sensed that his Classical audiences were in particular need of an education in rational prudence. Their limited historical consciousness promoted a tendency to mythologize or glorify warfare as heroic, patriotic, short, and not too bloody. The numbers, energy, and influence of young men could make war more appealing, and drown out the caution of elders who knew the sufferings of war.⁷⁴ In teaching this one “lesson,” therefore, the *History* is a thoroughly somber work. War, chance, and human nature do their worst throughout. Fear pervades the events of the war and actors' deliberations about it; fear is one of the strongest forces shaping political life, from primitive

70. See especially Plato's *Laches*, with Schmid (1992) and Hobbs (2000).

71. See esp. Archidamus at 2.11.5: *χρὴ δὲ αἰεὶ ἐν τῇ πολέμῳ τῇ μὲν γνώμῃ θαρσαλέους στρατεύειν, τῷ δ' ἔργῳ δεδιότας παρεσκευασθαι* (“In enemy territory, it is always necessary to campaign with an attitude of confidence, but to make preparations with a realistic apprehension”), and Pericles at 2.40.3: *διαφερόντως γὰρ δὴ καὶ τότε ἔχομεν ὥστε τολμᾶν τε οἱ αὐτοὶ μάλιστα καὶ περὶ ὧν ἐπιχειρήσομεν ἐκλογίζεσθαι· ὁ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἀμαθία μὲν θράσος, λογισμὸς δὲ ὄκνον φέρει* (“For we are exceptional in being ourselves at once extremely daring and capable of thinking through our future enterprises: among others, ignorance brings confidence, and calculation hesitation”). Cf. 2.62.4 (distinction between *αὔχημα* based on ignorance and *καταφρόνησις* on knowledge of one's superiority); and Wasserman 1953, 193.

72. 1.83.1, 1.84 (Archidamus); 2.9.2 (Nicias); 3.82.4 (perversion of normal language and admiration for τόλμα ἀλόγιστος in the Corcyrean *stasis*). Cf. Archidamus accused of *μαλακία* for his deliberate slowness during the first invasion (2.18.3).

73. So Demosthenes exhorting his sailors (2.88.1); Pericles encouraging the Athenians suffering their first experience of war and plague (2.59.3–2.65.1; cf. 2.13.6, 2.65.9); or Nicias before the final sea battle at Syracuse (7.60.5–64; cf. 7.77).

74. For demographics, see 2.8.1 (νεότης πολλή), 2.20.2, 2.21.2. For appeals by Archidamus and Nicias to older, calmer voters, see 1.80.1, 2.11.1, 6.13.1.

times to the most advanced periods. And this is as it should be: if the *History* would teach the statesman anything general, it is the value of a rational fear—or more positively, a cautious courage. It is perhaps to this end that Thucydides chooses to write in what might be described as a “postmodern” style, at least in his speeches. Thucydides would wrench the reader away from conventional certainties, ready phrases, and easy associations of thought. His prickly style, dense with antitheses, abstractions, and μεταβολή, force one to take nothing for granted, but constantly to compare, question, doubt. If the “lesson” is learned, then perhaps a destructive fear that divides individuals in *stasis* and states in war might develop into a prudent fear “useful” for avoiding or ending conflicts less painfully—so that human disasters like the twenty-seven-year Peloponnesian War, and “things like them,” might not occur again.

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