

The Dangerous Qualities of Hope in Thucydides

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As way of providing an entrée into the complicated subject of how hope (*elpis*) works in ancient Greek literature, I want to concentrate on the Athenian historian Thucydides. I've chosen him for a couple of reasons. The first is that Thucydides is representative, in some very broad ways, of *elpis* as a whole; he comes right at the end of the most fruitful period of Greek literature, Classical Athens, and is influenced by both Herodotus, the historian before him, and by a wide variety of Greek poets. And in turn, his historiographical style proves extremely influential upon those who come after. So too, he paints a picture of *elpis* that coheres with what I have found elsewhere in Greek, emphasizing its negative aspects rather than its positive, and, while there are other themes more important in his work, he clearly sees *elpis* as a key feature in human decisionmaking about the future, as the verb, noun, and adjective appear in a wide variety of important passages, which – scholars tend to think – they therefore connect. On the other hand, while there has been a good amount of attention paid to *elpis* in the *Histories*, I think there's still quite a lot of work to be done. So I want to start doing some of that with you today.

I've said that *elpis* runs through Thucydides; in fact there are just about 150 examples of it, only a few of which we'll have a chance to talk about today. Given the care with which Thucydides tends to structure his narrative, and the leitmotifs that run through it, we are certainly safe in thinking that the places where *elpis* clusters might well tell us something important about how they connect those portions of the narrative (i.e., I am offering a literary, not a historical, reading). But just how they connect them is a question very much up for grabs. I'm going to suggest that two key earlier incidents in Thucydides' war foreshadow his extended discussion of the Athenian expedition to Sicily, which many scholars read as the culminating point of the *Histories* (this is my way of alluding to but dismissing the fact that the text we have

ends abruptly, not long after the narrative of the expedition, right in the middle of a sentence). In the time I've got today I want first to provide some very brief background information on Thucydides, and on the Greek emotion of *elpis*, then to summarize what I think are the three most important clusters of *elpis* in the *History*, and to point to the way they create a tragic atmosphere of foreshadowing, in which readers gradually observe Athens falling prey to just the mistakes it points out – and punishes – in others. And I'll finish up by throwing out a few suggestions about what *elpis* really means in ancient Greek, and how its two-edged structure gets at an important point about Greek views of the future that has interesting implications for other emotions, and perhaps other worldviews.

First, Thucydides: often thought of as the first real historian of the west, Thucydides is usually credited with great critical acumen. He sees the real causes of things, or so he tells us, and he realized early on that the Peloponnesian war, the war (or series of wars) between the city-states of Athens and Sparta in the late fifth century BCE, would be of unparalleled importance, so decided to write it up. For many classicists, Thucydides' writing (especially in the Sicilian expedition, to which I'll come) is the single greatest passage of extended narrative prose in Greek. This matters for us today because, among other things, it means that he chooses his words very carefully, and lexical repetition normally signals some larger similarity. So too, Thucydides is an ideal subject for us because he is interested in why things happened the way they did, and because he believes in emotions as a primary force of human motivation, as we'll see. So in addition to what you might think of as military history, details of troop movements and strategic positions, the *History* is full of Thucydides' own speculations about what his agents are feeling – as well as speeches in which they attribute various emotions to themselves and others.

Indeed, Thucydides explains that he has decided to write his history in the belief that patterns recur in human history, such that those who can understand the past will better know the future. So who hopes for what and how ties in nicely with another key feature of Thucydides, the fact that he is interested in how the actors on both sides learn or fail to learn from past events. *Elpis* matters from the very start of the history. In fact the participle Thucydides uses to explain his rationale, in his very first sentence, is *elpisas*, he expected/hoped that the war would be extremely important (**first item** on your handout).

This will provide for us a transition to *elpis*, which so far I've been calling hope. It is, in fact, a bit more complicated than that. *Elpis* and *elpizo*, noun and verb, plus the occasional adjective and participle, are usually translated into English as 'hope'. In fact the lexeme covers a pretty broad semantic range, from English hope to expectation or thought (as in Thucydides' first sentence); sometimes it even denotes a guess about the future that would be unwelcome (i.e., something like 'fear', though this is also a well-articulated emotion in its own right in Greek, and one regularly opposed to *elpis* in Thucydides and elsewhere); both are about the future, and envision outcomes alternately pleasing and displeasing. So there is a fundamental ambiguity in the very nature of *elpis*, centering on whether it is really an emotion at all, or simply a rational prediction of future events, or somewhere in between (but as Douglas noted yesterday, that's not really a problem). As an example of the problem, note that one of the earliest attested occurrences of *elpis* in Greek literature is in Pandora's jar at Hesiod's *Works and Days* 96 where it is seemingly classed with the evils (this is the **second item** on your handout). Pandora, you may remember, is the first woman, created to punish mankind; she is a beautiful evil, hiding terrible things within her pleasing exterior. As a kind of representation of herself, she is given a jar and told not to open it. Being incurably curious, she opens it, which is all part of the divine

plan, and all of the evils fly out of the jar into the world to punish humanity. Interestingly, *elpis* alone remains inside. Many have argued that its presence inside the jar mirrors its presence in us, but it is unclear whether this is a boon or a further punishment (i.e. does human *elpis* mitigate the other evils, or make them even worse?).

We could easily spend all our time today with this very interesting problem, but I want instead to leave it in the air, suggesting that it is the ambiguity itself that is Hesiod's most important lesson for us: sometimes, hope is all people have and it helps them to soldier on through difficulties. But at other times, it simply prolongs human agony; recognizing that things are not going to get better on their own may be the first necessary step to ameliorating them yourself. Note that *elpis* has already become rather complicated, including, especially, the fact that its status can depend on the reality of the situation (note too Margaret's mention yesterday of the Epicurean *alogos* and *eulogos eparsis*). And any Greek could tell you that human beings are not nearly as competent as they think they are at knowing the difference. The ambiguity I have noted in *elpis* is important: it represents not merely an inconvenient difference in how Greek and English divide words, but a statement of fundamental importance about the world. For Thucydides, the fact that one word can cover both pure emotion, hoping against hope, and almost-pure rationality, making your most carefully educated guess about the future, symbolizes the essential problem with human plans, as we shall soon see. Thucydides presents himself throughout the narrative as a rationalist, gifted with brilliant hindsight into the mistakes that would eventually cause the defeat of his native land. So there is some irony, perhaps unintended, in his application of this loaded concept to himself.

It is much more characteristic for Thucydides to use *elpis* as a marker of how bad things really are. Take, for instance, the pithy statement at 4.108.4 (**handout 3**): "Men are wont to

entrust what they desire to unreflecting hope, and to push aside with sovereign reason what they do not want.” That statement will prove to be fairly important as the war continues, and will manifest itself in a variety of ways. It’s fairly clear, but let’s unpack it for just a moment: Thucydides claims that most people, rather than thinking carefully about how plausible their wishes are, using all of the admittedly limited information they have available to gauge rationally whether they are likely to get what they want, simply wish. We have in English a number of ways of saying the same thing, one of which is that God helps those who help themselves. Hope, that is, is not enough all by itself.

For Thucydides, the tendency to hope is a universal human condition (and indeed, one which the even the wary can fall prey to). But for the Athenians the matter is even more serious, for they are characterized early on in the narrative by another group of Greeks as *euelpides* (**handout 4**), full of good hopes, even in dreadful circumstances (*en tois deinois*). Hopefulness, in the Corinthian view of Athenians, goes hand in hand with their activeness, and with success. At this point, this seems like a positive characteristic, as it makes the Athenians resilient, but as the war, and the narrative, continue, we begin to see that hope regularly leads people to behave rashly because it impedes their perceptions of reality. And note the troubling *para dunamin tolmetai*, daring beyond their resources. This is a degree of hope which cannot really be counted upon for long-term success, however cheery and optimistic the Athenians are.

At the same time, there are moments in the *History* that emphasize hope’s potential to save the day, when it is buttressed by careful planning (and a good amount of luck); while hopeful individuals and city-states sometimes make terrible mistakes of judgment, those without hope never prevail. I’ll come back to this point at the end, when we talk about Gylippus, whose

hopes are of a wholly different kind from those of the Athenians. And remember Thucydides himself, who turned out to be absolutely correct in his *elpis* about the hugeness of this war.

I want today to focus on *elpis* at three key moments in Thucydides, the first two of which feed into the last. Our first stop is 427 BCE, and **item 5** on the handout. Mytilene, a former Athenian ally, has revolted. Civil strife, and the failure of the expected Spartan aid, makes them surrender to the Athenians, who vote to kill all of the adult men and enslave all of the women and children. This message is duly sent, but the Athenians reconsider, and open up the question again on the following day; the debate about what should be done with the rebels is one of the most famous scenes in Thucydides, and both speakers draw attention to the role hope plays in people's thinking about the future. The first speaker, Cleon, who wants the Athenians to stick to their guns, claims that **(5a)** the Mytileneans conceived hopes greater than their resources (*dunamis* again) but less than their ambition. He makes, again, the point that hopes need to be grounded in some kind of reality; when they are not – as is the case with the Mytileneans – disaster can – and will – ensue. Diodotus, the speaker who advocates leniency, puts forth the work's first fully articulated view of hope, arguing that it underpins all human action directed toward the future **(5b)**: “men are inspired by hope to run risks, and nobody has ever yet entered into a dreadful situation while convinced that he would not succeed” (here again *deinois* reinforces the link with the Corinthian assessment of the Athenians). Diodotus continues, “hope and desire are everywhere: desire leads, hope follows; desire makes a plan and hope makes the path of luck seem easy; these two emotions are extremely harmful.” Diodotus concludes by suggesting that there is simply no getting around this fundamental law of human nature: people are tricked by hope into behaving in ways that harm them. His words win the day for Mytilene – for the Athenians vote *not* to kill them all. And they echo throughout the narrative, raising the

suggestion that human action is irrevocably hampered by human irrationality, that there is perhaps no way to counteract this design flaw, whose primary symptom is hope about the future. Indeed, we might here reflect that our understanding of hope in English only *really* comes into play in “dangerous situations” (*deinois*), when one is stretched beyond “resources” (*dunamis*). Less dire situations, in which the emotion might be better expressed as confidence, seem to involve something entirely more rational, though again, that is usually the same word, *elpis*, in Greek.

Our second stop is Melos (**6 on handout**), a Spartan colony, which has remained faithful to its parent city. The year is now 416 BCE. Athenian generals, just about to besiege Melos, discuss the situation with its ruling body. The question at issue is whether the Melians ought to surrender (as the Athenians think they should) or remain neutral in the war (as they would prefer). The Melians are well aware that the deck is stacked against them, and claim that their main interest is their own safety; the Athenians for their part dismiss questions of justice out-of-hand, in favor of practical matters: “The powerful,” they say, “exact what they can, and the weak yield what they must.” The Melians observe that this principle might be to the benefit of Athens at the moment, but might soon turn on them, and then note that the fortunes of war are uncertain; for them to yield without a fight would entail giving up all hope, but if they make an effort, there might be hope of standing upright (i.e. remaining a sovereign people). The Athenians respond by saying, essentially (and I apologize for the patchiness of my translation; this is a fairly nasty example of the notoriously difficult Thucydidean style) that hope is a luxury the Melians cannot afford: hope is indeed a solace in dangerous situations (here *kindunois*, also used of the Athenians above), and for those who have further resources. For if she (hope, a feminine noun) harms, she still does not ruin. But for those who put it all on one throw, since hope is by nature

prodigal, only when disaster occurs does she make her true nature known, and when she is known she leaves her victim no resources with which to guard against her in the future. That is, the Athenians suggest that hope is at best harmful and at worse the first step to disaster. They continue dispensing advice: it is the mark of fools when the visible grounds of hope leave them in distress, to take themselves to invisible ones – divination, oracles, and such things – which ruin men through hope. Nowhere else does Thucydides draw this distinction between visible and invisible grounds for hope, but it is clearly crucial in separating out the two strands, one rational (i.e., visible to all who enquire into the matter), the other more mysterious, specialized knowledge, available through non-rational means.

Note that the Athenians have remembered Diodotus' point about what I translated above as “dangerous situations” – they agree that is an especially tempting time to rely upon hope, and an especially unreliable one. But the Athenians also make the counter-Diodotean point that hope, being intangible and unreliable, should *not* motivate the Melians, who have no other options. Where Diodotus seems to see foolish hopes as unavoidable, the Athenians suggest at least the possibility of access to a more realistic version. Their point, which is a good one, is that if you are going to hope, you ought to have a backup plan, such that you are not relying on hope for anything you really *need*. But the Melians do not have a backup plan. In the end, they decide to wait, hopefully, and in fairly short order, they are defeated and destroyed.

In the time that remains, I want to turn to the Sicilian expedition, built wholly upon Athenian hopes, which mostly turn out to be of the invisible, even delusional kind. It is as if the Athenians have forgotten everything they taught others about hope, or as if – though Thucydides does not use the word in this context – their hubris has gotten so out of control that the balance must be redressed. Up to this point, the Athenians have been excellent judges of the foolish

hopes of others, and their own hopes have mostly been realized, in part because they were *not* in dangerous situations, or operating beyond their resources. But now things start to change. Although they are pretty well occupied with a war at home, against Sparta, for reasons not entirely clear, the Athenians decide to send another expedition to Sicily, for purposes also not entirely clear. Athenian hopes about Sicily begin in 416, and they stem from ignorance: Thucydides claims that they want to conquer it, but without realizing the extent of its size or population. Facts are of no import, however, and the Athenians mount a massive expedition, against the advice of their most experienced general, Nicias. Nicias is opposed by Alcibiades, one of the most fascinating characters in Greek history. And Alcibiades is motivated by hope – hope not only of capturing Sicily, but, Thucydides tells us, also Carthage. Incidentally, there’s no other ancient evidence that Athens had any thoughts of extending its empire this far, and scholars are not sure what to make of Thucydides’ claim. Given the disastrous failure of the Athenians’ Sicilian campaign, it makes Alcibiades seem faintly ridiculous – but many readers of Thucydides also have the impression that he believes Alcibiades might have pulled it off – and that’s only part of what makes this episode so interesting and puzzling.

The fleet departs, amid distressing omens signs and mixed emotions (**7a**): Thucydides says (**7b**) that the expedition was the longest voyage from home to date and undertaken with the highest hopes for the future. Fairly early on, Alcibiades is discredited, which leaves the unwilling Nicias more or less in charge. He is of good hope, as you will see from, the extracts at **8a**, and so are the troops, especially after they win an early victory. But the Spartans send a man named Gylippus to assist the Syracusans, who are the most formidable of the Sicilians facing Athens, and he is both more careful in his hopes and better able to manipulate those of the Athenians (**8b, 8c, and 8d**).

8e is the reactions of the Athenians to a series of defeats, and to Gylippus' capture of one of their main supply forts: the "generals" (later specified as Demosthenes) think they had better go home, but Nicias believes there is still hope. Thucydides does give him some reasons, but they are not terribly good ones: he thinks various Syracusans may defect, and especially he is afraid of the temperament of the Athenians, who do not like losing. Syracusan reinforcements convince even him, and a lunar eclipse makes them all anxious, especially, says Thucydides, Nicias, who was given to superstition. There's a lot to be said here as well, which I hope we'll have time to go into together – but for now let me say only that Nicias, who started off seeming like the last man on earth to rely upon *elpis*, has now come, through his connection with superstition, to be classed among those who are irrationally buoyed up by invisible hopes.

After another Syracusan naval victory, the Athenians find themselves trapped in the harbor and short of supplies. *Elpis* proliferates in the next several pages, and its abundance is worrying (**8f**): Nicias encourages the troops not to feel *elpis* – which has here taken a dangerous turn in meaning, and become an expectation of bad things. Instead, they should focus on the changing fortunes of war, hoping that lady luck will be with them. The fact that Nicias both encourages and discourages *elpis* mirrors, I think, his own confusion, which we might see as emblematic of the situation of all those who find that even their most plausible-seeming hopes have somehow vanished into nothing. From here on out, Nicias becomes ever more an advocate of *elpis* as the reality becomes ever worse.

On the other side, Gylippus (still **8f**) encourages the Syracusans, noting that those who have judged their own resources poorly, against all expectation, give up entirely; this contradicts the Corinthian assessment of Athenian optimism and hopefulness. The Syracusans and Spartans, on the other hand, have had their hopes confirmed, increased even, and, Gylippus tells them that

the greatest hope provides the greatest zeal. The Syracusans win again, and the Athenians give up hope of escaping by land (8g). But they realize that there are no other options so, on the following day, the Athenians march out, having lost all their ships, and instead of their high hopes, endangering themselves and Athens. Stunningly, Nicias still encourages the men to hope, for no other reason than that sometimes things work out better than they look like they will. This explicitly groundless hope is a far cry both from his earlier caution and from Gylippus' speech, which bases itself on real events in the past. Nicias continues by observing that despite his piety, he too is in the same straits as they (perhaps not as encouraging a statement as he thinks), and that despite it all, he is still hopeful about the future. It is, he says, reasonable to hope for a change in fortune, for the Athenians deserve pity from the gods, rather than jealousy. After wandering about making little progress, they head in the opposite direction from what they had planned, hoping (*elpizo* again) to meet with some friendly natives, whom they had sent for.

But the Syracusans are there too. The troops under Demosthenes surrender, and eventually, so do those under Nicias. Many are killed, though many are also enslaved. The disaster is enormous. Thucydides pauses to detail the death of Nicias, treacherously put to the sword, calling him "the man who, of all the Hellenes of my time, least deserved to meet with such a calamity, because the course of his life had been entirely regulated in accordance with virtue." But, whatever Thucydides says in mitigation, it is his portrait of Nicias that lies at the root of the frequent modern scholarly censure of Nicias for the calamity.

At Athens, the news is treated as literally unbelievable, but the people soon grow angry at those who encouraged their hopes of Sicily (by means of oracles and divination, which shows that the Athenians now understand invisible hopes, like those of the Melians, in a more vivid way than they used to), and they feel hopeless about the future. In fact it takes a few years still

for the war to end – Thucydides gives out before the Athenians give up – but the failure of the Sicilian expedition, and the loss of manpower, mean that for the rest of the war Athens is at a great disadvantage, constantly in dangerous situations and operating beyond its resources.

Time, now, for me to sum up as best as I can the complicated story of Thucydides and hope. First: the Athenians turn out to be absolutely correct in their evaluation of *elpis*: it is dangerous, especially if it is what you are mainly relying upon. But second, even knowing this does not always prevent you from falling prey to its dangerous snares, in part because of the complex ways in which feeling *elpis* affects your ability to make rational assessments, as we see with Nicias. On the other hand, it is possible to negotiate a safe path, as we see with Gylippus the Spartan, who is able to learn from the mistakes of others and retains unimpaired rationality.

Thucydides' conception of *elpis*, at least as I understand it, suggests that it is an emotion, it is also part of the resources of war, and therefore, like ships or terrain or manpower, it can be positively or negatively deployed. It is, of course, not easy to distinguish between reasoned and unreasonable *elpis*, except of course once it is too late. Finally – a gesture toward our comparative subject. In no way am I qualified to speak about Arabic hope, but I do want to note that the Qu'ran, at least in my English translation, contains both a positive and a negative nuance of hope, so perhaps it is English that does not quite understand the connection between wishes about the future and irrationality.