

## The Political Significance of Luck: A Thucydidean Perspective

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**Abstract:** Contemporary authorities invoke luck to explain the arbitrariness of economic success, to emphasize our shared vulnerability to disaster, and to urge more generous policy, legislation, and governance. According to Robert Frank, Martha Nussbaum, and Ronald Dworkin, for example, extreme bad luck can befall individuals no matter what they know or do. By redefining luck as a psychological phenomenon (rather than as a constitutive principle of the world), this article challenges the contemporary consensus. My approach to luck arises out of my engagement with the political thought of Thucydides. Whereas influential interpreters present Thucydides as a witness to the crushing power of bad luck, and whereas they criticize Thucydides' Pericles for being insufficiently deferential to luck, I revisit and defend Pericles' skeptical and psychological approach to luck, and I argue that Thucydides shares this approach, at least in the main. The pathological intellectual and emotional responses to apparent good or bad luck diagnosed by Pericles in his final speech recur throughout the *History* and influence the evolution of the whole war. Going beyond Pericles, Thucydides shows that the appeal of luck arises out of a human need to explain, beautify, or lament what is merely natural necessity, haphazard coincidence, or awful suffering.

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What is the political significance of the unforeseen, the uncontrollable, and the extraordinary—or what many people would call luck? As observers of political life, and as citizens ourselves, what should we know about luck, if anything? One prominent answer to this question right now is that all “successful” individuals should grasp that they themselves are lucky—that they are not mythical self-made men and women but ordinary creatures of chance. Robert Frank makes this argument in *Success and Luck: Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy* (2016). Frank relies on scholarship in economics and psychology to reveal luck’s influence on economic success and distributions of wealth (2016, 40–68). But his takeaway point is normative. Acknowledging the role of luck in his or her own successes, the reader of *Success and Luck* is supposed to say, in effect, *there but for great good luck go I*. Clearly the author hopes that knowledge of luck’s shaping power will serve as both a wellspring of humility and a spur to generosity (Frank 2016, 101–102). Frank joins a chorus of writers inside and outside the academy—from Martha Nussbaum (1986) to Barack Obama (1995), from Ronald Dworkin (1981) to Danielle Allen (2018)—who invoke luck as kind of a regrettable social entropy that stands in the way of egalitarian distributive justice and healthier democratic societies.

Without doubting the commitment to equality that animates these luminaries, I wonder whether their account of luck passes muster, and whether it offers scholars and citizens adequate materials for understanding the political significance of luck. One gets the impression from the contemporary discourse that human experience can be divided into two fields. On one hand, there is the field of human agency, in which we exercise significant control over our actions through deliberation. On the other hand, there is the field of luck, in which events simply befall us no matter what we know or do. According to Nussbaum (1986, 3), “what happens to a person by luck will be just what does not happen to a person through his or her own agency, what just

*happens* to him, as opposed to what he does or makes.” And Dworkin (1981, 293) has encapsulated this view in a memorable image: brute bad luck strikes, at the limit, like “a falling meteorite”—in the manner of an unpredictable, uncontrollable, and devastating external force.

None of these authorities has explained, however, why he or she assumes that luck refers to something “out there” in the world that resists deliberate human action from outside. Is it not possible that invocations of luck primarily reflect our own internal limitations and preoccupations as agents? Indeed, in my view, luck is better understood as a psychological phenomenon. What we talk about when we talk about luck are the intellectual and emotional reactions of human beings themselves as they run up against the limits of their own knowledge and power. When human beings prove unable to foresee or to control events that appear to be significant for their own purposes or flourishing, then luck is invoked to describe what has happened.

My view of luck arises out of my engagement with the ancient Greek political thinker and statesman, Thucydides. In Thucydides’ *History*, I find a skeptical, specifically political, and strongly psychological approach to luck (*tuchē*)—an approach from which we can still learn, no matter the differences separating Thucydides’ political moment from our own.<sup>1</sup> My reading also challenges the critical literature on Thucydides. Influential interpreters have argued that bad luck’s nefarious work is everywhere apparent in the *History*. For example, in a celebrated yet enigmatic line, Bernard Williams (1993, 163–64) writes that Thucydides depicts “rationality at risk to chance.”<sup>2</sup> According to Williams, Thucydides stands against the (pre-Nietzschean) tradition of European philosophy by denying to human reason the power to make the world “safe” from bad luck (1993, 163–64). Even before Williams, Adam Parry had argued that, for Thucydides, “man’s attempt to master the world by the intellect” will founder on the shoals of

“the world,” “outside things,” or “actuality,” which “in its capacity as luck, will behave in an unreasonable way” (1981, 181–82, 186, 192; see also Parry 1969, 116). Similarly, in the interpretation of H.P. Stahl (2003, 96) “Thucydides sets human optimism next to chance and subsequently provides a corrective for that optimism in the concrete experience of chance”—that is, in the experience of “those factors of which [an agent] is ignorant and over which he has no control” (see also Cornford 1907, 105). These scholars of Thucydides join Frank, Nussbaum, and Dworkin in supposing that bad luck has the power to overwhelm human reason and crush bones.

Connected to these pessimistic readings are critiques of Thucydides’ Pericles, whom many critics cast as a proto-modern optimist regarding the power of human reason to neutralize bad luck. In his *Chance and Intelligence in Thucydides* (1975), Lowell Edmunds argues at length that Pericles “trivializes,” “disdains,” “scorns,” and “disparages chance,” and that his war “policy as it emerged in the first speech . . . rested on the premise that chance was not a major factor in wars” (17, 61–71, 74, 76–88, 144; see also Monoson and Loriaux 1998, 289–90; Orwin 1994, 25 n. 28; Stahl 2003, 96). For Edmunds, Pericles trivializes luck by presenting it as a “subjective” or psychological phenomenon rather than as an objective feature of reality itself. Edmunds supposes that this psychological approach to luck by itself reveals Pericles’ aspiration to “tame” luck (1975, 17; cf. Hacking 1990; Strauss 1964, 15). For if Pericles thinks that bad luck can be “reduced to the same status as human error, that is, to the subjective” (Edmunds 1975, 17) then does he not consider it possible for the Athenians under his leadership to control themselves absolutely and to eschew mistaken perceptions of good or bad luck?

This paper begins by giving Pericles’ skeptical and psychological account of luck a more sympathetic hearing.<sup>3</sup> What motivates my return to Thucydides and his Pericles is my dissatisfaction with the “rationality at risk to chance” reading of Thucydides and the two fields

view of luck that shapes contemporary political theory in particular and the social sciences and humanities in general. Without denying that unexpected events, like the plague at Athens, are endemic to political life, Thucydides' Pericles nevertheless insists that political life is explicable in principle, and that luck shapes political outcomes only when citizens respond with unwarranted hope or fear, and without sufficient judgment, to events or circumstances that they did not foresee. Against those who cast luck as an independent force that resists human agency from outside, Thucydides' Pericles presents luck an internal obstacle to efficacious political agency, a pathology of the political soul that citizens and especially statesmen must seek to palliate. At the same time, and in contrast to Edmunds, I show that Pericles' view of luck is not intrinsically optimistic. That luck figures into political life as both an illusion and an excuse does not entail that one can imagine political life without luck.

Having examined Pericles' perspective on *tuchē*, I go on to argue that Thucydides himself shares this perspective, at least in the main. Like Pericles, Thucydides is a strict causationist, always searching for the truest cause or explanation (1.23.6).<sup>4</sup> While his *History* recounts freak accidents, turning points, and unexpected outcomes, Thucydides never adduces luck as a cause or explanation of these. As a historiographical or philosophical concept, luck evidently falls short of Thucydidean "accuracy" (1.22.2). Like Pericles, Thucydides locates luck within the psyche—namely, in human beings' intellectual and emotional responses to events or circumstances that they view as unpredictable, uncontrollable, yet meaningful.<sup>5</sup> More concretely, the pathological intellectual and emotional responses to apparent good or bad luck diagnosed by Pericles in his final speech recur throughout the narrative of the *History* and influence the evolution of the whole war. What is more, Thucydides ultimately goes beyond Pericles in his precise analysis of the psychology of luck. For Thucydides, as we will see, the enduring appeal

of luck arises out of the human need to explain, beautify, or lament what is merely natural necessity, haphazard coincidence, or awful suffering. To the extent that Pericles did not fully grasp this longing for “meaningfulness,” Thucydides’ psychology of luck can furnish a more satisfactory critique of Pericles (cf. Nietzsche 1967, 162; Orwin 1994, 90).

Finally, redefining *tuchē* as a psychological phenomenon can help us to understand Thucydides’ theoretical and pedagogical purposes in writing the *History*. Rather than pigeonhole Thucydides as a contemplative and bardic witness to human suffering, bad luck, calamity, and civilizational decline, I highlight Thucydides’ proclivity to expose illusion and error and to wonder at resilience and judgment (cf. Connor 1984, 31; Macleod 1983, 140). Thucydides’ demystifying account of luck is part of his effort to teach future citizens and statesmen how to cultivate the individual self-sufficiency that Pericles championed, but to which the Athenians rarely measured up.

### **Pericles, Luck, Statesmanship**

According to Edmunds (1975, 71), “Pericles regards the individual soul as the locus of chance; and he seems to deny implicitly that the city as a whole can be seriously affected by chance.” In Pericles’ own view, however, precisely because the soul is the locus of *tuchē*, the intellectual and emotional responses provoked by the appearance of good or bad luck can seriously affect the city. Thucydides shows that Pericles’ statesmanship was deeply attuned to the pathologies of the Athenian people, including their preoccupation with ostensible good or bad luck. For Pericles, luck is a chimera, which nevertheless elicits intense emotions, especially fear, hope, anger, and even selfishness or greed.

The first words spoken by Pericles in the *History*—the opening lines of his War Speech—emphasize the psychological power of perceived good or bad luck to sway judgment. Strikingly, Pericles begins this hawkish speech with a warning: most people “change their minds (*gnōmas*) with the circumstances” and “blame luck” (*tuchēn*) for the reversals, losses, and deprivations that attend upon war (1.140). By implication, Pericles regards this behavior as nonsensical and shameful: the same people who become fearful and despondent in the face of ostensible bad luck eagerly “boast of [their] intelligence if all goes well,” no matter that their victories may be unwitting (1.140.1; cf. Edmunds 1975, 7–23). Pericles issues a proto-Machiavellian challenge to the Athenian people—to eschew growing “intoxicated in good fortune” and “abject” in bad (Machiavelli 1996, 281). Whatever happens in the impending war with the Peloponnesians, Pericles wants the Athenians to rely on themselves, resisting the temptation to “change their minds with the circumstances” (see Jaffe 2017, 183–84).

How can the Athenians meet this challenge according to Pericles? In the Funeral Oration, Pericles locates the potential for self-reliance within the Athenian character itself. Judgment and daring, though traditionally held to be cross-cutting virtues, combine in the Athenian character to constitute individual self-sufficiency (2.40.3; Manville 1997, 73–84). Pericles concludes that “each of us presents himself as a self-sufficient (*autarkes*) individual, disposed to the widest possible diversity of actions, with every grace and great versatility” (2.41.1). He adds that the entire Greek world has marveled at Athenian deeds undertaken in the expansion and the defense of the empire; these deeds have yielded imperishable glory for Athens. To hear Pericles tell it, the self-sufficiency of the individual Athenian extends to the realm memory or history (2.41.4).

Pericles’ remarks on individual self-sufficiency might seem to support the reading of Edmunds (1975, 71), according to which Pericles dismisses luck as politically insignificant.

Indeed, when Pericles invokes *tuchē* in the Funeral Oration, he shows little respect for ordinary usage. For Pericles, paradoxically, it is “good luck (*eutuchēs*) for anyone to draw a glorious end for his lot, as these men have done” (2.44.1). Rather than meet an ignominious end or live a long but undistinguished life, an Athenian should consider it good luck to catch an arrow through the helmet. Whereas Herodotus’ Solon had argued that human fortunes were so unstable that one could not call a man happy before he was dead, Pericles suggests that the Athenians make their own good luck in battle (Herodotus 1987, 46–48; see also Edmunds 1975, 76–84; Foster 2010, 205). Rhetorically and conceptually, Pericles explodes traditional motifs of luck and mortality. Like Plato’s Socrates in the third book of the *Republic*, Pericles seems to regard these tragic motifs as too spooky and opaque to be helpful for warrior citizens who must control their fear of death during battle and limit their grief after it (Plato 1968, 63–66).

Yet Pericles’ highly rhetorical presentation of the Athenians in the Funeral Oration raises the question: were the Athenians self-sufficient citizens who did not countenance bad luck? The truth was more complex and less rosy, as Pericles well knew. Even in Pericles’ heyday, the Athenians required the guiding judgment and self-possession of Pericles himself. Thucydides asserts in his so-called eulogy of Pericles that Pericles’ standing in Athens was explained by his capacity as a statesman to manage the emotions of the *demos* amid changing circumstances: “whenever [Pericles] saw them insolently bold out of season, he would put them into fear with his speeches; and again, when they were afraid without reason, he would raise up their spirits and give them courage” (2.65.8; see also Connor 1984, 61). How then did the Athenians meet the Machiavellian challenge of eschewing intoxication in good fortune and abjectness in bad, insofar as they did meet it? Imitating Thucydides, we might say that at the outset of the war the truest



reason for the Athenians' self-sufficiency—though the one least openly avowed in democratic Athens—was Pericles' own kinglike statesmanship (2.65.9; cf. 1.23.6).

Pericles's second and final speech to the Athenian assembly offers a window onto both the psychology of luck in democratic Athens and Pericles' demos management (see Edmunds 1975, 70–76; Hornblower 1991, 331; Ober 1998, 89–91; Orwin 1994, 20–22, 27–28, 198–99; Romilly 1963, 120–30). In the summer of 430 BC, Athens suffered under the plague, while the Spartans wasted the Attic countryside for the second time. Thucydides tells us that the Athenians “began to criticize Pericles, holding him responsible (*en aitia eichon*) for persuading them to go to war and for being the cause of the misfortunes (*xumphorais*) they had encountered” (2.59.2). The people's grumbling went beyond dissatisfaction with the Periclean war plan insofar as they held him responsible for all their misfortunes, chief among which was the plague. By imputing the plague not only to Apollo but also to Pericles, the Athenians identified a human scapegoat for their bad luck (2.54.2–3; Kagan 2009, 81–83). When the Athenians sued for but failed to secure peace with the Spartans, “in complete despair they turned their anger on Pericles” alone (2.59.2).

Seeking “to give the people heart, to blunt their anger, and to make their minds calmer and more confident” (*tēs gnōmēs pros to ēpiōteron kai adeesteron katastēsai*; 2.59.3), as Thucydides puts it, Pericles convened the citizen assembly. His speech offers a therapeutic account of the people's intellectual and emotional responses to misfortune, simultaneously elucidating their suffering and challenging them to regain possession of themselves. Pericles reminds the demos that he had predicted in the War Speech that the demos would change its mind under the pressures of war; moreover, he can explain this change (2.60.1; cf. 1.140.1):

For my part, I am the man I was. I have not shifted ground. It is you who are changing: you were persuaded to fight when you were still unharmed, but now

that times are bad, you are changing your minds (*metamelein*); and to your weak judgment (*en tō humeterō asthenei tēs gnōmēs*) my position does not seem sound. That is because you already feel the pain that afflicts you as individuals, while the benefit to us all has not yet become obvious; and now that this great reversal (*metabolēs megalēs*) has come upon you in so short a time you are too low in your minds to stand by your decisions, for it makes your spirit slavish when something unexpected happens suddenly (*to pleistō paralogō xumbainōn*) and defies your best-laid plans. That is what has happened to you on top of everything else, mainly because of the plague. Still, you live in a great city and have been brought up with a way of life that matches its greatness; so you should be willing to stand up to the greatest disasters rather than eclipse your reputation. (2.61.2–4)

While many terrified Athenians clearly view the plague as a massive instance of external misfortune visited upon them by the gods, Pericles assimilates the plague to the reversals of war. The Periclean view is, to put it crudely (but not too crudely!), “stuff happens.” Reversals are ubiquitous in war; when they occur suddenly and severely, terror is the all-too-human response. But Pericles denies that terror is a necessary or characteristic response to disaster for Athenians. By illuminating the psychological link between reversal and fear, by affirming his own rock-solid judgment, and by evoking Athens’ history of resilience (for example, at Salamis), Pericles suggests to his fellow citizens that their response to misfortune remains up to them.

Pericles offers a second explanation of the people’s despondency. What really bothers the Athenians about the war and the plague is the loss of the so-called goods of fortune, especially their wealth and health. Pericles takes the people to task for being ready to “sacrifice [the] common safety” as a result of their “dismay” at their “private misfortunes” (2.60.4; cf. 2.42.4).

Again he contrasts their failures to his virtues. While the people long for bodily comfort and blame Pericles for their deprivations, even though they themselves voted for the war, Pericles declares himself “a patriot (*philopolis*), beyond corruption” (2.60.5). Indeed, before the first Spartan invasion of Attica, he had offered to donate his own property to the city, lest his guest-friend, the Spartan King Archidamus, spare it (2.13.1).

These passages, which comprise the speech’s first half (2.60–61), have a “psychoanalytic” function—to lay bare the Athenians’ fear and selfishness in the face of perceived bad luck and to motivate them to buck up. Pericles holds up a mirror to the Athenian mind; the reflection pales in comparison to the beautiful portraits of the Athenian character painted at the outset of the war (e.g., 1.70.6). Pericles employs the rhetoric of shame in order to convey to the Athenian people that they have failed to live up to their reputation for and self-image of prudential and courageous citizenship (Balot 2014, 34–39). At the same time, he puts forth a model of Athenian judgment and daring, namely, himself (Nichols 2015, 39). Anticipating Socrates in Plato’s *Apology*, Pericles aims to benefit the Athenians by telling them that they must become more like him (Plato 1997, 28).

To some extent, in the speech’s second half (2.62–64), Pericles continues to speak in these therapeutic and hortatory modes, attempting to purge the Athenians of their terror and to imprint Periclean judgment upon them. He proclaims the empire a tyranny over unwilling subjects (2.63.2), and he reminds the Athenians that eventually the empire will fall (2.64.3). His frank speech arguably helps the Athenians to confront their fear of the destruction of the empire and to rededicate themselves to the responsibilities of imperial rule. On this point, consider the blunt yet beautiful final line of the speech: “The most powerful cities and individuals are the ones who with respect to misfortunes (*pros tas xumphoras*) least lose their minds and most stand

their ground” (2.64.6).<sup>6</sup> When the Athenians regain possession of themselves, then they will also regain possession of the power that will make them victorious in the war.

Even so, the rhetoric of the second half of the speech also reveals Pericles to be the puppeteer of the people’s emotions praised by Thucydides at 2.65. Here Pericles appeals to the Athenians’ emotions as much as or more than he appeals to their judgment. Because the Athenians are more discouraged than [they] have reason to be,” Pericles airs what he himself calls “a rather boastful claim” (2.62.1). The claim is that the Athenians are invincible at sea; Athenian power, instantiated in the empire, is potentially limitless (2.62.2–3). In addition, at the climax of the speech, Pericles directs the Athenians to “keep your minds on the fine future that you know will be yours”; this future will bring the Athenians “glory that will be remembered for ever after” (2.64.5–6). Josiah Ober has remarked (1998, 90–91) that Pericles’ presentation of invincible Athenian sea-power is “quasi-mystical”; the same could be said of his vision of unending imperial glory (see also Foster 2010, 187–89; Orwin 1994, 20–22). It is striking that in the course of inflating Athenian hope with these promises of omnipotence and glory, Pericles issues a warning against unwarranted hopefulness, especially as it relates to perceived good luck:

Confront your enemies not just with confidence but with disdain. Any fool who strikes lucky can boast, even a coward; but the pride of disdain belongs to the man who has the good judgment to believe that he is better than his opponents, which is the case with us. Since luck is the same for everyone (*apo tēs homoiās tuchēs*), it is intelligence derived from this sense of superiority that fortifies one’s courage, placing its trust less in hope, whose force depends on desperation, than in a judgment based on the facts, which offers more reliable foresight. (2.62.4–5)<sup>7</sup>

For Pericles, the delusive power of good luck cuts in two directions. On one hand, it is commonplace to fall back on hope for good luck when victory appears unlikely or even impossible. On the other hand, having won an unlikely victory, the foolish person who had entrusted his success to unfounded hope for good luck will credit not good luck but himself. Although these orientations toward good luck might seem to conflict, the former credulous and the latter dismissive, Pericles suggests that they both arise out of unwarranted hopefulness. In the words of Clifford Orwin (1994, 202), “we will have it both ways, presuming on fortune or dismissing it—itsself a form of presuming upon it—as our hopes suggest.” Puffed up by success, the unwitting victor is no less hopeful, no less captive to his belief in the special efficaciousness of his own agency, than the fool who blindly hopes for good luck against his better judgment. Even during the plague, Pericles remains wary of the siren song of good luck (cf. 1.144.1).

To be sure, Pericles’ main point in these lines is that the Athenians need not succumb to desperate hope for good luck because “judgment based on the facts” still supports the Periclean grand strategy. Yet in this speech Pericles neither reviews the facts nor plans for the next phase of the war. Especially in the speech’s second half, Pericles paints a grandiose picture of Athenian power and imperial rule. Since Pericles’ rhetorical capacity to manage the emotions of the demos is the key to his statesmanship in Thucydides’ own view, it seems that Pericles regarded the Athenians as so abjectly terrified of their perceived bad luck that they required an injection of pure hope (see Ahrens Dorf 2000, esp. 589–90; Schlosser 2013). This rhetorical gambit worked; according to Thucydides, the Athenians “were persuaded on the public matter, and no longer sent embassies to the Lacedaemonians, but applied themselves more to the war” (2.65.2).<sup>8</sup>

Viewed as a whole, Pericles’ final speech displays his control of the emotions of the demos. While Edmunds has argued that Periclean *gnōmē* (judgment) aims to foresee and to

control *tuchē* absolutely and without qualification, Pericles in fact orients his final speech toward a more reasonable and necessary end. He aims to soothe the Athenians' fear and anger and to educate their judgment so that they do not panic amid the war and the plague. For Pericles, the opposition between *gnōmē* and *tuchē* can be reduced to the opposition between *gnōmē* and *orgē* (passion; see 2.22.1; Connor 1984, 61).

### ***Tuchē* as Illusion in the Action of the *History***

Whatever Pericles may think, many scholarly authorities maintain that the “antithesis” between *gnōmē* and *tuchē* is essential to Thucydides' own outlook (Cornford 1907, 104–107; Edmunds 1975, 3, 147–48; Romilly 2012, 104). Note, however, that the significance of this conceptual opposition is opaque. When Williams (1993, 163–64) asserts that Thucydides displays rationality at risk to chance, is his point merely that plans miscarry and human beings fall victim to events outside their control? But who could disagree with these banalities? Parry (1981, 181–82, 186, 192) and Stahl (2003, 96) make the stronger claim that *tuchē* is a deep feature of reality itself that obtrudes on human action in the manner of an unpredictable and irresistible external force. One wonders, though, whether Thucydides would have accepted this reification of luck. Does luck function as a cause of change on par with those of nature and human action?

In my view, Thucydides rightly approaches luck as a psychological phenomenon rather than as an agential force in its own right. The first reason to think that Thucydides remained Periclean at least in this respect is that the narrative action of the *History* foregrounds the same intellectual and emotional responses to apparent good or bad luck that had preoccupied Pericles; these psychological factors propel forward the action of the war. Consider Thucydides' narration of the divergent Athenian and Spartan reactions to the Athenian capture of Pylos and the

Spartiates trapped on the island of Sphacteria during 425 BC. According to Thucydides, for the Spartans, these “unexpected reversals, which had been so many, unaccountable, and rapid, shocked [them] to the core, and they were now afraid that some new disaster might strike, like the one on the island” (4.65.3). As Pericles had chastised the Athenians for allowing their terror of the plague to overwhelm them, Thucydides comments that it was really the Spartans’ “inexperience of adversity” (*aētheias tou kakopragein*) that led them to think that “now their every move would end in failure” (4.55.4). Characteristically, the Spartans wallow in their fear of perceived bad luck.<sup>9</sup> Later in the text Thucydides reveals that the Spartans did not fully regain their nerve until the Athenians violated the peace of Nicias and sailed for Sicily—a full ten years later (7.18.2). Spartan fear in the wake of perceived bad luck shaped the war’s Nician phase.

Conversely, Thucydides remarks of the Athenian mood after Pylos:

For such was their current run of good fortune (*eutuchia*) that the Athenians felt the right to expect that nothing could go wrong for them, but they could accomplish the possible and impracticable alike, no matter with a large force or a weaker one. The reason for this attitude was the success of most of their undertakings, which was unpredictable (*para logon*) and so added to the strength of their hopes. (*elpidos*; 4.65.4)

As is their wont, the Athenians congratulate themselves and take credit for their apparent *eutuchia*. Relying on their good luck as opposed to their judgment, they decline to think strategically about the war. Hope for good luck, when fulfilled, yields to self-congratulation, which fuels hope for good luck—just as Pericles had said (see also Cleon at 3.39.3, Diodotus at 3.45.5–6, and the Athenian envoys to Melos at 5.103). A similar dynamic marks the Sicilian debate: Nicias’ attempt to steer the Athenians’ deliberation toward sober assessment of the

material factors only intensifies the hopes that they place in the immaterial future (6.24). The hopeful Athenian mood after Pylos paves the way for the Sicilian expedition (4.65.4, 7.71.7; see also Connor 1984, 111; Macleod 1983, 143).

Moving beyond Pylos, the anger of the demos that Pericles faced in delivering his final speech—the demos' desire to find a scapegoat for its misfortunes—also redounds throughout the *History*. The hopeful Athenians expect their ventures to succeed; when one fails instead, they mete out severe punishments to the speakers who proposed the venture and the generals who undertook it (2.59, 2.65.3, 2.70.4, 3.43.5, 3.98.5, 3.114.2, 4.65, 5.26.5, 5.46.4, 7.14.4, 7.48.4, 8.1.2; see also 6.103.4 for a Syracusan example). Note the context of the block-quote reproduced above—Thucydides' comment on Athenian hope. In the summer of 425, after the conquest of Pylos, the Athenians exiled two generals and fined another on the grounds that they had been bribed to leave Sicily (4.65). But the Sicilians had made peace among themselves in order to expel the Athenians (4.58–4.65.1). It is unclear what the Athenians could have done with a relatively small force to press their advantage against the united Sicilians. Considering the failure of the subsequent expedition, the Athenian generals made a wise decision to leave.

The punishment of these generals foreshadows Nicias' catastrophic and perhaps treasonous choice to keep the Athenian force in Sicily in spite of disintegrating conditions. “Knowing the Athenian character as he did, he had no wish to be unjustly put to death by the Athenians on some dishonorable charge; but would rather take his chance (*kinduneusas*) and die at the hands of the enemy” (7.48.4).<sup>10</sup> Thucydides had introduced Nicias by emphasizing Nicias' desire “to protect his good luck . . . he thought the best way of doing this was to avoid taking risks and to expose oneself as little as possible to luck” (5.16.1). The possible annihilation of the Athenians in Sicily scares Nicias less than his own punishment at Athens. The ironic result is



that Nicias is left to trust in luck. When an eclipse occurs just as the Athenians are about to withdraw from Sicily, Nicias demands on the advice of soothsayers that the Athenians wait twenty-seven days (7.50.4). To the end, Nicias issues pathetic and quixotic exhortations to his soldiers to “remember the uncertainty of war (*en tois polemois paralogōn*), and prepare to renew the fight in the hope that luck (*tuchēs*) will not always be set against us” (7.61.3). In the narrative of Nicias, each of the pathological emotional responses to apparent good or bad luck diagnosed by Pericles contributes to the ultimate disaster: anger, fear, hope, and pleonectic self-regard.

Even more than Pericles, in fact, Thucydides aims to explain exactly why luck intoxicates human hearts and minds. The key text is his authorial commentary on the plague at Athens. Note, first of all, that Thucydides does not mention *tuchē* in his account of the plague’s effects on the human body. Instead he says that he will “only say what it was like” (2.48.3). In so doing Thucydides employs the language of Hippocratic medicine; his hope is that the symptoms of the plague may be understood in the future (2.48.3; cf. 1.22.4; Connor 1984, 58 n. 19; Parry 1969, 116). Only when Thucydides turns to discuss the psychological and “social” ramifications of the plague does luck enter. Thucydides observes that “the great lawlessness that grew everywhere in the city began with this disease, for as the rich suddenly died and men previously worth nothing took over their estates, people saw before their eyes such quick reversals that they dared to do freely things they would have hidden before—things they never would have admitted they did for pleasure” (2.53.1–2). These lines add depth to a point made by Pericles in his final speech. During the plague, the Athenians are particularly disturbed by the instability of the goods of fortune—that a rich man may lose everything and that his loss may be another’s windfall. At the root of the Athenians’ perturbation, Thucydides suggests, is their desire for pleasure. The

Athenians are like Heracles at the crossroads; but without knowing whether they will live long enough to reap the rewards of virtue, the Athenians slough off shame and choose pleasure.

At the same time, Thucydides presents the Athenians' desire to make sense of their suffering as even more basic than their desire for pleasure. Paradoxically, the Athenians resorted to the lawless pursuit of pleasure precisely because "they thought that a far greater sentence hung over their heads now, and that before this fell they had a reason to get some pleasure in life" (2.53.4). Although Thucydides writes that the plague was stronger (*kreisson*) than *logos* (2.50.1), the Athenians were keen to tell the story of their suffering—to sing the blues. They preferred to have bad luck rather than no luck at all, even when their bad luck took the form of capital punishment.

Equally important, on this point, are Thucydides' reflections on the psychological reactions manifested by individual Athenians who contracted the disease. "The most terrible thing of all in this affliction, however, was the sense of despair (*athumia*) when someone realized that they were suffering from it; for then they immediately decided in their own minds that the outcome was hopeless and they were much more likely to give themselves up rather than resist" (2.51.4). Conversely, as it seemed that "the plague did not strike the same person twice, at least not fatally," the survivors "were congratulated by others, and in the exhilaration of the moment entertained the blithe (*koufos*) hope that at no time in the future would they ever be killed by any other disease" (2.51.6). Thucydides suggests that the fatalism of the first cough and the optimism of the broken fever are of a piece. Both reactions betray the hope that one's own fate is written in the stars or placed in the hands of the gods. The Athenians want their suffering to be meaningful, lamentable, even beautiful.<sup>11</sup> By exposing this longing in the context of his depiction of the bodily, religious, and political disorder effected by the plague, Thucydides declines to satisfy it.

## Two Objections

At this point one might object: certain events that occurred throughout the war were unlucky, full stop (Edmunds 1975, 190). Think of the occurrence of the eclipse that terrified Nicias (7.50.4). Was it not unlucky that the eclipse occurred at that time and place? Thucydides is indeed preoccupied with the war's "hinge moments" and "turning points"—events that proved pivotal because they occurred at a specific times and places (Hornblower 2011, 7–11). Yet if Nicias and his soldiers had not reacted hysterically, it is unclear that the eclipse would have mattered. Strikingly, Thucydides himself views eclipses as natural phenomena that can be predicted in principle: "In the same summer and at the start of the lunar month, which seems to be the only time such an occurrence is possible, the sun went into an eclipse after midday and became fully visible again only after it had shrunk to a crescent and some stars had become visible" (2.28). One wonders what would have happened if, *per impossibile*, Thucydides had led the Sicilian expedition—or, more realistically, what would have happened if Alcibiades had retained his command. Would either general have allowed the eclipse influence his plans (see also, 3.89.5, 6.70.1; Strauss 1964, 159)?

True, Thucydides observes that natural disasters such as eclipses and earthquakes seemed to occur with greater frequency and magnitude during the war (1.23.3). But why exactly did these formerly incredible disasters engulf Greece at this moment? Thucydides' explanation is that the war itself led the Hellenes to invest significance in every irregular event. In his comments on an earthquake that occurred at Delos just prior to the formal initiation of hostilities, Thucydides writes: "this was said to be a sign of what was going to happen afterwards, and people believed that. And if anything else of this sort happened contingently (*ei te ti allo toioutotropon xunebē genesthai*), people started looking for an explanation" (2.8.3; cf. 2.17.2,

2.54.3).<sup>12</sup> Calamities of this kind did not in fact increase during the war; rather, human beings intensified the attention they paid to these events.

The fundamental point is that Thucydides does not invoke luck as a cause of events. Only nature and human action figure into Thucydides' narratives as causes.<sup>13</sup> Still, I have argued that luck plays a critical role in the war—because perceptions or descriptions of events as either lucky or unlucky motivate deeds in turn. In this way Thucydides preserves and highlights the political significance of “luck talk” while jettisoning *tuchē* from his historiography. In fact, even on the rare occasions when Thucydides writes, colloquially, that a certain event happened *kata tuchēn*, he always situates such a statement within a more complex and precise narrative that points toward human actions and natural causes as the underlying explanations of the outcome.

A test case is the Pylos episode (4.2–41; Connor 1994, 108–121). Cornford writes that “Thucydides represented the occupation of Pylos as the merest stroke of good luck, undertaken with the least possible amount of deliberate calculation, and furthered at every turn of events by some unforeseen accident” (Cornford 1907, 74). In support of Cornford's reading, one might observe that Demosthenes' Athenian fleet initially put into Pylos by luck (*kata tuchēn*) during a storm (4.3.1, cf. 3.49.3). Yet Thucydides also reports that Demosthenes had accompanied the Athenian expedition with permission from the demos to use the fleet in the western Peloponnese precisely because he wanted to fortify Pylos (4.3.2)! In addition, Thucydides draws attention to the fire that one of the Athenian soldiers “happened to set to a small area of woodland [on the island of Sphacteria], and when a wind got up this resulted in most of the woods being burnt down before they knew what was happening” (4.30.2). This fire afforded Demosthenes a clear view of the island and of the Spartiates hiding on it—a crucial turn of events that paved the way for Demosthenes' guerilla tactics and the Athenian victory (4.30–37). One wonders, however,

whether Demosthenes had a hand in setting this fire. Could it be a coincidence that the Aetolians had previously used fire to expose Demosthenes' own troops when they had attempted to hide in the woods of Aetolia (cf. 4.30.1 and 3.98.2)? Wherever the truth may lie, Thucydides' historiography pushes past ordinary speech about luck, illuminating more precise and concrete explanations of the events at issue—in this case, the dynamic interplay between the intelligent agency of Demosthenes and the physical circumstances and uncertainties that conditioned his actions at Pylos (see also Gomme, Andrewes, and Dover 1945–81, 488 n.1; Kagan 2009, 123–24; Rood 1998, 31).

Here a second objection arises. Even if one were to concede that luck is too imprecise to work as a historiographical explanation, one might maintain that political actors like Demosthenes should still dwell on the possibility of lucky or unlucky events when they confront the unknown future. A version of this objection appears in the work of Laconophile critics such as Edmunds: “Clearly Thucydides' method has closer affinities with the Athenian principle of *gnome* than with the Spartan diffidence before *tyche*. But to some degree what the method discovers is the validity of the Lacedaemonian principle at least from the point of view of the actors in the history” (Edmunds 1975, 147–48, 183; Stahl 2003, 96). Edmunds thinks that Athenian rationalism paradoxically vindicates Spartan deference to *tuchē* (see also Orwin 1994, 204). According to the Spartan King Archidamus, no one can “work out whose chances (*tuchas*) in war are better in a speech” (1.84.3); rather, the only adequate foundation for virtue is Sparta's austere military training (*agōgē*), which used shame and punishment to inculcate courage and self-control (1.84.3–4).

I submit that Edmunds whitewashes the Spartans' confused perspective on *tuchē*, while he exaggerates their virtues (see also Balot 2014, 207; Aristotle 2013, 207). Recall the first naval

battle of the war, which takes place off the coast of Rhium (see Strauss 1964, 170; Stahl 2003, 83–91; Romilly 2012, 80–87). The Athenian general Phormio correctly predicts that a morning wind will disrupt the Spartans’ ill-advised circle formation, allowing the Athenians to perform their typical break-through maneuver (2.84.2). After the Athenian rout and before the second battle, Phormio delivers a speech to his sailors that attributes the victory to the experience and skill of the Athenian navy (2.89.3)—a view confirmed by Thucydides (2.85.2). By contrast, in their corresponding harangue, the Spartan commanders blame bad luck for their defeat, and they sound the traditional theme of Sparta’s unfailing courage (2.87.3–4). Even as the commanders crow about Spartan courage, however, they evidently do not trust it. Hornblower notes that “although [the speech] begins by asserting that the earlier defeat was due to no cowardice, it ends by threatening would-be cowards” with punishment (Hornblower 1991, 367; 2.87.9). The Spartans do not understand what caused their defeat in the first battle or how better to prepare for the second—apart from amassing more ships and threatening their forces (Stahl 2003, 86).

Surprisingly, perhaps, the second battle begins with the Peloponnesians on the offensive. They manage to compel Phormio to engage in the narrows of the Gulf of Corinth, neutralizing Athenian seamanship and even capturing nine Athenian ships. But the Athenians ultimately recovered these ships and seized six belonging to the Peloponnesians (2.90–92). The turning point of the battle occurred when a fleeing Athenian ship sailed around a merchant vessel that “happened to be moored in open water” and “rammed the pursuing Leucadian vessel amidships and sank it” (2.91.3). Thucydides says that “fear fell upon the Spartans at this unexpected and extraordinary feat” (*genomenou toutou aprosdokētou te kai para logon*; 2.91.4). The Athenians then routed their fearful and disordered pursuers (see Romilly 2012, 83–84).

The interplay between Spartan speeches and Spartan deeds at Rhium suggests that the Spartan orientation toward luck does not make sense for four reasons. First, because the Spartans do not deliberate before entering into battle, they often encounter situations that appear unpredictable to them, even when these situations could have been predicted—such as the wind and the Athenians’ ability to use it to their advantage (2.84.2, 3.16, 4.13–14, 5.65–66, 8.10). Second, the Spartans’ cautious adherence to their accustomed mode of hoplite warfare leaves them terrified by novel tactics and by unexpected changes in the circumstances of battle. Third, for all their ostensible respect for the power of luck, the Spartans seem to think that bad luck can be reduced to shameful cowardice (4.17.2, 7.18.2–3). When the Athenians seized control of the second battle by ramming the Leucadian ship, the Spartan commander of that ship, the aptly named Timocrates, killed himself (2.92.3). Fourth, the Spartans are terrified at the first hint of misfortune, which they tend to regard as somehow inexplicable, blameworthy, and a sign of divine disfavor (2.85.2). Ultimately, the Spartans’ deference to bad luck reflects their piety.<sup>14</sup>

Nor was Rhium unique: although the Spartans claim to respect the power of luck and to cultivate martial virtues such as courage and self-control that will allow them to withstand the appearance of bad luck, their deeds throughout the war show that they in fact respond to ostensibly unlucky events with fear, incomprehension, and pious guilt. We have already discussed the Spartans’ response to the capture of the men on Sphacteria. Consider, in addition, the ubiquitous hesitation of the Spartan kings, who repeatedly led out armies only to return home before fighting; in particular, whenever an earthquake occurred, the Spartans fled (1.101.2–3, 3.89.1, 5.54.1–2, 5.55.4, 5.60.1, 5.65.2, 5.82.3–4, 5.116.1, 6.95.1, 8.6.5, 8.60.2–3, 8.78).<sup>15</sup> Blinkered by their misology and their piety, the Spartans err not less but more than the Athenians—though their timorousness makes their errors less calamitous. It cannot be the case

that Thucydidean historiography foregrounds *tuchē* in order to make Athenians (and others) more like Spartans—obsessed with and fearful of bad luck.

### **Thucydidean Historiography: Accuracy and Agency**

What were Thucydides' authorial purposes in unmasking *tuchē* as a psychological phenomenon?

In his well-known “methodological” reflections on the composition of the *History*, Thucydides characterizes the *History* as “useful” (*ōphelima*; 1.22.4), and he grounds the usefulness of the work in its “accuracy” (*akribeia*; 1.22.2; Connor 1984, 243–48; Edmunds 1975, 149–55; Euben 1990, 194–201; Ober 1998, 60–63). According to Thucydides, writing accurately entails rejecting the tendency of poets to tell people what they want to hear (1.21.1). Thucydides self-consciously refuses to placate the longing for meaningfulness and beauty that underlies the appearance of good or bad luck. He recognizes that some readers will find his unmusical candor to be unpleasant. But he also supposes that his accuracy will gratify those who wish “to examine the clear truth” (*to saphes skopein*) about the general contours of “the human condition” (*tō anthrōpinon*), within which the future will take its particular shape (1.22.4). The usefulness of the *History* for these forward-looking types consists not least in its almost clinical exposure of human irrationality, our proclivity for “magical thinking.” Grasping the seductive power of luck to elicit emotion and to corrupt judgment could empower future citizens and statesmen to keep their heads and to manage the emotions of their fellows when their credulousness proves intractable. Thucydides' psychological approach to *tuchē* contributes to his education of future Periclean political actors.

At the same time, Thucydides' commitment to accuracy may distinguish him from Pericles—even beyond the obvious difference between the sweeping, retrospective gaze of the



political historian and the active, deliberative orientation of the statesman. For all that Pericles urges the Athenians to rely on themselves and to view bad luck as an excuse, he also constructs a highly embellished vision of Athenian democracy, the empire, and his own statesmanship (Foster 2010, 197–98). In the Funeral Oration, Pericles holds up the city’s imperial history as a kind of autobiography that exceeds Homeric poetry in its power and beauty (2.41.4). What is the effect of this Periclean myth if not to cultivate the kind of hope for the special meaningfulness of one’s own agency that attaches us to luck in Thucydides’ view? Rhetorically, at least, Pericles traffics in a poetic account of “Athenian exceptionalism” that may dispose the Athenians to hope, unreasonably, for good luck—as they do throughout the war.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, many commentators have argued that the circumstances surrounding Pericles’ death imply a Thucydidean critique of Pericles—a critique that is often couched in the language of luck. For example, according to Sara Monoson and Michael Loriaux (1998, 290), the death of Pericles is the signal moment in Thucydides’ text that “enables us not only to know but also to feel the power of chance.” In a similar vein, Leo Strauss (1964, 153) has written that Periclean Athens “saved democracy from itself and increased Athens’ power and splendor beyond anything achieved earlier but it had to rely constitutionally on elusive chance: on the presence of a Pericles.” The critique is that Pericles did not understand that the success of his war plan and the health of the democracy itself were contingent on his own survival. On one hand, this argument correctly points out that Pericles’ crypto-monarchic rule over the demos left the Athenians overly dependent on him and vulnerable thereafter to the machinations of less capable or worthy successors such as Cleon and Nicias. As Strauss indicates, Pericles’ sudden and fateful demise reminds the reader that worthy statesmen are not always at the helm. On the other hand, to say that the quality of Athenian leadership ultimately depended on luck involves diminishing

both the talents of certain post-Periclean leaders and the role of the demos in directing and selecting those leaders. No matter Pericles' unexpected death, Alcibiades could have led a successful expedition to Sicily; not bad luck but internal strife caused his removal and therewith the loss of the expedition and the war according to Thucydides (2.65.11–13).

In fact, in his account of the Sicilian expedition and its aftermath, Thucydides does not emphasize the Athenians' bad luck so much as he wonders at the capacity of the Athenians "to go on together," to think and to act in dire circumstances that could have elicited their despair (Ober 2005, 3). Thucydides highlights the Athenians' resilience: that they continued to wage war in spite of the ravages of the plague; that they beat back the Peloponnesians for twenty-seven years; that they undertook a war of equal size in Sicily; that they continued to besiege Syracuse even after the construction of the Spartan fort at Deceleia; that they carried on the war for eight years after the loss of the Sicilian expedition; and that they might not have been defeated in 405 were it not for their own civic strife (2.65.12, 7.28.3, 8.1.3–4, 8.24.5, 8.106.5). In Thucydides' own words: "it was incredible that in their display of power and daring they could so confound the Greeks"; until it happened, "no one would have believed it possible" (7.28.3). Thucydides identifies the resilience and irrepressible activity of the Athenians as the most unpredictable aspect of the war (cf. 4.55).

The eighth book of the *History* shows that the Athenian people did not yield in the face of disasters such as the loss of the Sicilian expedition and the revolts of Chios and Euboea (8.1.3–4, 8.15.2, 8.96–97). According to Thucydides, the people not only exhibited its greatest daring during these crises of the empire, but they also cultivated political order at Athens. Whatever was necessary to preserve the city the demos accepted, even resolving to limit its own power for the sake of good government (8.97.2). "And in the fear (*peridees*) of the moment they were ready to

accept good order in everything, as the people tend to do in such circumstances” (8.1.4). The Athenians’ fear was appropriate—it was a species of *deos* rather than of *phobos*—because they recognized that the grave circumstances facing the city warranted fear; because they grasped the necessity of maintaining order (lest their errors compound their bad circumstances); and because they knew that they alone were responsible for the city’s survival (see Desmond 2006; Edmunds 1975, 59–60, 118–22).<sup>17</sup> The Athenians’ appropriately fearful nonetheless energetic responses to disasters at home may present the most admirable side of their political agency.

At their best, then, the Athenians recognized and acted on a Periclean insight: serious misfortune is not an immovable *ergon* (fact, deed) but a disadvantageous situation that constrains action without compelling or preventing it. Understanding the gravity of such a situation is a necessary step toward acting to change it, however long the odds may be. Without a doubt, the Athenians’ ability to think and to act in the dire circumstances of 413–410 BC did not obviate their need for a Periclean statesman to manage their emotions. Even so, the resilience of the Athenians functions in the *History* to affirm a fact so basic that it is easily missed: human action remains up to us no matter the appearance of good or bad luck.

## **Conclusion**

The ubiquity of bad luck would demand humility, contemplation, and tragic resignation if bad luck referred to some unpredictable, overwhelming, or divine force. But returning to Thucydides, I have tried to show that we should not think of luck as something “out there” in the world. Thucydides’ attention to the psychology of luck—coupled with the fact that he nowhere refers to luck as a cause—makes clear that *tuchē* is lodged in intellectual beliefs and psychological orientations in his view. This demystification of luck has important implications for

understanding and performing political action. For the emotions elicited by ostensible good and bad luck are powerful causes of political change in their own right, with which citizens and especially statesmen must contend. In so doing, although they may confront many circumstances outside their control, their actions remain up to them. What is most unexpected in political life, from a Thucydidean perspective, is the human capacity for resilient action in the face of circumstances that many people would regard as extremely unlucky.

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<sup>1</sup> Luck is the best translation of *tuchē*, in my view, because luck connotes a human-focused and psychologically rich phenomenon, whereas chance is often used to describe impersonal outcomes in nature or mathematics. This distinction originates in Aristotle, *Physics* 2.4–6, where Aristotle hives off *tuchē* (luck) from *automaton* (chance). See Schillinger (2019).

<sup>2</sup> Williams’s interpretation has won many admirers (Guess 2005; Hornblower 2011, 6–7; Hawthorn 2014, 1; Rood 1998, 292–93). I take inspiration from Williams even when I find reason to criticize him.

<sup>3</sup> Many scholars hold up Pericles as Thucydides’ exemplary statesman (Euben 1990, 178, 194–95; Nichols 2015, 26; Romilly 1963, 112). My own account is more critical of Pericles, at least in the end, and it focuses on his view of *tuchē*.

<sup>4</sup> References to Thucydides are inlaid in the text. My translations and transliterations refer to the Oxford Classical Text, edited by Jones, revised by Powell (1942). Wherever possible, I use the excellent translations of Woodruff (1993); otherwise, I draw on Mynott (2013). I have also benefited from the commentaries of Hornblower (1991, 1996) and Gomme, Andrewes, and Dover (1945–81).

<sup>5</sup> For a likeminded view, see the Hawthorn (2014, 235): “It is not [Thucydides] but his characters who talk of *tuchē*. . . .” Edmunds (1975, 198) also grasps Thucydides’ psychological approach to luck, though he exaggerates Pericles’ optimism and Thucydides’ pessimism. For useful discussions of the vocabulary of luck in the *History*, including *tuchē* and its cognates, see Edmunds (1975, 174–204).

<sup>6</sup> My translation.

<sup>7</sup> Trans. Mynott (2013, 127) modified in light of Edmunds (1975, 73–74, n. 89).

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<sup>8</sup> “The outcome is success for Pericles at the level of public policy and failure at the private level. He is fined and removed from office, although only temporarily” (Connor 1984, 59; see also Gomme, Andrewes, and Dover 1945–81, 182–83). But in light of the immense anger that the Athenians felt toward Pericles, the slap-on-the-wrist signals the speech’s success.

<sup>9</sup> That the Athenians and Spartans each have characteristic discourses on luck has been argued, persuasively, by Edmunds (1975, 3, 89–90, 182 and *passim*); see also Orwin (1994, 10–11, 193). But cf. Zumbrunnen (2008), who helpfully explores the dissonances within the Athenian and Spartan characters.

<sup>10</sup> Also recall that Nicias had said during the Sicilian debate, with Socratic flair, that “the responsibility of office [is] to do everything you can to help your city, or at least never to harm it knowingly” (5.14). See Plato’s *Apology* 28d and *Protagoras* 345e (1997, 27, 776).

<sup>11</sup> As Nietzsche writes in the final section of the third essay of the *Genealogy*: “The meaningless of suffering, *not* suffering itself, was the curse that lay over mankind so far—and *the ascetic ideal offered man meaning!* It was the only meaning offered so far; any meaning is better than none at all. . . .” (Nietzsche 1967, 162). Orwin (1994, 90) pointed me to this passage.

<sup>12</sup> Trans. Woodruff (modified).

<sup>13</sup> In demoting luck from the rank of cause, I believe that Thucydides joins good company, namely, Aristotle and Democritus. See Aristotle, *Phys.* 2.4–6; Democritus fr. 119; Schillinger (2019). But this contextual point lies beyond the scope of the paper.

<sup>14</sup> On luck and piety, see Aristotle’s comment at *Physics* 2.4.196b6 (1992, 33) and Orwin, (1994, 88–89).

<sup>15</sup> The Spartans also passed up two golden opportunities to attack the Peiraeus (2.94.1, 8.96.4–5). Thucydides is emphatic: “had [the Spartans] been bolder, they easily could have [taken the

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Peiraeus]. . . . Instead, on this occasion, and on many others too, the Spartans proved themselves to be the best possible opponents for the Athenians to be at war with” (8.96.4–5).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Plato’s *Gorgias* 515d–e and *Menexenus* 235a–b (1997, 859, 951).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.7.1115b8–19 (2011, 56) and Plato’s *Laws* 647c–649c (1980, 28–30).

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