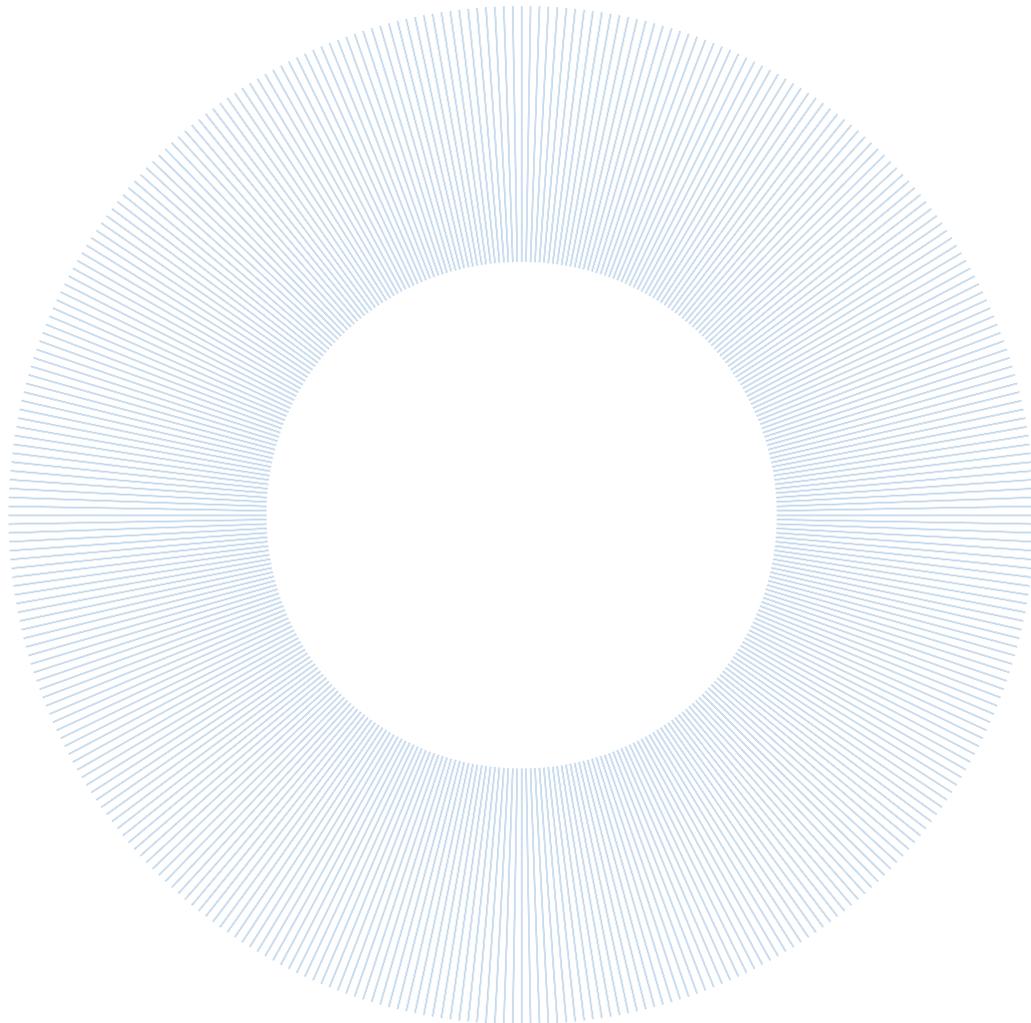


Greek Thinking, Fast and Slow.  
Euripides and Thucydides on  
Deliberation and Decision-Making



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## *GREEK THINKING, FAST AND SLOW. EURIPIDES AND THUCYDIDES ON DELIBERATION AND DECISION-MAKING*

*Euripides' 'Suppliant Women' and Thucydides' account of Pericles' leadership within the Athenian democracy of 431/430 BCE are good examples of classical Greek texts which ask citizen-audiences to reflect very deeply on the processes by which they come to make political or legislative decisions in a council or assembly. They also stimulate reflection among elite citizens and leaders on their own involvement in such processes. Both texts achieve these forms of reflection by anticipating recent empirical work in sociology, political psychology, 'behavioural economics' and cognitive science. These anticipations may reflect an elite 'paternalistic' approach to political rhetoric and leadership to an extent. But in the case of the mass art form of Greek tragedy, its dramatization of 'pathologies' and 'errors' of both mass deliberation and leaders' responses to them may have contributed to Athens' relative success as a participatory 'deliberative democracy' in which the masses were sovereign.*



Classical Greece's primary unit of social and political organization was called the *polis* (plural: *poleis*). Scholars usually translate *polis* as 'city-state' but we will soon see why 'citizen-state' is probably a better rendering for the classical period (500–300 BCE). In the fourth century BCE, Aristotle was able to argue 'that every *polis* exists by nature' and that 'man is by nature an animal of the *polis*' (*Politics* 1.2.1252b30–53a2). He thereby captured the extent to which this particular conception of community had come to dominate the Greeks' definition of what it meant to be fully human. The dramatic and historiographical representations of political deliberation and decision-making which are the focus of this article were written by two Athenian 'animals of the *polis*': Euripides and Thucydides. I will argue that these representations must have prompted Greek (and especially Athenian) citizens to reflect upon the psychological dynamics and mechanisms of leadership and collective deliberation in their *poleis*. So we must start by explaining the salient features of the *poleis* in general and the democratic *polis* of Athens in particular.

### *Decision-Making in the Greek Polis*

Scholars estimate that around 1,000 different Greek *poleis* were in existence at any one time in the classical period. 600 of these were located across mainland Greece, the Aegean islands and Aegean coast of Asia Minor and a further 400 around the rest of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. During this period, the vast majority of *poleis* operated self-governing 'citizen-centred' constitutional regimes, as opposed to monarchies or tyrannies.

Some of these self-governing citizen-states were 'democracies' in the ancient Greek sense: they gave the power (*kratos*) of final decision in all or most areas of policy-making and legislation to their *demos*.<sup>1</sup> The *demos* was the city's 'mass' of adult male citizens – its children, women, free non-citizens and slaves did not get to vote or hold office. A key feature of Greek democracies in

this period was their incremental extension of full political and juridical decision-making powers to all economic classes of their male citizenry and the use of monetary payment to incentivize wide participation. Two of these democracies, Athens and fifth-century Syracuse, were among four unusually large and successful 'super-*poleis*' which controlled surrounding territory of more than 2,000 km<sup>2</sup>. The more numerous 'oligarchic' *poleis* such as Sparta (also a 'super-*polis*'), Corinth and Thebes (in the fifth century) came to be so called because only the wealthiest 'few' (*oligoi*) citizens had sovereign decision-making power. Such states would thus distinguish between different grades of male citizen by virtue of their property holdings.

It is important to realize that the majority of city-states (about 80%) were very small with territories ranging from 9 km<sup>2</sup> to 200 km<sup>2</sup>. The estimated population (including slaves, women, children and free non-citizens) of these small states ranged from 500–25,000. This meant that most *poleis* had hundreds of citizens rather than thousands. Even the super-*poleis* were not large in comparison with most modern nation states, with territories ranging between 2,000 and 12,000 km<sup>2</sup> and populations of between 75,000 and 250,000. Classical democratic Athens' adult citizen male population will have fluctuated but estimates range between 20,000 and 40,000.

The fact that Greek *poleis* were small-scale in this way meant that it was both feasible and efficacious for these states to devote a good deal of time and organizational effort to face-to-face counsel and debate among their citizens. Regardless of whether they were democracies, oligarchies, tyrannies or monarchies, most *poleis* had a citizen council (*boule*) and/or a senate of 'elders' (*gerousia*), and a much larger citizen-assembly (*ecclesia*), courts of law (*dikasteria*) and a number of 'magistrates' (*archons*) who were elected or appointed by lot. So, it was the manner in which power was divided between these different deliberative institutions and offices, and the restricted access to some of them, which distinguished each type of regime.

Athens had the most radical and participatory form of citizen-centred democracy. For example: it had a sovereign assembly which met as much as 40 times per year in Aristotle's day and this required a quorum of 6,000 citizens to deliberate and decide on certain issues; it made extensive use of annual sortition (lots), as opposed to elections or property qualifications, as a means of filling its many important administrative positions and its 500-strong executive *boule*; some of its law courts used randomly selected citizen juries numbering hundreds. These institutional arrangements embodied the ideal that all the free male citizens of Attica would enhance the quality of the city's decisions by virtue of their shared deliberations and the aggregation and alignment of citizens' relevant knowledge and expertise. It has been persuasively argued by Josh Ober that this deliberative-epistemic ideal was largely realized in practice and, despite the major setback of losing the Peloponnesian War, it made classical Athens the most successful and prosperous of the classical *poleis* (Ober, 2008). But even in oligarchic *poleis* such as Sparta or Corinth, the citizen assembly was convened from time to time and thereby 'served to provide some degree of participation for ordinary citizens, as well as a means by which information could be conveyed and decisions ratified' (Brock and Hodkinson, 2000, p.10). And because *poleis* were so small, their oligarchic councils could hardly have avoided interaction with the rest of the citizen community or the mobilization of mass opinion in support of whatever the ruling minority had decided.

So, there was a strong consensual and deliberative aspect to all self-governing classical Greek *poleis* and we know that even when city-states were subject to a tyrant or monarch they sometimes held assemblies. This means that the representation of political decision-making in a Euripidean tragedy and Thucydides' account of Pericles' interactions with the Athenian democratic assembly which I discuss below would have been of interest to citizens of all Greek

states and not just the Athenians who were unquestionably the *primary* audience. In the case of Thucydides, it seems likely that we are dealing mainly with a literate audience of wealthy elite citizens.

What I hope to show is that these two texts prompted citizen-audiences to reflect very deeply on the processes by which they come to make political or legislative decisions in a council or assembly. They also stimulate reflection among elite leaders on their own involvement in such processes. I will also argue that both texts achieve these forms of reflection by anticipating two partially-overlapping areas of recent empirical research into possible errors in, or distortions of, human deliberation and decision-making.<sup>2</sup> Let me briefly outline those areas and their salient findings.

### *A Catalogue of Errors*

Empirical work in sociology, political science and political psychology has identified a number of ‘pathologies’, ‘effects’ or ‘biases’ which can lead workplace committees, juries and democratic-deliberative bodies, whether small or large, to make poor or ‘inauthentic’ decisions. An ‘inauthentic’ decision would be one which would not be made if the decision-takers had been given much fuller access to relevant information and arguments (Luskin et al., 2016). Let me briefly outline the ‘pathologies’, ‘effects’ and ‘biases’ of group decision-making which are salient to my argument.

i) The ‘common knowledge effect’. This is where a group can end up making a poor or ‘inauthentic’ decision because it focuses debate around information which the majority of the group shares rather than vital but unshared information (Gigone and Hastie, 1993).

ii) ‘Groupthink’ and ‘homogenization’. A group may make poor or inauthentic decisions because it has become too inward-looking and self-reinforcing in its outlook (Janis, 1982; Fuller and Aldag, 1998). Some participants, aiming to gain approval or avoid conflict, may self-censor or simply adopt the deliberative group’s prevailing views: this can prevent attitudes, information and arguments being aired and thereby risks an inauthentic or poor decision (Sunstein and Hastie, 2015). Of course, homogenization might be glossed positively if it describes an outcome of consensus following a healthy, well-informed exchange of diverse views and arguments which reflect the participation and expertise of the whole deliberating body (Luskin et al., 2016, p. 4). But one key symptom of unhelpful ‘groupthink’ is that the group entertains illusions of invulnerability, which in turn create excessive optimism and encourage unwarranted risk-taking (Janis, 1982). This is further exacerbated when the group does not see a need to consult independent, external expertise to fill its gaps in knowledge or understanding.

iii) ‘Polarization’. There are different types of ‘polarization’. One type is where new information, debate and deliberation can actually exacerbate or entrench disagreement in a group around two opposed positions on an issue or push opinions to even greater extremes (e.g. Lord et al., 1979). Of course, this need not be seen as problematic at all if the mechanism by which the polarized body reaches a decision – for example, majority voting – results in the best policy. But in circumstances where the achievement of consensus is required or where the polarization seems to be either a cause or symptom of ill-informed debate or an unwillingness to listen to disconfirming evidence from the other side, it can be deemed to be negative and ‘pathological’. Another type of ‘polarization’ is where group members may hear more arguments on the side of the issue towards which the group initially leans, thus tending to make the group’s mean attitude more extreme (Sunstein, 2002, 2009).

iv) 'Domination'. In the modern literature, this usually describes the ways in which 'it may not be possible to insulate deliberation from the everyday effects of social inequalities' (Luskin et al., 2016, p. 4). For example, the less well-off or well-educated might not be able to express themselves forcefully enough in the face of more well-resourced and trained-up opponents and/or they may be listened to less seriously. Thus the mean attitude of the group might move towards that of its most socially advantaged members. Another example: in a context where forms of 'gender bias' against women are consciously or unconsciously in operation, the views of the women in the group may be disregarded or marginalized. Another form of 'domination' is when a group's preferences and decisions are unduly influenced by a well-resourced and highly strategic 'special interest' faction within itself (Stokes, 1998).

v) 'Rhetoric, falsehoods and deception'. It should be obvious that exposure to intentional or unintentional falsehoods about relevant information could easily lead a group to make poor and 'inauthentic' decisions. 'Rhetoric' is more ambiguous. Some normative theorists of deliberative democracy argue that emotive and powerful forms of political persuasion are too manipulative and coercive to count as positive forms of argumentation and evidence-sharing within a group. This is especially associated with the Habermasian tradition of grounding deliberative democracy in 'communicative rationality' – where the goal of discussion is reciprocal understanding between individuals rather than success in achieving predefined individual goals (Habermas, 1996). But other normative theorists of democracy embrace rhetoric as an inevitable component of deliberative communication and provide empirical evidence that it can often be a benign tool for shifting opinions, for representing and explaining excluded and marginalized sub-groups and views, and for enhancing empathy and understanding between segments of a divided community (Dryzek, 2002, pp. 51–5).

A second area of salience to me is the empirical work in cognitive science, psychology and 'behavioural economics' which has revealed that an individual's calculations, judgements and decisions are arrived at via two different 'systems' in the brain: there is a 'fast', automatic 'system 1' of thinking, which forms judgements and executes decisions before we are even aware of doing so, and then there is the slow, effortful 'system 2', where we consciously and very deliberately weigh up options, calculate sums and probabilities, imagine the steps of a plan, and so on (Kahneman, 2011). It should be stressed that the identification of two systems is itself an explanatory device rather than an accurate mapping of physical-material processes or discrete areas in the brain.

The two systems interact so that errors made by our 'fast' system can be noticed and corrected by our 'slow system', or so that we use the right system for the right job. However, our 'system 2' can be very 'lazy' and ineffective and there is much debate about how we should characterize the overall performance of our 'two-system' brains. Some argue that we are very prone to mistakes due to hard-wired cognitive 'biases', emotions, snap judgements and 'heuristics' (short-cuts, so-called 'gut feelings' or rules of thumb). Others argue that 'heuristics', experience-led intuitions and snap judgements serve us very well indeed and in certain circumstances may actually outperform more prolonged and effortful processes of calculation and deliberation or over-reliance on algorithms (e.g. Klein, 1998; Gigerenzer, 2014).

Much of this research shows that the kind of thinking that works best will vary depending on the task at hand and that individuals' susceptibility to biases is highly variable. Some people are better than others at using their 'system 2' effectively. And while certain forms of training can reduce our susceptibility to 'effects' and 'biases' and can boost the effectiveness of our 'system 2' considerably, our fast and frugal 'system 1' can never be switched off and no matter how intelligent or 'rational' we think we are, *all* of us will make many decisions in our lives

which are essentially based on a mistaken perception or flawed calculation of risks. These observations have led to the development of 'prospect theory' as a more realistic model for predicting the economic behaviour of real humans than the 'rational choice theory' used in traditional economic modelling (Kahneman, 2011, pp. 279–87).

Under the auspices of this second strand of research, there are three clusters of cognitive 'bias', 'heuristic' or 'effect' which are especially relevant to my ancient examples:

vi) 'What you see is all there is'. In order to think fast and make sense of partial information in a complex world, our two-system brains like to achieve coherence. But in order to achieve the coherence and cognitive ease which such fast thinking requires, we tend to operate a number of biases which Kahneman places under the umbrella term 'What you see is all there is' (hereafter WYSIATI for short). Put briefly, WYSIATI biases mean this:

The confidence that individuals have in their beliefs depends mostly on the quality of the story they can tell about what they see, even if they see little. We often fail to allow for the possibility that evidence that should be critical to our judgement is missing – what we see is all there is. Furthermore, our associative system tends to settle on a coherent pattern of activation and suppresses doubt and ambiguity (Kahneman, 2011, pp. 87–8).

vii) 'Availability bias', 'affect heuristic' and associated cascades. These are particular examples of WYSIATI. Traumatic and unpredicted events such as mass-casualty terrorist attacks or tornado strikes become highly 'available' through publicity and can lead people to greatly overestimate the statistical risks of air travel or living in 'Tornado Alley' (Kahneman, 2011, pp. 137–45). The more novel, poignant and vivid the thoughts and images associated with a particular risk are for the mind, the more that risk will be overestimated in relation to others and the more it will produce and exacerbate fear. Because we use our emotions as 'heuristics', these fears in turn materially affect our judgements about relative risks and guide our decisions (Slovic et al., 2002). For example, in the 12 months after 9/11, so many Americans chose to drive rather than fly to their destinations, that an estimated 1,600 extra road deaths occurred. The very low probability of actually being caught up in a terrorist attack as opposed to the much higher risk of driving more than 12 miles at a time was masked by the prominence of 9/11 and subsequent security scares in the media and the fear that they introduced (Gigerenzer, 2014, pp. 8–14). Sometimes 'availability cascades' occur: for example, a minor, localized public health problem can create mass panic through exaggerated and blanket coverage by the media. This self-sustaining 'snowballing' of fear then sidelines any expertise and evidence which suggest that the associated health risks are minimal or spurious. Such cascades may even lead to unwarranted changes in public policy (Kuran and Sunstein, 1999).

viii) 'Overconfidence' or 'optimism bias'. This is a specific example of WYSIATI and it is especially critical for decision-making and planning by organizations, leaders and entrepreneurs. It describes a documented tendency to underestimate the costs and durations of projects, to 'focus on the causal role of skill and neglect the role of luck' and to 'focus on what we know and neglect what we do not know' (Kahneman, 2011, p. 259). Optimism bias often leads to the underestimation of risks when decision-taking. In some cases, such errors of calculation can nevertheless result in beneficial innovations and successes. But they can also cause projects and policies to fail disastrously, take too long or cost too much.

### *Deliberative Errors in Euripides' 'Suppliant Women'*

Athenian tragedies were performed at many different Dionysian festivals throughout Attica in the fifth century BCE. But the largest and most prestigious dramatic festival was the annual City Dionysia, which took place at the Theatre of Dionysus on the south slope of the Acropolis in the heart of the city of Athens itself. The tragedies performed at this festival were watched by at least 5,000 Athenian citizens and visitors from other Greek states. Some scholars put the audience figure as high as 15,000. Euripides' tragedy *The Suppliant Women* was performed at this festival sometime in the 420s BCE when Athens was at war with Sparta.

This play stages a story from the mythic-historical age of heroes which was often cited by the democracy's orators as an example of one of Athens' most glorious and altruistic military exploits. In the tragedy's opening scene, we learn that a group of mothers from the city of Argos and their king, Adrastus, have come as ritual suppliants to the altar of a temple in the Attic town of Eleusis. They petition king Theseus and the city of Athens to bring about the burial of their sons who have died in an attack on the city of Thebes in support of Polyneices' attempt to claim back the throne from his brother. Theseus cross-examines Adrastus about the whys and wherefores of the decision to support Polyneices (Morwood, 2007, *Euripides: Suppliant Women*, 155–61):

THESEUS: Did you consult prophets and study the flames of burnt offerings?

ADRASTUS: Alas, what you charge against me was my greatest blunder.

TH: It appears you did not go with divine approval.

AD: And what is more, I went in spite of what Amphiaraus said.

TH: Did you so lightly disregard the gods' will?

AD: Yes, for the clamour (*thorubos*) of young men shattered my judgement.

TH: You followed strength of spirit (*eupsuchia*) rather than strength of counsel (*euboulia*).

The king of Argos admits that he did not consult prophets or look for divine signs. He even ignored the warnings of his city's trusted seer Amphiaraus. Instead, he says, he was swayed by the shouts of the young men of Argos who were in favour of making war on Thebes. The seeking of religious prophecies as sources of advice might seem deeply 'irrational' to modern readers, but there is plenty of historical and comparative anthropological evidence to suggest that the precise manner and uses of such consultations by leaders or deliberative bodies in Greek *poleis* were often a means of managing risks, of clarifying options or of lending authority to difficult decisions that had already been made.<sup>3</sup> For many in the fifth-century Greek audience, Adrastus' failure to consult the evidence supplied by divination and the advice of a trusted prophet would seem deeply foolish, just as it does to Theseus.

This exchange anticipates a number of decision-making 'errors' and 'effects' which I detailed in the previous section. The Greek word which Adrastus uses to describe the young men's 'clamour' to which he succumbed is '*thorubos*'. This is usually used to describe the noise made by a large crowd within a political assembly, mass jury or theatrical audience. Thus we have a reference to the way in which a sub-group within the city has created an effect of *domination*. And if the 'clamour' of the young men is taken to include their speeches in the assembly, the exchange may also be an interesting dissection of the way in which *rhetoric* can manipulate its target and thereby drown out the countering advice and evidence of an expert (in this case, Amphiaraus). Finally, Theseus' pithy diagnosis that the 'clamour' caused Adrastus to substitute *eupsuchia* (courage, spiritedness) in place of good counsel (*euboulia*) hints that the Argive king substituted an appropriate awareness of the possible risks of a campaign against Thebes with an

emotionally-compromised judgement brought about by the young men's fervour. He succumbed to the *affect heuristic* and/or *overconfidence*.

Theseus soon returns to these dynamics and reflects on them in a way which brings out the workings of *deception* and *rhetoric* that can occur in deliberative bodies. He also returns to the *domination* of a faction (ambitious young men), and argues that the very rich and the very poor can create *polarization* if left to their own devices (231–49):

You used force and went against the gods and destroyed your city, led astray by young men who delight in winning honour and intensify wars with no regard for justice, destroying their citizens, one so that he can be a general, another so that he can grasp power and behave high-handedly, another to make money, not considering if the ordinary people are harmed at all by such treatment. For there are three classes of citizen. The rich (are) harmful and always covet more, while the have-nots who lack the resources for living are dangerous, giving way to envy, and stick nasty torments into the haves, deceived by the rhetoric (literally 'tongues', *glossai*) of worthless leaders. Of these three classes, it is the middle one that keeps cities safe, guarding whatever constitution the city sets up. And in view of that am I to become your ally? What good grounds for that could I give my fellow citizens?

This analysis may well have struck a chord with the audience's real experience of assemblies and councils in their *poleis*. But it also seems cold and more than a little pompous. Furthermore, Theseus is wrong to reject initially the appeal of Adrastus and the Argive women when they are suppliants. He has both a *religious duty* and a patriotic, civic obligation to put his city and its military might at their service (Burian, 1985). He changes his mind when he listens to the advice of his mother, Aithra, which goes along these lines (286–364). But in changing his mind, Theseus makes a point of maintaining that his analysis of where Adrastus was 'tripped up' in his deliberations is correct (334–6). It is striking that this analysis and the predicament of the chastened Adrastus focus the citizen-audience's attention on how mistakes and miscalculations can come about at the level of *polis*-wide deliberations and decision-making.

This focus returns for a third time in a famous debate between Theseus and the Theban Herald who has come to tell Theseus that the tyrant Creon will not give back the bodies of the Argive dead as requested. It is notable that the Herald's criticism of democracy matches up with some of the biases and effects which I have listed in the second section. For example, he warns Theseus against proposing war against Thebes to the people of Athens (476–91):

Take thought, and do not, in your rage at my words on the grounds that you have a free city, make a puffed-up answer, when you have less to be confident about. For we should not trust in the hope which has engaged many cities (in conflict), urging their passions (*thumos*) to excess. For whenever war comes to be voted on by the people, no-one any longer reckons on his own death but assumes that this disaster will come to someone else. If death were before the eyes when the vote is cast, Greece would never be suffering destruction in its madness for war.

The Herald's vivid point is that citizens of Greek cities would not so readily vote for a war if they had death before their eyes and did not entertain the expectation that someone else, and not they themselves, would die in that war. This very closely matches some of the alleged symptoms of *groupthink*: for example, its tendency to create illusions of invulnerability which in turn encourage excessive risk-taking. It also brings out that aspect of *optimism bias* wherein deliberators neglect the operations of chance and 'unknowns' in their calculations of risk. There is also some suggestion of the *common knowledge effect* and *affect heuristic*.

Despite these cautionary notes, the Athenians' decision to support Theseus' call for intervention and, when it comes to it, to go to war with Thebes can be regarded as a wise one by a number

of measures. There is a strong sense that the Athenian blood spilt in the ensuing battle is justified, not just because it achieves the return of the seven corpses in accordance with religious obligations but because it establishes the greatness of Athens, its people and Theseus himself. However, the play's emphasis on the circumstances and terrible consequences of Adrastus' disastrous decision-making and the Herald's all-too-plausible analysis of the working of 'untrustworthy hope' in a democratic body remind the audience that decision-making about war, with its extremely high stakes, requires care and vigilance in relation to headstrong interest groups and over-optimism.

My argument that this Euripidean tragedy highlights and explores various possible 'pathologies', 'biases' and 'effects' in a Greek city's political decision-making processes is not generalizable to *all* extant Greek tragedies. But many other tragedies do represent and discuss juridical or political decision-making in heroic-era Athens, Thebes or Argos in a similar fashion. And even those tragic dramas which focus on more domestic or dynastic dilemmas, deliberations and decisions can be said to foreground the complexities of decision-making in ways which were salient and enriching for their audiences' status as citizen-deliberators (Hall, 2009, 2012). This thematic focus on the whys and wherefores of decision-making errors might help to explain Athens' considerable investment in this mass art form and its flourishing under the democracy.<sup>4</sup> As we saw in my first section, Josh Ober has characterized Athens as a successful state by virtue of the fact that it was a specific type of participatory democracy which fostered innovation, expertise, learning and the 'alignment' of its citizens' use of these towards collective goals (Ober, 2008). If this is right, then Greek drama may have contributed to this success by highlighting typical 'epistemic' and 'deliberative' errors which the citizenry must guard against. Greek tragedy focuses on the terrible consequences of mortal overconfidence, disastrous choices, the dangers of ignoring or misinterpreting prophets and oracles and the chasm between human uncertainty and a future which is divinely ordained. But this is not *simply* a lesson in fatalism, or the importance of mortal piety in the face of chance events and divine caprice. Greek tragedy is also interested in examining the points where characters *might have decided differently* and the influences on their cognition which prevented them from doing so.

### *Thucydides and Pericles as Political Psychologists*

My second case study focuses on Pericles' responses to Athenian doubts and fears and the way in which they are represented in Book 2 of Thucydides' *Histories*. We will start with his final speech to the Athenian assembly in that book (2.60–64). Sometimes in the Greek historians, wise and powerful oratory has its effects negated by certain historical contingencies or a particular faction's manipulation of the perceptions of Athens' enfranchised citizen population (the *demos*). But in this speech, Pericles is represented as successfully overcoming these obstacles through speech and strategy. Not only that, but his oration partially achieves its aims by offering a commentary on the very theme of the malleability of 'demotic' cognition itself.

The situation in which the elected Athenian general and statesman Pericles finds himself prior to this speech is as follows. It is the summer of 430 BCE, the second year of the Peloponnesian war between Athens and its allied states on the one side, and Sparta and its Peloponnesian allies on the other. A great plague has ravaged the city and Thucydides famously offers a vivid autopsy of that disease's ravages and its terrible effects both on the Athenian populace and their normal ways of life. These effects were made worse by overcrowding within the city of Athens. The overcrowding was a direct result of Pericles' defensive policy of evacuating the countryside and not engaging the invading Peloponnesian land forces in pitched battle. Then

the Peloponnesians mount their second invasion of Attica. Thucydides tells us that this invasion, combined with the terrible experience of the plague, prompted the Athenians to undergo a change of view. The Athenians 'blamed Pericles for having persuaded them to go to war and held him responsible for the misfortunes which had befallen them' (2.59.2). They were eager to come to an agreement with the Spartans and had even sent envoys. With no agreement yet achieved, the Athenians were at a loss for ideas and they 'turned against' Pericles. Thucydides says that Pericles expected the people to act like this and called an assembly 'with the double object of restoring confidence and of leading them from these angry feelings to a calmer and more hopeful state of mind' (59.3).

The speech which Pericles then delivers is successful in stopping the Athenians from seeking terms with the Spartans and in making them more enthusiastic for the war. It is long, complex and wide-ranging in its connections with the wider narrative of the *History* in general and it is pivotal to the Thucydidean heroization of Pericles in particular. But commentators have not made the points I am about to make.<sup>5</sup> I want to consider a key passage from the speech and I have put the most relevant sentences in bold (2.61.2–4):<sup>6</sup>

For my part, I stand where I stood before, and do not alter my position. But it is you who have changed. For it has happened, now that you are suffering, that you regret the consent you gave me when you were still unharmed, and in your weakness of judgement (*asthenei tes gnomes*) my advice now appears to you wrong. **The reason is that each one of you is already aware [lit. 'has perception (*aisthesis*')] of his hardships, whereas the proof [lit. 'demonstration'/'manifestation': *delosis*] of the advantages is still lacking to all, and now that a major reversal of fortune has come upon you without any warning, you are now too dejected in mind to persevere in your former resolutions. For the mind is enslaved by that which is unforeseen and unexpected and happens contrary to all calculation; and this is exactly the experience you have had, not only in other matters, but especially as regards the plague.** Nevertheless, seeing that you are inhabitants of a great city and have been brought up in a way of life which corresponds to her greatness, you should willingly endure even the worst of misfortunes and not let your good reputation be obliterated. For just as all men claim the right to despise him who through presumption tries to grasp a reputation which he does not deserve, so they equally claim a right to resent him who through feebleness fails to live up to the reputation he already enjoys. You should, rather, put away your private grief and devote yourselves to our communal security.

Pericles diagnoses the people's change of heart as caused by a combination of suffering and limited perception. The terrible suffering caused by the war, Pericles' defensive strategy and the plague are all clear and present to their perception – the *aisthesis* of each and every one of them. By contrast, the advantages which the people will accrue from following Pericles' advice is not yet in evidence. These must be the gains which he outlined in his first speech at the end of Book 1 of the *History*. In that speech, Pericles successfully persuaded the Athenians that freedom from Peloponnesian diktat and the wealth and power which Athens derives from its empire would most likely only be preserved, and eventually enhanced, if the Athenians went to war with the Spartans immediately and followed his 'city and ships' strategy regardless of any reversals and concomitant doubts (1.140–44). The proximate, vivid evidence of the invasions of Attica and the plague is dominating the Athenians' perception, says Pericles, and it is hard for them to see any balancing proof that Pericles' recommended strategy will ultimately confer greater benefits than any that could be derived from an immediate truce and negotiation. This is why they are regretting their initial decision.

Now, of course, this can be read as special pleading and *rhetoric* on Pericles' part. But his strategy here is to tell the Athenians that they are succumbing to WYSIATI. To bring this out, it is worth re-stating Kahneman's summary of this particular cluster of biases and heuristics:

The confidence that individuals have in their beliefs depends mostly on the quality of the story they can tell about what they see, even if they see little. We often fail to allow for the possibility that evidence that should be critical to our judgement is missing – what we see is all there is. Furthermore, our associative system tends to settle on a coherent pattern of activation and suppresses doubt and ambiguity (Kahneman, 2011, pp. 87–8).

Pericles also says that the Athenian *demos* are having their judgement skewed and degraded by sudden and unexpected reversals in their fortunes, in particular the plague. Such unpredictable events enslave the mind, he says. This observation seems to anticipate some key findings of the way in which *availability bias and the affect heuristic* can influence judgements and decisions: unforeseen and highly traumatic events are especially likely to trigger miscalculations of relative risk and alter our attitudes and behaviour as a result of heightened fears.

A key element of Pericles' psychological analysis here is the role of perception and its effect on the citizens' imaginations and emotions. This is a constant theme in Thucydides. The Spartan king Archidamus explicitly relies on the notion that people in general, and the Athenians in particular, will find it impossible to resist an angry impulse to rush into a full land-based engagement with his Peloponnesian forces when an unusual calamity bursts into their field of vision (2.11.7–8):

We have therefore every reason to expect them to risk a battle, if they have not already set out before we are yet there, at any rate when they see us in their territory laying it waste and destroying their property. For with all men, when they suffer an unfamiliar calamity, **it is the sight set then and there before their eyes which makes them angry, and when they are angry they rush into action making least use of rational calculation (*logismoi*) and most use of their passion (*thumos*).**

Once the Spartans get to Acharnae, a region of Attica which was visible from the walls of Athens itself, it is indeed the sight of them ravaging the land which makes the Athenians want to abandon Pericles' policy of non-engagement and mount a full scale land attack. Notice how Thucydides lingers on the causal relationship between this shocking, and for many, unprecedented *visual spectacle* and its effects on the emotions and behaviour of the citizenry (2.21.2):

But when they **saw** (*eidon*) the army in the neighbourhood of Acharnae, only sixty stadia from the city, they thought the situation no longer tolerable; on the contrary, it naturally appeared to them a terrible thing when their land was being ravaged **in open view** (*emphaneî*), a sight which the younger men **had never seen**, or even the older men except in the Persian war; and the general opinion, especially on the part of the younger men, was that they ought to go forth and put a stop to it. They gathered in knots and engaged in hot disputes, some urging that they should go out, others opposing this course of action.

This account may well be influenced by one of Thucydides' contemporaries, the rhetorician and sophist Gorgias. Gorgias' mock speech in defence of Helen puts emphasis upon the power of sight and spectacle (*opsis*) to leave its mark upon, and disturb the soul to such an extent that it stirs emotions and thereby alters behaviour (*Helen* 15–19). It is perhaps significant that Gorgias judges *opsis* to be as powerful as words in this regard (18). But the above passage also underlines the shrewdness of Archidamus' prediction of how the Athenians will react.

Thucydides goes on to narrate that the Athenian people now started to turn their anger on Pericles and 'forgetting his previous advice, they accused him of cowardice in not doing what a general should and leading them out to battle' (21.2). Seeing that the people's 'intentions were

not for the best' (*ou ta arista phronountas*) and convinced that his policy of non-engagement was still sound, Pericles decides not to allow a people's assembly: 'if they got together there would be an outbreak of anger (*orge*) lacking in judgement (*gnome*) that would result in them making a serious mistake' (22.1). Archidamus' provocation is thwarted because Pericles is able to prevent the predicted descent into passion (*thumos*) and anger (*orge*) from changing policy and (it is implied) he himself does not abandon his rational calculation (*logismos*) or good judgement (*gnome*). Thucydides tells us that Pericles then took steps to maintain calm in the city, sent out cavalry raids to prevent the Peloponnesians getting too close to the city walls and launched a naval expedition against the Peloponnese itself.

According to Thucydides, then, Pericles manages the Athenians' anger in two different ways depending on the specificities of context. After the first invasion, he contains the Athenians' angry urge to abandon the policy of non-engagement by temporarily blocking access to their own democratic-deliberative body. This is fascinating, because it seems to tell the reader of Thucydides that there are certain situations where the mood of an audience could be beyond the reach of persuasive arguments. If Pericles is taken to be a model leader – and this does seem to be Thucydides' assessment of him (2.65)<sup>7</sup> – it turns out to be just as important for that leader to know when to *prevent* a debate on policy among the citizenry, as it is to know when to call an assembly with the aim of persuading it. In the language of my second section, Thucydides implies that Pericles was aware of the danger that a *cascade* of *availability bias* and *affect heuristic* brought on by the high visibility and proximity of the effects of the Peloponnesian invasion on the countryside might well lead the Athenians to enact a catastrophic and unwarranted change of policy. In this instance, the implication is that Pericles correctly identified the high risk of such a change occurring if he allowed an assembly and so he opted for the lower risks associated with avoiding a debate, and with initiating the cavalry raids and sending out some ships.

After the second invasion and the plague, Pericles judges that he must call an assembly and make a big speech in order to bring the Athenians back into line. After all, he had predicted and expected that they would falter in this way (1.140.1, 2.59.3–4, 60.1). Although the Athenians' attempts to make peace with the Spartans are not working, there is an implication that Pericles sees that the situation here is very different to that which held after the first invasion: this time, there is nothing to lose in trying to persuade the Athenians to stick to their guns. He loses out personally for a brief period: the Athenians accepted his arguments but fined him and seem to have briefly rejected his leadership (2.65.3–4). But they soon re-elected him as general and once more 'entrusted their affairs to his management' (2.65.4). Commentators are right to stress that Pericles' speech brings his audience around via a number of strategies: he reminds them of 'the individual's duty to the state (60.2–4), his own unique qualities of leadership (60.5–61) and the glories of the Athenian empire (62–64.5)' (Rusten, 1989, p. 197). But they have missed the importance of Pericles' political-psychological analysis of why the Athenians have turned on him in this oration. Whether Pericles *really* accused the citizenry of 'WYSIATI thinking' is impossible to know: the question of how accurate and verbatim are Thucydidean speeches is vexed.<sup>8</sup> It seems possible that Thucydides is importing his own analysis here. Either way, Thucydides shows his readers how effective it can be in rhetorical terms to make one's listeners reflect on (what we would now call) their own cognitive biases.

## Conclusion

Thucydides clearly had a good awareness, through observation, anecdotal evidence and hearsay, of the sorts of biases, effects, heuristics and cascades which I outlined in my second section and which modern social science and cognitive science have now identified and labelled through experimental work and data collection. He uses Pericles' career and speeches to show how an awareness of them can be a powerful tool of leadership as well as a persuasive strategy of deliberative oratory in its own right. It may even be that orators like Pericles themselves helped citizens to monitor their own susceptibility to these potentially 'pathological' features of participatory democratic decision-making.

When we take these Thucydidean passages together with my section on *Suppliant Women*, we can also see how popular drama and more elite intellectual writing in Athens are concerned to explore the epistemic and cognitive vulnerabilities which can lead collectives and their leaders to make poor decisions. The examples I have selected err on the side of a very paternalistic attitude wherein mass decision-making is seen to require the corrective manipulation of an enlightened leader. And of course, some of the modern policy applications of the research outlined in my second section are avowedly paternalistic too (e.g. Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). But in the case of the tragic material, a non-elite citizen-audience were at least afforded the opportunity to reflect on certain biases, heuristics and pathologies which they and their leaders might exhibit. And they were perhaps prompted into greater awareness and monitoring of such tendencies during their future deliberations as a result.



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lack of surviving evidence and difficulties of definition make it hard to be precise about how many democratic classical *poleis* there were, at one time or another in this period. Robinson, 2011, argues for 55 while Hansen and Nielsen, 2004, and Hansen, 2013, go for nearly double that figure.

<sup>2</sup> The application of recent insights from cognitive science and behavioural economics on decision-making to classical texts and ancient history is rare but not without precedent. For example, Ober and Perry, 2014, use Thucydides' 'Melian dialogue' to show that the Greek historian grasped the principles underlying contemporary 'prospect theory' (as summarized and refined in Kahneman, 2011). I hope that my own work here and forthcoming will build on that of Ober and Perry by examining different biases, effects and heuristics in different parts of Thucydides and by also considering other genres such as tragedy.

<sup>3</sup> Greek states only occasionally posed questions of oracles as a means of checking or informing their political decision-making but it seems to have been routine for generals on military campaign to have taken a *mantis* (seer) with them and to have regularly made divinatory sacrifices when making important decisions (e.g. Xenophon *Anabasis* 5.6.29, 6.1.22–4, 6.4.14). At the same time (and as is typical of societies which rely heavily on divination) seers, omens and oracles were not always seen as reliable. After the disastrous failure of the Athenian campaign in Sicily in 415, Thucydides tells us that the Athenian citizenry blamed 'the oracle-mongers, the seers and all the others whose professed revelations of divine will had at that time encouraged their hope of conquering Sicily' (8.1.1). Greek literature abounds with examples where consultants fail to interpret correctly the prophecy given to them: for example, when Croesus invaded Persia on the oracle's advice that if he did so he would 'destroy a great empire', he failed to see that the oracle was referring to his own empire (Herodotus 1.53). On all of this and more see Parker, 1985; Harrison, 2000; Bowden, 2005; and Eidinow, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> For a different but compatible account of the way in which Greek tragedy and comedy reflect and reinforce Athens' specifically *democratic* ideology and culture, see Burian, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> See, however, the analyses of Halliwell, 2002, pp. 70–2, and Greenwood, 2006, pp. 69–76, which stress that Thucydides has Pericles use medical and other language drawn from the context of the plague to suggest that the Athenian *demos*' political rationality and judgement have become 'diseased', while his own remain unaffected. My emphasis is totally different and yet entirely compatible with these points.

<sup>6</sup> My translations from Thucydides are based on Smith, 1919, with occasional adaptations and glosses. Many of those changes draw on the following scholarly translations and commentaries: Rhodes, 1988; Rusten, 1989; Hornblower, 1991; Hammond, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Thucydides' admiration for Pericles should not be conflated with an entirely straightforward or uncritical stance towards his decision to take Athens to war, a decision which, after his death, does end in disaster for the Athenians. See Connor, 1984, pp. 71–5, on the ways in which the text raises possible questions about the wisdom of Pericles' strategy whilst also forcing the reflection that if Athens *had* negotiated an early peace agreement, its empire, power and reputation would have been severely compromised.

<sup>8</sup> By the same token, we may also suspect the historical accuracy of Archidamus' astute observations in his speech. Thucydides' own statement on the matter at 1.22.1 is difficult to

interpret and leaves room for supposing that some speeches are closer to what was actually said than others. The bibliography on this question is vast: for good discussion in connection with Pericles' last speech and further references, see Greenwood, 2006, pp. 67–76.

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**Insights**

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