

PSYCHOLOGY AND PLAUSIBILITY IN THUCYDIDES' HISTORY

By

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One of the most engaging qualities of Thucydides' *History* seems to be its ability almost everywhere to convince the reader of the purported accuracy of its account of historical events. This conviction is reinforced not only by the particular stylistic features and historiographical method of Thucydides, which lend to it an aura of 'scientific' or 'objective' investigation and analysis,¹ but perhaps even more so by a particular Thucydidean view of man in nature and a fairly extensive vocabulary of psychological activity to express that concept.

by a particular Thucydidean view of man in nature and a fairly extensive vocabulary of psychological activity to express that concept.² It is largely through Thucydides' explanation and interpretation of human events through this particular psychological understanding of man that lends his work such plausibility and hence makes it much more acceptable to us today. Except when totally unforeseen and drastic accidents of fortune intervene, the procession of human events in Thucydides seems to proceed with consistent plausibility.³

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Aside from the purely stylistic features of Thucydides' *History* which indeed enhance this effect on the reader, a major factor constantly at work in the narrative is the author's way of expressing and explaining motivations behind human events. Human thought, perception, deliberation, emotion, and action Thucydides expresses in terms of a particularly fairly well definable psychology.

Such a statement does not mean that Thucydides' explanation of the reasons and motivation for each and every human act recorded in his narrative is historically accurate. It only implies that his explanation is generally at once convincing and acceptable to the reader as historically accurate **because of the psychological interpretive method behind it.**⁴ Thucydides works a great deal from inference. Having such keen insights into human nature and such an understanding of how it reacts to circumstances, he is extremely adept at sizing up what most probably was

¹ Cf. C.N. Cochrane, *Thucydides and the Science of History*, Oxford, 1929; K. Weidauer, *Thukydidens und die Hippokratischen Schriften*, Heidelberg, 1954.

² See W. Mueri, 'Beitrag zum Verstandnis des Thukydidens', *Museum Helveticum*, 1947, fasc. 4, pp. 251-275. Also E. Topitsch, 'Anthropeia Physis und Ethik bei Thukydidens', *Wiener Studien*, LXI-LXII, 1943-47, pp. 50-67. Also C. Meister, *Die Gnomik im Geschichtswerk des Thukydidens*, Winterthur, 1955. Especially see P. Huart, *Le Vocabulaire de l'Analyse Psychologique dans l'Oeuvre de Thucydide*, Paris, 1968. Also M.C. Mittelstadt, 'Thucydidean Psychology and Moral Value Judgement in the History: Some Observations', *Rivista di Studi Classici*, Torino, Fasc. I, 1977, pp. 30-55.

³ Cf. W. P. Wallace, 'Thucydides', *Phoenix*, XVII, 4, 1964.

⁴ See Wallace, *op. cit.*; also de Romilly, *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism*, Oxford, 1963.

in the minds of men at any given time under any given circumstances. Given his own expressed theory of nature as a fixed factor — *τῶν τε γενομένων... καὶ τῶν μελλόντων ποτὲ αὐθις κατὰ τὸ ἀνθρώπινον τοιούτων καὶ παραπλησίων ἔσεσθαι* (1.22.4) — reactions to circumstances have a high degree of predictability. The solidity of the foundations of his psychology, therefore, in large measure explain the degree of plausibility in his historical account.

It is not as if Thucydides has not told us very clearly from the beginning what his method is to be — *ὡς δ' ἂν ἐδόκουν μοι ἕκαστοι περὶ τῶν αἰεὶ παρόντων τὰ δέοντα μάλιστ' εἰπεῖν, ἐχομένω ὅτι ἐγγύτατα τῆς ξυμπάσης γνώμης τῶν αἰεὶ λεχθέντων οὕτως εἴρηται* (1.22.1–2). Although the statement was made specifically in regard to speeches, we find this same principle, or variations of it, applied also in the narrative proper wherever Thucydides explains motivation. Probability, plausibility and consistency of motivation everywhere increase the credibility of the Thucydidean narrative.

It goes without saying that the total lack of a theological superstructure and a complete dependence on human psychology to explain historical events give Thucydides the credibility in terms of human motivation that Herodotus lacks. Herodotus, though also a man of keen insights into human nature, worked out no consistent theory of human nature or psychology to apply to history. His is a rather traditional theological interpretation of history in any case, which precludes the kind of plausibility in motivation that we find in Thucydides.⁵

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A number of studies⁶ have analyzed Thucydidean psychological theory in terms of a particularly Thucydidean vocabulary of human nature. Through a painstaking analysis of all terms in the *History* dealing with sensation, perception, deliberation, understanding and decision-making Huart especially has given us a quite accurate understanding of how Thucydides conceives the human 'soul' (for he does not use the Greek equivalent of that word, *ψυχή*, at all) to operate.⁷ In the first place Thucydides does not follow the more or less traditional tri-partite division of the soul into elements resembling the *νοῦς* — *θυμός* — *φρήν* categories of psychic activity upon which Plato, of course, elaborates in his own psychology, e.g., *τὸ λογιστικόν τὸ ἐπιθυμητικόν, τὸ θυμοειδές*. At least these are not the central terms of Thucydidean psychology.

As a matter of fact, although Thucydides does reserve a large place for the analysis of human feelings in his narrative, he abandons the notion of semi-concrete facul-

⁵ See A. Lesky, *History of Greek Literature*, New York, 1966, pp. 306–328. For the idea of predestination and other tragic concepts related to Herodotean theology see W. Potscher, 'Götter und Gottheit bei Herodot', *Wiener Studien*, 71, 1958.

⁶ vide supra n. 2

⁷ Huart, p. 62

ties of the soul. Thucydides' purpose is not that of a philosopher like Plato, who studies the psychology of human beings almost entirely in the abstract, forcing his theory to harmonize with his theory of the universe. Thucydides set out to write a 'scientific' history totally subordinated to the reality of facts. And for him this reality consists chiefly of human thoughts, feelings, emotions, and decisions which explain the unfolding of events.

To be sure Thucydides does not reject the abstract. Quite the opposite. It is only that he does not search for reality in philosophical generalization, but analyzes the various concepts within the context of real human behavior. He does not concern himself directly with faculties *per se*, i.e. what causes sensation, thought, or will, but what men have effectively felt, thought or willed. Thus Thucydides has a propensity for using the verb or a verbal form more often than a substantival form.⁸

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W. Mueri's study⁹ has shown that none of the usual terms to describe the operations of the human psyche — e.g. soul, spirit, temperament, heart, mind, etc. — are really capable of conveying, or of even approximating the meaning of the specifically Thucydidean psychological complex. For lack of a better term Mueri, coining his own expression, refers to it as *das Innere*. Many separate statements in the text of the *History* reveal a set of associative interrelationships which define a spiritualpsychological internal state. The whole of the human psyche cannot be apprehended at all at the same time by conscious reflection, but separate psychological relationships and facts can be sharply distinguished by observation. Thucydides thus grasps the significance of real events as they take place within the framework of this psychological view which endows them with universality and historical validity.

This particular psychological complex in man as Thucydides sees it is described within a complex of three terms representing three types of interactive internal activity in man: *ὀργή* — *ξύνεσις* — *γνώμη*. The interaction between these three elements accounts for all human acts and thus is capable of explaining historical events. Both Mueri's study and Huart's analysis, statistical and otherwise, make it abundantly clear that these terms define the bases of Thucydidean psychology.

The way in which Thucydides sees this 'internal state' partially eludes description since the meaning of one of the key concepts — *γνώμη* — has many nuances. Not only this, but also the fact that sometimes there is an overlapping or mingling of two concepts together — as for instance when Thucydides speaks of *τὸ ὀργιζόμενον τῆς γνώμης* (2.59.3), or in the same sentence in which *ὀργή* is used we find *ἀποπληῖσαι τῆς γνώμης τὸ θυμοδμενον*. (7.68.1). On the whole, however, the three

⁸ Huart, p. 41–42

⁹ Mueri, *op. cit.* I am heavily indebted to Mueri's study for many of the following observations and remarks.

terms are quite distinctly definable, (*ζύνεσις* being mostly a synonym for *γνώμη* however), at least for purposes of analysis and elucidation of motivation in Thucydides.¹⁰

Fundamentally the psychological complex described by these terms points up the distinction between the irrational and the rational, mostly symbolised by the opposition between the two terms which carry the most weight in Thucydides: the irrational — *ὄργη* and the rational — *γνώμη*. But *ὄργη* and *γνώμη* are not treated as faculties. For example, Huart shows that the result of the struggle between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians in the first year of the war depends not on the strictly military confrontation, but on the outcome of the opposition between the *ὄργη* of the Athenian populace and the *γνώμη* of Pericles.

The passage at 2.22.1 quite clearly shows the differences between the two concepts.¹¹ When Pericles confronts the *orge* of the populace, he does not interpret it as a theoretical and abstract disposition of the citizens which enables them to act more by feeling than by reason. The Athenians are certainly aggravated (*χαλεπαίνοντες*) at seeing their lands ravaged before their very eyes by the enemy, and they would like to go out immediately to meet the foe in combat to avenge themselves. Their *ὄργη* indeed, if not checked by Pericles, would force them into real and immediate action. On the other hand, the statesman, seeing the consequences, deplures the fact that they are not guided by their *γνώμη*.

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Here it is not a matter of a reflective faculty, or of merely abstract ideas, but of a process of clear judgement about a given situation. Pericles is really reproaching his fellow citizens for not seeing that a sortie at this point against the enemy outside the walls would expose them to the loss, not only of some immediate goods, but to a defeat which could lead to the total collapse of Athens and her empire.¹²

Though the struggle between *ὄργη* and *γνώμη* is not always presented with such nicety of distinction or dramatic impact, it does underline constantly the nexus of events and explains their connections. *ὄργη* and *γνώμη* define the reactions of men in contact with reality.

Mueri has discovered severally combined in *γνώμη* the rational, the power of reflection, and the conceptual intellect.¹³ The semantic field which *γνώμη* seems to cover is somewhat delineated by concepts used in association with it — *βουλε-*

¹⁰ On *xynesis* or *synesis* see Huart, pp. 282–5; 289–90; p. 311

¹¹ Huart, p. 56

¹² Huart, p. 57

¹³ On *gnome* see Huart pp. 56–57; 161–162; 290; 304–310; 502; 504–507

ύεσθαι, μὴ ἀξύνητος, ξύνητος, σοφός — as the unique power of thought by which man penetrates the shell of circumstances to the inner realities, ordering them to his own ends. By this power he also overcomes obstacles and directs his activity. As the power of thought it stands beside other powers which shape reality for him. Moreover, whenever the word γνώμη stands for the power of deliberative thought it is to some extent imbued with the emotional and the volitional, sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker, as the case may be.

In short, to generalize and to simplify, we can say that for Thucydides γνώμη and kindred words (like ξύνησις for example) represent man's intellectual, reflective, and deliberative capacity — or the rational source of his actions, while ὄργη defines the non-rational, more primitive, sometimes even instinctual, wellsprings of his activity. Here we have a typical Thucydidean antithesis and it is always the proper order, balance and symmetry between these two sources of motivation in man, with γνώμη as guide of course, that ensures the well-being both of the individual and of society. Every significant and major episode in Thucydides points up the tragic calamities attendant upon the usurpation of ὄργη over γνώμη. One need not look far for examples which abound: the Plague, the Corcyrean stasis, the Mytilinean revolt, the consequences for Athens of her action against Melos, the catastrophic results of the Sicilian expedition, the outcome of the war itself.¹⁴

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Within the compass of ὄργη lies all psychological activity relating to man's acquisitive instinct and Thucydides uses a number of terms in connection with it: ὀρέγεσθαι, ἐπιθυμία, ἐλπίς ἔρωσ, θράσος, etc. Such words, and primarily πλεονεξία are constantly used in Thucydides in connection with a basic drive in human nature. Its manifestation in individuals is well exemplified by a Cleon, for instance, or an Alcibiades. Its manifestation in the body politic is displayed perhaps largest of all in Athens and in her drive for imperial expansion. Corresponding to this vocabulary of 'ambition' is a vocabulary of 'effect of ambition' — in the case of Athens the progressive moral deterioration from the ideals set forth in the Funeral Oration, the shocking transformation of the Athenian character as described in Book One at the first Spartan assembly¹⁵ to the cynical and ruthless imperialists of the Melian Dialogue in Book Five.

On the political level of the Athenian state the vocabulary of 'ambition' is distilled by Thucydides into three key words which he explains as the basic motives for the expansion of the Athenian Empire: τιμή, δέος, ὠφέλεια¹⁶. Honor and self-interest forced the Athenians to acquire the empire initially and fear compelled them to hold on to it. Another generalization, perhaps more universally applicable, is found in his treatment of the Corcyrean revolution (3.82–3). Commenting

¹⁴ On *orge* see Huart pp. 56–57; 156–162; 502

¹⁵ Thuc. 1.74–75

¹⁶ Thuc. 1.75.3. On motivation in Thucydides cf. W. Thompson, 'Individual Motivation in Thucydides', *Classica et Mediaevalia*, XXX, 1969.

on the horrors of civil strife throughout the Greek world he notes πάντων δ' αὐτῶν αἴτιον ἀρχὴ ἢ διὰ πλεουεξίαν καὶ φιλοτιμίαν, ἐκ δ' αὐτῶν καὶ ἐς τὸ φιλονικεῖν καθισταμένων τὸ πρόθυμον (3.82.8) This observation is repeated in his comparison of Pericles with his successors who act κατὰ τὰς ἰδίας φιλοτιμίας καὶ ἴδια κέρδη... ὀρεγόμενοι τοῦ πρῶτος ἕκαστος γίγνεσθαι ἐτρόποντο καθ' ἡδονὰς τῷ δήμῳ καὶ τὰ πράγματα ἐκδιδοῦσι (2.65.10) Also ... κατὰ τὰς ἰδίας διαβολὰς περὶ τῆς τοῦ δήμου προστασίας ... (2.65.11).

Such vocabulary dealing with the human appetitive drives makes it abundantly clear that for Thucydides individuals as well as states are primarily motivated out of profit, prestige, or fear. As for fear, the overwhelming emotion which it summons up, often denoted in Greek by τὸ δεινόν is closely linked with the term κίνδυνος.

All such concepts relating to fear point up a single limiting and constraining life situation — the endangerment of life and threat of annihilation.¹⁷ Thus κίνδυνος is often used in Thucydides both in reference to the individual and the state — threat to individual life on the one hand, threat to the state's autonomous existence on the other. κίνδυνος is the abyss from which the people of Mytilene escape at the last moment through the arrival of the counter-command (3.49.4). It is the catastrophe which the city of Syracuse avoided just in time through the arrival of Gylippus (7.2.24). It is thus that the historian condenses events into the single moment in which he sees the reversal of fate taking place.

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In fact, as Mueri has shown¹⁸, the passages which best and most forcefully elucidate the idea of the state as an historical, living entity are those in which he speaks of the constraining, narrowing and restricting conditions of threat and danger. The state as a power system which confronts other powers is affected at its very center by a decrease in power. Thus it suffers a wound and the whole life of the state is put into jeopardy. Before the Sicilian invasion (the beginning of Athens' downfall according to Thucydides [265.11

according to Thucydides [2.65.11]), Nicias voices a warning: in the interest of one's country an opinion could be voiced against the expedition on the grounds that Athens was contemplating the greatest of all risks she had ever undertaken (6.13.1): ὑπὲρ τῆς πατρίδος ὡς μεγίστων δὲ τῶν πρὶν κίνδυνον ἀναρριπτοῦσης ἀντιχειροτονεῖν...

The tension which κίνδυνος creates is a necessary concomitant of the tyrannical state. Here is an idea which Pericles, Alcibiades and Cleon express in similar words: whoever wishes to demonstrate manly behavior without risk must do it in inactivity, but the choice of a foreign policy of such inactivity will introduce the down-

¹⁷ Cf. Mueri *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Mueri *op. cit.*

fall of the state (2.63.2; 3.40.4; 6.18.3.7.). Security guarantees only slavery (*ἀκνωδύνως δουλεύειω* [6.80.5; 2.63.3]).

Logically the pursuit of either intangibles (power, prestige – *τιμή*), or any other possession or advantage (*ὠφέλεια*), must begin with *ἐλπίς* – expectation followed by a confirmed and optimistic hope for the successful, prosperous and gratifying outcome of something willed and planned.¹⁹ It presupposes initially a willful intent, a desire (3.45.5; 6.15.2; 4.103.4) *Ἔρως* desire and *ἐλπίς*, the hopeful expectation (3.45.5) are the two companions of many human undertakings: any all-engrossing, blind and optimistic scheme for the future. Success strengthens the hope and present good luck and favorable outcome nourish it (4.17.4; 4.65.4). Its focal point is always future gain, in any case on something *ἀφανές* (2.42.4).

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Perhaps in his psychological understanding and explanation of the workings of *ἐλπίς* in the human soul is Thucydides most eloquent. Hence a greater depth of plausibility is added to his work. Hope allows for little if any deliberation for human beings when desire takes hold of them.²⁰ Then they usually abandon themselves to unreflecting hope – always for a course of action jealously defended and which they are loathe to give up at any cost, judicious deliberation being the most resented obstacle (4.108.4). Hope is not only the companion, but also the servant of desire. Before a decision involving great risk Demosthenes (4.10) advises his men: in this present emergency one should be careful not to appear so rationally prudent as to evaluate in detail and calculate all the odds of danger at hand. He should, rather, go at it unreflectingly and full of the best expectations – *ἀπερισκέπτως ἐν ἐλπίς*. Reflection has no place in an emergency. Here Demosthenes reckons with hope as a force which can unleash a man's powers of execution through the emotions. Wherever *ἐλπίς* is at work, say the Athenians to the Melians (5.103), delusion is at hand: in time of danger it is surely a source of consolation, but it is harmful – *δαπανός γὰρ φύσει* – „wasteful by nature”. Diodotus expresses the same sentiments in his arguments against deterrent punishment at 3.45.5: *ἢ τε ἐλπίς καὶ ὁ ἔρως ἐπὶ παντί, ὁ μὲν ἠγούμενος, ἡ δὲ ἐφεπομένη, καὶ ὁ μὲν τὴν ἐπιβουλὴν ἐκφροντίζων, ἡ δὲ τὴν εὐπορίαν τῆς τύχης ὑποτιθεῖσα πλεῖστα βλάπτουσι, καὶ ὄντα ἀφανῆ κρείσσω ἐστὶ τῶν ὀρωμένων δεινῶν.*

The evidence for Thucydides' explanation of the psychological motivating forces behind human acts stems from his conviction that man in his limited abilities and in his psychological structure remains, as he understands it, essentially and permanently unchanged. Therefore it is possible and valid for the author to make statements requiring no further substantiation. Thucydides find in man himself as he is a dominant, inevitable regularity of psychological economy, comprehensible in spite of its many ways of operations and manifestations.²¹

¹⁹ Mueri *op. cit.*

²⁰ Mueri *op. cit.* On *elpis* cf. also Huart pp. 145–149.

²¹ Mueri *op. cit.*

This conviction of the unchangeability of human existence and of the law of necessity in the adjustment and reaction to given external conditions is the principle by which the aim of Thucydides' historical work is understandable. This unalterable human nature also determines, for example, that the prevailing consensus on the nature of justice can place no limits on the violence of man: *πέφυκασί τε ἅπαντες καὶ ἰδίᾳ καὶ δημοσίᾳ ἀμαρτάνειν* (3.45.3). This elemental drive does not allow itself, even through force of law, to be suppressed by any threat whatsoever (3.45.3 and 7). The activity of man is determined from ultimate elemental drives, i.e. once set in motion, necessary, according to a law of regularity. Therefore human activity is also the object of an understanding which can exist as a lasting, useful possession.

It is not without importance that the concluding sentence of 3.45 — a chapter treating of human nature in a fundamental way — makes a powerful statement: „Finally, it is impossible to prevent, and only great simplicity can hope to prevent, human nature from doing what it has once set its mind upon, by force of law or by any other deterrent whatsoever.”

The shattering historical events of this century itself, let alone those of the previous twenty odd intervening centuries, certainly bear Thucydides out. Here is precisely why we find Thucydides' historical account so plausible. We also tend to accept his psychology and theory of human nature²² since we have witnessed its effects and manifestations ourselves so many times recently in this century alone. But Thucydides' view of human nature need not lead us to conclude that there is no hope for man. On the contrary, perhaps Thucydides is merely telling us that there is a cogent need to rethink certain 'principles' in consideration of the realities of human nature. At 3.82 Thucydides does not say expressly that human nature will always be the same, but as long as human nature is the same. *ἕως ἄν ... ἤ* — a slight nuance which allows for the possibility even if remote, for improvement. He seems to be stating that it is impossible to hope to modify the mentality of human beings except by forcing them to reflect upon the realities confronting them in order to arrive at a better understanding of their real significance. But improvement must proceed gradually and men must learn to unshackle themselves from their passions (*ὀργή*) at such times, and learn the true guidance of reason and judicious decision (*γνώμη*). Thus Thucydides seems to be presenting history in terms of a constant struggle — incessantly waged within each individual — between the impulses of

²² Topitsch (op. cit.) has shown that by *ἀνθρωπιὰ φύσις* Thucydides means only those powers which we might term natural, primitive or instinctual and which, in spite of their elemental force, do not constitute the whole man. These forces are more at home in the lower regions of the psyche, the primitiveness which all men share in common. *Ἀνθρωπιὰ φύσις* deranges the life of individuals as well as the social order by stirring up war of all against all. In spite of the restraints and sanctions of *nomos* repeatedly the destructive forces of instinct break through.

ὄργη and the rational, reflective powers of γνώμη. The triumph of ὄργη over γνώμη is thus inevitably tragic, the triumph of γνώμη spiritual, moral, and even materialistic success.

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PSIHOLOGIJA I UVJERLJIVOST U TUKIDIDOVOJ „POVIJESTI“

Uvjerenje što ga čitalac stječe o brižnosti s kojom Tukidid izvješćuje o povijesnim zbivanjima uvjetovano je u velikoj mjeri posebnim Tukididovim pogledom na čovjekov položaj u prirodi i posebnim načinom psihološkog izražavanja koje daje čvrstoću i uvjerljivost njegovu djelu.

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Tukididov pojam „duše“ ne slijedi manje ili više tradicionalnu tročlanu podjelu na elemente koji nalikuju na νοῦς — θυμός — φρήν. Ključni pojmovi Tukididova izražavanja psihološke aktivnosti jesu izrazi ὄργη i γνώμη, koji prilično dobro na općenit način definiraju polove Tukididove psihologije: ὄργη emocionalnu i neracionalnu sferu aktivnosti, γνώμη intelektualnu, voljnu, prosudbenu i racionalnu. Ali Tukidid ne upotrebljava ove izraze za *sposobnosti* duše, poput Platona, na primjer. Tukididova se psihologija ne temelji na teoretskim apstrakcijama, nego na stvarnim povijesnim događajima — *na onom što su ljudi doista osjećali, mislili ili htjeli.*

Upravo time što γνώμη kontrolira ὄργη, osigurava se ljudska dobrobit, individualna i društvena. Svaka značajnija veća epizoda u Tukididu ukazuje na tragične nesreće koje su posljedica nasilja ὄργη nad γνώμη.

Kao osnovne motive i države i pojedinca navodi Tukidid τιμή, δέος, ὠφελία. Tukididov rječnik obiluje riječima koje se odnose na čovjekov grabežni instinkt i onima koje se odnose na ugrožavanje ili opasnost za egzistenciju ili sigurnost. Prema Tukididu, glavna čovjekova zla proizlaze iz tih grabežnih instinkata.

Tukididova psihologija također pretpostavlja očevidnu neizmjenljivost ljudske prirode. Ona je ocrтана kao elementaran nagon, gotovo nezadrživ, koji je nemoguće potisnuti bilo kakvom prijetnjom ili zakonom. No upravo je zbog toga ljudska aktivnost razumljiva i do neke mjere pretkaziva, a čak je moguća i skromna mogućnost za mijenu nabolje ako se čovjeka može prisiliti da razmisli o stvarnosti s kojom je sučeljen. Za to bi bio nuždan trijumf γνώμη nad ὄργη.