

# FEAR

## In a Pandemic and in Thucydides

*“We must re-learn how to be afraid.”*

October 2020

Rusticated on an island in Maine! Away from my books and from any serious library, I have been listening to our President’s advice not to fear the corona virus. Good, I think for a split second. We are all fed up with being afraid. Somehow we have to get on with our lives. But, on second thought, we must above all live them smart.

Do I remember correctly that Jacqueline de Romilly, years ago, drew a distinction between two Greek words we translate as *fear* – phobos and deos? What was that distinction precisely? Was it between the corrosive fright that rises up within us and ends in panicky decision making? Was that phobos. And was the other, deos, the assessment of risk essential for sound policy formulation?

Was Thucydides thinking along these lines? Or, in a more timely way, is this a distinction we should be drawing right now – or rather *living by* right now? Phobos will almost surely lead to bad decision making, either by making us tremble in our boots, or by pushing us over the edge into rash actions. You can’t make good decisions when phobos is the boss. In fact,

phobos won't let you live a reasonable life because, one way or the other, phobos destroys reason.

Deos is just the opposite. If phobos led the Spartans to dread the growth of Athenian power so much that they miscalculated the relative power of the two adversaries, then deos is what was missing in the Athenians' decision to invade Sicily. This kind of fear is essential for reasonable decision making. It's *rational fear*. Or, better, deos is "risk assessment" under pressure.

I'm not sure I remember de Romilly correctly, or am right in thinking that Thucydides thought his two phase war was shaped by two forms of fear. But, right at this moment, I care more about how we live our lives as individuals and nations in a very frightening time. Pass the deos, please. I've had enough phobos.

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## **Some comments and reactions:**

**Joanna Hitchcock** writes:

... it struck me right away that the English word "fear" describes an emotion only, whereas both the Greek words incorporate a response to it, adding an intellectual element to the raw feeling. If *deos* describes a rational response, using fear as a stimulus to sound planning, then our current administration provides an all-too-perfect example of *phobos*.

**Matt Christ** and **Lisa Kallet** both provided the reference for de Romilly's article:

"La *crainte* dans l'oeuvre de *Thucydide*," *Classica et Mediaevalia* 17, 1956.

Lisa adds "I wish I could remember who, or in what article, someone contested that difference (not in Thuc but in general)."

**Dan Tompkins:**

I do agree on *phobos* and *deos*, and I think you spell the difference out quite well.

As regards how we live our lives, agreed! I connect *phobos* with appeals to the limbic area of the brain, and sometimes translate it as "anxiety." Several psych authorities find that anxious thinking excludes or marginalizes the rational, affecting the quality of decisions. So you are, I think, onto something. This was the way de Romilly and Huart viewed it. David Konstan, in his big book on Greek emotions, challenges the antithesis, but he tells me he would not go to the wall on this, and that we can still be friends. ...

I have been working on these words myself, ... Essentially, I'm arguing that Athenians use *phobos* by design in 1.73-78, and that their underlying goal is to play on Spartan anxieties: they hope Spartans will respond to their speech emotionally, and declare war. ... I'd be very interested in any criticisms, from any in the group. I'll be glad to send the full draft essay if anyone is interested.

**Jeff Rusten** notes the odd phrasing in 4.117.1 where the two fearing verbs are juxtaposed: ταῦτα τοὺς Ἀθηναίους ἠγούμενοι ἅπερ ἐδέδισαν φοβεῖσθαι. Jeff set me to thinking: Hammond and Rhodes in their translation (““The Spartans had accurately identified the Athenians’ fears ...”) seem to me to get the first part right, but what about the dramatic juxtaposition of the two verbs? Is Thuc. implying that the Athenians’ judgment was distorted by one kind of fear, while the Spartans experienced the kind that does not preclude sound assessment of risk, and that they then concluded that the risk was worth taking?

**Don Lateiner** and other respondents seemed to reflect another kind of fear, the nagging philological fear that perhaps the terms are just synonyms used for *variatio*. Thuc. does like metabolē, as Ros showed. But *why*? Not, I think, because it is elegant or pretty. Could it be that its use reminds the reader of the instability of language in situations like war, pandemic and stasis each of which can destroy stability?

**Lisa Kallet** urges us also to take a closer look at 4.108, and **Rosaria Munson** notices “Pericles in his first speech uses φόβος twice and at short range (1.140.5 and 141), both times identifying it as an emotion that the Athenians should neither feel nor give the impression to their enemies that they feel. Whereas, as some of your contributors already observed,

the word for fear in the Athenians' enumeration of the three powerful motives for political action is δέος (1.75.3, 76.2). I should also add that Jeff Rusten's online lexicon to Thucydides defines φόβος as emotional fear and δέος as intellectual fear—very impressive!”

**John Immerwahr** says:

It is a great distinction. I have heard the same idea expressed as the difference between existential emotions and neurotic ones. Existential fear is realistic. If you are hiking in Yellowstone you should be afraid of bears and take appropriate steps to protect yourself (make a lot of noise as you come over a hill, carry bear spray). Neurotic fear is unhealthy. You refuse a free trip to Europe with a stop in Rome, because you think the Rome airport is prone to terror attacks.

**Paul Cartledge** suggests “there's a third type of fear, viz prudential - i.e. fear/concern for security - and that that is the sense that applies to Thuc 1.23.5-6. Of course, that type of (basically existential) fear could also tip over into being neurotic.”

**A Philological Excursus:**

**Gary Pence** notes that “in modern Greek δέος means “awe,” “.

That also seems to me to apply to the New Testament, where phobos almost entirely eclipses deos, with the one exception being *Hebrews* 12.28 which Danker explains as “*emotion of profound respect and reverence for deity, awe.*”.

That translation will not work well in most classical texts but I notice the etymologist J. Hoffman linked δέος to θεουδής . Maybe also to δεισιδαιμονία? (And possibly to δεινος and δειλος?) If so, it might indeed denote a feeling of existential threat, as John Immerwahr suggests.

**Gary Pence** adds a further dimension: “According to LSJ Iliad 7.478 had χλωρόν δέος. But the citation quotes fifth century CE Ammonius defining δέος as “more lasting.” δέος . . . κακοῦ ὑπόνοια, φόβος δὲ ἢ παραυτικά πτόησις). That late definition would fit with your idea that δέος is less about ephemeral emotion and more about rational “risk assessment,” as you put it.”

**Dan Tompkins** noted the importance of David Konstan’s work on the emotions and adds:

“Fear and anger... are arguably no less cognitive than envy and guilt, and elementary reflexes may enter into the formation even of highly cognitive emotions. In his well-known analysis of fear, Joseph LeDoux states (1996: 69) that ... "A fear reaction system ... involves parallel

transmission to the amygdala from the sensory thalamus and sensory cortex. The subcortical pathways provide a crude image of the external world, whereas more detailed and accurate representations come from the cortex." ....

"Virtually alone among classicists, Konstan delves into the trove of neurological research on fear in the brain. LeDoux elsewhere describes the amygdala as a "'guard dog, constantly sniffing for threats' ... its role in fast" involves "evolutionarily primitive" pathways for which cognition comes second to emotion, though LeDoux is careful to note that the brains regions aren't arranged like offices in a building. "

**David Konstan** responds:

Dan is right, "I've not found such a sharp distinction between *phobos* and *deos*, but there nevertheless is a difference. *Deos* wouldn't normally be the word for fleeing an enemy in terror, and *phobeisthai*, as you know, often has the sense of running away (though by no means always). When Aristotle says that we ought to have some fear, for example, of a bad reputation or of committing an injustice, I think he uses *phobos* – but I'll have to check. I recall that the Stoics discriminated between good emotions or *eupatheiai* and *pathê* proper, which they condemned. Fear was in the latter class, but caution, or *eulabeia*, was okay, and even sages would react cautiously in the face of danger. Today, here in the US, there is a constant appeal to fear, with people from both parties warning that extremists from the other are

about to stage a revolution. This does not make for a healthy political climate.”

The Stoics return in a stimulating discussion **Bill Berg** calls attention to, Michael Chase’ discussion **Hans Jonas and the heuristics of fear** in academia.edu. Bill notes the discussion covers “fear from the pandemic to philosophical thinking. It reaches back to the Stoics and to the philosopher Hans Jonas. Much of the discussion turns on a distinction between “ ... the kind [of fear] that blocks, paralyzes and freezes us, [and] the kind that unleashes energy and [lets us] be able to solve the problems raised by what frightens us.” I’m not sure this corresponds to the deos / phobos distinction, but it is certainly worth exploring...”

Here is one excerpt from Chase’s discussion:

” ... the optimal response to the current crisis brought about by the coronavirus and what I have suggested may be its putative cause: human depredation of the biosphere. What is needed, as we have seen, is not the kind of fear that paralyses us and renders us incapable of effective action, but a fear that mobilizes and motivates us, and that, when sufficiently intense, might even inspire us to undertake the acts of heroic self-abnegation and limitation required to change our lives in the sense of a more ecologically sustainable lifestyle.”

To me the most interesting idea raised by Jonas, and by the pandemic is that “it is nature itself that demands that its own rights be taken into account,” and, hence, that abused and



maligned nature is giving us through the terror of the pandemic a message we better not filter out.

It's this discussion that produced the injunction "We must re-learn how to be afraid."

### **Deuterai Phrontides:**

Are we right in trying to distinguish different kinds of fear? Or among the Greeks are there emotions that refuse to fit neatly into *our* semantic field "Fear"? That's *our* analytical category, not theirs. Could the terms derive from different *physiological* conditions, rather than states of mind? – the trembling of the knees in phobos vs. in deos the tightening within the chest cage, the phren, when one realizes "This could be it"? That might not be *rational* fear but it certainly is *existential*!

If so, "risk assessment under pressure" might be OK, but my rational / irrational distinction won't work. Apologies to my hero E.R. Dodds, but increasingly when I hear "rational" or "irrational" applied to the ancient Greeks, I fear that we are imposing our categories on a culture that has perfectly good categories of its own. I wonder too if, in fact, their categories might sometimes be more useful than the ones we take for granted, like monolithic fear.

Well, I fear, the time has come for a pause. What an amazing group of friends and colleagues have weighed in on this topic! I am deeply grateful.

Others who want to join in for a possible Round Two of this discussion can write me at [wrconnor1@gmail.com](mailto:wrconnor1@gmail.com).

Bob Connor

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Many thanks to all of you (quoted and unquoted) for such a stimulating discussion! .

Bob Connor

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