Both of the naval leagues led by Athens in the classical period—the Delian League of the fifth century and the Second Athenian League of the fourth—have been the subject of extensive and lively debate. Scholars have argued about the popularity of the Delian League; about when and if it hardened into an empire; and about whether the Second Athenian League was any different. These debates all dealt in an implicit way with the question of whether (or to what extent) Athens oppressed and exploited its allies at various points of the classical period. Recent scholarship has rightly focused in on this question, which should be considered the central normative consideration in the debate about the Athenian naval leagues.

This chapter proposes a new way of looking at the Delian and Second Athenian Leagues—from the perspective of the social scientific theory of collective action. This new perspective aims to change our view of the leagues by affecting our positive or descriptive understanding of inter-state relations in the classical Aegean and by altering our normative or moral evaluation of Athens’ treatment of its allies within its naval leagues. This chapter will lay out a model of collective action, examine whether the ancient evidence supports the model, and finally consider how the exercise might increase our positive understanding of the Athenian naval leagues. The more complex question of what implications the perspective of collective action might have for our normative evaluation of the naval leagues will have to be tackled at a later stage.¹

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¹ For a prospectus of what future points will be considered, see the conclusions.
Two Types of Collective Action

The novel perspective offered in this chapter is that of the social scientific theory of groups, specifically the theory of collective action. This section presents the basic assumptions and parameters of the model and distinguishes two types of collective action. These are hierarchical—characteristic of large groups and reliant on a coercive hegemon—and cooperative—characteristic of smaller groups and marked by a more cooperative way of operating. Emphasis is placed on the three predictions of the theory of groups: that groups work differently depending on their size, that coercion is often necessary for collective action, and that the costs of joint activity are often borne to a disproportionate degree by the largest members of groups.2

The account of collective action offered here shares many of the basic assumptions of the theory of rational choice, whose central assumptions are that individual agents seek to increase their utility in a rational way.3 In utilizing models of collective action, I am not claiming that all actual individuals always act rationally to increase their utility. Such models are useful, however, because analyzing human actors as if they acted in that way turns out to have significant explanatory force. It should be noted that ‘utility’ is a place-holder for our specific conception of what is good for a particular set of agents (so that it does not, by definition, rule out other-regarding preferences, such as altruism). The only two assumptions about the utility of Greek poleis that are made in this analysis are that it includes survival as a polis and that it includes material prosperity as a significant ingredient, though not necessarily the most important.

The theory of collective action describes the conditions for enterprises engaged in jointly by rational agents. In joint enterprises, groups seek to secure for themselves certain goods, and in the provision of collective or public goods, a special set of conditions apply. Public goods are ‘non-excludable’ and ‘non-rivalrous’, that is they cannot be prevented from being consumed by all and one person’s consumption of them will not reduce the amount available to others. Clean air is a good example of a public good as, once provided, nobody can be

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2 This account of collective action is drawn mainly from the classic analysis by Olson (1965) 5–65 and, for his formal model, 22–33. The conception of hierarchical collective action, in which group-members consent to being monitored by a hegemon, can be traced back to Hobbes (1651/1968). For models (and real-world examples) of cooperative joint activity, see Ostrom (1990).

3 For a good introduction to the theory of collective action (as espoused by Olson) within the context of the rational choice paradigm, see Hindmoor (2006), especially 102–128.