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Introduction

1. LUCK AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

In the early morning hours of August 9, 1945, the B-29 *Bock's Car* bomber left the American airfield on Tinian island in the Pacific bound for the arsenal city of Kokura on the northern tip of Japan's Kyushu island. In the plane's belly sat "Fat Man," the second atomic bomb readied for military use. It was a plutonium-based implosion device with the explosive power of some thirteen thousand tons of TNT. Three days earlier, the bomber *Enola Gay* had dropped on Hiroshima the first such weapon, "Little Boy"-a bomb constructed on rather different, less sophisticated principles. And now phase two of the world's greatest physics experiment was about to take place. But matters did not go exactly as intended.

Over Kokura there was considerable cloud cover and haze, and the aiming point was obscured. In consequence, Army Air Corps Major Charles W. Sweeney proceeded southward as per contingency plan to the secondary target, the old port city of Nagasaki. There, Fat Man detonated, producing a ball of fire described by observers as twenty times brighter than sunlight. The rest, as the saying goes, is history. Kokura was a city literally saved by the clouds. And what was an incredible piece of good luck for the inhabitants of Kokura turned equally bad for those of Nagasaki.

Luck need not, of course, make its impact so dramatically. On a lesser scale it is a reality that makes itself felt in every aspect of daily life. But it is a challenge to philosophers as well. Why is it a fact of life? What does it mean for the human condition? Why is life so unfair? And what should the moralist make of luck's destabilizing the balance between fate and merit? Such questions are obviously intriguing. And yet, since classical antiquity at any rate, philosophers have not taken luck as seriously as the topic demands.

The human significance of luck stems from the fact that it is one of the characteristic factors that define our condition. For while we are intelligent agents who make our way by thought along the pathways of a difficult world, we are agents of *limited* knowledge who do and must make our decisions in the light of incomplete information. And for this reason we are inevitably at the mercy of luck. Our choices and decisions propose, but the ultimate disposition is at the mercy of a force beyond the limits of our cognitive and practical control. When matters do indeed turn out as we design, then--all

too frequently--it is by good luck rather than rationally determinative planning and execution. And if things go badly, then--all too frequently--it is by bad luck rather than sheer incompetence.

To be sure, once we intelligent creatures appear in this world under the aegis of evolution, it transpires that the world's eventuations must--normally and in general--be such that the bulk of what happens to us is in line with our sensible expectations. Most of what happens to the intelligent beings who have a thought-guided lifestyle on nature's stage must run as expected, and only a fraction of what substantially affects us can eventuate counter-expectedly. Were this not so, then creatures of *our* sort would not have developed and endured. But this of course does not mean that things will always go as we expect.

In matters of benefit, intelligent creatures find themselves in a situation where there are two ways to lose out: actually suffering losses and not sustaining gains. Accordingly, our expectations can go wrong in two ways: (1) we expect something bad, but what actually happens is good (happy surprises); (2) we expect something good, but what actually happens is bad (disappointments). Here luck operates on both sides of the balance. The course of natural and rational selection at work in producing a viable community of rational creatures will presumably be such that happy surprises will have to outnumber disappointments. For since disappointments are physically and psychologically dangerous, and happy surprises are unproblematic (and indeed positive), evolutionary selective processes will so operate as to favor a prudence that produces substantially more favorable misjudgments (happy surprises) than unfavorable ones (disappointments). On this basis, good luck seems destined to outweigh the bad.

But good luck does not have the held to itself. Bad luck too exists and even has its uses. For when things go wrong, it is far more comforting and ego-protective to avoid an acknowledgment of personal fault by blaming one's bad luck. Luck is a most useful instrument of self-exculpation. One's self-image--and public image to boot--is obviously safeguarded whenever one can manage to avert personal culpability by deflecting blame for one's failures on uncooperative chance. (But of course in taking this stance, one is also less likely to profit by the useful lessons that such experiences afford.) Interestingly enough, the domain of luck is not limited to this life alone. For one can also have posthumous luck to exactly the extent that one can have posthumous interests. It seems altogether plausible to say that it was unlucky for Christopher Columbus that the continent came to be called America, after the insignificant cartographer Amerigo Vespucci, instead of Columbus, after its actual discoverer. The long, long reach of luck extends even beyond the grave.

2. THE LANGUAGE OF LUCK

Luck as an English word is a creature of the fifteenth century and derives from the Middle High German *gelucke* (modern German *Gluck*), which (somewhat unfortunately) means both happiness *and* good fortune, conditions that are certainly not necessarily identical. Virtually from its origin, the term has been applied particularly to good or ill fortune in gambling, in games of skill, or in chancy ventures generally.

What is useful for the discussion of luck--and what several European languages do not make available--is a single word to mean "good or bad fortune acquired unwittingly, by accident or chance" ("ein zufalliges Gluck oder Ungluck"). In English, *luck* does exactly this job; in other languages we have to do the best we can. For luck fares rather mixedly in European languages. The Greek *tuche* is too much on the side of haphazard. In Latin, *fortuna* comes close to its meaning, with the right mixture of chance (*casus*) and benefit (be it positive or negative). But the German (as indicated) suffers from the unfortunate equivocation that *Gluck* means not only *luck* (*fortuna*) but also *happiness* (*felicitas*). The French *chance* (from the Latin *cadere*, meaning how matters fall--"how the dice fall") is a fairly close equivalent of *luck*, however. And the Spanish *suerte* is also right on target.

On the other side of the coin, several languages have a convenient one-word expression for "a piece of bad luck" (French *malchance*, German *Pech*)--a most useful resource considering the nature of things, which English unaccountably lacks. (Despite its promising etymology, *misfortune* is not quite the same, since it embraces any sort of mishap, not merely those due to unpredictable accident or chance but also those due to one's own folly or to the malignity of others.) And it may be emblematic of something larger that no European language seems to have a single-word expression for "a piece of good luck."

We may, from time to time, realize a wholly unanticipated boon. When such an event occurs, we are lucky indeed. But this happens to some more than to others. Good luck seems to accompany some people and bad luck to haunt others in a

more or less systematic way. In English we do not have a special expression for such people-unlike German, where someone so favored can be called a *Gluckskind* (child of good luck), and someone not favored an *Unglucksrabe* (bad-luck raven). But while English lacks a convenient terminology to implement the distinction for those more or less systematically endowed with good (or bad) luck, we do have the expression *jinx* for someone who *brings* bad luck--though, curiously enough, no comparable expression for someone who brings us good luck.

Is the term luck strictly and literally applicable outside the human realm? It is clear that when we say the tree was lucky to escape uprooting in the hurricane, we speak figuratively. Does this mean that cats and dogs cannot be lucky? Not at all! Perhaps cats and dogs cannot *appreciate* their luck--cannot realize that they are lucky. But that, of course, does not mean that they cannot actually be lucky. (Cats and dogs presumably cannot realize that they are overweight, but that does not preclude them from being so.) There is no question that animals have interests and desires that can be affected by developments running contrary to any reasonable expectation that could be formed--not, of course, by them; that is actually immaterial, for here an intelligent spectator will do. The crux is that we can do it on their behalf; after all, it is we who characterize them as lucky. (One can be lucky without realizing it, even as one can be foolish without realizing it.) Luck pivots on having things go well or ill fortuitously from the angle of its beneficiaries. And as far as the nature of the recipient is concerned, the pivotal question is, once again, not "Can they reason?" but "Can they suffer?" And the fact that we ourselves can make judgments on the beneficiary's behalf serves to keep cats and dogs in the picture.