

ARISTOTLE’S PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE IDEA OF LUCK

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What is luck (*tuchē*)? This is the central question of Book 2, Chapters 4–6 of Aristotle’s *Physics*—the starting point of my inquiry.¹ Cynthia Freeland has identified two contrasting interpretations of this text in particular and of the idea of luck in general.² On the one hand, “causal realists” such as Freeland herself contend that the idea of luck refers to an objective feature of reality—namely, to an “accidental cause” (*aitia kata*

¹ Translations of the *Physics* refer to Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. Hippocrates Apostle (Grinnell: Peripatetic Press, 1980). I have modified Apostle’s translations as necessary, having consulted the Greek of *Physics: A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary*, ed. W.D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936). Also helpful is *Aristotle’s Physics: Books I and II*, trans. William Charlton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970). “Luck” is the most common translation of *tuchē*; *automaton*, of “chance.” These translations are appropriate because, as we will see, Aristotle hives off the more human-focused and psychologically rich concept of luck (*tuchē*) from impersonal chance (*automaton*). For justifications of these translations, see also Lindsey Judson, “Chance and ‘Always for the Most Part’ in Aristotle,” in *Aristotle’s Physics: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Lindsay Judson (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 73–74.

² Cynthia Freeland, “Accidental Causes and Real Explanations,” in *Aristotle’s Physics: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Lindsey Judson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 68–71.

sumbebēkos) of motion or change.³ Freeland returns to the Stagirite because on her reading of the *Physics* “accidental causes are really ‘out there’ in the world, since intrinsic causal relations and accidental unities in which they are grounded are objective features of reality.”⁴ Many influential theorists of luck implicitly subscribe to the “causal realist” view. When Martha Nussbaum defines luck as “external happening,” when

³ Aristotle, *Physics* 2.5.197a5, 33. In addition to Freeland, causal realist interpreters of the *Physics* include Judson, “Chance,” 97–99; John Dudley, *Aristotle’s Concept of Chance: Accidents, Cause, Necessity, and Determinism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 27–31; Gareth Mathews, “Accidental Unities,” in *Language and Logos: Studies in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, ed. Malcolm Schofield and Martha Craven Nussbaum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 223–40; Susan Sauvé Meyer, “Aristotle, Teleology, Reduction,” *The Philosophical Review* 101, No. 4 (October 1992): 798–803. For a more recent treatment of these issues, see James Allen, “Aristotle on Chance as an Accidental Cause,” in *Aristotle’s Physics: A Critical Guide*, ed. Mariska Leunissen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 45–65. Essential pre-modern commentaries are those of Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics*, trans. Richard J. Blackwell, Richard J. Spath, and W. Edmund Thirkel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963); and Simplicius, *On Aristotle’s Physics* 2, trans. Barrie Fleet (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁴ Freeland, “Accidental Causes,” 69–70. See also Meyer, “Aristotle, Teleology, Reduction,” 798–99: “it is a fact *in rerum natura* whether the causal relation between two entities is intrinsic or accidental.”

Ronald Dworkin uses the idea of “brute luck” to refer to wholly unpredictable events that befall agents no matter what they know or do, each theorist supposes that luck refers to phenomena that are “really ‘out there’ in the world.”⁵

On the other hand, Freeland argues against what she calls the “pragmatist” view of luck. For pragmatists, the idea of luck refers to an explanation or an interpretation of an unpredictable outcome.⁶ Freeland correctly associates the pragmatist approach with those Aristotelian scholars who argue that Aristotelian *aitiai* refer to explanations rather than to causes.⁷ For example, Julia Annas writes that Aristotle’s “examples of *X*’s

⁵ Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 334; Ronald Dworkin, “What Is Equality? Part 2: Equality of Resources,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 10, No. 4 (Autumn 1981): 293.

⁶ Freeland, “Accidental Causes,” 62. Freeland’s exemplar of the pragmatist approach is Bas C. van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980). For a recent and notorious book on the topic of luck that also fits Freeland’s definition of pragmatism, see Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2007).

⁷ See Freeland, “Accidental Causes,” 49–51; Jonathan Barnes, “Commentary,” in *Aristotle: Posterior Analytics*, trans. Jonathan Barnes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); Julia Annas, “Aristotle on Inefficient Causes,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 32, No. 129 (October 1982): 319; Charlton, *Aristotle’s Physics*, 98–104; Max Hocutt, “Aristotle’s Four Because,” *Philosophy* 49, No. 190 (October 1974): 385–87; Julius M.E.

standing as an *aitia* to *Y* include: the bronze to the statue; the ratio 2:1 to the octave; the planner to the deed; the aim of health to walking (*Physics* 194b23–35). These cannot all be *causes* without absurdity. . . . It is a great improvement to cease thinking of an *aitia* as a cause and to treat it instead as an explanation, a ‘because.’”⁸

Interestingly, Annas and other exponents of the “explanation” approach have not examined Aristotle’s account of luck as an *aitia kata sumbebēkos*.⁹ My reading of

Moravcsik, “Aristotle on Adequate Explanations,” *Synthese* 28, No. 1 (September 1974): 3–17; Richard Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause, and Blame: Perspectives on Aristotle’s Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 69. The reevaluation of the concept of *aitia* in Aristotle’s philosophy arguably originated with Gregory Vlastos, “Reasons and Causes in the *Phaedo*,” *Philosophical Review* 78, No. 3 (July 1969): 291–325.

⁸ Annas, “Inefficient Causes,” 319; see also Moravcsik, “Aristotle on Adequate Explanations,” 3–6.

⁹ An exception is Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause, and Blame*, x–xi, 139. Yet Sorabji argues, unconvincingly in my view, that coincidences are undetermined according to Aristotle. In fact, Aristotle holds both that luck is a psychological phenomenon and that apparently lucky or unlucky outcomes have determinate explanations. My argument has been influenced by Bernard Williams and Leo Strauss, who recognize the psychological depth of ancient Greek thought on the topic of *tuchē*. For example, Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 66–71; Leo Strauss, *The Argument and the Action of Plato’s Laws* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 56–57.

Physics 2.4–6 will show that, for Aristotle, the idea of luck indeed refers to an explanation or an interpretation of action as opposed to a cause of it. More precisely, the idea of luck is invoked when an unexpected outcome appears to have a striking effect on human flourishing in the eyes of some agent or observer. Luck interests Aristotle—and it should interest us—primarily because invocations of luck lay bare the epistemic limitations and ethical orientations that lead human beings to invest certain unexpected outcomes with extraordinary significance.

Aristotle’s psychological approach to the topic of luck in the *Physics* has important implications for his ethical thought.¹⁰ When one ceases to think of luck as a cause that determines human action in the manner of an external force, then it is possible to see that many actions that might seem to be influenced by luck in fact originate in agents themselves. Consequently, whereas many contemporary commentators suppose that the influence of luck on human action nullifies voluntariness according to Aristotle himself, I find in *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 a far more expansive conception of voluntariness that encompasses all actions that agents knowingly initiate—even those actions that may appear to have been undertaken in lucky or unlucky circumstances or to

¹⁰ To be clear, I do not assume that Aristotle’s account of the idea of luck in the *Physics* informs his remarks on luck in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (or in any other work). Instead I treat each treatment of luck on its own terms—though I find a high degree of consistency among them.

have issued in lucky or unlucky effects.¹¹ Aristotle thereby illuminates the ethical seriousness of agency and the task of practical wisdom—to deliberate and to act in accordance with the particulars of the situation and to take responsibility for one’s own actions without invoking bad luck as an excuse.

I

Interpretations of Aristotle’s account of luck (*tuchē*) in *Physics* 2.4–6 hinge on the translation and analysis of the phrase *aitia kata sumbebēkos*; for Aristotle defines the idea of luck as “an *aitia kata sumbebēkos* of things done according to choice and for the sake

¹¹ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1111a22–23. Translations of the *Nicomachean Ethics* refer to *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). My own translations and transliterations refer to *Ethica Nicomachea*, ed. Ingram Bywater (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963). Among contemporary commentators, even Nussbaum, who is attuned to the tragic dimensions of Aristotle’s thought, argues that the influence of luck on the circumstances of action often nullifies moral responsibility. See Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 334–35; and Nussbaum, “Equity and Mercy,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 22, No. 2 (Spring 1993): 91. A more promising approach can be found in John Cooper, “Aristotelian Responsibility,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 45 (November 2013): 265–312. Cooper’s key insight is that Aristotle theorizes causal responsibility for actions as opposed to specifically moral responsibility.

of something” (*kata prohairetin tōn heneka tou*).¹² The most common translation of this phrase is “accidental cause,” a rendering that tacitly supports Freeland’s “causal realist” reading. True, this translation is rooted in an influential philosophical tradition: for Platonic and Christian commentators such as Simplicius and Aquinas, the *aitia kata sumbebēkos* is an accidental cause because it is a property inherent in the substance that comprises the *aitia kath’ hauto*, the intrinsic cause.¹³

Yet, in my view, rendering *aitia kata sumbebēkos* as “accidental cause” is neither precise nor sound. A better translation, following Jonathan Barnes, would be “contingent explanation.”¹⁴ The superiority of the “explanation” translation emerges through

¹² *Physics* 2.5.197a5–6.

¹³ Simplicius, *On Aristotle’s Physics* 2, 97; Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics*, 101–103; Dudley, *Aristotle on Chance*, 30.

¹⁴ “‘Explanation’ and its cognates render *aitia* and its cognates. . . . Roughly speaking, to give an *aitia* for something is to say why it is the case, and *X* is an *aitia* of *Y* provided that *Y* is because of *X*. . . . The standard English translation is ‘cause’ (with its cognates); but in many contexts this is false, or at any rate seriously misleading.” Barnes, “Commentary,” 89–90. “The man sitting over there is Socrates expresses an accidental identity, according to Aristotle; for it is at best an accident—a contingent truth—that Socrates is sitting. . . .” Jonathan Barnes, “Review of Edwin Hartman, *Substance, Body and Soul*,” *Philosophical Books* 20, No. 2 (June 1979): 59; cited in Mathews, “Accidental Unities,” 228. Putting these two passages together, one arrives at “contingent explanation” as a possible translation of *aitia kata sumbebēkos*. This translation conveys,

examination of Aristotle's concrete examples. Consider the classic example found in *Physics* 2.5: while the *aition kath' hauto* of the house is the art of building, the *aition kata sumbebēkos* refers to an indefinite (*aoriston*) number of contingent facts about a particular builder of a particular house, including his complexion and musical ability.¹⁵ For Freeland, the builder's musicianship counts as an accidental cause of the house because his musicianship indirectly figures into the causal story of the house's genesis.¹⁶ More precisely, the builder's musicianship is a property inherent in the substance—the builder himself—that performed the efficient-causal work of building. But this argument is mysterious: does the builder's musicianship contribute to the construction of the house in any meaningful way?

On the contrary, the point of Aristotle's example is that the builder's musicianship can work as an explanation of the house's construction in the case that the person who

crucially, that what is contingent is the explanation itself rather than a property inherent in a substance. Note that while many commentators translate *aitia* as "explanation," Barnes is unique translator who employs this rendering throughout an Aristotelian text—in this case, the *Posterior Analytics*.

¹⁵ *Physics* 2.5.196b24–29. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 6.2.1026b35–1027a2.

¹⁶ Freeland, "Accidental Causes," 55–58. For similar views, see also Dudley, *Aristotle's Concept of Chance*, 30; James Allen, "Aristotle on Chance as an Accidental Cause," in *Aristotle's Physics: A Critical Guide*, ed. Mariska Leunissen, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 76–77; Irving M. Copi, "Essence and Accident," *The Journal of Philosophy* 51, No. 23 (November 1954): 164–65.

receives this explanation understands the relevant context.¹⁷ Imagine that there happened to be two builders living in the same town and of the two only one played music; then it would be useful to explain the construction of a new house by saying, “the musician built it.” Without this background knowledge, however, the *explanans* would be disconnected from the *explanandum*. The *aition kata sumbebēkos* is, therefore, a type of contingent explanation—not an “accidental cause.”¹⁸

Why, then, does Aristotle cast the idea of *tuchē* as a type of contingent explanation? His chief example of luck as an *aitia kata sumbebēkos* is that of a creditor who happens to meet his debtor in the marketplace and consequently recovers his debt. Aristotle explains that the creditor “would have gone to a certain place for the sake of getting the money, had he known; but he went here not for the sake of this; and it just happened that he got the money when he went there; and this happened neither for the most part whenever he went there nor of necessity.”¹⁹ Commentators who subscribe to the causal realist approach find themselves tasked with identifying the accidental and intrinsic causal pairing in this example. John Dudley writes that “the *per se* or

¹⁷ See the excellent discussion of this point in Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause, and Blame*, 5.

¹⁸ See also *Physics* 2.5.196b28–29: “the intrinsic explanation of something is definite (*hōrismenon*), but the contingent explanation is indefinite (*to de kata sumbebēkos aoriston*), for limitless (*apeira*) contingencies may belong to a thing.” Because it would be absurd to hold that an indefinite number of properties might count as causes of some definite state of affairs, Aristotle cannot view the *aition kata sumbebēkos* as a cause.

¹⁹ *Physics* 2.5.196b34–197a1.

fundamental cause—assimilated by Aristotle to a substantial cause—of collecting the debt is then seen as the cause in the mind of the man which made him go to the marketplace, while the accidental cause of collecting the debt is the mental recognition of the significance of the coincidental meeting with his debtor.”²⁰ Others argue that the “accidental cause” is not the recovery of the money but rather the creditor’s decision to go to the market in the first place.²¹

In Aristotle’s own view, however, the creditor-debtor example shows that “the *aitiai* of things which might come to be by luck are of necessity indefinite.”²² Precisely because there is no apparent link between the creditor’s decision to pass through the marketplace and his recovery of the debt, Aristotle argues that “in going to a place and getting the money . . . the contingent explanations might be a great many, such as wishing to see someone or following someone or avoiding someone or going to see a play.”²³ The idea of luck falls within the category of the contingent explanation because the unpredictable outcomes of human action that we call lucky or unlucky elicit an indefinite range of contingent explanations rather than a defined set of intrinsic explanations: “since the explanations are indefinite luck too is indefinite.”²⁴ In other words, we recur to luck

²⁰ Dudley, *Aristotle’s Concept of Chance*, 35–36.

²¹ See Meyer, “Aristotle, Teleology, Reduction,” 802–803; Charlton, *Aristotle’s Physics*, 107; and David Bolotin, *An Approach to Aristotle’s Physics: With Particular Attention to the Role of His Manner of Writing* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 37.

²² *Physics* 2.5.197a9–10.

²³ *Physics* 2.5.197a15–19.

²⁴ *Physics* 2.5.197a21.

as a contingent explanation when an unpredictable outcome seems to lack intrinsic explanations.

To be sure, the apparent unavailability of intrinsic explanations and the corresponding invocation of the idea of luck as a contingent explanation does not mean, as Richard Sorabji has argued, that what happens by luck is altogether undetermined.²⁵ Aristotle clearly vindicates both the common opinion that that lucky or unlucky outcomes are inscrutable and the more philosophic view that strictly speaking all motions of nature and human action admit of precise and determinate explanations. In Aristotle's own words: "luck seems to be something indefinite and inscrutable to man (*adēlos anthrōpō*), and yet there is a sense in which nothing would seem to come to be by luck (*ouden apo tuchēs doxeien an gignesthai*); for both opinions are correct."²⁶ But how can Aristotle save both *endoxa*—the opinion of "the many" and that of "the wise," respectively?²⁷

The solution lies in Aristotle's psychological approach to the idea of luck.²⁸ With the so-called many, Aristotle observes that human beings invoke the idea of luck when the outcomes of their actions appear to have come about irrespective of their own deliberations, especially when these outcomes either satisfy or thwart their choices in

²⁵ Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause, and Blame*, 139.

²⁶ *Physics* 2.5.197a10–12.

²⁷ *Physics* 2.4.195a36–196b6.

²⁸ David Ross, *Aristotle*, rev. 6th ed. (London: Routledge, 2004): "Chance is not an operative cause but only a name for a certain kind of connexion between events."

ways both spectacular and uncontrollable.²⁹ In particular, the idea of luck often attaches to the special class of unpredictable and uncontrollable outcomes that seem to have an extraordinary impact on human flourishing.³⁰ Aristotle's examples of lucky or unlucky outcomes in the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics* include, in addition to the recovery of the debt, various coincidences that save lives or destroy them. Walking to fetch water after eating a salty meal, a man is murdered at the well.³¹ Another person happens to discover a kidnapping victim—perhaps a member of his own family—and frees him by paying the ransom.³² Finally, the shovel of a gardener strikes something solid—buried treasure.³³ Like the plots of comedies or tragedies, these actions turn on unexpected reversals that yield or ruin prosperity and provoke characteristic tragic responses of wonder, pity, and fear.³⁴ Aristotle thus saves the common opinion that luck is strikingly mysterious and

²⁹ *Physics* 2.5.197a5-6.

³⁰ *Physics* 2.5.197a26–27. See also *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.13.1153b25: the “definition” (*horos*) of “good luck” (*eutuchia*) is “relative to flourishing” (*pros tēn eudaimonian*). Dudley points in this direction when he writes, somewhat ambiguously, that chance is both “coincidental” and “meaningful” for Aristotle. Dudley, *Aristotle's Concept of Chance*, 33–37.

³¹ *Metaphysics* 6.3.1027b3–1027b13.

³² *Physics* 2.8.199b20–25.

³³ *Metaphysics* 5.30.1025a15–19.

³⁴ True, in the *Poetics*, Aristotle argues that tragic action should not hinge on luck alone.

On closer examination, however, he praises tragic plots that feature unlucky turnabouts of

unpredictable (*paralogos*), even as he implicitly rejects the equally common view that luck is something “godlike” (*hōs theiōn*).³⁵

At the same time, Aristotle eventually defends a deflationary view of luck that he had initially attributed to pre-Socratic, atomist philosophers such as Empedocles and Democritus: “there is a sense in which nothing would seem to come to be by luck.”³⁶ From the fact that human beings often fail to discover non-contingent explanations of a unexpected outcomes, it hardly follows that such explanations do not exist: “luck is an explanation only contingently (*estin aition hōs sumbebēkos hē tuchē*); but as an

the kind theorized in the *Physics*. “Since tragic mimesis portrays not just a whole action, but events which are fearful and pitiful, this can best be achieved when things occur contrary to expectation yet still on account of one another. A sense of wonder will be more likely to be aroused in this way than as a result of the simply arbitrary or fortuitous, since events that happen by luck make the greatest impact of wonder when they appear to have a purpose (as in the case where Mity’s statue fell on Mity’s murderer and killed him, while he was looking at: such things do not seem to happen without reason). So then, plot structures which embody this principle must be superior.” Aristotle, *Poetics* 1452a1–10. See *Aristotle’s Poetics*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 42.

³⁵ *Physics* 2.4.196b6.

³⁶ *Physics* 2.5.197a12; cf. 2.4.196a1–35. See also Cicero, *De Fato* 39, in which Cicero groups together Aristotle, Empedocles, Democritus, and Heraclitus on the grounds that each of these thinkers holds that everything that happens happens of necessity.

explanation without qualification, it explains nothing.”³⁷ Because, in the words of Charlton, “the same thing under one description may have a definite and proper [explanation], and under another be due to [luck],” the appearance of good or bad luck actually invites the search for more determinate explanations.³⁸ Even so, Aristotle departs from Empedocles and Democritus in a crucial respect. While the atomists had denied that luck refers to a cause in its own right, they had simultaneously maintained, perhaps confusedly, that the formation of the universe occurred by luck.³⁹ Aristotle limits the idea of luck to the domain of human action: “luck is necessarily an explanation of what may happen through action” (*praxis*).⁴⁰ Hence Aristotle’s account of luck is thoroughly anthropocentric, whereas the atomists had transformed luck into a cosmic starting point.

³⁷ *Physics* 2.5.197a13–14; see also *Metaphysics* 5.3.1025a23.

³⁸ Charlton, *Aristotle’s Physics*, 108. Where Charlton writes “cause” and “chance,” I have written “explanation” and “luck.” Note that even among contingent explanations, it is clear to Aristotle that some are “nearer than others” (*allôn eggutera*). See, for example, *Physics* 2.5.197a22–25: when a sick person makes a miraculous recovery, his most recent medical procedure is a more likely explanation than the sun or the wind.

³⁹ On the atomistic account of the origins of the universe, see Cyril Bailey, *The Greek Atomists and Epicurus: A Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), 139–43. Cf. Plato, *Timaeus* 69c.

⁴⁰ *Physics* 2.6.197b1–2.

In sum, Aristotle's investigation of luck saves the phenomena. On the one hand, Aristotle emphatically rejects the causal realist view that "accidental causes are really 'out there' in the world."⁴¹ The undefined field of luck varies with the intellectual and ethical dispositions that observers bring to bear on ostensibly unpredictable outcomes. On the other hand, for all that the idea of luck is used to refer to an imprecise and even chaotic set of phenomena, Aristotle's psychological approach to the topic clarifies the kinds of outcomes that we routinely call lucky or unlucky. Those outcomes that appear unpredictable to the point of being uncontrollable and which also have a striking effect on human flourishing elicit the idea of luck as a contingent explanation. Equally important, Aristotle's psychological approach emphasizes the fact that because it is a contingent explanation the idea of luck masks underlying intrinsic explanations.

As a final point, consider that Aristotle also examines unpredictable outcomes of non-human nature or necessity (as opposed to the unpredictable outcomes of human action), for which he reserves the concept of chance (*automaton*).⁴² In a striking image, Aristotle depicts a man who has been struck by a falling stone: "the stone fell not for the sake of striking the man, but by chance (*apo tou automatou*), seeing that it might have been thrown by someone for the sake of striking the man."⁴³ Notice that this central example assimilates chance to luck. Aristotle suggests that the idea of chance is invoked when an unpredictable natural occurrence appears as if it might have occurred through

⁴¹ Freeland, "Accidental Causes," 69–70.

⁴² *Physics* 197a36–197b20.

⁴³ *Physics* 2.5.197b31–33.

deliberate human action.⁴⁴ From beginning to end, Aristotle’s treatment of luck and chance situates these ideas against the background of the human choice and flourishing.

True, Aristotle’s presentation isn’t simply anthropocentric insofar as he contrasts what happens by chance and luck with the teleological motions of nature: “chance and luck are posterior to intellect and nature.”⁴⁵ Yet for Aristotle this point is obvious. The chance genesis of a six-fingered man is the exception that proves the rule: nature tends to realize certain ends and therefore demands explanation in light of those ends. The more interesting point is that the idea of luck should not be dismissed as a form of “insignificant speech,” to borrow a memorable line from Hobbes, since this idea has a hold on human beings, even though it is hardly necessary to explain what happens in non-human nature or in the cosmos.⁴⁶ As long as we remain the credulous creatures that we are, the idea of luck will appeal to us—and we to it.

⁴⁴ Again, see the parallel passage at *Poetics* 1452a6–8; also Bolotin, *An Approach to Aristotle’s Physics*, 39.

⁴⁵ *Physics* 198a9–10.

⁴⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan [1651], with selected variants from the Latin edition of 1668*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 7. See also Jonathan Lear, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 37: “Chance is not a disturbance of the natural order, it is just that in the affairs of men, events occur which look as though they have occurred for a certain purpose when they have not.”

II

Having examined Aristotle's analysis of luck in the *Physics*, we are now in a position to grasp the role of luck in *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1—a crucial and well-known passage in which Aristotle distinguishes between the voluntary (*hekousion*) and the involuntary (*akousion*) and establishes conditions of causal responsibility for actions.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 has attracted extensive commentary in the critical literature, in which one finds multiple approaches to Aristotle's discussion of responsibility. For many commentators, Aristotle puts forth a theory of specifically moral responsibility. See Susanne Bobzien, "Choice and Responsibility in *Nicomachean Ethics* iii 1–5," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Ronald Polansky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 85; David Furley, "Aristotle on the Voluntary," in *Articles on Aristotle*, vol. 2., ed. Jonathan Barnes, Malcolm Schofield, and Richard Sorabji (London: Duckworth, 1977), 60; Terence Irwin, "Reason and Responsibility in Aristotle," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 134; Susan Sauvé Meyer, *Aristotle on Moral Responsibility: Character and Cause* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993). Other scholars have emphasized Aristotle's dialogue with Athenian legal thought and practice. For example, Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause, and Blame*, 288–295. For yet another camp, the key point of reference is Plato, especially the Socratic paradox that no one does wrong knowingly or voluntarily. See the stimulating reflections of Ronna Burger, *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 62–67; and Jean Roberts, "Aristotle on Responsibility for Action and Character," *Ancient Philosophy* 9

For Aristotle, the apparent influence of luck on a certain action does not necessarily render the action involuntary or nullify the agent's causal responsibility for the action.⁴⁸ Since the idea of luck refers to a contingent explanation of action rather than to a cause in its own right, Aristotle shows that agents knowingly initiate many actions that might seem to occur in lucky or unlucky circumstances or to issue in lucky or unlucky effects. By contrast, those actions originating in either external force (*bia*) or in non-culpable

(1989): 23–36. The most promising approach, in my view, is that of Cooper, who argues that Aristotle theorizes causal rather than moral responsibility; see Cooper, “Aristotelian Responsibility.” I engage throughout with Cooper and Nussbaum. See Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 28–30, 43, 282–89, 328–42, 380–81; and “Equity and Mercy,” 90–91. Finally, for analysis of the issues of voluntariness, responsibility, luck, and error in the *Eudemian Ethics* as well as in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, see Anthony Kenny, *Aristotle's Theory of the Will* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Anthony Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 56–75; and Jozef Müller, “Agency and Responsibility in Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics*,” *Phronesis* 60, No. 2 (March 2015): 206–51.

⁴⁸ Having argued that Aristotelian *aitiai* in the *Physics* should be understood as explanations rather than as causes, it might seem strange to propose that Aristotle offers a theory of causal responsibility in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Yet “causal responsibility” is common in the literature, and this term highlights the fact that Aristotelian responsibility extends far beyond deliberate actions. More precisely, Aristotle offers an efficient-explanatory account of responsibility; but that is a clunky and idiosyncratic locution.

ignorance (*agnoia*) are simply involuntary.⁴⁹ It follows on the Aristotelian account that human beings can be considered causally responsible, if not ethically responsible, for many actions that they may regard as seriously lucky or unlucky. Moreover, irrespective of whether an action ostensibly influenced by good or bad luck incurs praise or blame, such an action may elicit powerful and cognitively-rich emotions from the doer and from observers. This psychological approach to the idea of luck ultimately yields lessons about practical wisdom and the ethical seriousness of agency that might teach human beings to think and to act well no matter the appearance of good or bad luck.⁵⁰

Aristotle divides *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 into two parts that correspond to the two criteria of involuntary action: the first treats actions influenced by external force (*bia*) or compulsion (*anankē*), whereas the second focuses on actions undertaken out of

⁴⁹ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1110a1–2.

⁵⁰ See *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1109b34–35. In addition to the fact that *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 directly addresses the question of responsibility for actions apparently influenced by luck, another reason for moving from *Physics* 2.4–6 to *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 is the etymological link between *aitia* and *aitios*, explanation and responsibility. Lionel Pearson writes that the word *aitia* “has the active meaning of ‘accusation’ ‘complaint’ ‘grievance’ and the corresponding passive meaning ‘guilt’ ‘blame’ ‘responsibility’; and by logical development it also means ‘that which is responsible’” Lionel Pearson, “*Prophasis and Aitia*,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 83 (1952): 205. Cf. Clifford Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 32–38.

ignorance (*agnoia*). In the first part, Aristotle chiefly devotes his attention to so-called “mixed” (*miktai*) actions that appear to be at once voluntary and compulsory; these are tough cases that “admit of dispute.”⁵¹ More precisely, while Aristotle grants that external force nullifies voluntariness and hence responsibility for the action in the case that “the person who is acting or undergoing something contributes nothing (*mēden sumballetai*), for example, if a wind, or people have control over someone, should carry him off,” he also examines mixed actions that seem to originate in both the agent himself and in compulsory external circumstances.⁵² Aristotle’s examples include a captain who throws his cargo overboard during a storm in order to save his ship and a citizen whose family has been seized by a tyrant and threatened with harm unless the man agrees “to do something shameful” on the tyrant’s behalf.⁵³

Commentators have reasonably invoked the idea of luck when analyzing these examples. John Cooper writes that “the situation [of the ship’s captain] . . . was unlucky; he is the victim of misfortune.”⁵⁴ Likewise, of the man in the grip of the tyrant, Cooper writes that “he too is the victim of bad luck: the misfortune of falling, with his family, into the clutches of a tyrant.” For Nussbaum, “bad luck” can push an individual to do

⁵¹ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1110a9–13.

⁵² *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1110a2.

⁵³ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1110a5–10.

⁵⁴ Cooper, “Aristotelian Responsibility,” 284. In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle himself invokes the idea of luck in his discussion of a ship that has been blown off course, arriving in Aegina rather than in Athens. See *Metaphysics* 5.30.1025a26–29.

“things that he or she would never have done but for the conflict situation. . . . The so-called ‘mixed actions’ are such cases.”⁵⁵ By unpredictably frustrating the choices of the actors involved and even threatening to ruin their lives altogether, the circumstances of mixed actions call forth the idea of bad luck as Aristotle defines it in the *Physics*.

Does the apparent influence of bad luck on the circumstances of mixed actions nullify either the voluntariness of these actions or the agents’ responsibility for them? On the contrary, in the situations of bad circumstantial luck faced by the ship’s captain and the man threatened by the tyrant, Aristotle finds that each man “acts voluntarily, for in fact the origin (*archē*) of the movement of the parts that serve as instruments in such actions is in the person himself; and in those cases in which the origin is in the person himself, it is also up to him to act or not to act.”⁵⁶ Precisely because he does not conceive

⁵⁵ Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 38.

⁵⁶ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1110a13–18. For the language of “circumstantial luck,” see Thomas Nagel, “Moral Luck,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Vol. 50* (1976): 137–51. Nagel builds on the influential work of Bernard Williams, who coined the term “moral luck.” Bernard Williams, “Moral Luck,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Vol. 50* (1976): 115–35. This essay also appears in Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981).

According to Williams, concrete examples show that we ourselves experience ethical emotions, and we make ethical judgments, in response to actions undertaken in lucky or unlucky circumstances (circumstantial luck), on account of actions issuing in lucky or unlucky effects (resultant luck), and even on account of aspects of our own identities that

of luck as something out there in the world, Aristotle looks for more concrete explanations of actions that elicit the idea of luck as a contingent explanation. One such explanation lies in the origin of the action: the apparent influence of bad luck on the circumstances of action is outweighed by the consideration that the action originated in the agent who acted knowingly. Cooper puts the point well: “For Aristotle, to be responsible for an action is a clear-cut, factual matter of the action’s origins: if it was originated by any of an agent’s desires, or a decision, taken together with its thought, then it is voluntary and the agent is responsible for it.”⁵⁷ Aristotle’s own summary statement at the conclusion of *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 supports Cooper’s reading: “Since what is involuntary is that which is the result of force and done on account of ignorance, what is voluntary would seem to be something whose origin is in the person himself, who knows the particulars that constitute the action.”⁵⁸

Scholars who attempt to find in *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 a theory of specifically moral responsibility are troubled by Aristotle’s insistence on the voluntariness of mixed actions. According to David Bostock, for example, “missing from the discussion is what

seem to have arisen through good or bad luck (constitutive luck). That the apparent influence of luck on human action does not nullify all kinds of responsibility is a welcome insight, since this insight accords with our powerful intellectual and emotional responses to the appearance of good or bad luck, and it quashes the quixotic impulse to neutralize the effects of luck absolutely and without qualification.

⁵⁷ Cooper, “Aristotelian Responsibility,” 296.

⁵⁸ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1111a21–24.

we call ‘mitigating circumstances,’ where the agent is to be blamed, and perhaps punished, for what he did, but the blame or punishment is to be *lessened* in recognition of the fact that, in the circumstances, it would have been *difficult*, but not *impossible*, for him to have done what is right.”⁵⁹ Similarly, Terence Irwin modifies Aristotle’s theory so that the opportunity and capacity for “effective decision” emerges as the *sine qua non* of moral responsibility.⁶⁰ By implication, on Irwin’s proto-Kantian reading of *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1, whenever luck significantly impedes on the circumstances of action, then the agent in question did not enjoy his usual freedom to deliberate; consequently, he should not be subjected to ethical judgment.⁶¹ Susan Sauvé Meyer makes this point explicit. For Meyer’s Aristotle, “voluntary actions must be performed non-accidentally” insofar as voluntary actions must display the “moral character” of the agent.⁶² Because Meyer also supposes that mixed actions are performed accidentally rather than through deliberate choice, she concludes that “it is inappropriate to blame the agent” for mixed actions.⁶³

⁵⁹ David Bostock, *Aristotle’s Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 107.

⁶⁰ See Irwin, “Reason and Responsibility,” 132, 134, 143.

⁶¹ Irwin, “Reason and Responsibility,” 143: “Aristotle . . . finds the power of self-determination in the capacity for effective decision, not in uncaused acts of will. He offers an alternative answer to Kant’s question which avoids Kant’s libertarian metaphysics.”

⁶² Meyer, *Aristotle on Moral Responsibility*, 113–14.

⁶³ Meyer, *Aristotle on Moral Responsibility*, 117.

While Aristotle grants that no one would choose a mixed action for its own sake, he simultaneously maintains—*contra* the moral responsibility reading—that actions ostensibly influenced by bad circumstantial luck can give rise to a range of ethical judgments, including (but not limited to) praise or blame (*epainountai* and *psegontai*).⁶⁴ Aristotle himself praises the captain who jettisons his cargo in order to save his ship; thus the captain exhibited his intelligence (*nous*).⁶⁵ Aristotle also suggests that one might praise the man threatened by the tyrant should he refuse to inform on his fellow citizens; for “people are sometimes even praised, whenever they endure something shameful (*aischron*) or painful in return for great and noble things.”⁶⁶ Conversely, Aristotle blames Alcmaeon of Euripides’ lost play for offering the “laughable” excuse that he was compelled to kill his mother.⁶⁷ Yet, for Aristotle, mixed actions need not give rise to praise or blame in every case. “Forgiveness” (*suggnōmē*) is more fitting “whenever someone does what he ought not to do because the matters involved surpass human nature.”⁶⁸ Whereas many commentators assume that Aristotle outlines conditions of

⁶⁴ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1110a19–24.

⁶⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1110a13.

⁶⁶ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1110a20–22.

⁶⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1110a26–27.

⁶⁸ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1110a30. Bostock’s worry about mitigating circumstances misses the mark: Aristotle is not arguing that all voluntary actions and hence all mixed actions must elicit either praise or blame. Moreover, Aristotle’s comment on forgiveness clearly shows that the idea of mitigation is not alien to him. In any case, the discussion of

moral responsibility, Aristotle in fact adduces ordinary judgments of praise and blame as evidence of the voluntariness of the actions that elicit these judgments.⁶⁹ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 puts forth a theory of causal responsibility for actions, not a theory of moral responsibility.⁷⁰ The key point made in the first half of *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 is that mixed actions undertaken in the face of circumstances ostensibly influenced by bad luck are voluntary, while actions wholly determined by external force are involuntary.

In the second half of the chapter, Aristotle goes on to examine actions that miscarry through ignorance of the particulars that constitute the action. When an agent acts as he acts because he lacks knowledge of an important feature of the situation through no fault of his own, then his action is involuntary. In Aristotle's own words: "since there may be ignorance about all these things that constitute an action, he who is ignorant of any them is held to have acted involuntarily."⁷¹ Observe Aristotle's examples of actions motivated by ignorance of the particulars: Merope mistakes her son for the

mitigating circumstances is somewhat out of place in analysis of *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1, since Aristotle does not discuss legal responsibility or punishment in this passage.

⁶⁹ For example, Furley, "Aristotle on the Voluntary," 60: "What we find in Aristotle, then, is . . . an insistence that there is a real distinction between voluntary and involuntary actions, such that moral categories are relevant to the former but not to the latter."

⁷⁰ See Cooper, "Aristotelian Responsibility," 265–277. The opening argument of Cooper's article establishes precisely this point—that Aristotle lays out a theory of causal responsibility for actions.

⁷¹ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1111a15–16.

enemy and nearly kills him; a fencer wounds his partner, not realizing that the blunt button has fallen off his weapon; a doctor does not see that the usual remedy for an illness will not save this patient but will kill him instead.⁷² To Aristotle's examples of involuntary actions undertaken on account of ignorance, one could appropriately add two examples favored by Bernard Williams—that of the lorry driver who accidentally kills a child wandering in the road, and that of Oedipus, who of course committed multiple crimes through ignorance.⁷³ Both unexpected and lamentable, actions undertaken out of ignorance of the particulars readily call forth the idea of bad resultant luck.

One question, then, is whether Aristotle thinks that agents whose actions arise out of ignorance of the particulars can ever be considered causally (or ethically) responsible for the lucky or unlucky results of their actions.⁷⁴ At first blush, Aristotle's seems to say that every action arising out of ignorance of the particulars is involuntary. Involuntary actions of this type contrast with the voluntary actions of vicious, drunk, or careless people, who are somehow responsible for their ignorance.⁷⁵ Whereas Plato's Socrates argues that no one does wrong knowingly or voluntarily, Aristotle restricts the idea of

⁷² *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1111a10–15.

⁷³ Williams, *Moral Luck*, 28, 30; Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 69.

⁷⁴ On the Aristotelian account, causal responsibility is necessary but not sufficient for ethical responsibility. See the illuminating remarks of Cooper, "Aristotelian Responsibility," 270, 297.

⁷⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1110b25–35, 3.5.1113b30–1114a2.

error to those who do not know what they are doing in a particular situation.⁷⁶ For Aristotle, the most important sign of involuntary as opposed to voluntary ignorance is the agent's own emotional response to his action after the fact: "what is done on account of ignorance . . . is involuntary [only] when it causes the person who acts to feel pain and regret" (*akousion de to epilupon kai en metameleia*).⁷⁷ Pain, regret, and even "disgust" (*duscherainōn*) are the characteristic emotional responses to erroneous action originating in ignorance.⁷⁸ Through his expression of these emotions, the agent reveals that he would not have acted as he did if only he could have foreseen the results of his action.

How does the agent's experience of regret indicate the involuntariness of his action? Anthony Kenny has expressed confusion at the idea that "a person's subsequent state of mind can [reveal] whether a particular action is voluntary, involuntary, or neither."⁷⁹ In the same breath, however, Kenny discusses a Shakespearean example that clarifies Aristotle's point. Having stabbed Polonius in place of Claudius, Hamlet exults: "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell! / I took thee for thy better, take thy fortune."⁸⁰ Although his ignorance explains how Hamlet came to kill Polonius rather than Claudius (or anyone else), one would not want to call his action involuntary because Hamlet delights in having performed it. The same might be said of Aristotle's creditor in

⁷⁶ See Plato, *Protagoras* 345e and *Laws* 9.860d.

⁷⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1110b18–20.

⁷⁸ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1110b21.

⁷⁹ Kenny, *Aristotle's Theory of the Will*, 53.

⁸⁰ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.4.32–33, cited in Kenny.

the *Physics*. The creditor went to the marketplace ignorant of the fact that he would meet his debtor there; yet, for the creditor, there is nothing involuntary about the meeting or the recovery of the money.⁸¹ When an agent himself claims responsibility for the lucky outcome of his own action, Aristotle sees no reason to gainsay him.⁸²

For Aristotle, then, agents incur causal responsibility for their resultant good luck, which does not give rise to regret. Does Aristotle also hold that agents are at least causally responsible for actions issuing in bad luck, even when they act involuntarily through non-culpable ignorance of the particulars? On the one hand, Aristotle argues that involuntary actions deserve “pity and forgiveness” in general.⁸³ Aristotle’s account of responsibility eschews punitive severity; he nowhere suggests that errors committed

⁸¹ Certainly the creditor did not recover his money *akōn* insofar as this word means “reluctantly.” See the discussion of ordinary notions of *hekousion* and *akousion*, *hekōn* and *akōn*, in Meyer, *Aristotle on Moral Responsibility*, 9–14.

⁸² Hence the conceptual distinction Aristotle draws at *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1110b20–25: “if someone’s action was caused by ignorance, but he now has no objection to the action, he has done it neither voluntarily, since he did not know what it was, nor involuntarily, since he now feels no pain. . . . let his action be ‘nonvoluntary’ (*ouch hekōn*). For since they differ, it is better that each have his own name.” Nonvoluntary actions refer to those lucky actions motivated by ignorance of the particulars for which the agent accepts responsibility.

⁸³ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1111a2.

through ignorance of the particulars deserve harsh blame or punishment.⁸⁴ On the other hand, could it possibly be the case that Oedipus, for example, is in no way responsible for his actions? According to Nussbaum's analysis of Aristotelian responsibility, Aristotle would indeed recommend a full exoneration of Oedipus. In Nussbaum's words: "circumstances impeded and thwarted Oedipus's blameless activation of his character, stepping in, so to speak, between the intention and the act and causing the intended act to have at best a merely shadowy existence."⁸⁵ Nussbaum argues that "[Oedipus] is not a parricide, because the act that he intended and chose was not the act that we have judged him to have performed."⁸⁶ "Bad luck" excuses Oedipus for the murder of Laius; on Nussbaum's reading of Aristotle, because Oedipus did not mean to kill his father, he did not really perform the murder at all.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.8.1135a28–32.

⁸⁵ Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 333.

⁸⁶ Nussbaum, "Equity and Mercy," 90.

⁸⁷ Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 38; Nussbaum, "Equity and Mercy," 91. See also Bernard Yack, *The Problems of a Political Animal: Community, Justice, and Conflict in Aristotelian Political Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 251–49; W.H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 105: "Even if Sophocles had the will, he had no means of acquitting Oedipus of his unintentional crimes." Arguably, these readings have been influenced by German Idealism. See Goldhill, "The Ends of Tragedy: Schelling, Hegel, and Oedipus," *PMLA* 129, No. 4 (October 2014): 634–48.

Yet, precisely because he is more attentive to the issue of causal responsibility, Aristotle's own remarks in *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 do not simply excuse Oedipus. Most importantly, Aristotle writes that errors committed through ignorance "must still be painful to the person in question and done with regret."⁸⁸ What is the significance of the experience of regret for evaluating causal responsibility for actions issuing in unlucky outcomes? On this point, Aristotle's influence on Williams is striking. A central passage in Williams's "Moral Luck" can be used to clarify Aristotle's reflections on luck, responsibility, and regret in *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1:

The sentiment of agent-regret is by no means restricted to *voluntary* agency. It can extend far beyond what one intentionally did to almost anything for which one was causally responsible. . . . The lorry driver who, through no fault of his, runs over a child, will feel differently from any spectator. . . . We feel sorry for the driver, but that sentiment co-exists with, indeed presupposes, that there is something special about his relation to this happening, something which cannot merely be eliminated by the consideration that it was not his fault. It may be still more so in cases where agency is fuller than in such an accident, though still involuntary through ignorance.⁸⁹

Williams's quintessentially Aristotelian point in this passage is that causal responsibility for actions can extend beyond voluntariness in cases of involuntary action performed

⁸⁸ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1111a20.

⁸⁹ Williams, *Moral Luck*, 28.

through ignorance of the particulars. For Williams as for Aristotle, regret is not merely a feeling, but a cognitively rich emotion that displays the doer's unique relation to the deed.⁹⁰ Involuntary though an action may be, the responsible agent recognizes that he did it and is therefore answerable for its unlucky result, at least to himself. As regards the example of Oedipus, consider that Aristotle holds up Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* as the tragedy *par excellence* precisely because of the powerful recognition (*anagnōrīsis*) and reversal (*peripeteia*) that structure the action of this play.⁹¹ What Oedipus comes to recognize is that he has brought about his own reversal of fortune through his deeds. Although he committed his crimes through involuntary ignorance, and although Apollo too had a role in these actions, Oedipus still regrets them and holds himself utterly responsible for them. Thus the drama brings home to the audience the terrible fact that Oedipus is *aitios*—that his own involuntary actions, compounded by bad resultant luck, have ruined his life.⁹²

⁹⁰ Williams, *Moral Luck*, 28–33. On the meaning and significance of regret in classical antiquity, see David Konstan, *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁹¹ See *Poetics* 1452a29–1452b2, 1453b1–9; and Stephen Salkever, “Tragedy and the Education of the Dēmos: Aristotle’s Response to Plato,” in *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*, ed. J. Peter Euben (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 297.

⁹² Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 69: “The whole of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, that dreadful machine, moves to the discovery of just one thing, that *he did it*. . . . In the story of one’s

In this way Aristotle and Williams implicitly draw an important distinction between voluntariness and causal responsibility. Sarah Broadie gestures toward this distinction when she poses the question: “Does Aristotle mean by ‘*hekōn*’ *one who knowingly originates* (voluntary₁), or *one who is answerable for* (voluntary₂)?”⁹³ In my view, Aristotle defines the agent who performs a voluntary action as *one who knowingly originates* the action; the “responsible” (*aitios*) agent, by contrast, identifies the person *who is answerable for* what he has done. Aristotle’s treatment of involuntary actions initiated on account of ignorance of the particulars shows that agents can be causally responsible for certain involuntary actions that issue in lucky or unlucky outcomes—in particular, those actions that provoke regret. The set of responsible agents is therefore broader than the set of actions that these same agents perform voluntarily.

III

Viewed as a whole, *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 offers at least three lessons about luck and human action supported by the book’s broader argument. First, individuals should take responsibility for their actions, even when their actions result in unlucky outcomes. Taking responsibility for one’s actions means being serious (*spoudaios*) about what one

life there is an authority exercised by what one has done, and not merely by what one has intentionally done.” See also Cooper, “Aristotelian Responsibility,” 288.

⁹³ Sara Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 138, with emphasis in the original.

has done.⁹⁴ Throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle portrays the serious person (*ho spoudaios*) as the person of consummate virtue, both ethical and intellectual.⁹⁵ For example, he writes that “the serious person is distinguished perhaps most of all by his seeing what is true in each case, just as is if he were a rule and measure of them.”⁹⁶ Aristotle contrasts seriousness to the readiness of most people to make excuses for their bad behavior: “seeking refuge in words (*ton logon katapheugontes*), [most people] suppose that they are philosophizing (*oiontai philosophein*) and that they will in this way be serious (*spoudaioi*), thereby doing something similar to the sick who listen attentively to their physicians but do nothing prescribed.”⁹⁷ By contrast, the serious person

⁹⁴ It is no accident that tragedies concern serious actions in Aristotle’s own view.

Consider Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, “Introduction,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 5: “The kinds of actions that are centrally significant to a human life—serious (*spoudaios*) actions with weighty, far-reaching consequences—have a normative structure. Such actions and activities have an objective end or point: they can succeed or fail to realize that point. Tragedies represent the way the protagonist’s serious actions—those that affect the major directions of his life and that determine his happiness—skew the essential ends of what he does, and how this error, this waywardness brings disaster.”

⁹⁵ For example, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7.1098a7–15, 3.4.1113a32–34 and 10.6.1176b18–20.

⁹⁶ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.4.1113a32–34.

⁹⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.4.1105b13–16.

appreciates the weight of action and its influence on character, and he consequently eschews hypocrisy, carelessness, and even excessive levity or play.⁹⁸ Certainly he does not invoke bad luck as an excuse.

Second, Aristotelian responsibility means doing voluntarily what the situation requires, having grasped the particulars of the situation through the exercise of practical wisdom (*phronēsis*). Aristotle's treatment of mixed actions in the first half of *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 reveals the importance of practical wisdom as a guide to action in ostensibly unlucky circumstances. Look again at the example of the ship's captain: Aristotle comments that "in an unqualified sense, no one voluntarily jettisons cargo . . . but when one's own preservation and that of the rest are at issue, everyone who has intelligence (*nous*) would do it."⁹⁹ The captain made an intelligent decision to jettison the cargo; the appearance of bad luck in the form of the storm made this action necessary.

In *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.10, Aristotle explicitly elaborates this lesson about luck and practical wisdom. In his own words, "someone who is truly good and sensible bears up under all kinds of luck (*pasas tas tuchas*) in a becoming way and always does what is noblest given the circumstances, just as a good general makes use, with the greatest

⁹⁸ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.4–5.1113a32–1114a11 and 10.6.1176b34–1177a6. On the opposition between seriousness and play in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Plato's *Laws*, see David Roochnik, "Play and Seriousness: Plato and Aristotle," *Spazio filosofico* 18 (2016): 439–51.

⁹⁹ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1110a9–11.

military skill, of the army he has.”¹⁰⁰ Like the general, the pilot, or any other expert craftsman, the person of practical wisdom locates an “opportune” (*kairos*) course of action even and especially in unlucky circumstances.¹⁰¹ In fact, the general’s excellence may never be so brilliant as when he leads his troops to victory despite being outnumbered and hemmed in by the enemy. Similarly, when the ship’s captain recognizes the necessity of jettisoning his cargo, he demonstrates his excellence in piloting. Thus “intelligence in matters of action grasps the ultimate particular thing (*tou eschatou*) that admits of being otherwise”—that is, the various contingencies of circumstance that inevitably arise in the domain of *praxis*.¹⁰²

A third lesson follows from the second: it makes no sense simply to rely on good luck or to succumb to bad luck, since the very meaning of good or bad luck can vary with the virtue (or lack thereof) of the agent. Aristotle writes that when “even good luck, when in excess, acts as an impediment—and perhaps it is not just to call this ‘good luck’ (*eutuchian*) any longer, for its definition (*horos*) is relative to flourishing” (*pros gar tēn eudaimonian*).¹⁰³ Because the so-called goods of fortune will entice vicious or even akratic individuals to act in greedy or pleasure-seeking ways, the goods of fortune will

¹⁰⁰ *Nicomachean Ethics*. 1.10.1100b37–1101a4.

¹⁰¹ *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.2.1104a9–10.

¹⁰² *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.11.1143b1–2. On this point, see Ronald Beiner, *Political Judgment* (London: Methuen, 1983), 73.

¹⁰³ *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.13.1153b23–25.

not be good for them.¹⁰⁴ Conversely, the person of practical wisdom will find opportunities to display his excellence in the face of circumstances that many people might regard as bad luck.¹⁰⁵ Hence Aristotle's fondness for Agathon's quip: "art loves luck, and luck art" (*technē tuchēn esterxe kai tuchē technēn*).¹⁰⁶ Aristotle uses this quotation to point toward a paradox: for the virtuous, bad luck can be good luck; the opposite holds for those who are vicious. For example, in Aristotle's view, the virtue of courage characteristically manifests itself in situations of extreme risk—situations that many might characterize as unlucky.¹⁰⁷

To be sure, Aristotle affirms that at the limit serious misfortune can destroy human flourishing. This hardheaded insight explains the fundamental distinction Aristotle draws between flourishing and virtue. While cultivation of virtue is necessary for flourishing, virtue nevertheless "appears to be rather incomplete. For it seems to be possible for someone to possess virtue . . . while suffering badly and undergoing the greatest misfortunes (*kakopathein kai atuchein ta megista*). But no one would say that

¹⁰⁴ Aristotle, *Politics* 7.13.1332a20–24. See also Plato, *Laws* 2.661b–c.

¹⁰⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.10.1100b30–32. For these reasons, it would be too simple to argue that virtuous activity depends on the presence of the goods of fortune in Aristotle's view. Cf. Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*, 84; John Cooper, "Aristotle on the Goods of Fortune," *The Philosophical Review* 94, No. 2 (April 1985): 184.

¹⁰⁶ *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.4.1140a20.

¹⁰⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.8.1117a18–22.

such a person flourishes, unless he were defending a thesis.”¹⁰⁸ The situation of Priam admits of no redemptive interpretation. Whatever the more precise explanations of the fall of Troy, Aristotle does not quibble with the common-sense view that the bad luck ruined Priam’s life, full stop: “nobody deems happy someone who deals with luck (*tuchais*) of that sort and comes to a wretched end.”¹⁰⁹

Note, however, that while Aristotle acknowledges that bad luck may disrupt human flourishing, he maintains that luck cannot transform virtue into vice. True, Nussbaum has argued that, for Aristotle, “interference from the world leaves no self-sufficient kernel of the person safely intact. It strikes directly at the root of goodness itself.”¹¹⁰ But Aristotle himself contends, unequivocally, that virtue resists corruption, “since [the virtuous human being] will never do things that are hateful and base.”¹¹¹ “To entrust the greatest and noblest thing to luck would be excessively discordant,” in Aristotle’s view, because luck does not exist in the way that virtue exists, or even in the way that the gods may exist.¹¹² Not luck itself but the belief in luck is the crucial phenomenon for Aristotle.¹¹³

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¹⁰⁸ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.5.1095b35–1096a2.

¹⁰⁹ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.9.1100a8–9.

¹¹⁰ Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 381.

¹¹¹ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.10.1101a1. See also *Politics* 7.1.1323b28–29.

¹¹² *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.9.1109b24.

¹¹³ Cf. Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 209.