

# PART I

## The History of Luck

PROOF

PROOF

# 1

## ARISTOTLE ON CONSTITUTIVE, DEVELOPMENTAL, AND RESULTANT MORAL LUCK

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Discussing Aristotle's account of luck is challenging because Aristotle does not directly discuss luck in a way that is immediately comparable to modern debates; rather, the influence of luck permeates his theory. To make sense of Aristotle's diverse remarks on luck we will start with his definition of luck from the *Physics*. We will see how Aristotle defines luck as having five features: lucky occurrences are irregular, incidental, indeterminable, unstable, and its effects can be good or evil. Luck is then contrasted with both the purposefulness and the regularity we see in natural causes, and while it is understood as an intentional event, its results are incidental. In the next section we will consider how this definition of luck in the *Physics* relates to Aristotle's treatment of luck in his works on ethics and the good life, as well as how it compares with the modern understanding of moral luck in the debate introduced to philosophy by Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel. To answer the question of how Aristotle conceives of the influence of luck on the moral life, we will consider what his theory has to say on the three types of moral luck discussed in modern literature, i.e. constitutive, developmental, and resultant moral luck. We will see how Aristotle grapples to reconcile the intuitively plausible claim that luck as well as wisdom can make one's life go well, with the equally plausible observation that if we want to praise and blame agents for their virtues and vices, the origin of these character traits cannot be luck. The conclusion of a complicated discussion is a distinction between good fortune, a rare state where naturally positive dispositions lead one effortlessly to virtue without the need for wisdom, and luck which retains all the features of the concept as developed in the *Physics*. We will then consider the constitutive luck which, given Aristotle's emphasis on the importance of education, practice, and the development of good habits, is the kind of luck that most affects Aristotelian theory. We will see how Aristotle embraces this kind of luck, accepting it as the features that make human lives vulnerable but, at the same time, precious. Finally, we will consider resultant luck and conclude that this kind of luck tends to be less influential for theories that focus on assessments of characters rather than outcomes.

### Luck

For Aristotle luck<sup>1</sup> is a species of spontaneity,<sup>2</sup> as spontaneity is a wider phenomenon that encompasses cases of luck. Spontaneous events are events that have an external cause and that come to pass for the sake of something, but they do not come to pass for the sake of what actually results. Spontaneity applies to the actions of animals and inanimate objects, so we say, for example, the stool happened to

fall upright spontaneously so that it can now be used as a seat, but it did not fall this way for the purpose of being used as a seat (note that it still fell for the sake of something, i.e. being a heavy object it fell downwards in accordance with its proper nature; landing on its feet, which makes it usable as a seat, was accidental). Lucky events are spontaneous occurrences that come about through the action of something capable of intention, so they fall under the realm of choice and make us fortunate or unfortunate, but they occur incidentally. Aristotle identifies five features of luck (Aristotle *Physics* Book II part 5):

1. Chance events are not regular. They do not happen, either always or for the most part, the same way.
2. Chance events are incidental, that is, they do not occur for the sake of something in the way that the housebuilding skill is, in virtue of itself, the cause of a house. So, for example, imagine that A is owed some money by B and A goes to the market to do his weekly shop where he happens to bump into B; we want to say that A recovered his debt by luck as his intention in going to the market was not to meet up with B. Wanting to shop explains A's being at the market and is the non-incidental cause of him being there; what explains A and B meeting is the incidental fact that they both attended the market at the same time. When we ask A how did you manage to meet B, the answer is "I happened to bump into him, just luck," so A's desire to shop and his trip to the market does not, in itself, explain the sequence of events that led to A getting his money back.
3. Chance events are indeterminable. Because chance events are incidental, there are an indeterminable number of them. So, A bumped into B because he wanted to go to the market, but he could have bumped into him because he wanted to meet someone else, or because he was following someone or avoiding someone, and so on. Having said that, Aristotle does point out that that does not mean that *any* two events can become connected through luck; some events are closer to others, e.g. warmth from the sun has a closer connection to health than getting one's hair cut.
4. Following on from that, we observe that luck is a thing contrary to rule, it is unstable and neither always true nor true for the most part. This makes luck unaccountable because it cannot be accounted for on a rational basis.
5. The effects of luck can be good or evil.

Aristotle then uses these insights about luck to set up a contrast with natural causes and develop a teleological argument about nature. At the heart of the Aristotelian account of teleology is the observation that every activity has a purpose. When Aristotle looks at the eye, he observes that it is constructed in order to see, and when he considers the activity of medicine, it is aimed at restoring health. The eye is *for* seeing, and medicine is *for* healing. One can use the eye to wink but that is not its characteristic function, for while eyes can be used for winking that is not what is essential about them. Similarly, medical skill can be used to torture but that is not what medicine is for, using medical skill to cause pain and extract information is a distortion of the function of medicine. This purposefulness is not something that is added later by our use of the eye or our application of medicine, nor is it something that is constructed by anthropocentric understandings of characteristics and activities. Rather this normativity is present in nature (Annas in Gardiner 2005: 13); what something is for is determined by its very nature. Luck is contrasted with both the purposefulness and the regularity we observe in natural causes (Johnson 2005: chs 3 and 4; Irwin 1990: ch. 5).

Both natural and lucky causes take place for the sake of something; they are the products of intention, but luck is incidental to the result. So, take the example of a sculptor who is working on a sculpture. His skill at sculpting is the cause of the sculpture but it is an internal cause, i.e. there exists a sculpture because he is a sculptor; there is a non-incidental link between his skill and its product. At the same time, there are an indefinite number of incidentals at work here as well, e.g. the sculptor

is wearing a hat or not, has three brothers or not, etc. All these factors are incidental and external to the activity of sculpting as the sculptor sculpts in virtue of his skill in sculpting, not because he is wearing a hat or has three brothers. So to say “The man with the hat sculpted a sculpture” is true but accidental and does not tell us anything about the abilities of men with hats in general to sculpt sculptures. Natural causes are intrinsically related to their products, lucky ones are not; lucky ones just happen to come about. The function of sculpting explains why a sculpture was produced, in a way that is missing from the relationship between a lucky cause and its results.

Furthermore, if it is the function of activity A to produce result R we will see a lot of Rs coming about because of A. In nature we observe regularity, it is the function of eyes to see because natural things exist for the sake of something that is part of them, i.e. the eye exists for seeing. Equally, skills, arts, and activities exist for the sake of their products, sculpture for sculpting, and medicine for healing, so that where there are sculptors we expect to find sculptures and where there are doctors we expect to find healed patients. The opposite is true of lucky causes. Because luck is not intrinsically related to its results, there is no regularity to lucky occurrences; there are an infinite number of lucky causes for every single thing, because lucky causes are incidental.

In summary, Aristotle develops three concepts relevant to our purposes: spontaneous causes that are incidental and non-intentional, lucky causes which are incidental and intentional, and natural causes that are non-incidental and intentional. His discussion of luck serves two purposes, to account for luck as a cause and to contrast the features of lucky causes with natural causes thus setting the groundwork for the teleological argument that will underpin the definition of virtue.

### The link between the *Physics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*

So much for the definition of luck, a discussion of which takes place in the *Physics*, now we move on to what Aristotle has to say on the influence of luck on morality, a topic mainly developed in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and in part in the *Eudemian Ethics*. However, I have two concerns with framing our inquiry in this way, that is, as an approach that attributes two different and unrelated understandings of luck to Aristotle, i.e. the one developed in the *Physics*, and an incompatible one that underlies the discussions of luck and the good life in his works on morality. The first is the reasonable question, what is the relationship between the discussion of luck in the *Physics* and that in the *Nicomachean Ethics*? If we want to understand what Aristotle had to say about luck, we should attempt to understand all of it; it is not plausible that Aristotle intended for us to just set the *Physics* discussion to one side and move on.<sup>3</sup> The second concern, is that approaching the work of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudemian Ethics* in isolation tempts us to impose modern conceptions of morality and luck on Aristotle, something that threatens to distort his theory. Let us consider this second point in detail first, and then we will return to the first concern.

The modern discussion of moral luck was ignited by and shaped in terms of the debate introduced by Williams (1993a) and Nagel (1993). Williams sets the scene from the beginning: the term “moral luck” is oxymoronic, because it encapsulates the tension between morality, responsibility, agency, and control on the one hand, and luck, lack of control, and the inappropriateness of ascribing responsibility, on the other. We feel the tension, as cases of moral luck are cases where admittedly there was lack of control on the part of the agent over a crucial aspect of the trait, action, or consequence but we still ascribe responsibility to him for it. The very definition of the phenomenon reveals a particular way of seeing things: an adversarial account between luck and morality, one that tempts us, along Kantian grounds, to reject moral luck altogether in favor of all powerful reason or at least to view cases of moral luck as extraordinary and as requiring special consideration. However, this is not Aristotle’s view. For Aristotle, the moral life is steeped in luck. Williams himself seems to make this point in his postscript to the original paper on moral luck (Williams 1993b: 251). Williams suggests there were some misunderstandings in the way his original paper was read; moral luck poses a problem for a particular and well-entrenched conception of morality. However, if we think of ethics in the generalized

sense, rather than morality as referring to a particular system of ideas, we do not have the same sense of conflict. That means that there are conceptions of the ethical that do not invite the problem of moral luck. Such wider conceptions of the ethical offer different insights into the distinctions between voluntary and involuntary which affect how we evaluate the influence of luck on human affairs. Rather than adversarial, luck becomes a benign part of the human experience. Furthermore, for Williams, a wider conception of the ethical challenges whether it is appropriate to see blame as a “divine, perfect, judgment” (Williams 1993a: 254). Williams urges us instead toward making more nuanced judgments suited to particulars, and toward accepting the importance of reactions other than blame, such as regret (Williams 1993b: 254–255). When approaching Aristotle, then, we should be careful not to import conceptions of morality that are alien to his thought, but rather to understand luck within a system of ethics that sees morality steeped in luck rather than opposed to it.

How is Aristotelian ethical theory steeped in luck? The answer comes from the *Physics* and will also answer our first concern over how the discussion in the *Physics* relates to Aristotle’s treatise on ethics. In the *Physics*, Aristotle tells us that luck is only relevant where there is a possibility of benefit and, in general, of action (*praxis*) (Aristotle *Physics* 197b3). He links luck with action and luck is contrasted with spontaneity because spontaneity is only possible for inanimate objects and non-human animals, objects that cannot deliberate and make choices.<sup>4</sup> The very notion of deliberation and choice is linked to luck because of our human nature, and we cannot make sense of what kinds of people we should strive to become unless we see the commonalities between luck and thinking, namely that they both concern choice.<sup>5</sup> Not only that, but chance mimics causality; had the creditor known the debtor would be at the market, he would have gone there so as to meet him. “Luck comes about when the result that was *not* intended happens *as if* it had been intended” (Massie 2003: 23). This is why intention is so significant to luck and why it is defined separately from spontaneity; lucky events appear as if they were the objects of our intention, affecting us either positively or negatively, but they were not what was intended, as they are not done for the sake of the thing that results. For Aristotle, the concept of “luck” is linked to intentionality, choice, and deliberation, and can be properly understood only within this wider context.

Finally, then, the most important conclusion for our purposes is that our enquiry into choice, luck, and deliberation remains aporetic, that is, unresolved and questioning (Massie 2003: 16). We should not expect definitive and rigid answers from Aristotle as the subject matter does not permit them; “for it is a mark of the trained mind never to expect more precision in the treatment of any subject than the nature of that subject permits” (*NE* 1984b23–25). If the modern debate on moral luck forces us to take sides, either rejecting the very possibility of moral luck or surrendering to its influences, then Aristotle cannot be interpreted as taking part in the debate. Perhaps the most we can hope for from Aristotle is to shed some light on the question rather than arrive at confident answers, but that is not the fault of Aristotelian theory, this merely reflects the limits of the subject matter.

### On the different types of luck

If we are to learn something from the preceding discussion, then it is that luck exists and that it cannot be ignored but it makes us wonder at its place in nature.<sup>6</sup> Aristotle’s remarks on luck are dotted around his works but there is no doubt that he considered the questions posed by luck to be important and central in ethics. To make sense of his diverse discussions, I will order them under the more modern distinctions of types of luck, namely constitutive, developmental and resultant luck.<sup>7</sup> In brief, *constitutive luck* affects who we are, the natural tendencies we are born with that may or may not assist us on the road to virtue. So, someone who is born naturally empathic may have an advantage when developing the virtue of kindness, whereas someone who is naturally irascible may have a weakness to overcome. *Developmental luck* refers to all the elements that go toward making us who we are, and which affect our moral development. These may include the ease or difficulty with which we develop good habits, the availability of appropriate role models for emulation, the conduct

of our families and peers, the kinds of moral tests we are exposed to at different stages of development, the opportunity to learn from mistakes and failures, etc. Nagel's original discussion is slightly narrower and refers to the kinds of problems and situations one faces (Nagel 1993: 60), but I think the term "developmental" luck, with its broader connotations, captures more of the diverse factors which, along with the situations we come across, shape who we become.<sup>8</sup> *Resultant luck* affects the consequences of our actions. A callous driver shows utter disregard for the lives of others when he gets behind the wheel of his car while drunk, but if he does not encounter anyone else on his drive home, no one is hurt by his actions. What does Aristotle have to say on each kind of luck?

### Constitutive luck

The idea that who we fundamentally are affects who we become is crucial to any theory of development, but the thought that we have no control over our natural constitutive endowments, is disturbing. If we have no control over who we are, what chance do we have of shaping who we become? If constitutive luck does affect our characters then some of us are privileged and some of us are weakened in significant aspects of our moral development before we are even born. This suggestion is disturbing due to its unfairness, and it could lead us to despair about the very possibility of becoming virtuous before we have even begun on our journey.

Aristotle engages in a complicated discussion of the possibility of constitutive luck in Book VIII section 2 of the *Eudemian Ethics* where he tries to reconcile the intuitively plausible observation that luck as well as wisdom can cause one to lead a good life,<sup>9</sup> with the equally plausible claim that if we want to praise and blame agents for their virtue and vice, the origin of the character traits cannot be luck.

Aristotle starts by observing that even the foolish can sometimes luckily succeed in their endeavors, and that in some cases, such as navigation or strategy, there is an element of luck as well as skill involved. What is the source of such luck? It cannot be wisdom, because the wise can give reasons for their actions and the lucky succeed in spite of being unwise about the very matters about which they are fortunate. If you ask A how he recovered his debt, he cannot say because he searched out and found B in the market; he has to say that he was lucky to have done so. Luck cannot be a gift of the gods because luck is random, and it is strange to think the gods would not bestow their favor on the wise. Nor can luck come from nature as nature is the cause of things that happen always or for the most part, and, as we noted above in the *Physics*, lucky events are the opposite. Does it then mean that there is no such thing as luck? This seems contrary to what we perceive so we cannot accept this conclusion.

To resolve this problem, Aristotle draws a distinction between what we will call from now on *good fortune* and *luck*.<sup>10</sup> Luck retains all the features of the concept we saw developed in the *Physics*, while good fortune accounts for the possibility of constitutive luck.<sup>11</sup> Those who have good fortunes do so because of their nature. Just as some musical people can sing without having to learn to sing but due to a natural talent, some of us lead virtuous lives due to inclinations and desires that naturally point toward the right actions without the need for deliberation and intellect. Such people are *naturally* virtuous as opposed to those who have *moral* virtue proper, where virtue proper requires the right reason and the right desire leading to the right action. The merely naturally virtuous will do the right thing even though they are foolish and irrational. They will be unable to account for their behavior or teach it to others, just as those who are merely naturally talented singers cannot teach singing. Such good fortune, whose origin is in the person's nature, saves the merely naturally virtuous person from his poor reasoning. Since the origin of the actions is in nature, this person will have continuous good fortune.

The lucky, on the other hand, succeed against their impulses. They have the wrong reason and the wrong desire but luck intervenes and brings about the right outcome. This maintains the characteristics of luck we saw developed previously, i.e. it is not regular, it is incidental and it is



indeterminate. That means that the use of luck in the *Eudemian Ethics* is the same as that in the *Physics* but now this type of luck is restricted, in modern terms, to resultant luck, i.e. luck in how the effects of our actions turn out. Constitutive luck becomes the notion of the naturally caused, continuous good fortune, and good fortune is no longer luck as defined in the *Physics* as it is neither episodic, nor indeterminate, nor incidental.

Aristotle views good fortune, in this sense, as something people have from birth, in the same way they have blue or brown eyes. According to Aristotle's teleological account, nature continually reaches for its end, so the fact that some people are born naturally virtuous is not problematic; it is an expression of our nature acting unimpeded. It might be a rare phenomenon, and most of us who are not naturally fortunate have to work at bringing about the natural ends of humans *qua* humans through habituation, education, etc., but, for some of us, those ends come to fruition effortlessly due to having the right desires and impulses by our very nature. In this sense, deliberation and intellect are required where nature falls short of its own end and needs a helping hand.<sup>12</sup>

All this accounts for why some of us are virtuous without having wisdom and means that praising the naturally virtuous is unproblematic; they are both fortunate and praiseworthy as they are acting in ways natural to human beings. The link between morality and control is not so much abandoned but fades into the background. Control seems more important when corrective action is necessary, action on the part of the agent which brings him in line with the goals of nature. If such goals are already met, then moral praise is already appropriate and the requirement for control is not as relevant from the Aristotelian perspective. Here Aristotle breaks down the oxymoronic feature of moral luck, as good fortune is an expression of our very nature and there is no conflict between what we are due to fortune and what we should be due to nature.

Does a parallel argument work for natural vice? Much of what Aristotle has to say about virtue in terms of a cultivated, stable, and reliable purposive disposition is supposed to also be true for vice, but I think here we have a case where natural vice is not parallel to natural virtue. This is because natural virtue mirrors the goals of nature and therefore natural vice is an impossibility. Vice is only possible if one makes a deliberative choice in that direction, if one cultivates the wrong reason and the wrong desire to result in the wrong action. That would mean that constitutive fortune is possible but only with respect to natural virtue. Such a conclusion seems to me to be consistent with Aristotle's arguments but he does not make it, in fact, what he does say about how we are ruled by nature points to a bleaker picture. In the *Politics*, Aristotle tells us that while all humans are ruled by nature, different parts of the soul are present in different people differently. Thus, the slave has no deliberative faculty at all, the woman has the ability to deliberate but has no authority, while the child deliberates imperfectly (Aristotle *Politics* 1260a8–14). Further, Europeans are brave and spirited but lacking in intellect and art, Asians are intelligent and inventive but wanting in spirit and slavish, while only the Greeks are both high spirited and intelligent (Aristotle *Politics* 1327b19 ff.). These qualities are natural qualities that people have before any process of character development even begins.<sup>13</sup>

One might interpret Aristotle here as saying that we all participate in virtue, but not all in the same way; that in itself is unproblematic and could even be perceived as an advantage of his theory, as it allows for differing conceptions of the good life. In addition, we have also concluded that moral fortune is not objectionable in the constitutive case as it has been reduced to natural causes; this is a possible argument we can make in the case of good constitutive fortune. However, it seems to me that bringing these two conclusions together is problematic. The very reason why constitutive fortune is unproblematic is because nature aims toward the noble and the good. Since, however, the concept of nature expresses itself so differently in different people, we would have to accept that the life of a natural slave is a good life. Arguing that the naturally good life has many instantiations in one thing, asking us to accept that some of us are destined to be slaves, or destined to be women or Europeans where this is understood as being inherently less morally capable than Greek males, is problematic, even if we were to grant Aristotle that it is true due to our nature. It is not just that a different kind of good life is naturally available to those with good fortune, but rather that some versions of the good



life available to the constitutionally gifted, i.e. the natural slaves or women, do not appear very good any more. While Aristotle does give an answer to the question of constitutive good and bad moral luck then, this answer is, at least in part, quite controversial.<sup>14</sup>

Aristotle then moves on in his discussion in the *Eudemian Ethics* to wonder what the source of reason is, the source of our ability to overcome natural deficiencies in the first place. In order to avoid an infinite regress, he argues that the starting point is God. I will not consider this argument further as it seems to move away from questions of constitutive luck to a discussion of antecedent luck. Antecedent luck is not widely discussed in the literature on moral luck and raises questions about determinism that are beyond the scope of this chapter, so we will move on to look at Aristotle on developmental luck.

### Developmental luck

Aristotle begins Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics* by telling us that virtue is neither engendered in us by nature nor contrary to it.<sup>15</sup> Underlying this claim is the belief that the moral life is worth living if it can be secured by our efforts and cannot be entirely at the mercy of luck—the episodic, incidental kind of luck discussed above. The good life has to be within the capabilities of most people (Nussbaum 1986: 320), because it is an expression of natural excellence and, as such, the final and best end (Aristotle *NE* 1099b16 ff.). Aristotle specifically tells us that our understanding of the good life must be of a good that is widely shared among those who make an effort to study or practice it, so at least for most of us, who are not born naturally fortunate, the good life is within our possibilities.

Having the potential for something, though, is not the same as having the ability itself. Any moral theory that relies on the notion of character has to say something about the process of character development, and it is this process of developing the skills necessary for living the good life that is open to the influence of developmental luck. At its heart, Aristotelian theory is a theory about a gradual process of moral development, that eventually, and if all goes well, leads to established, reliable dispositions to act in accordance with reason, the characteristic function of human beings. Aristotle gives a complex and detailed account of this process of moral development with ties to moral psychology and education, but for our purposes, we can merely pick out its main elements. For a start, the student of virtue needs to develop the right habits. Virtue is not mindless habituation, but the first step on the road to virtue is to practice developing the right habits. The mind of the student of virtue must be prepared in advance to receive the seed of virtue, i.e. it must be habituated to take pleasure in the right things and feel dislike at the right things. If this appropriate habituation does not take place, it may be that the student will not be receptive to discussion and instruction in virtue later on (Aristotle *NE* 1179b23–27). A number of factors will influence the habits of the young, from their family, peers, and associations, to the law of the land which upholds and enforces the good (Aristotle *NE* 1179b31 ff.).

Central to this idea of habituation is the claim that we become virtuous by practicing the virtues (Aristotle *NE* 1103b6 ff.). This is a complex claim. For our purposes, it can be captured in the thought that the student of virtue begins by emulating an appropriate role model,<sup>16</sup> perceives the virtue in others, stands in awe of the virtue of others, and is motivated to aspire to the virtue of others. The first steps of this process involve copying virtue without fully understanding the details of the right reason but over time, with practice and the development of experience, the student of virtue comes to not only do it but understand why she does it. That is, she comes to understand how the complexities of the particulars of each situation generate the right reason, which, along with the cultivated right desire, lead to the right action. To make this move from the action to understanding, the student of virtue must learn to reason for herself, internalise the values involved and become an expert in judging the many aspects of each virtue that might be relevant to each situation.<sup>17</sup>

It is already evident that a very large number of factors crucial for this process of character development may be subject to luck; from the place of one's birth and upbringing, to the quality of one's

parents and family, to the availability of suitable role models and friends, to the type of situations and moral tests one comes across, to the opportunities for learning from failure, etc. Whatever natural tendencies we may happen to be born with, a large number of factors, both positive and negative, have an influence on the process that goes toward developing our established and stable dispositions. As such, any theory that relies on character, and therefore has something to say about character development, is inherently vulnerable to luck.

Furthermore, luck affects not just the immediate period of character development but also the later opportunities for the expression of virtue and the living of the good life. The Aristotelian good life requires external goods, no one can act virtuously while starving; the exercise of virtue requires external goods such as wealth to be shared liberally with others; the living of the good life requires the support of virtuous friends.<sup>18</sup> This means that the vulnerability of the good life to luck extends to the whole of one's life, as external events and circumstances affect what situations we come across, what external goods are available to us, what happens to our friends, etc.

What should be our response to this influence of luck? Should we be concerned by the fickleness of it all, disturbed by the influence of random factors on something as important as moral development? The standard interpretation of the Aristotelian answer to the influence of luck comes from Nussbaum's highly influential work. Nussbaum argues that our very understanding of human excellence only makes sense as something of value *because* it is something vulnerable:

[h]uman excellence is seen ... as something whose very nature is to be in need, a growing thing in the world that could not be made invulnerable and keep its own peculiar fineness. The contingencies that make praise problematic are also, in some as yet unclear way, constitutive of that which is there for praising.

(Nussbaum 1986: 2)

Like a delicate plant, the student of virtue must find herself planted in fertile soil, nurtured by gentle rain, able to avoid sudden frosts and harsh winds.<sup>19</sup> The right circumstances will foster virtue, the wrong ones will tempt toward vice, but that is our nature as human beings, and much of what we value is based on this very human vulnerability. For Aristotle, this vulnerability brought about by luck is not inimical to morality, but rather goes to the heart of ethics (Nussbaum 1986: 264). William's oxymoron is not appropriate here as the tension dissolves; luck can have a profound influence on the good life, but the good life cannot be understood without the humanity that makes us vulnerable to luck. This is not a clash between morality and luck, but an interdependent relationship where what makes human lives valuable is the same thing that makes them vulnerable to luck; we cannot make sense of one without the other.

Yet at the same time the attainment of virtue, the end of the long period of character development, offers some protection against luck. The virtuous person possesses practical wisdom, a kind of applied expertise in making judgments about moral matters, which expresses itself in action, proceeding from settled and reliable dispositions. As such, the virtuous person will act kindly, for example, easily and effortlessly even when it is difficult to do so, or even when faced with what others perceive as tempting circumstances to do otherwise. The virtuous is insulated, by the reliability of his virtue, from the caprices of the world. Furthermore, like any good craftsman, the virtuous person makes the best of the materials at hand, so even when faced with bad tools in terms of the limited choices he may have, he makes the best of the situation. It is part of Aristotle's understanding of the nobility of virtue that one faces adversity in the right way. The virtuous man feels misfortune the same way we do, but his nature leads him to take the most honorable course available; like the good craftsman, the virtuous makes the best of the materials he has and faces the situation he finds himself in with dignity. Fundamentally this is because the good life is determined by our activities, which are the expression of our choices and therefore cannot be held hostage to good or bad luck.<sup>20</sup> It is virtue that determines *eudaimonia*, not luck (Aristotle *NE* 1100b4–10).

Aristotle's answer to the influence of luck on the good life, then, is complex. The developmental aspect of acquiring virtue is sensitive to many factors subject to luck. A lot has to go well in one's life before one can attain virtue, in terms of both the influences one is exposed to and the situations one comes across. The life of virtue requires activity, external goods, and good friends, but, at the same time, it also resists luck in that virtue is a purposive choice, it is the expression of the agent's practical wisdom in action.<sup>21</sup> Having said that, Aristotle inserts one last caveat: a life cannot be judged to be good until it has been lived to its end, as devastating misfortunes, the kind of comprehensive bad luck Priam suffered, might affect even the most prosperous of men (Aristotle *NE* 1100a5–9 and 1100a5–7). The *eudaimon* man, then, is "one who is active in accordance with complete virtue, and who is adequately furnished with external goods, and that not for some unspecified period but throughout a complete life" (Aristotle *NE* 1101a15–18).

### Resultant luck

Any normative theory that emphasizes the importance of having the right sort of character, of being the right kind of person, will be less vulnerable to luck affecting the consequences of one's actions. The virtuous person is virtuous because he perceives the right thing to do and feels the right way toward the right person and at the right time. This stable disposition toward the noble and the good will often result in action because the right choice often involves expressing one's state of being into doing, but the emphasis of the moral assessment of praise is on *who* you are, not on *what* you do.<sup>22</sup>

If the source of moral worth, then, is who one is, luck affecting the results of what one does is less problematic for character-based theories. If the good life is concerned with the kind of person you are, then all drunk drivers are equally culpable for being the kinds of people who recklessly disregard the welfare of others, and this holds true regardless of whether any one drunk driver is lucky to get home safely on a particular night or not.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Aristotelians resist the pressure to evaluate whether a life has been well lived based on the consequences of one's choices; it is the choices themselves, and the reasonableness of the choices, that matter, not their incidental consequences. The virtuous person makes choices in light of the noble and the good, and while the fickle circumstances of the world can hijack the consequences of the virtuous action, they cannot hijack the essence of the character of virtue expressed in these actions. The reckless, vicious disregard for the welfare of others is expressed in the choice to drink when one knows one will drive and is not mitigated by the good luck displayed by pedestrians who happen to be indoors while one drunkenly veers one's car onto pavements. Equally, the virtuous concern with the welfare of others is displayed even in the failed effort to save another person from drowning; the praise is due for the genuine commitment to attempt the rescue, and is not negated by the, perhaps inevitable due to circumstances beyond one's control, lack of success.

This point is not merely a requirement for foreseeing the results of our actions, i.e. knowing that driving drunk endangers others, but is a more substantive point about knowing oneself and developing one's character in such a way that one's choices embody the right reason. Discussing Williams' famous Gauguin example, Kenny argues that our assessment of Gauguin should take place at the time he chooses to abandon his family to pursue his artistic career, rather than later on when we find out what kinds of painting he has produced. A painter who gives up on everyone in his life to pursue an artistic career when he has, at best, only a mediocre talent to develop, is not judged on his bad luck in producing mediocre paintings, but on his culpable lack of self-knowledge which led to the original deluded choice.<sup>24</sup> Other elements of Gauguin's choice can also contribute to our assessment of his character at the time the choice is made: for example, this is a person who is willing to abandon his wife to an extremely uncertain financial and social future to pursue his passion, this is a person who abandons his responsibilities to his children, this is a person who cannot reconcile artistic ambition and familial duties, etc. So, Gauguin's choice is not merely an assessment of the chances of artistic success but also a judgment that artistic success is more valuable than family commitments, a choice for which he can be held responsible at the time of the choosing and without needing to know how it pans out.

It is clear, then, that the good life resists the influence of resultant luck because virtue ethics is less concerned with *what* you do and more concerned with *how* you do it. The emphasis is on having the right dispositions and if their instantiation into action is occasionally perverted through bad luck this does not affect the moral assessment of the agent's character.

## Conclusion

We started this chapter with Aristotle's definition of luck. Luck is a species of spontaneity that is brought about by something capable of intention and has five features: it is irregular, incidental, indeterminable, unaccountable, and may be either good or evil. This definition allows Aristotle to set up luck as a cause contrary to natural causes which are non-incidental and intentional. We then saw how Aristotle goes on to link luck and thinking because they both concern choice, luck also mimicking the kind of causality we observe in deliberate action. This understanding of luck makes it part of the human experience and we saw how Aristotelian theory is steeped in luck rather than setting luck against morality.

We then went on to consider the Aristotelian response to three kinds of luck discussed in modern debates: constitutive, developmental, and resultant luck. A complex discussion in the *Eudemian Ethics* concluded by drawing a distinction between good natural fortune which accounts for the possibility of constitutive luck, and luck that retains all the features of the concept as defined above. Developmental luck has the greatest influence on the Aristotelian good life as it can affect all the diverse factors that contribute to the long process of character development as well as the conditions for the expression of virtue in later life. Again, here the Aristotelian response to the possibility of luck is to accept the essential vulnerability of the human life but argue that much of what is valuable about the good life depends on this vulnerability. This is not an oxymoronic, contrasting, adversarial relationship between the demands of morality and the realities of luck; rather, it is a conception of morality as fully immersed in luck—a point to be embraced rather than resisted. Finally, we saw how, in the same way that character theories are more vulnerable to considerations of developmental luck because of their emphasis on a long period of character development, they are resistant to the possibility of resultant luck because of their emphasis on who one is as opposed to what one does.

Our final conclusion on Aristotle on luck and the good life can only be that the subject is complex and not easily captured in generalizations, reflecting the very complexity of the good life and its myriad interconnections with luck.<sup>25</sup>

## Notes

- 1 The Ancient Greek term *tyche* is often also translated as “chance” but for ease of reference I will use “luck” throughout. Note that “*automaton*” can also sometimes be translated as “chance” but I have opted for “spontaneity” to avoid confusion.
- 2 The Aristotelian account of spontaneity and luck discussed in this section can be found in the *Physics*, Book II, parts 4–8.
- 3 Most authors interpret Aristotle as having a consistent understanding of luck as he moves from the *Physics* to works on morality. See for example K. Johnson (1997), Bodéüs (2000), and M.T. Johnson in Henry and Nielsen (2015). For an opposing interpretation see Woods (1982).
- 4 Aristotle, *Physics* 197b10, discussed in Shew (2008: 44).
- 5 Shew makes this wonderfully original argument in Shew (2008).
- 6 For more on this see Shew (2008: ch. 3).
- 7 These are introduced by Nagel, in Statman (1993).
- 8 For more on this see Athanassoulis (2005: ch. 3).
- 9 *EE* 1246b36–1247a1 is the passage that links good luck to *eupragia*. Kenny (1992: 57), doubts that *eupragia* should be understood as *eudaimonia* here, which would mean that luck cannot bring about true happiness, but I follow Johnson K. (1997: 94), who notes that Aristotle frequently substitutes *eupragia* for *eudaimonia* and Johnson M.R. (2015: 258), who concurs with this understanding, as otherwise the passage would not be setting up the problem of moral luck. If we do not interpret this passage as setting up the problem of moral luck the ensuing discussion and Aristotle's perplexity as to the role of luck do not make much sense.

- 10 Johnson, K. (1997), sees three distinctions here: those with bad reasoning who achieve success due to a desire which they may or may not have at other times, those with bad reasoning and bad desires who succeed due to external features of the world (resultant), and those who have continuous natural good fortune. It does not seem to me that there is sufficient evidence that Aristotle saw this as a triple distinction, so I follow Johnson, M.R. (2015), in distinguishing only between episodic luck and constant good fortune.
- 11 A similar distinction occurs in modern discussions, see for example, Hartman (2017: 28).
- 12 This argument on the natural sources of good fortune is developed in Johnson, M.R. (2015). Not everyone interprets these passages in this way, e.g. Leunissen (2013) paints a more moderate picture, interpreting such passages to show that there are natural attributes but they make moral development easier rather than predetermining it.
- 13 Some commentators interpret these passages as arguing for a strict division between races (Johnson, M.R. 2015), while others read Aristotle as saying that different races have these different characteristics for the most part (Leunissen 2012).
- 14 Admittedly this is a rather bleak point that Aristotle seems to be making here, however readers should not be put off his theory purely because of this. All it shows is that even Aristotle did not get everything right.
- 15 Aristotle, *NE* 1103a14ff. This is mainly a discussion of how virtue can be developed through habituation so therefore cannot be contrary to nature. However, Aristotle also explicitly says that virtue is not engendered in us by nature, a comment which does, on the face of it, seem to contradict the *Eudemian Ethics* discussion of constitutive, natural good fortune. Unfortunately, the scope of this chapter does not permit further discussion on how these points might be reconciled.
- 16 Aristotle discusses emulation in the *Rhetoric*; for this definition see 1399a35–1388b1. One of the few authors to discuss the Aristotelian concept of emulation is Kristjhansson (2007: 102–108).
- 17 For more on this move see Burnyeat (1980), Sherman (1989), and Vasilioi (1996).
- 18 On the need for external goods see Aristotle *NE* 1153b12ff., on liberality see *NE* Book IV, and on friendship see *NE* Book VIII.
- 19 The analogy comes from a poem by Pindar discussed by Nussbaum (1986: 1).
- 20 For all the above points see Aristotle *NE* 1100b23ff.
- 21 For more on how Aristotle both embraces and resists luck see Athanassoulis (2005: chs 3, 4 and 8).
- 22 Practically we make inferences from what people do as to what kind of person they are, but this is a different point.
- 23 For more on this see Athanassoulis (2005: ch. 3).
- 24 Kenny (1988: 110). A similar point is made by Andre (1983).
- 25 I am very grateful to Monte Johnson for kindly discussing ideas that inspired this chapter, and to Robert Hartman for extensive comments on earlier drafts of it.

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