

## Chichele Essay 2009

### Luck

by  
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The context in which the word 'luck' is perhaps most familiar to people is a rather banal one; that is, the popular saying 'good luck', used before one is about to attempt something. This saying is a wish: we want the person to know that we want them to do well. That at least is how the saying is generally interpreted. However, the actual wording is rather different, since we actually are calling for luck to be on their side, and, intentionally or not, we are in fact implying that the recipient will need luck, or at least that luck will play a significant role in whatever task they are attempting to succeed in. In fact, this seemingly anodyne expression raises some interesting philosophical questions: what is the role of luck, or chance, or fortune in our lives? How powerful a force is it? And these questions also lead on to a third, namely, if luck is a powerful force in our lives, what are the consequences of this?

The debate over the role of luck in our lives has engaged artists, authors and philosophers for centuries. It is significant that the connotations of the word 'luck' are different in different cultures. When we use the word, unless we specify that we are speaking about 'bad luck', we generally interpret the concept in a positive light; the adjective 'lucky', for instance, means good luck. When a character in a play by Aeschylus speaks of 'luck' or 'fortune', on the other hand, we are usually safe to assume that the word is meant in a bad way. In Greek literature, men are portrayed as being wholly at the whim of fortune, which is presented as a merciless force; in the *Iliad*, not even Zeus can defend Sarpedon, his own son, against Fate. The rise of Christianity led to a downplaying in the role of luck in our lives, since the idea of a life governed by arbitrary chance doesn't fit in well with an all-powerful and all-good God.

We can chart the decline of the importance of luck through literature: in the *Divine Comedy*, there is a goddess of Fortune, but she is firmly subordinated to the Christian God and has been integrated into a harmonious universe – a far cry from the fatalism of the Greeks. The Reformation brought with it an even greater belief in Providence, and hence luck became seen as even less important (if not a blasphemous idea): in *Hamlet*, the prince declares that 'there's a divinity that shapes our ends' and that 'there is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow'; humans 'defy augury' and superstition. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton consigns 'chance' to the realm of 'Chaos' and the 'wild Abyss', and makes sure that it is kept out of our world altogether. Even when Christianity began to lose strength in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, people were still loath to admit the rule of chance: a rational world order was substituted in the place of God, and promoted by people like Newton and, in the political sphere, the American founding fathers with their 'self-evident truths'. Even later, Marxism and the quasi-providential processes of dialectical materialism can be seen as attempts to ward off chance and luck. For Marxists, there is still a 'divinity that shapes our ends', even if that divinity is class conflict.

However, in the modern age we have seen a return of the view that chance rules our lives. Postmodernism in particular celebrates randomness and the role of luck in modern life. Deconstructionists tell us that there is no particular reason for the connection between 'signifiers' and 'signifieds'; language itself is completely down to chance. Postmodern literature emphasises the importance of luck: Ian McEwan's *Atonement* is constantly reminding to reader that things could have gone very differently had a certain character not acted in a certain way at a certain moment in time; the protagonist (and, we later discover, author) Briony Tallis causes Robbie Turner to go to jail because she sees a rape and thinks that he is responsible, but in the section immediately preceding her discovering the rape, the narrator jumps in and comments on how different it would have been if Briony had taken the more obvious route back home and hence missed the rape. Chance, it seems, governs all.

We can see the dominance of chance when we look around us today. In the recent American Presidential election, the two candidates were essentially equal in the opinion polls from August to September. Then, in late September, came the dramatic collapse of Bear Stearns and a massive crash on Wall Street. Neither candidate had anything to do with this, but the Republican Party's free market ideology was partly blamed for causing the crisis, and Obama suddenly took the lead. The economic crisis continued to get worse, and Obama continued to increase his lead in the polls. When he won in a landslide, many pundits tried to explain it by talking about how Obama had run a much better campaign; how he had inspired the youth; how people were sick and tired of the Karl Rowe style of politics, and so on, and there may well be some truth to these points. However, ultimately the reason Obama won is a landslide would seem to owe a lot more to one chance event, which gave him a sudden momentum in the weeks going toward the election, and made McCain seem out of touch, than to any carefully worked out strategy of the Obama campaign. The economic crash itself should make us reflect on the role of chance in the stock markets; at this year's Cheltenham Literature Festival I heard Nassim Nicholas Taleb, the prominent economist, speak on the role of chance in financial markets: he claimed that despite the fact that investment bankers used technical terms and rigorous charts to try to understand how the stock market worked, in fact the markets were completely irrational and chance events were enough to trigger off panicky responses. This may not always be true, but there is no shortage of such events in history.

All of these arguments would seem to suggest that chance plays a crucial role in our lives. However it is far easier to say this than to consider the consequences of this claim. If chance governs all, and everything that happens to us is down to luck, then ideas which our society is based upon, such as individual responsibility, no longer have any value. How can I be responsible for doing wrong, if all outcomes are the result of chance? The 'reductio ad absurdum' of this argument was presented by the great American lawyer Clarence Darrow in the Leopold and Loeb case of the 1920's. Leopold and Loeb were two wealthy young men who had killed someone for little apparent reason. Darrow defended them by arguing that it was wrong to blame them for the crime, because they had got the idea of murdering someone through reading Nietzsche at university. This is a simplification of his argument, but it captures the main point: the defendants were influenced by chance circumstances to embark on a certain course of action; they didn't plan it all themselves, and weren't

personally responsible. This case, now so far off, does have an almost comic element, since the argument seems so cynical and disingenuous, but it ought to make us reflect on the moral consequences of assigning too important a role to luck in our society.

If our lives were governed by luck, this would also have important political consequences. Recently, the government raised the top rate of tax to 50%, and howls of outrage went up from the right-wing press and those who earn over £150,000. In angry interviews, investment bankers tell us that they deserve the money because they have worked hard all of their lives and so the government is penalizing the virtue of industriousness. However, if, as has been suggested before, they only got their money through chance, and it actually has little to do with hard work, then these arguments become more flawed. Moreover, if Chance dominates our careers, then one might say that no-one actually deserves to earn a lot of money. A wealthy man, for instance, might only earn more than a poorer man because he was born into a wealthier family, who supported him through private education and university and thus helped him get the well-paying job. Fairness had nothing to do with it; Chance was entirely responsible. Thus the dominance of chance strikes right at the heart of the 'virtue' of capitalism, and certainly puts paid to Thatcherite arguments about the rich deserving to earn more. There are also consequences to the idea of nationhood. Recently, we had St George's Day, and the usual concern about a lack of English patriotism. But if chance rules all, as it seems, then patriotism seems a ridiculous idea – why be proud of a country where you just happened to be born? It is completely random that we are English, and, along with this idea, we can also see that it is largely random that we were born into a generally Christian (or, at least, post-Christian) culture. Even our deepest religious beliefs would seem to be determined by chance: I went to a Christian school, and was taught about religion from the Bible; but if I had been born in Pakistan, I would almost certainly have been a Muslim.

These examples all show what far reaching (and sometimes disturbing) consequences the view that chance and luck rule our lives can have. Perhaps it was a fear of the consequences that led so many to believe in ideas such as Providence, or dialectical materialism. It may be that, just as Voltaire once said that if God didn't exist it would be necessary to invent him, so too if Providence (or any belief that our lives had a purpose and were not dominated by luck) didn't exist it would be necessary to invent it. Certainly those who do promote a view of an ordered and rational universe often find comfort in their views: one thinks of Spinoza happily accepting that in obtaining knowledge of the nature of a universe in which everything is determined and nothing down to chance, one can achieve a kind of freedom in understanding and accepting the predetermined order of things. The Stoics believed that everything happened in accordance with the Natural Law and the Will of Nature, and happily gave themselves over to accepting their place in an ordered universe. The Early Christians were undoubtedly influenced by Stoicism (even faking letters between Seneca and St Paul) and undoubtedly this belief in Providence was continued by them, and again presented as a comforting alternative to a wretched life ruled by luck. It is difficult to challenge the serene optimism of Cardinal Newman's beautiful hymn 'Lead Kindly Light', even if it doesn't match up with a world which, as we have seen, is all too often dominated by chance.

However, after what Max Weber famously called 'the disenchantment of the world', and after the advent of a cynical and disillusioned postmodern era, it seems almost impossible to have any faith in the orderliness and rationality of our world. The Ancient Greek world view seems far more persuasive a model for human life than the optimistic Christian belief in Providence. Humans do have choices, and human effort does count for something, but far more, it seems, is down to chance: what race we are; what country we are born in; what kind of family we are born into; what kind of school we go to. These events all happen at the beginning of our life (we have no say over them) and yet they condition us throughout our life, and ensure that many of the decisions that we make (which we may think we are making independently) are actually decided in the context of past experiences which have often been determined for us by chance. To deny this, and to assume a universalist belief and say that a student who has gone to Tonbridge School would think in exactly the same way as, say, a boy educated in an Islamic School in Saudi Arabia, seems to me to be a form of cultural arrogance. Whether we like it or not, we cannot really deny that luck plays a significant role in our lives.