Agency, Luck, and Tragedy
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AGENCY, LUCK, AND TRAGEDY

Abstract. The term “tragedy” is widely misused in common parlance to designate any disastrous occurrence of great magnitude. If this practice is to be resisted and reformed, an alternative account of real-life tragedy must be sustained. I attempt to offer one that is grounded in the connections between agency and luck. More specifically, I argue that in a universe lacking any supernatural power of fate, real-life tragedy occurs when the exercise of agency results, through a confluence of constitutive and circumstantial bad luck, in the suffering and the destruction of the agent.

On Saturday, May 15, 2004, William J. “Billy” Post, age thirty-four; his pregnant wife, Anita, thirty-six; and their two-year-old daughter Koby were traveling eastbound on U.S. Interstate 70 near Evergreen, Colorado. Shortly before 10 a.m., as they passed under the C-470 overpass then under construction, a forty-ton girder collapsed onto their Dodge Durango, entirely shearing off the upper cab of the vehicle and killing all three occupants instantly. Later investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board showed this event to have been eminently avoidable. A number of observers, including a senior Colorado transportation engineer, noticed the girder twisted and sagging in the hours and even days before it fell, but only one, an ordinary driver, called 911 to report the situation. This call was transmitted to the Colorado State Patrol dispatcher. As a result of apparent miscommunication, however, the dispatcher understood the object in question to be a listing road sign, not a sagging girder. Two Colorado Department of Transportation
workers had visited the overpass minutes before the girder collapsed, but, primed by the inaccurate directive, looked for hanging signs and missed the girder. In addition, the girder had been temporarily and, as it turned out, improperly placed and secured pending continuation of work on the overpass after the weekend had passed.

Was this event, horrifying as it was, the “tragedy” the Denver Post (May 31, 2006) described it to be? If you are inclined to answer no, then I am guessing that, like me, you are uncomfortable with the currently debased use of the term to designate any horrific event. But now add the following pertinent facts. Billy Post had worked as a systems engineer in New York City near the World Trade Center. After the 9/11 attacks, he and his family relocated to Evergreen in search of a safer environment. Do these facts affect your intuitions, your inclination to apply the term “tragic”? They do mine, though I am prepared only to go so far as to say that they inject into the story a tragic element theretofore absent. If you agree, then we both, in our resistance to common usage, reveal ourselves as descendants of Aristotle. For what has been added is the element of reversal of fortune, or *peripeteia*, that he emphasizes in *Poetics* 10, 1452a–11, 1452b—reversal, moreover, that is sharpened with irony. In taking reasonable action to protect themselves and their family, the Posts instead brought destruction upon themselves. But Aristotle, it will be said, was analyzing tragic drama, the imitation of action, not action itself. So how is the *Poetics* relevant?

I have two responses to this. First, if spectators of tragic drama are to undergo catharsis of the emotions of pity and fear, as Aristotle claims they should (6, 1449b), both emotions must not be entirely simulated or off-line: the real emotions, not their simulations, are in need of catharsis, however we understand that vexed term. And we are particularly susceptible to emotions of pity and fear when we witness actual tragic events: we think that if a person of comparatively elevated status can be brought low, the person who, as Aristotle says, is not perfect but is “better than the ordinary man” (15, 1454b), so can we. This immediately yields the second response to the objection voiced above: dramatic tragedy may have effloresced supremely in the West only twice, once in Attic Greece and once in Elizabethan England, and this literary form may be a singularly effective lens for bringing into focus certain patterns of human, real-life suffering. But it does not create these patterns. It reveals them. The Posts’ real-life accident exemplifies one such pattern and elicits real pity and fear.
Putting aside characteristics that Aristotle deemed necessary for tragic drama, such as imitation of action, language with “pleasurable accessories,” melody, and diction (6, 1449b), Aristotelian hamartia—usually translated as “tragic flaw” but perhaps more adequately rendered as “missing the mark”8—seems mostly lacking in the story of the Posts, unless we count as a kind of hamartia the cognitive limitations that beset any finite agent. Such a view is by no means without merit, but I do not press it for the moment. For now, I just note the obvious: this awful event was a piece of wretched luck. The decision to relocate did, no doubt, precipitate the event, but there is nothing to fault in the Posts’ planning or execution. Whatever tragic impact the story of the family may possess seems to depend upon its exemplification of Aristotelian action and ironic reversal, which is why I hesitated to brand the event as outright tragedy, as opposed to according it tragic coloration. Nonetheless, luck, if properly understood, I shall argue, lies at the heart of real-life tragedy.

When we find an element of tragedy in the story of the Colorado family, we do not just demonstrate that we are children of Aristotle. We demonstrate that we are also—via Chaucer and then, most powerfully, Shakespeare—children of Boccaccio,9 author of The Fates of Illustrious Men (1358),10 a highly influential chronicle of the destruction of the lives of actual persons, some admirable, some execrable. Suppose we altered the family’s story such that the accident occurs as it did, but with the girder not slung quite so low, so that it only clips the roof of the SUV, thereby injuring both adults seriously, but not mortally, and sparing the young child. After a long and painful period of recovery involving multiple surgical interventions, the family survives. It has undergone grievous suffering, but it has managed to emerge more or less intact. This alteration, it seems to me, would lessen any tragic impact the story had on us. On Aristotelian principles, on the other hand, a happy ending does not preclude tragedy, so long as self-induced misfortune and suffering occur at some point in the plot.

A tragedy, that is, need not end disastrously (11, 1452b). Aristotle’s admiration for the tight plot of Sophocles’s Oedipus the King is widely recognized, but fewer have noted that he rated “best of all” tragic plots in which a horrific deed is nearly consummated but then averted through astounding discovery, as in Iphigenia in Tauris (14, 1454a) by Euripides, for Aristotle the “most tragic” of the classical Greek dramatists (13, 1453a). All of Shakespeare’s tragedies, by contrast, end with the destruction of the protagonist, a plot turn that has left an indelible mark on our conception of the tragic. The suffering of the family in the altered
version of the Post story may have been greater than that of the actual family. But the family would have escaped destruction.

If the Colorado incident is but colored by tragedy, then consider another. On Sunday morning, November 24, 1963, members of the press gathered in the basement of the Dallas, Texas, police station to await the appearance of the recently arrested Lee Harvey Oswald, who was scheduled for transport to another location. Among them were two newspaper photographers, Ira Jefferson “Jack” Beers Jr. of the *Dallas Morning News* and Robert H. “Bob” Jackson of the *Dallas Times Herald*. Both were accomplished professionals, but Beers was especially known for his meticulous habits. “Luck is a product of being prepared,” he often told his young daughter, who described him as a detail-oriented perfectionist. As was his custom, he arrived at the basement an hour early and picked what he thought would be the best spot for a clear shot. At 11:21 a.m., Oswald appeared, flanked by two police officers. As the officers walked Oswald to an unmarked car, a sudden commotion ensued. Jack Ruby had darted out, holding a revolver leveled at Oswald’s chest and cursing, “You son of a bitch.” Clearly seeing Ruby’s approach, Beers took his photo, and a fine one it was. It shows Ruby, gun extended, closing in on a stone-faced Oswald.

But Jackson’s subsequent shot was better still. In fact, it was perfect. Because he was less well positioned than Beers, Jackson did not perceive Ruby’s approach when Beers did. He sensed rapid but indeterminate movement in Oswald’s vicinity, he wanted very much to get a shot of Oswald before his view became totally occluded, and then snapped his photo six-tenths of a second after Beers took his. In the commotion, Jackson was not sure he had gotten much of anything. But this turned out to be the exact moment at which Ruby fired the gun, and Jackson’s now world-famous photo shows Oswald grimacing with pain as the bullet entered his chest, as well as the shocked and horrified visage of the police officer to Oswald’s right. Jackson’s photo went on to win the Pulitzer Prize. It also made him wealthy, for the *Times Herald* ceded him the rights. “Just dumb-ass luck,” opined Joe Laird, a retired *Dallas Morning News* photographer.

Thereafter, Beers was a broken man. With all his preparation and discipline, he had missed the shot of his career by less than a second. “I was there. I was prepared. But I didn’t get it,” his daughter reported him repeatedly saying. His fundamental life principle had been upended, and he never got over it. He lost all zest for life and all his previous love of his work, took to drink and other self-destructive behaviors, and, to
his beloved daughter’s sorrow, died of a heart attack at fifty-one in 1975. Jackson, by contrast, was living as recently as 2013 in a mountain retreat in Manitou Springs, Colorado, with his second wife, three Jaguars, five Porsches, and a Lotus. He had three daughters, three sons, and ten grandchildren.

This affecting story, I submit, is not just tragically colored: it bears the hallmarks of tragedy itself, absent Aristotle’s literary accouterments. Not only is it a story of ironic reversal. It is both Attic and Shakespearean in the magnitude of the suffering, as well as the ultimate destruction, visited on a man who, in his self-discipline, commitment to excellence, and decency was “better” than many, but was brought low by a kind of hamartia: Beers may have turned out to have been too well prepared in this fast-moving and fluid situation. His defeat therefore inspires pity and fear. The most careful preparation, doing everything one humanly can do, may not be enough. It may even be self-defeating, for one can be defeated by “dumb-ass luck.” But was this bad luck really so dumb-ass?12

II

Although Joel Feinberg13 first drew attention to the issue, a pair of papers—one by Thomas Nagel,14 the other by Bernard Williams15—were what put the notion of moral luck on the philosophical map, and, like most philosophical ideas of consequence, it is both gripping and controversial. If we accept the possibility of moral luck, then we seem to be committed to holding agents responsible for actions that are beyond their control, for it is widely agreed that luck as such involves some degree of lack of control.16 Similar considerations apply to practical luck in general, and not only to moral luck. The cases of both Post and Beers are arguably more cases of practical luck than of specifically moral luck. Not all philosophers allow that moral luck is even possible. Nicholas Rescher17 and Michael Zimmerman,18 for example, do not. These writers counsel a Kantian retreat to the “inner citadel” of volition, which they believe is immune to luck, because our volitions are allegedly always under our control, whatever the external circumstances or the outcomes of our actions. But as I am about to show, the notion that our volitions are immune to luck is far from clear.

To provide focus to his discussion, Williams adduces the example of Paul Gauguin, or at least a thought-experimentally imagined individual relevantly like Gauguin, who abandons his wife, children, and regular employment to pursue the life of a painter in Tahiti. When we judge this
Gauguin’s actions, Williams claims, we cannot help but be influenced by the fact that, in reality, he turned out to be a great artist. Should his results have proved mediocre, we would judge him and his project more harshly. But Gauguin’s greatness was, at least in part, a matter of luck. Artistic genius is not something one acquires through effort, though effort is no doubt required to realize its potential. Moreover, Gauguin could not possibly know before he made this momentous life decision that his plan would succeed, an epistemic point bearing on the quality of Gauguin’s agency that Williams emphasizes. In the terminology developed by Nagel, Gauguin’s genius, if not its cultivation and expression, was a matter of luck both constitutive and circumstantial. His gifts, as we commonly call them, were a result of some combination of luck of inborn nature and luck of external nurture, neither of which was under Gauguin’s control. As we shall see, however, Gauguin’s constitutive moral luck may be better characterized as constitutive moral good fortune. I shall take up the distinction between luck and fortune presently.

To constitutive and circumstantial luck Nagel adds two additional varieties, namely causal and resultant luck. The former concerns external causal factors antecedent to the exercise of agency, while the latter concerns effects that flow from the agent’s actions. Distinguishing results or outcomes from resultant luck is of signal importance. Any action taken will have some outcome or other, but not all outcomes are properly termed lucky or unlucky. Driving home under normal circumstances will result, ceteris paribus, in one’s getting home absent any intervention of luck. But a drunk driver who runs a stop sign and strikes a pedestrian in a crosswalk a glancing blow that happens not to result in injury enjoys considerable resultant luck (example from Nagel modified). Since antecedent causal luck is bound up with issues of determinism and freedom of the will—topics that have been co-opted by the large literature on the metaphysics of action theory—it attracts less attention in the philosophy of luck literature than do the other varieties. It is also irrelevant to my discussion, as is resultant luck. That leaves constitutive and circumstantial luck.\textsuperscript{19} Tragedy, I shall argue, resides in the interstices between these two.

Unsurprisingly, philosophers lack consensus concerning the nature of luck. As is widely, perhaps universally, agreed, luck involves lack of control as well as unpredictability. The disagreements arise over the question of how to interpret these factors and what must be included in any definition of luck. Various theorists favor modal, probability, significance, and risk interpretations. Some hold mixed accounts. On the
modal view, an event is lucky or unlucky if it occurs in the actual world but does not occur in nearby possible worlds; on the probabilistic view, an event is lucky or unlucky if it is comparatively improbable and, as a result, predictively elusive. The risk view encompasses significance but emphasizes negative over positive significance as well as the proleptic perspective of risk over the retrospective perspective of luck. Risk also combines significance with modal proximity and with probability. The more negative the projected outcome and closer in similarity space the possible world in which that outcome occurs, or the higher the probability that the negative outcome will ensue, the greater the risk.

While some theorists favor one-factor accounts, mixed approaches are, in my judgment, more convincing. Although the lack of control condition on luck is widely accepted, it cannot account for luck on its own. I have no control over whether the number of hairs on my head right now is odd or even (see Levy, p. 13), but I am not lucky that it is whatever it is. Significance must play a role. But lack of control and significance are also not enough, for significance is linked to probability. If I play a round of standard Russian roulette, I will consider myself lucky if I survive the event, despite the fact that the probability of surviving is 5/6. If I win a twenty-five-dollar Starbucks gift card in a raffle, on the other hand, the probability of drawing a winning ticket would have to be much lower than 5/6 for me to consider myself lucky. This shows that probability of negative outcomes and significance are inversely proportional: the more significant an event, the lower the probability of a negative outcome may be for a positive outcome to be considered lucky (p. 36). After all, the probability that I shoot myself in the head during a round of Russian roulette is “only” 1/6. E. J. Coffman offers an alternative, roughly equivalent, formulation of this, the “inverse proportionality thesis”: “The degree of chanciness required for an event to count as lucky for one is inversely proportional to the degree to which the event is good for one” (Coffman, p. 40). In this formulation, as the degree to which an event is good for me increases, the lower the improbability (degree of chanciness) of that event need be to be considered lucky.

Neil Levy, a mixed-approach proponent, holds three conditions individually necessary and jointly sufficient for an event or a state of affairs to count as lucky (Levy, p. 36). A lucky event or state of affairs must (1) be significant for an agent; (2) the agent must lack direct control over that event or state of affairs; and (3) that event or state of affairs must fail to occur in “many nearby worlds,” where “the proportion of nearby
worlds [with unlucky outcomes] that is large enough for the event to be chancy lucky is inverse to the significance of the event for the agent.” Rik Peels offers a similar version, absent the inverse proportionality thesis: “The actualization of some state of affairs $\Sigma$ is lucky or unlucky for some person $S$ at some time $t$ if and only if (i) $\Sigma$ is significant for $S$ at $t$, (ii) the actualization of $\Sigma$ is not the intended result of $S$’s exercising control over the actualization of $\Sigma$ at $t$, and (iii) $\Sigma$ obtains in the actual world, but does not obtain in a wide class of nearby possible worlds” (Peels, p. 151).

Unfortunately, Levy’s “many nearby worlds” and “proportion of nearby worlds that is large enough” language is, at least prima facie, problematic. How we determine proportions of nearby worlds when the sets of worlds in question are infinite, as they clearly are, is not obvious. Peels’s “wide class” expression is vaguer, but to all appearances equally problematic. In his earlier work Duncan Pritchard, the originator of the modal approach to luck, had used the expression “wide class” to indicate the comparative sizes of sets of worlds: “not only does the event in question [winning the lottery] not obtain in a wide class of the relevant possible worlds, but in fact it doesn’t obtain in most of them (indeed, in the case of the lottery win, it doesn’t obtain in nearly all of them)” (EL, p. 129). This is clearly quantification over worlds. Difficulties besetting quantification over infinite sets so as to compare their size or “width” may have motivated Pritchard in his more recent work to abandon the “wide class” locution. He now bases judgments of luck on distance between worlds in the similarity space of nearby possible worlds. A good outcome that is “close” to a possible bad outcome in possible-world similarity space is luckier than one that is more distant from the possible bad outcome. But this says nothing, or at least nothing explicit, about proportions of classes of worlds or about probabilities.

The modal derivation of probabilities is no simple task. If propositions are defined as possible worlds in which a (declarative) sentence in a language is true, and if these propositions are limited to atomic propositions true in disjoint sets of worlds in the total space of possible worlds accessible from some possible world (presumably one containing language users), then these atomic propositions may be interpreted as similarity spheres with finite diameters. The sets of worlds in which the sentences are true are infinite sets, but the diameters of these sets of worlds considered as similarity spheres are finite and additive.

The diameter of a similarity sphere is the maximum distance between pairs of worlds in that similarity sphere. Probability may then be
interpreted as the comparative size of the diameters of similarity spheres of worlds in which various atomic sentences are true. The larger the spheres in similarity space, the more probable the propositions identified with them, and the finitude of diameters allows the comparison of determinate probabilities of propositions. This is intuitively appealing: the most probable propositions are sets of worlds that have the greatest spherical diameters in similarity space: “We might naturally conjecture that a proposition which is true in widely dissimilar worlds will, in general, be more probable than one which is true only in a more restricted range of very similar worlds” (Bigelow, p. 305). Notice that there is no attempt to quantify over worlds themselves.

Levy (p. 36) terms modal luck “chancy luck” and nonmodal, relative frequency-based luck “non-chancy luck.” One important benefit of this distinction is that it can be used to distinguish good luck from good fortune. If an American happens to have an IQ of 118, that person is somewhat fortunate, not chancy-lucky. Since IQ is mainly, even if not entirely, a matter of genetic endowment and neural phenotypic expression, that person’s IQ and the IQs of his or her counterparts at nearby possible worlds are going to be similar. The same can be said about Gauguin’s endowment of artistic gifts. So, as I suggested earlier, his constitutive luck is really better conceived as constitutive good fortune. The good fortune of possessing an IQ of 118 concerns comparisons of reference classes of IQ scores and rests on the recognition that the average IQ in the United States is about 98. The possession of an IQ of 118, however, says nothing about comparisons between similarity spheres of worlds. I shall adopt a version of Levy’s distinction between chancy and non-chancy luck, so as to identify non-chancy luck with fortune.

Non-chancy luck is also arguably less demanding than chancy luck. According to Levy (p. 36), any event that is chancy lucky will also be non-chancy lucky, but not all non-chancy lucky events are chancy lucky. This strong claim, if true, requires the modal derivation of probabilities, as outlined above. Otherwise, chancy luck and non-chancy luck will be incommensurable: non-chancy luck will involve probabilities based on relative frequencies, while chancy luck will involve not probabilities but closeness in possible-world similarity space. With the modal derivation of probabilities in place, however, we may follow Levy and say that not shooting myself in Russian roulette is chancy lucky, but it is also non-chancy lucky: the similarity sphere of worlds in which I shoot myself has a smaller diameter than the spheres of worlds in which I do not, but the bad outcome is very significant, so the inverse relationship between
significance and probability of bad outcomes obtains. Similarly, the relative frequencies of deaths compared to survivals in populations of players of Russian roulette at the actual world will approach 1 to 5 in the extended run, but the bad outcome is, once again, very significant.

But an event’s being non-chancy lucky does not, according to Levy, make it chancy lucky. Suppose the aircraft in which I am traveling undergoes a crash landing (but not a total aerial disaster) and I survive with some second-degree burns and two shattered legs (I was sitting at the very rear of the plane), while most of the passengers seated forward perish. This may well be considered a piece of good fortune, not because of nearby possible worlds at which I (or my counterparts) do and do not survive, but because of relative frequencies of populations of passengers at the actual world who survive such crashes and those who do not. Seated where I am and keeping laws and initial conditions the same, my counterpart survives at the nearby possible worlds in similarity space (see Peels, p. 156, who is somewhat equivocal on such cases).

The distinction between chancy and non-chancy luck not only enables us to distinguish luck from fortune, it also provides a modal version of the probability account of luck that fortifies the merely epistemic notion of unpredictability with a “logical” (set-theoretical) as opposed to an “empirical” (relative frequency) version of objective probability (see Bigelow, pp. 318–19). Bigelow’s version of the modal account of probability could be said to rely on the slippery notion of similarity, but then so does probability based on relative frequencies: we must determine what are the relevant similarities between the individuals we include in our reference groups.

Significance, once again, is inversely related to the requisite size of the proportion of negative to positive outcomes: the more significant the event or state of affairs for the agent, the smaller the proportion of negative outcomes may be for the positive event or state of affairs to be counted lucky. Depending on whether the luck in question is chancy or non-chancy, the proportion will rest on a comparison between diameters of similarity spheres of possible worlds (the modal approach) or on relative frequencies in relevant reference groups.

III

Constitutive and circumstantial luck combine to produce a mechanism that Levy terms the “luck pincer,” whereby constitutive and circumstantial luck interact. Levy does not, however, employ Nagel’s expression
“circumstantial luck.” For him, that type of luck is folded into what he terms “present luck,” which includes not only external circumstantial luck but also any piece of luck concerning an agent’s present state that is not part of the agent’s standing constitution. Such a state may be something that just happens to come to mind for an agent. It may be prompted by external circumstances, but it may also result from changes in mood or subtle shifts of attention. What is important is that the occurrence of such present states is not subject to the agent’s control. Just happening to notice something in the environment can be of immense importance, but also chancy lucky.

Imagine an observant detective who just happens to take note of a crucial detail that is so blatantly obvious that it has been repeatedly overlooked at a crime scene, as in Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Purloined Letter,” or a scientific investigator who makes a major discovery that is prompted by the chance occurrence of an image in a daydream, as August Kekulé did when he discovered the structure of the benzene molecule. Hence the luck pincer: such significant events are at once a function of a happy confluence between luck concerning a person’s constitution and that person’s present luck, the luck of present circumstances and events. How lucky or unlucky (or fortunate or unfortunate) someone is by constitution will be in part determined by the circumstances she faces, and how lucky or unlucky the circumstances are will be in part determined by her constitution. The luckily or fortunately constituted person happens to be in the right internal states and the right circumstances at the right time.

But a person can also be in the wrong constitutional states and the wrong circumstances at the wrong time, like poor Mr. Post. This situation admittedly displays little constitutive bad luck, but it does display immense circumstantial bad luck, to revert to Nagel’s terminology. Because of the absence of obvious hamartia, or missing the mark, Post’s situation affords us only a tenuous sense of the tragic. Still, the totally unexpected but horrible circumstances meshed badly with Post’s constitution as a finite agent, as they would with the constitution of any finite being who must plan and act, a demand that he, like any finite agent, was not able to evade and that was subject only to limited control. Here, as with Gauguin, Post’s constitutive luck is better described as constitutive fortune. Still, the luck pincer exerted its force.

The case of Beers is different. A professional photographer must of course come to a scene prepared. But in this case, Beers’s preparation seems to have worked against him—as if circumstances developed in such
a way as to exploit his hamartia, in this case his distinctive vulnerability, so as to find the chink in his formidable armor. Bad circumstantial luck meshed horribly with constitutive luck and fortune, like a set of infernal gears. This is the stuff of tragedy. That luck, indeed chancy luck, played a circumstantial role seems clear. At another nearby possible world, Ruby’s counterpart does not dart out just as Beers was poised to take his shot, and Jackson is not perfectly positioned to react to the ensuing commotion around him to take his. The role of constitutive luck in this story is less straightforward. But it is there, and it does qualify as luck and not just fortune.

No doubt Beers’s meticulous habits of preparation were in part the result of his self-formative choices, and so within his control, and, as a consequence, neither lucky nor fortunate. On the other hand, they resulted from his innate tendencies (constitutive fortune) but also, importantly, his early environment. His parents having divorced when he was seven, Beers grew up poor, an only child raised by a single mother in Dallas during the Great Depression. This was circumstantially chancy unlucky. (Jackson’s background, by contrast, was a far more privileged and forgiving one.) After a stint in (what was then) the Army Air Forces following high school, Beers signed on as a photographer with the Times Herald, moving two years later to the Morning News. Making his way under these initial conditions must have required considerable fortitude and steely habits of self-discipline. To the extent they were not under Beers’s control, the acquisition of these traits could be considered, as a response to his chancy-unlucky childhood environment, constitutively lucky, and they were on display on that fateful Sunday. But, because of circumstantial chancy bad luck that morning, those very traits suddenly turned constitutively chancy unlucky.

IV

If everything in the universe be conducted by general laws, and if animals be rendered susceptible of pain, it scarcely seems possible but some ill must arise in the various shocks of matter and the various concurrence and opposition of general laws; but this ill would be very rare were it not for . . . the great frugality with which all powers and faculties are distributed to every particular being. . . . Every animal has the requisite endowments, but these endowments are bestowed with so scrupulous an economy that any considerable diminution must entirely destroy the creature.28
In the summer of 1848, Phineas Gage, a vigorous man in the prime of life, suffered a freak accident. Gage was the foreman in charge of a group of railroad workers laying new track across Vermont. He was charged with the task of placing explosives to blast away impassible outcroppings of rock. This task was a delicate one, requiring judgment, skill, and concentration. First, a hole was drilled into the rock at just the appropriate spot. The hole was then half filled with explosive powder, a fuse was inserted, and the remaining space backfilled with sand. At this point, the sand had to be carefully tamped down with an iron rod so as to ensure direction of the explosive force into the rock, rather than back out of the hole. Gage had performed this task with consummate skill many times using his own custom-made tamping rod, but that afternoon he suffered a stroke of circumstantial bad luck, indeed circumstantial chancy-bad luck. Just as sand was about to be poured, someone called to him from behind, he looked away momentarily, lost his concentration, and then commenced tamping absent the buffering presence of the sand. Upon hitting bare rock, the iron rod produced a spark that ignited the charge. The ensuing explosion sent the 1.5-inch-diameter, meter-long rod hurtling out of the hole. It entered Gage’s face just below the left cheekbone and exited through the top of his skull.

As his horrified coworkers looked on, Gage was violently hurled onto his back. But to their astonishment, he soon regained consciousness and was able to converse in an apparently normal manner, his only obvious dysfunction being blindness in his left eye. He was examined and treated by a local physician who took what steps he could to stanch the bleeding, drain and clean the wound, and prevent infection.

Gage’s bad circumstantial luck, however, brought in its wake equally bad constitutive luck, and not constitutive bad fortune. He survived the incident, but as a changed man. “Gage was no longer Gage,” as Damasio (p. 8) expresses it: his constitution had undergone a radical alteration. Whereas before the mishap he had been in all matters punctilious in the extreme, his behavior now became erratic and, most notably, socially grossly inappropriate. His damaged constitution no longer meshed smoothly as it had with his circumstances: the luck pincer began to press. Though still able-bodied and as intelligent as ever, he proved unable to retain steady employment. He began to display strong attachments to objects and animals, the sort of “collector’s behavior” (Damasio, p. 9) associated with individuals with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). After numerous employment failures, he devolved into a degraded state as a “freak of nature” at Barnum’s Museum in New York City and worked
for a time as a day laborer in South America, returning finally to the United States in 1860, his health deteriorating, to live with his mother and sister in San Francisco. After suffering ever-more-serious epileptic seizures, he died on May 21, 1861, following a series of particularly violent neural episodes.

The neurological explanation of this remarkable case concerned the extreme localization of the damage to Gage’s brain. Based on the state of his skull (which to this day sits in the Warren Anatomical Museum at Harvard Medical School), Damasio’s wife and colleague, Hanna Damasio, was able to calculate the probable trajectory of the rod. After entrance, the rod had destroyed the left optic nerve, but more important, had destroyed the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, the lower central portion of the brain located just behind the eyes that is responsible for planning, judgment, self-monitoring, and self-control. It is particularly important for the ability to track and behave in accordance with social behavioral norms, including moral norms. Areas of Gage’s brain supporting motor function, sensory experience (with the exception of the partial blindness), language use, and even abstract reasoning remained unaffected.

If Gage had been killed outright, little about this incident could have been called tragic, except in the common, debased sense of the term. He would have suffered a terrible accident, self-induced, to be sure, but one that lacked the ironic reversal that marks the story of the Post family. But he was not killed outright. Apparently chancy-lucky survival turned suddenly chancy unlucky and brought about an intensely tragic outcome. As a result of a minor, but all-too-human lapse of attention—a touch of hamartia triggered by a chancy-unlucky distraction—a person who was, by all accounts, an exceptionally capable human agent, one “better” than most, brought on himself a massive reversal, a devastating fall from social grace, as Damasio (p. 19) has it. Gage’s fate is surely one to inspire pity and fear, but not so much because we should fear freak accidents. The danger lies much closer to home.

Accurate discernment of others’ mental states is indispensable for success in human society. Damasio observes (p. 19) that there “are many Gages around us, people whose fall from social grace is disturbingly similar. Some have brain damage consequent to brain tumors, or head injury, or other neurological disease. Yet,” he adds, more chillingly, “some have had no overt neurological disease and they still behave like Gage, for reasons having to do with their brains or the society into which they were born,” or, I might add, both. Such people are particularly
vulnerable to an encounter with circumstances that suddenly may lead them to destroy themselves as agents and social beings.

But one need not be in a severely disabled Gage-like state to be subject to the luck pincer. It has us all in its grip. The human social environment is a very demanding one that requires significant cognitive and emotional flexibility. A human agent must at almost all times engage with other agents, be they family members, friends, associates, allies, or competitors, operating all the while under mutually understood rules, many or even most of them only implicit. Coordination between agents requires the ability to reason practically, to combine beliefs and desires and to discern the beliefs and desires of others so as to strategize and achieve goals in concert or in conflict. Discerning the beliefs, desires, and goals of another agent amounts to a kind of mind reading, a task at which some excel and others do not. Mind-reading skills demand cognitive and emotional flexibility because cues are sketchy or ambiguous, they vary greatly with context and occasion, and more often than not they are implicit rather than explicit. Such capacities are properly considered to be, at least to some degree, a matter of constitutive luck or constitutive fortune. The congenitally socially ill adept—those who suffer from ASD, for example—learn quickly from their personal interactions that something is amiss, but are often at a loss to understand what it is or what to do about it.

Even for the more skilled among us, those “better” than most, flexibility has limits, and when circumstances combine in such a way as to overwhelm appropriate response, tragedy can be the result. In Gage’s case, a freak accident severely degraded his previously highly capable constitution. But what natural creature, what product of natural design, is immune to the mesh between constitutive fortune and circumstantial luck? Adaptation concerns the fit between organism and environment. The human environment uniquely includes a very challenging social environment. Natural selection may suit a simple organism exquisitely to its environment, but should that environment suddenly change, the organism is out of circumstantial luck and, as a result, out of constitutive luck, not just fortune, as well. As the luck pincer works its effects, circumstantial and constitutive luck tend to modify one another reciprocally. A neurologically more complex creature, preeminently a human agent, may be more capable of adjusting to major change by modifying behavior and/or environment, but neurological complexity is costly in terms of energy consumption and demands of parental care. Complexity is therefore subject to limits beyond which flexibility and control are
overwhelmed and luck moves once again to center stage. What worked previously for the organism now, through reversal, works against it.

We must continue to face down ever-present fear, for, as living creatures, we all must act. This may help explain the power of the spectacle of tragedy, be it visited on actual agents or visited virtually on the dramatic imitators of agents. We witness an agent undergoing self-induced suffering and destruction. Because of the luck pincer, any one of us could find herself in a situation similarly unforgiving, and somehow, we ken this. We the onlookers feel pity and fear, but are prepared, newly sobered by the spectacle, to collect ourselves, rise up, and face down our fear. We have been chancy lucky and non-chancy lucky enough to make it through so far, we feel a deeply humbling appreciation of that fact, and we fervently hope and trust that our luck will continue.32

This arc might be viewed as a cathartic experience. On this reading, “catharsis” would signify something like renewal, a conception possessing Nietzschean resonances. Duly forewarned, we are girded by tragedy to resume action in life’s ongoing gallant, if unelected, struggle against an unforgiving environment, both natural and socially constructed, a struggle we all, absent supernatural intervention, eventually must lose.

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1. For an official account of the event, see ntsb.gov/investigations/AccidentReports/Reports/HAB0601.pdf.

2. If you are happy with this usage, you need read no further.

3. See the end of this story: freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1138988/posts.


5. As of yet, I make no distinction between fortune and luck.

6. “Aristotle stresses repeatedly that what we pity when it happens to another we fear in case it might happen to ourselves” (Martha Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986], p. 385; hereafter abbreviated Nussbaum).

7. “Catharsis” is standardly taken to signify a process of purgation. Nussbaum (p. 389) suggests “clarification” or “clearing up.” I shall gesture at an alternative proposal at the close.


16. Although he is a one-factor modal luck theorist, Pritchard agrees that lack of control is a necessary condition for luck, but he holds that it is entailed by the modal theory (to be discussed below) and therefore need not be separately specified. Duncan Pritchard, “Modal Accounts of Luck,” in The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy and Psychology of Luck, ed. Ian M. Church and Robert J. Hartman (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 115–24; hereafter abbreviated Church and Hartman.


19. For constitutive luck skeptics such as Rescher and Zimmerman, all moral luck other than causal luck is either circumstantial or resultant. If constitution is allowed to be subject to the vagaries of luck, they contend, we begin to lose our grip on agential personal identity. How constitutively different may a lucky or unlucky counterpart at a nearby possible world be before she ceases to be a counterpart at all? A possible world is nearby only if it operates under the same or closely similar physical laws as does the actual world. In more Kripkean terms, what about any agent will count as essential across worlds so as to allow rigid designation? I do not deny the force of this objection, but I will not undertake to try to engage it directly here, since it involves tricky and controversial issues of personal identity. But see the discussion of constitutive luck and fortune below.

20. This notion will be explained presently.


23. Pritchard (“Modal Accounts of Luck”) is committed to the view that *I am* lucky that the number of hairs on my head right now is odd rather than even (or vice versa), and that significance plays no role in that piece of luck. I just have no particular interest in this piece of luck. Pritchard’s motivation is to exclude all “pragmatic encroachments” or interest relativity from the theory of epistemic luck. On this view, luck, it seems, is reduced to mere chance. Nathan Ballantyne and Samuel Kampa argue that this move is so counterintuitive that it obliterates our conception of luck rather than refining it (“Luck and Significance,” in Church and Hartman, pp. 160–70).

24. An agent achieves “direct control” by performing, for a reason, a “basic action” (an action that is not the result of another action) that she believes with a high degree of confidence (certainty is not required) will bring about an intended effect.


30. “And someone who survives a disaster by good luck may no longer see matters in this light if this survival does no more than set her up for some sort of horrendous catastrophe.” Nicholas Rescher, “The Machinations of Luck,” in *The Philosophy of Luck*, ed. Duncan Pritchard and L. J. Whittington (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), pp. 169–76 (172).


32. To infer that our luck will continue would be to commit a version of the gambler’s fallacy.