

We can't control our luck

An ancient writer says, very truly, that there are three great powers in the world: *Sagacity*, *Strength*, and *Luck* . . . I think the last is the most efficacious.

A man's life is like the voyage of a ship, where luck – *secunda aut adverse fortuna* – acts the part of the wind, and speeds the vessel on its way or drives it far out of its course. All that the man can do for himself is of little avail; like the rudder, which, if worked hard and continuously, may help in the navigation of the ship; and yet all may be lost again by a sudden squall. But if the wind is only in the right quarter, the ship will sail on so as not to need any steering.

The power of luck is nowhere better expressed than in a certain Spanish proverb: *Da ventura a tu hijo, y echa lo en el mar* – give your son luck and throw him in the sea.[#]

Schopenhauer, 'Counsels and Maxims'

good wants, bad wants

As we can in no aspect control what we want, and because what we want is therefore a matter of luck, so am I a most fortunate person, with respect to my desires, if what I want is: good for me, good for others, and possible in fact for me (in addition to being believed, by me, to be possible). The icing on my good-fortune cake will be further sweetened by my closeness to freedom from competing wants and diswants.

In the previous chapter we mentioned the American tennis champion John McEnroe in the context of dominant wants. We now cite him also as exemplifying good fortune in the present domain: he wanted to win Wimbledon, it was possible

for him to win Wimbledon, and he did win Wimbledon. This was good for McEnroe himself (in obvious ways) and good for others too. Even as ‘Superbrat’ he was always an exciting player to watch, and if he hadn’t been such a successful player he might not have become a commentator, but he did become a commentator, and now he is a more insightful and fluent, entertaining and witty tennis commentator than most other personalities who ply that trade.

Possible, achieved; good for him, good for us; jolly good luck.

Success!

Whether or not McEnroe’s icing has been thickly sweetened by freedom from competing wants, and diswants, we leave to him to advise if ever this chapter should reach his notice. Meanwhile we note that the ‘possible’ in ‘possible for McEnroe to win Wimbledon’ was also contingent and itself a matter of luck. This can be seen by simply supposing that Pete Sampras had been born on the same day as McEnroe, instead of a tennis generation later. For then it might have come to pass that McEnroe never won Wimbledon, or anything.

The unlucky end of the wanting scale is a bit more vexed, because here we find folk who not only are fraught by competing wants and diswants by also driven by dominant wants which are bad for themselves *and* bad for others. But who is to determine what is ‘bad for themselves’? The BDD sufferer who desperately wants his adequately healthy left leg to be amputated just below the knee? This will certainly be bad for others aesthetically (if it offends their sensibilities) and economically / ‘morally’ (if it results in his inability to generate an income and hence his becoming a ‘burden on the state’ or ‘scrounger’). But is it ‘bad’ for him to have the amputation effected by a competent surgeon, if he really was so desperate that the alternative might have been the front wheels of the 14.00 from King’s Cross?

In that sense, isn’t he lucky to have sourced the competent surgeon?

In any case wouldn't his luck have been rather less bad if he had never been afflicted with such a bizarre and unconstructive dominant want, of no benefit at all to others, and wouldn't the sufferer himself agree with this?

The most unfortunate individual, from this point of view, is someone who dominantly and wittingly wants what is bad for others and bad for himself, and who perhaps dearly *wishes* he did not have this dominant want, but is stuck with it. Such an individual might be a drug addict who wants so badly to inject himself with low-grade and possibly contaminated heroin that he is prepared to go to any length, including injuring or even murdering other persons, in order to obtain the money which will allow him to gratify his desire.

As we cannot control what we want, it is utterly pointless to demand that such an addict reform himself, transmute his desires and graft them on to more public-interest objects, autonomously and by sheer 'moral effort'. Such a person needs help. He may seek help, or, if he has injured others, such help may be thrust upon him. To help him by way of his desires, we have two main lines of attack. First, we can seek to understand, and to assist him in more clearly realizing, what his ends-wants actually are. And second, we can to some extent control him by way of his means-wants. If we discover that such an individual really does hate himself, and hate other people, and doesn't care if he dies young, or if he 'takes others' with him, then we may face a problem that can only be 'dealt with' by way of compulsory medication and/or custodial confinement.

Alternatively, if we find that 'deep down' our heroin punter really rather would like to live to a ripe old age, take his grandchildren to feed the ducks, and all that, then we might go some way towards massaging his means-motivation for him by taking him to a hospice to converse with a patient of similar age who is nearing death due to AIDS . . . caused by shooting up with infected needles.

That sort of thing.

It's also worth bearing in mind that:

‘Our luck can change.’

Such reversals affect good luck more often than bad, for the obvious reason that it is the good luck which is the more rare and fragile. If this were not so, then what would be so good about it?

Fluctuations in our fortunes, relative to what we want, can occur in several ways. We may find that a dominant want, once satisfied, either evaporates or withers. A player who has won Wimbledon once, or several times, may find next year that he or she simply cannot ‘summon up’ the same old indomitable ‘will to win’. Or it may be that we still badly want what we used to want, but that what used to be possible, for us, is no longer possible. A former boxing champion desperately wants to stage a comeback, regain the title and the limelight, the glory and the dosh – but being no longer up to it he is badly beaten, sustains head injuries and suffers brain damage . . .

Or, again, what wasn’t possible may suddenly become possible. This could be due to a medical breakthrough such as treatment of duodenal ulcers with antibiotics, rather than yesterday’s major surgery. Phew! Or it could be due to a financial breakthrough, or ‘windfall’, such as an unexpected (or unexpectedly princely) inheritance – or a lottery jackpot. More money brings more possibilities and so facilitates more wants. Now, ‘more wants’ does not logically entail ‘more competing wants’, but that’s what tends to happen in practice. Another way of assessing luck, in relation to money:

Are the richest people, those we know personally, also the happiest?

Up here the answer is clearly no. Also, if we zoom in on those persons we know who have become rich quickly, we find they are amongst the least happy. Sudden wealth tends to result in a surfeit of sudden wants, many of which are competing wants – and that is a recipe for misery.

However, perhaps like me you too would be willing to ‘take a chance’ on sudden wealth not turning out to be bad luck in disguise – in our special case!

After all, if (learning about ourselves empirically) we found the lolly was getting us down, we could always give it away.

Or could we?

That we can't control our luck may seem rather obvious, especially when we consider that it is true by definition: *if* we could control it, then it wouldn't be luck.

However, there are people – libertarians of one form or another, whether or they realize it or no – who maintain that we *can* control our luck. Accordingly, the remainder of this chapter, as a bridge between our surveys of wanting and thinking, will consider some further reasons for accepting that we *can't* control our luck.

Beginning with:

luck, 'genius' & the Findaway Conjecture

The concept of genius will be fully critiqued on another occasion (with a bit of luck) and there the conclusion will be justified that, properly considered, *there is no such thing* as genius; that 'genius' serves principally as a slogan which makes the speaker feel better, superior, proud; rather clever himself, indeed. Otherwise, how would he know to bandy the slogan?

Still, as is immaculately established by 'God', the fact that a concept has been dismantled down to a slogan does not guarantee that all associated vocabulary will be expunged from the language. And rule one, for anyone still wishing to be hailed as a genius, is to want things, and achieve those things, which are of unusual benefit to *others*. Our own view, needless to say, is that any credible candidate for the accolade 'genius' must already have been unusually lucky. But there are others who espouse the view, or whose beliefs are taken to support the view, that:

'Genius will always find a way.'

Support for the view? Yes, plenty of it can be drawn from surprisingly diverse directions. Here's Matt Ridley:

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. . . the heritability of childhood IQ is about forty-five per cent, whereas in late adolescence it rises to seventy-five per cent. As you grow up, you gradually express your innate intelligence and leave behind the influences stamped on you by others. You select the environments that suit your innate tendencies, rather than adjusting your innate tendencies to the environments you find yourself in.#

And if that's true of intelligence across the board, it must also be true of 'genius' intelligence. Very consistent with this argument, in the field of intellect, is the biography of Schopenhauer,# and remarkably similarly, in the pantheon of musical 'genius', we have Handel (1685–1759):

Handel's father was a barber-surgeon, who disapproved of music and wished George Frederick to become a lawyer. A friend smuggled a clavichord into the attic, and on this instrument, which is inaudible behind a closed door, the little boy practised secretly. Before he was eight his father went to visit a son by a former marriage who was a valet-de-chambre to the duke of Saxe-Weissenfels. The little boy begged in vain to go also, and at last ran after the carriage on foot so far that he had to be taken. He made acquaintance with the court musicians and contrived to practise on the organ when he could be overheard by the duke, who, immediately recognizing his talent, spoke seriously to the father, who had to yield to his arguments . . . '#

A heartening story, but the epistemological rickets rear up when we consider the logical status of the proposition itself. I.e., 'genius will always find a way' is either tautologically true (so, by definition, all geniuses *do* find a way, and if you didn't find a way you weren't a genius) or else it may in fact be true, empirically true, but it can never be adequately known to be true.

Our own feeling is that it may be reasonable to conjec-

ture that those individuals whom we come to regard as super-achievers would probably, in the absence of traumatic misfortune, have developed into at-least-substantial-achievers of some sort. Rather in the tradition of Livy's verdict on Cato Major:

'In this man there was such strength of body and mind that wherever he had been born it seems certain he would have made fortune his own.'[#]

But that's nonetheless rather a dilute conjecture, and one which it is impossible to rigorously test. It may also carry on its shoulders two rather insidious dangers.

the first danger of the Findaway Conjecture

It is that the romantical-'genius' frills, trappings and associations might distract us from recognizing and bearing in mind the crucial role of positively good luck in the life and career of any super-achiever. For Mozart? Tragic misfortune might have taken the form of being obliged to wear an iron mask and chainmail gauntlets twenty-four hours a day until his thirtieth birthday. Since he died shortly before he would have been thirty-six, that wouldn't have left him long to catch up.

But what about Mozart's good luck?

First we may point to his phenomenal natural talent: the gift of his genetic and uterine inheritance. Then there was the happy facilitation of being born into a supportively musical family:

He was educated by his father, Leopold Mozart, a composer with a high reputation as a violinist in the service of the archduke of Salzburg. When only three years old he shared the harpsichord lessons of his sister Maria . . . , five years his senior. A year later he played minuets and composed little pieces, some of which are still preserved.[#]

But those exceptional advantages of nature and nurture would still not have resulted in Mozart, would they, in the

absence of equally exceptional temperament and inclination?
If the three-year-old Mozart had taken the line:

‘Don’t wanna play horrid harpsychord. Wanna play Monopoly.’

And stuck to his contrary guns?

Disraeli said that the secret of success is for a man to recognize when his opportunity has arrived. A predictably pompously Victoryan way of echoing Bacon’s pithier quote from ‘the common verse’:

‘Occasion turneth a bald noddle, after she hath presented her locks in front, and no hold taken.’#

‘Seize it or lose it,’ we might urge today, ‘especially during your chaffinch years.’

And surely it was a vital part of Mozart’s good luck that he had adequate inclination to seize and capitalize upon the unique advantages available to him.

Or was it?

I mean, was it really Mozart’s good luck?

Or is it ours?

Considering that it is we who enjoy the legacy of some of the most sublime music ever written, but not we who had to endure Mozart’s adulthood of difficulties and debt, culminating in death due to typhoid (or renal failure, or syphilis, or was it vindictive poisoning?) in his mid thirties?

From Mozart’s own point of view, might not a happier destiny have beckoned down the Monopoly avenue: mastering the arithmetic of usury, leading to a splendid career and enjoying great reputation and honour as a merchant banker, plus conspicuous wealth and a cushy old age?

Certainly, if we set aside for some moments the meta-lament of Voltaire (that ever to have been born is the greatest misfortune of all), then what constitutes good or bad luck, as it touches upon some aspects of life, is a function of viewpoint and interpretation. If this were not so, we would not have telling locutions such as ‘mixed blessing’, ‘blessing in disguise’, and possibly ‘curate’s egg’.

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Between people, it's obvious that my good luck may be or result from your bad luck. My mother's wartime sweetheart was a young man from Edinburgh named John MacNaught. If he hadn't been killed by a Japanese bomb in Burma, my mother would never have married my father. Probably some comparable baby boy or girl would have entered the world, round about the time and place of my birth, but it wouldn't have been me. In those terms, and assuming Voltaire to be still off the pitch, the tragedy of John MacNaught's early death was simultaneously a benison for me-to-be.

It is surely difficult to imagine many greater undeserved misfortunes, in the twenty-first century so far, than to have happened to be high up in one of the World Trade Centre buildings in New York, on 11 September 2001, when they were hit by the hijacked fuel-filled airliners piloted by kamikaze terrorists. And yet a time will come when individuals who otherwise would never have existed, probably several hundred of them, will be born to bereaved partners of some of the thousands of people killed in the Manhattan atrocity – when the survivors have done their grieving, and formed new relationships with new partners, and got on with making the best of their battered lives, including the way of all flesh.

And to that extent we're all lucky.

Each of us, if we thread back through enough decades, will be able to identify some cusp phase following which, if X hadn't happened, or Y had happened, we would not be alive and kicking to tell the tale today – but someone else might. Those fortunate phases, fortunate for us, might be described as ancestral 'close shaves'. Good and bad luck can befall species just as much as individuals. For a fascinating account of the kind of macro-scale catastrophe which can eliminate some species, like dinosaurs, and ipso facto pave the way for others, like us, the reader is referred to Richard Leakey's *The Sixth Extinction*. As to individual lifetimes, many of us can identify one or more personal close shaves: incidents in which,

if circumstances had concatenated only slightly differently, we would have departed this life sooner.

One Saturday night in the early 1980s a Japanese pick-up truck, driven by a paralytic Irishman (yes, it might have been a Welshman, or even a Scotsman, but on this occasion it wasn't), ran headlong into the back of a stationary Volvo estate. I was in the front passenger seat. If I'd been in the back seat of a minimal euro-saloon car I'd probably now be dead. As it happened, I was only two hours late in getting home.

'Lucky me, perhaps. Or does God love me after all?'

And what about you?

Anyway let's not over-rejoice prematurely. For, if we agree that there's a sense in which we're all lucky, okay, but how interesting is that? If we're all either writing or wittingly reading this book then we're all (as of today's technology) bipedal mammals. Certainly I was this morning. But frankly: so what?

One of the fankles Descartes gets himself into, attempting his Ontological Argument, is through treating *existence* as a predicate. But actually it would be more interesting to know that God played football, for this would certainly imply that He existed. It would also give us some useful information – if, say, we were getting together a football team. In Aristotle's terms, *to be* does not belong to the *essence* of a thing, for existence is not a predicate. In other words, *everything* that exists . . . *exists*. Big deal. Whereas not everything that exists plays football. Yet everything that plays football exists.

Unlike *existence*, *luck* is certainly a viable predicate. But to the extent that it applies equally to all persons ('lucky just to be alive'), and arguably also to all sentient beings, it is inevitably less fascinating than in applications of the concept where distribution of the quality is less demotically uniform.

In plainer words:

It's true, and also more interesting, is it not, that some of us appear to be just downright luckier than others? If that were not so, then how could we account for such commonplace

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locutions as 'a charmed life', 'some folk have all the luck', and 'you jammy bugger'?

In his *Lives of the Artists* Vasari records:

Titian [now aged seventy-six, and this in the sixteenth century] has always been in sound health and as fortunate as any man of his kind has ever been; from heaven he has received only favours and blessings. His house at Venice has been visited by all the princes, men of letters and distinguished people staying or living in Venice in his time; for, apart from his eminence as a painter, Titian is a gentleman of distinguished family and most courteous ways and manners. He has had some rivals in Venice, though none of any great worth. So he has easily surpassed them through the excellence of his work and his ability to mix with and win the friendship of men of quality. He has earned a great deal of money because his paintings have always commanded high prices . . . '#

Unalloyed good fortune of that order can be a dangerous asset, the focus of envy and spite, and earlier in the story Vasari gives us a glimpse of Giorgione's incensed resentment of Titian's effortless superiority. Possibly the sheer ease of Titian's success was in itself a leaven of bad luck, and this was why Michelangelo is said to have remarked, after inspecting Titian's 'Danae in the Rain of Gold':

'That man would have had no equal if art had done as much for him as nature . . . Pity that in Venice they don't learn how to draw well.'#

Still, everyone must concede that Titian had a lot of talent. Does it then follow that talent and luck go hand in hand? Absolutely not, insists Montaigne. Indeed:

We commonly observe in the affairs of the world that fortune, to teach us her power over all things, and being pleased to humble our presumption, since she cannot make the incompetent wise, makes them lucky, to spite the virtuous; she is fond

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of interfering in favour of those actions that she has had the greatest hand in prompting. Hence it is that every day we see the simplest among us carrying through the most important business, both public and private.’#

How else could George W. Bush have become President of the most powerful nation on earth?

Perhaps it’s a bit like the mythic monkey on a typewriter, who eventually hammers out a perfectly rhymed and scanned Shakespearean sonnet? That a small minority of otherwise unremarkable individuals, roller-coasting on freaks of fate – are deemed to be born with silver-spoon luck? Right place at the right time, family connexions don’t hurt, luck of the draw, as chance would have it . . . bingo.

But if so, would it follow that others – less silver-spoon-fed but typically more talented individuals – could not, as it were, manufacture their own luck? Make the most of their talents, and achieve success come what may?

Another way of formulating the Findaway Conjecture?

Francis Bacon [1561–1626] begins his essay ‘Of Fortune’ thus:

It cannot be denied but outward accidents conduce much to fortune: favour, opportunity, death of others, occasion fitting virtue. But chiefly the mould of a man’s fortune is in his own hands.

Now of course it would be sweepingly rash and unprofessional to suggest at this point that many educational and clinical psychologists have a tendency to shallow triteness compounded by unimaginative point-missing. But then again:

‘Scientists show that we make our own luck,’ is the headline to a *Sunday Times* report by Simon Trump and Tom Robbins, which focuses on thirty years of work by clinical psychologist Steve Nowicki, on the basis of which Nowicki believes that:

‘ . . . when confronted by a problem, people fall into two

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groups: internalists and externalists.' In Nowicki's own words, as reported by the *Sunday Times*:

Internalists analyse, act and learn from whatever the outcome is. They believe there is a connection between them and what happens to them. Externalists believe they have no control over their fate and just let life wash over them; they are passive. If they fall over, they just blame bad fortune instead of trying to work out why they fell over and how to prevent it happening again.#

And the *Sunday Times* reporters comment:

The willingness of externalists to see the hand of fate in what has happened makes them liable to more "bad luck". Nowicki's research suggests they are more likely to drift into a life of crime and delinquency than internalists, who tend to become high achievers . . .

Certainly that theory would seem to be consistent with the view that successful Jewish-American intellectuals are 'high achievers' and the further view that the approximately one billion Muslims in the world, insofar as they orthodoxically subscribe to the belief that whatever happens is in accordance with the will of Allah, must be regrettably liable to bad luck and also drifting into lives of crime and delinquency. But even if credited with those immense advantages, Nowicki's theory can swiftly be shown to be irrelevant, if not spurious, in relation to the gulf between serious good luck and serious bad luck. Thus:

My own hunch is that Nowicki's distinction between 'internalists' and 'externalists' is rather derivatively derived from psychology's longer-standing and better-founded distinction between 'introverts' and 'extroverts'. But let's for the moment assume that the labels 'internalism' and 'externalism' do indeed correspond to real properties of persons which can to some

extent be quantified and may have some useful predictive power. They could only be deducible properties (never perceptible),# but that's okay. Intelligence and extroversion are also only deducible properties, but that doesn't stop them having some value in vocational-assessment and similar contexts. So let's concede that internalism and externalism might also be gainfully sold in questionnaire form to high-octane headhunters and the personnel departments of large corporations and government departments. What then?

Well, possibly a brilliant career if you emerge as a high-scoring internalist.

But as regards the tension between good luck and bad?

Nothing remotely interesting will have been said, since the crucial issues have only been pushed back a stage. If it is good/desirable/advantageous to be an internalist, then being an internalist would in itself seem to constitute a measure of good luck. But where does that good luck come from? To what do we owe it? Genetic inheritance? Uterine inheritance? Nurture and education?

Which group a child grows into depends most importantly on the influence of parents, grandparents, teachers and peers. Nowicki suggests children from rich backgrounds are more likely to become externalists than children from poor backgrounds, who have had to overcome adversity to succeed.

So it's bad luck to be born rich, and good luck to be born poor?

Excuse me, but that is tosh.

Further, and more invidiously, even if it could be argued that being born poor was a stroke of good fortune, that would only apply to a small minority of exceptionally gifted individuals. And anyway *how* poor? Happily unpoor enough, from a family living on state welfare benefits in Britain or North America, that you can still wrest an adequate school education from your local comprehensive or high school, before winning

your mathematics scholarship to Cambridge or Harvard? Or miserably so poor, somewhere in Africa or Asia, that your body and brain don't develop properly, due to no education at all, combined with malnutrition and untreated disease?

In the point-missing department, Nowicki and others (such as Richard Wiseman, yet another psychologist) have, apparently with great industry, failed to note the rather basic consideration that, if you make it happen, it isn't luck. Not for you, anyway. Consider the Chambers primary definition of 'fortune':

‘ . . . whatever comes by lot or chance; luck; the arbitrary ordering of events; the lot that falls to one in life . . . ’

Witness Clint Eastwood.

He always had talent, charisma, willingness to work hard; but so did James Coburn. And it was Coburn that Sergio Leone wanted to play the lead in 'A Fistful of Dollars'. But Coburn was too expensive, and this was the 'lucky break' that enabled Clint to become The Man With No Name, and subsequently extremely successful and rich. Similarly, Bill Gates. Even those of us who abominate his software do not doubt that he is an intelligent and enterprising individual; possibly even an 'internalist'. And no doubt Gates, like Cato Major, would have achieved some kind of success even without a freak of good fortune. But would he have become the world's richest man if IBM had not made a ghastly mistake?

How many *richest* men are there in the world?

To claim that we 'make our own luck' is in fact almost unbelievably crass. Winners of jackpots in the national lottery have made their own luck to the extent that they (unlike non-participants in the lottery) have purchased tickets. Is it then the case that the millions of other citizens who never win a penny in the national lottery have made their own bad luck (no winnings, and money down the drain besides) by choosing the wrong numbers? This is another way of making the point that for every Clint Eastwood and Bill Gates there are hundreds, possibly thousands, of other actors, programmers,

entrepreneurs and games-of-chance punters, with just as much talent, and who worked just as hard or bet just as often, but upon whom Fortune never smiled.

How many men *can* become *The Man With No Name*?

The ludicrousness of the the Nowicki notions can perhaps be illustrated more finely by the football pools than by the lottery. The lottery is just that: a ‘pot-luck’ gamble in which the only things you can do to improve your chances are (a) buy a ticket (as opposed to not bothering) and (b) buy more tickets. By contrast, one’s chances of winning something – yes, *something* – from the football pools can be improved by application (which you might badge as ‘internalism’ if you were trying to milk a career out of it). I.e., students of form – league-table positions, track record away from home, injuries to key players, etc – will on average be better predictors of the results of individual matches than novices having a flutter with their eyes shut, choosing numbers with a pin. The problem here is that the *something* won by the assiduous experts will tend to be the *same* something as is won by other experts on the same afternoon, when the results go according to form. If 1000 experts win equally this Saturday, thanks to their industriously accumulated expertise, then the money in the pool will be split 1000 ways. Jackpot *luck*, however, and very differently, is enjoyed when some of the results do not go according to form but *my* aunty gets them ‘right’ by having chosen her selections on the basis of the dates of her nephews’ birthdays.

That’s luck, that is. Jolly good luck.

Your aunty and lots of other aunties have punted on the same day, some of them according to the same principle of selection, and not one of them has hit the jackpot.

That’s less-good luck, that is. In response to which we may say:

‘Oh well. Never mind. *Better luck next time.*’

The total fatuousness of the Nowicki approach to luck, and by extension to life, becomes even more glaring if we focus closely on extreme bad luck. And what could be worse luck

than to be genetically doomed to become an Alzheimer's victim?

'Once again,' writes Matt Ridley, 'the "bad" version of the gene is E4.' This is the same variant of the APOE gene on chromosome 19 which is associated with high-cholesterol risk. And:

The chances of getting Alzheimer's are twenty per cent for those with no E4 gene and the mean age of onset is eighty-four. For those with one E4 gene, the probability rises to forty-seven per cent and the mean age of onset drops to seventy-five. For those with two E4 genes, the probability is ninety-one per cent and the mean age of onset sixty-eight years. In other words, if you carry two E4 genes (and seven per cent of Europeans do), just about the only thing that can prevent you getting Alzheimer's disease is premature death from some other cause.#

That is surely a tragic instance of genetic bad luck, which none of us has done anything at all to 'make', or 'deserve', and which could become multiply atrocious luck if your amiable life-assurance company were to get wind of it.

'Sorrows come not single spies,' as Claudius laments to Gertrude, in *Hamlet*, 'but in battalions.'

Nowicki-style notions (and we say this generically) regarding luck, fortune and misfortune, are immensely misconceived. That should now be obvious. But there's also something politically and morally suspect and – some might say – tentidiously despicable about them. To this extent, in their complacently elitist overtones, they remind me unpleasantly of the Moral Stages pronouncements of Laurence Kohlberg, which we look forward to dismembering at a later date, luck permitting.#

Meanwhile let's shudder together at the following propositions:

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Genius will find a way.

Internalists make their own luck.

*Only professors of moral philosophy can be
fully morally developed and . . . good.*

Everyone gets what he or she deserves.

God's chosen people shall prevail.

The infidel must be exterminated.

They are all pretty obnoxious, aren't they? Either intrinsically-immediately, or swiftly by association. And all of them except one can be easily shown to be wholly false. The iffy exception is the Findaway Conjecture:

Genius will find a way.

So let us now gratefully vault away from professors of psychology and moral philosophy, and on to consider:

the second danger of the Findaway Conjecture

Which goes like this:

First, allow that it may be the case that a small minority of exceptional individuals (unless thwarted not just by workaday hindrances and superable adversities, but by irreversibly catastrophic bad luck, such as being killed in a car crash in your teens) will somehow contrive to discover and manufacture means of realizing their potential, expressing their individuality and making their unique mark upon the world.

Okay?

Must the same logic then also apply to the average citizen?

In other words:

Does it necessarily follow that a normal child, of average ability, will also always achieve the maximum that it may

have been 'in' him or her to achieve, regardless of disadvantages, setbacks, and come what may?

And the answer is no: it doesn't necessarily follow. Furthermore, as any sensitive teacher can testify, it simply isn't true. Children vary greatly in their capacity to soak up, feed off and creatively survive such classroom hazards as bad teaching, under-assessment, snide denigration, withering sarcasm, collusive bullying, beatings and sexual abuse.# Some, like the child I once was, respond with defiance and competitive aggression ('I'll show those bastards . . .'), but it doesn't follow that we haven't in some aspects been wounded along the way. Other children, of both genders, respond more passively, obediently and acceptingly. Probably those children weren't going to become Isaac Newton or Marie Curie anyway. But they might well have graduated into a more fulfilled adulthood, with better qualifications and a more positive self-image, if they had been more fortunate in their education.

The danger is that those with a fondness for the Findaway Conjecture (not all of them obviously prodigies themselves) may generalize it into a form of educational *laissez faire*. 'Children will find their own level in any education system,' they may suppose. 'So that's all right.' Or worse. They may endorse 'traditional-wisdom' doctrines of public-school sadism, supposing that arbitrary discomforts, compulsory contact sports, corporal punishment, psychological humiliations and the odd bit of mental torture all constitute a jolly good assault course of thoroughly improving obstacles, at the sweaty end of which a superior stiff-upper 'character' will have been successfully 'built'.

That too is tosh. But it's dangerous and destructive tosh, and needs discrediting wherever it lurks.

Even in the heady realms of 'genius', and even if the Findaway Conjecture might be true, it could never be known to be true. For every Isaac Newton we know of, there may be one or a hundred Other Newtons, who never quite became Isaacs because, 'as luck would have it', the final vital piece to

complete the unfathomably fragile jigsaw-puzzle of ‘genius’ was missing.

Which piece?

We’ll never know.

The further unwisdom of the Findaway Conjecture may be illustrated by a brief harkback to Mozart and Handel. Both, in terms of conditions favourable to their careers as composers, were lucky. Part of Handel’s good luck was to have a father with ‘a son by a former marriage who was a valet-de-chambre to the duke of Saxe-Weissenfels’. Otherwise the musical duke could never have heard the prodigy boy practising on the organ, or recognized his talents, or browbeaten the prodigy’s daddy.

But was it also part of Handel’s good luck to have a father who was ‘a barber-surgeon, who disapproved of music and wished George Frederick to become a lawyer’? I.e., did this provide an essential motivational spur, in the absence of which Handel wouldn’t have been sufficiently pumped up to practise on the clavichord in secret and run after the carriage when his papa set off for Saxe-Weissenfels?

Alternatively:

Did Handel’s lack of early paternal approval and support for his musical aspirations constitute serious and to some extent chaffinch-choking *bad* luck, by comparison, say, with Mozart, whose good luck, in musical terms, was as entirely unalloyed as ‘genius’ good luck could ever hope to be?

Might Handel have become Mozart if he’d had Leopold for his pater?

Of course, again, we can never know. What we can do, though, is challenge anyone to seriously doubt that Mozart is the more supremely great composer. And this at least confirms that to be born rich (rich in gifts and opportunities, just much as, and often more than, mere money) is in no way a dulling misfortune, but rather a stroke of the most precious good luck imaginable. Nor is being born financially wealthy to be lightly sneezed at. Of course there will always be rich-born

idiots who waste themselves and blow their fortunes on vodka, cocaine, jet-set partying and AIDS. But let's also bear in mind that without plenty of dosh in the family there could not have been the same intellectual legacies from the likes of Charles Darwin and his cousin, Francis Galton, to widen the horizons of all the rest of us today.

Darwin attributed his own achievements to:

. . . the love of science, unbounded patience in long reflecting over any subject, industry in observing and collecting facts, and a fair share of invention as well as of common sense . . . I have steadily endeavoured to keep my mind free so as to give up any hypothesis, however much beloved (and I cannot resist forming one on every subject), as soon as facts are shown to be opposed to it.#

The compleat and perfect scientist, no less.

But how much of that unbounded patience and monumental industry, in accumulating and reflecting upon data, would have been possible if – instead of going to Shrewsbury School, Edinburgh University, Cambridge University, then round the world on the 'Beagle', and all – Darwin had instead been sent down a coal mine at the age of fourteen, so his meagre wages could augment the family income and help to feed his younger brothers and sisters?

We'd like now to propose a distinction between:

Fluke luck & conferred luck.

Firstly:

fluke luck

This, by definition, must be rare. 'One in a million,' used to be the slogan. Nowadays, in lottery contexts, it would be nearer ten million. Buy your ticket, then cross your fingers, fondle your rabbit's foot, kiss your cross; whatever. But if you win the lottery this week (congratulations, and please can I have a hand-out too?) that's a freak occurrence in your favour,

which wasn't in any way influenced by your superstitious rituals. If you doubt this, treble the rituals next week, and see if you win again. Nor could anyone else have helped to bring about your jackpot win. Or if they did, then your win was not a matter of luck but of graft and corruption. See you in court.

A curious portrayal of fluke luck can be found in Balzac's masterpiece *Le Père Goriot*. Madame de Nucingen, one of Old Goriot's two beautiful daughters, is, despite her respectable appearances, in harrowing financial difficulties. She tells the young law student, Eugène de Rastignac, that if he wishes to prove he really loves her he will take her last 100 francs into the nearest gaming house, place it on a single number at the roulette table, 'and either lose the lot, or bring me back six thousand francs.'

Eugène does as instructed, and throws down the 100 francs on the number of his own age in years: 21. Of course (!) he wins, and so is 3600 francs up. 'Pick up your money,' says a bystanding elderly gentleman. 'You won't win twice on that system.' Eugène, as in a dream, now places his entire 3600 francs on the red. Better odds this time; nearly 50/50. He wins again at the shorter odds and hence has 7200 francs in winnings.

'If you'll take my tip,' whispers his venerable counsellor, 'you'll stop now; the red has turned up eight times running. If you're feeling charitable, you will acknowledge the bit of advice I gave you by relieving the poverty of a former prefect under Napoleon, reduced to dire need.'

'The bewildered Eugène allowed the white-haired gentleman to take ten louis from him, and went downstairs with his seven thousand francs, still understanding nothing of the game but staggered by his good luck.'#

Freak debut wins like that do occasionally occur, and we talk about 'beginner's luck'. But how often do such novice flutters pay off? Not often enough, surely, for us to get away with that chunk of plot in a novel written today. Balzac gets away with it because he was writing in the 1830s: decades before Darwin,

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Marx, Freud, elementary statistics in secondary-school maths courses, plus the healthy atheistical scepticism that causes us now to smile benevolently at the outrageously miraculous coincidences so rife in Restoration comedy, not to mention the novels of Fielding and Sir Walter Scott.

In Balzac's day, still, enough of his readers would have believed in a Benevolent Providence, guardian angels, fairy godmothers, and all, for Eugène's actuarially improbable success to be swallowed without sneers. After all, if you had a kindly and industrious fairy godmother, while I did not, then to that extent . . . lucky you!

But by the 1880s fairy godmothers were in serious decline and Maupassant, for example, was much more sensitive to sophisticated reader vigilance. In his essay 'The Novel', published as preface to *Pierre et Jean* (1888) he wrote:

The number of people who die in accidents in the world every day is considerable. But can we drop a tile on the head of a principal character or throw him under the wheels of a bus in the middle of a story on the pretext that one must allow for accidents?#

And the answer is No. We can't. Not unless we're unusually keen to ensure unfavourable reviews and alienate our readership. What we can do, though, is allow Maupassant's *aperçu* to cue the further observation that:

most fluke luck is BAD luck

This may have been partially why Scotland's great literary Pekinese, Hugh MacDiarmid, said, regarding the title of his autobiography, *Lucky Poet*, that he meant to refer to bad luck just as much as good. Fact is indeed stranger than fiction, and the world is abundantly stocked with events too improbable to be tolerable in the plot of a drama, but which nonetheless happen. A few of them, like winning the lottery, are nice. But most of them are either nasty or downright tragic.

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In the words of Paul Sieveking, Editor of *Fortean Times*:

Some situations are impossible to prepare for. In April last year [2000], Arvin Jah was killed by a flower pot thrown by a monkey from the sixth floor of an apartment block.#

Very bad luck, that, and arguably of the worst sort.

By contrast:

conferred luck

Good luck, of the conferred kind, is still devoutly to be wished for. But it is less rare than fluke luck. Conferred luck may be considered as arriving either vertically or horizontally. Vertical conferred luck will be some kind of inheritance: genetic, uterine, legal . . . Mozart's gifts and family environment; Darwin's comfortable circumstances; the Duke of Westminster's estate . . .

Obvious examples of vertically conferred good luck are alive, acting, and being enviably well paid in Hollywood. In an industry where it is notoriously difficult for newcomers to get employed or even noticed at all, you may have an enviable 'head-start' if your surname is Bridges, Curtis, Douglas, Fonda, Griffith, Sheen, or Suchlike. That doesn't imply for a moment that the inheritors of such names, and associated advantages, do not themselves possess talent. But if two young starlets possess equal good looks, acting skills and other credentials, and the first starlet's father is a Hollywood Great who plays golf with the Executive Producer, which starlet is more likely to get the career-launching part?

As to genetic good luck, an interesting and historically recent instance is described by Matt Ridley:

In the United States the Committee for the Prevention of Jewish Genetic Disease organises the testing of schoolchildren's blood. When matchmakers are later considering a marriage between two young people, they can call a hotline and quote

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the two anonymous numbers they were each assigned at the testing. If they are both carriers of the same mutation, for Tay–Sachs disease or cystic fibrosis, the committee advises against the marriage. The practical results of this voluntary policy – which was criticised in 1993 by the *New York Times* as eugenic – are already impressive. Cystic fibrosis has been virtually eliminated from the Jewish population in the United States.’#

In this case the good luck is enjoyed by some of the resultant children. First, since they will be free from diseases that otherwise might well have afflicted . . . whom? Not those lucky children themselves, but others who might have been born but for the possibility of genetic testing and the self-sacrifice of the candidate parents who put the quality of life of future individuals above the gratification of their own personal passions.

So the second dollop of good luck for *those* lucky resultants (assuming them, being Jewish children, to be not at one with Voltaire) consists in possessing existence at all. But for the ability of science to diagnose genetic susceptibility to specific diseases, the personal panting passions of the prospective parents would have prevailed and promoted procreation without let, hindrance or ‘second thoughts’, and the ensuing progeny would have been? Not you or me, him or her, but . . . otherwise.

Horizontally conferred good luck is ‘handed to one’, as it were, ‘on a plate’. A curious case in this category is the Winner of the Big Literary Prize. It’s not unknown for winners of such prizes to believe they thoroughly deserved their success, and it’s also not unknown for non-winners to believe they deserved to win too – particularly if they were born in Bombay. Nevertheless, it is easy to demonstrate that superior merit alone is not a sufficient condition for any novel to be sure of winning any prize for ‘the best novel’. Witness the two major awards for full-length fiction in what remains of the

'United Kingdom'. They are the Booker Prize for Fiction and the Whitbread Novel Award. Both are 'open' prizes: entries are accepted from novelists of all ages, genders and track records. There's one significant difference in the residential criteria, in that Booker eligibility is for authors resident in the UK, the Republic of Ireland, *and* 'the Commonwealth'. The Whitbread, by contrast, restricts its catchment to the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Nevertheless, even if we ignore years in which the winner of the Booker Prize was a Commonwealth author (i.e., not UK or Irish) we could reasonably expect – indeed, we could stipulate – that if superior merit alone were a sufficient condition of winning a literary award, then any non-Commonwealth novel which wins the Booker Prize must also win the Whitbread Novel Award.

But in fact?

Although more than a few novels have been shortlisted for both prizes, not once in three decades has the same novel scooped the loot.

Despite our diffident personal subscription to the view that the winners of these big literary prizes (and big art prizes too) are *not infrequently* correctly characterizable, from any vaguely competent perspective, as 'a load of fucking shite' (to borrow a specialist technical term from 'Theory of Scottish Literature'), we certainly would not dream of going the whole hog and claiming that such winners are *invariably* possessed of little or no merit. Perish the thought. And anyway, even if the stronger claim could be upheld, it still could not be argued that the winning of an organized, rule-governed competition is a matter of fluke luck. In the case of novels, every entry is a 'full-length work of fiction' (no matter how clumsily crafted, plotless and boring) which has been to some extent conceived, drafted, revised, submitted, accepted, edited, typeset, proof-read (occasionally, these days), published, and entered for the prize. That is not a random sequence of random events. And every entered author, in a field of 100+, as opposed to 10,000+, may reasonably feel he or she has a

'long-shot' hope of at least making it to the short leet. Anyone who does get through to the short leet of five or six can then have a sense of being 'in with a chance' – even if, in terms of bookmakers' odds, it's an 'outside chance' you are in with.

And why is that?

It is because, unless the competition is rigged (in the barely conceivable case of the funding sponsor particularly approving or disapproving of you politically), the graduation from short leet to winner is a matter of horizontally conferred on-a-plate *luck*. Or, if it isn't, then it isn't a question of the merit of one's work either, but rather of cheating. Bribe one of the judges, might we try? Anonymous death threats to another? Blackmail a third? 'Internalism' *par excellence*.

But assuming no such unsporting rotten apples on our short leet, each of us equally good sports can with some justification believe that I too have a 'sporting chance' that prize-giving day will be my personal 'lucky day'. Some of the factors which may jostle to determine the actual outcome will be suggested by the following questions.

How strong or weak, relative to other years, is this year's field considered to be? If weak, then is my own position relatively strengthened?

Does any of the present contenders have a pre-established 'halo effect' in the eyes of one, some, or all of the judges?

Does any of the judges fancy sleeping with me? Or rather, with you?

How much of a pompous, self-important, overbearing bully is this year's Chairperson of the Judges? And how submissive and obedient are the other judges?

Does any judge particularly perceive themselves as a (hitherto secretly) crusading post-post-modernist subversive, bent on upsetting the usual applecart of tired traditional tripe?

How many of the judges hate each other's guts sufficiently to spite them by vetoing their enemies' personal favourites for the prize, even if that results at the last minute of the eleventh

hour in the lucre, fame and kudos going to a humdrum ‘dark-horse’ ‘compromise candidate’?

Is it conceivable that two or more of the judges have conspired to supplement their honoraria by placing strategic bets, through faceless accomplices, on one of the longest-odds contenders, with a view to turning their wagers into a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy by coyly awarding the prize to that innocent dupe?

Alternatively . . . ?

The Booker Prize 2001 was said to be a ‘close-run thing’, a ‘neck-and-neck’ affair, between Peter Carey, for *True History of the Ned Kelly Gang*, and Ian McEwan, for *Atonement*. The McEwan has been hailed as his finest novel to that date, and certainly some of us feel this wouldn’t be difficult. In any case it was *Atonement* which won ‘The People’s Booker’. In other words, more ‘ordinary people’ voted for McEwan than for Carey. But in the ‘real’ Booker, judged by ‘real’ judges, and Chaired by the breathtaking Lord Baker, the verdict went in favour of Carey.

Why?

One suggestion has been that the clincher was not merit but ‘decorum’. Both authors had won the Booker Prize previously. Carey, thirteen years previously; but McEwan only three years earlier, and with a ‘novel’ so stunningly slight as to buggar the appellation. But anyway: could there possibly have been a nudge-wink to the judges, from the management, to the effect that the thirteen-year-gap, in such a prestigious context, would appear agreeably ‘less indecorous’?

Or might some of the judges have heard the news of Peter Carey’s ‘two children at private school in Manhattan’, and taken pity on him?

Of course the whole true story will never be told. The whole true story never is. And for Peter Carey, what does it matter? On the night, he ‘got lucky’. Once the winner is announced, as usual:

‘The decisions of the judges are final . . . ’ Quibblers and

grouzers, piss off. If you were a particularly bitter sour-graper, you could instruct your solicitor to raise proceedings to call for a judicial review. But you could spend the rest of your days doing that, couldn't you? And how many friends, readers, and potential publishers might you gain along the way?

How many new novels would you preclude yourself from writing?

Similarly with job interviews. And here, sometimes, the eventually successful candidate's luck takes the following form:

On the day, I am disappointed. I was 'a worthy runner-up', it appears. However, the coveted top position has been offered, I am solemnly informed at the end of a gruelling afternoon, to my detested competitor, F.U. Bloggs. And he or she, alas, has 'verbally accepted, subject to contract'. Early next week I get a phone call 'out of the blue' from the Personnel Director: informing me that the same job is now mine if I want it, after all. Bloggs has withdrawn his or her interest, having received a better offer from Zurich over the weekend. In this scenario, not everyday but not vanishingly rare either, Bloggs' good luck knocks on to become my good luck too.

luminary views of luck

Good luck generally, of its essence (and *pace* any intellectual slop-outers who might be coyly hoping, via 'internalism', to smuggle back into their dismal dungeon some cinders of 'free will', for themselves if not for the inferior 'externalists' in the cell next-door) is a matter of 'grace'.

Grace with God extracted.

Manna on a plate, of the 'windfall' variety, which may come our way only 'once in a lifetime'. An unforeseen 'gift horse' whose molars we critique at our peril.

Francis Bacon (Baron Verulam, Viscount St Albans) was unquestionably a man of great learning and unusual intellectual gifts. He was also something of a multi-faced and morally putrid shit. When, finally, he was rightly accused of bribery

and corruption in chancery suits, in his confession he admitted (since he could not credibly deny it) that he had indeed taken bribes, but at the same time:

. . . he affirms that his intention was never swayed by a bribe; and in several cases his judgement appears to have been given against the party bestowing the bribe.#

Furthermore:

. . . he does not hesitate to call himself “the justest chancellor that hath been in the five changes since Sir Nicholas Bacon’s time” . . . and this on the plea that his intentions had always been pure and had never been affected by the presents received.#

Whether it really is the case that Francis Bacon died of a chill contracted by attempting sexual congress with a dead chicken in the snow near Highgate, in March 1626, has never yet been established to my satisfaction. But while the very suggestion might appear laughable if shafted at, say, Sir Thomas More, in Bacon’s case it sounds alarmingly credible.#

What we’re inching towards here is the conjecture that while moral and civic turpitude and personal inconstancy (if not also sexual unusuality) may be great assets in and to politicians and lawyers, provided they continue to succeed in not being found out, and while such qualities do not logically entail that only feeble philosophy can possibly issue from a seeming philosopher imbued with those qualities, nevertheless in practice our hopes of discovering honesty, probity, truth and consistency, in the philosopher’s philosophy, may be rather shaken by glib and fatuous defence pleas of the kind quoted from Bacon above.

And in fact, when we home in on Bacon’s writings?

Certainly there is much to admire in his prose style, his familiarity with the Greek and Roman classics, his vivid imagery, and so forth. But we also find serious discrepancies

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and contradictions between what seem to be his opinions. We've already quoted Bacon as backing the Novicki agenda, thus:

It cannot be denied but outward accidents conduce much to fortune: favour, opportunity, death of others, occasion fitting virtue. But chiefly the mould of a man's fortune is in his own hands.#

And in the same essay he quotes Plautus as affirming:

'Every man is the architect of his own fortune.'#

Let us now contrast those claims with the end of Bacon's essay 'Of Wisdom for a Man's Self':

Wisdom for a man's self is, in many branches thereof, a depraved thing. It is the wisdom of rats, that will be sure to leave a house somewhat before it fall. It is the wisdom of the fox, that thrusts out the badger, who digged and made room for him. It is the wisdom of crocodiles, that shed tears when they would devour. But that which is specially to be noted is, that those which (as Cicero says of Pompey) are *sui amantes sine rivali*, are many times more unfortunate. And whereas they have all their time sacrificed to themselves, they become in the end themselves sacrifices to the inconstancy of fortune, whose wings they thought by their self-wisdom to have pinioned.#

Sounds to me like a Bacon self-portrait!

Machiavelli, another opportunist intellectual strumpet, tells us that:

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. . . because free choice cannot be ruled out [whereas actually it can], I believe that it is probably true that fortune is the arbiter of half the things we do, leaving the other half or so to be controlled by ourselves.#

Also:

. . . fortune is a woman and if she is to be submissive it is necessary to beat and coerce her.#

But if fortune were truly a weak woman to be reliably bullied into obedience, why should it also be necessary for Machiavelli to stoop to limp apologies and excuses on behalf of his hero, Cesare Borgia. Like:

So if we consider the duke's career as a whole, we find that he laid strong foundations for the future. And I do not consider it superfluous to discuss these, because I know no better precepts to give a new prince than than ones derived from Cesare's actions; and if what he instituted was of no avail, this was not his fault but arose from the extraordinary and inordinate malice of fortune.#

A woman to be reckoned with, *enfin!*

By contrast, two of the most unswervingly honest thinkers in history are Montaigne and Schopenhauer. That doesn't mean everything they assert must be true, but it does entitle us to expect fewer internal inconsistencies between their various opinions. Fewer than we get from lickspittle chameleons like Bacon and Machiavelli. Schopenhauer has again kindly provided this chapter's epigraph, and we've already quoted Montaigne on the fickleness of luck. Here he is again quoting Manilus to the same effect:

Often bad advice is of value, while good is deceptive. Fortune does not examine reasons or reward the deserving, but wan-

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ders where it will, guided by no discrimination.#

what we think is also down to luck

The following chapter will furnish further proofs that, for example, whether or not we have or will ever have thoughts that so greatly benefit others as to earn us the tinsel of 'genius' . . . is entirely a matter of luck.

Because: