The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy and Psychology of Luck

Ian M. Church, Robert J. Hartman

Aristotle on Luck, Happiness, and Solon’s Dictum

Publication details
Sarah Broadie
Published online on: 25 Feb 2019


PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
ARISTOTLE ON LUCK, HAPPINESS, AND SOLON’S DICTUM

Sarah Broadie

Aristotle’s thoughts on luck and happiness (eudaimonia) are not only seminal but subtle and rich. The question about luck and happiness was whether or to what extent human happiness depends on us, or is or could be under our control. In this ethical context, “what is by luck” simply indicates what, even by our best efforts, we cannot control, not merely in the sense of ensuring that it will or will not happen but also in the sense of making it much more likely than not that it will or will not happen. What is by luck, therefore, is what is not our fault and what is not to our credit.

It might be helpful to modern readers to start with a quick sketch of the role of eudaimonia in ancient Greek ethical theory.

Ancient thinkers disagreed on what happiness or eudaimonia is or consists in, but were united in holding it to be the highest or greatest good that humans might aspire to attain. (It will become clear as we go on that although “happiness” is probably the least awkward English translation, our modern use of this word can diverge significantly from the ancient understanding of eudaimonia.) In general it seems that the ancients did not anticipate John Stuart Mill in casting the highest good, whatever it might be, in the role of “foundation of morality” or “criterion of right and wrong” (Utilitarianism, the first paragraph). That is, they did not think of the highest good as that the pursuit of which makes right acts right. Nor did they think of conduciveness to the highest good as the mark or sign of rightness of acts. Instead, they tended to accept a commonsense pluralistic deontology of the morally right, in effect regarding the good, i.e. “What is good?,” as a question whose solution stands in no very obvious or direct relation to the problem of determining which actions are right or wrong. (For if the rightness of an action is not assumed to depend, in general, on the goodness or expected goodness of its consequences, the question of what sorts of things would be good consequences is not generally germane to the question of which acts are right.)

For the ancients, as for us, the question “What is good?” hardly needs deep philosophical reflection to begin to answer. Obviously many goods and many kinds of goods are necessary or important for human beings, such as health, security, enough to eat, providing for one’s dependants, peace, friends and family, freedom, a degree of honor or respect in the community, pleasure (which itself takes myriad forms), intellectual stimulation, knowledge, wisdom, virtues such as justice and moderation. Philosophical reflection raises its head when people, for whatever reason, begin to wonder about rankings among these goods, whether in terms of means versus ends or of some other principle of superiority/subordination. For example, once it is noticed that many people apparently pursue wealth, or power, just for its own sake, one can ask whether it makes sense to do so, or whether wealth...
and power are properly treated as means. And philosophical debate is definitely under way once people take the yet more systematizing step of claiming that this or that good is in fact the highest or greatest or best of all the many goods.

There are different ways of cashing out the claim that so and so (whatever it might be) is the highest or greatest or best of the goods. According to one ancient and axiologically austere perspective, for \( X \) to be the highest good is for \( X \) to be that from which the other so-called goods, including even non-instrumental goods such as honor, get their value. (Kant points toward this idea at the beginning of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, when he speaks of the good will as the only unconditioned good, the implication being that other goods are only worth having on condition one has the good will.) If \( X \) is the highest good then unless the other goods co-exist harmoniously and supportively with \( X \), whether in the life of individual or community, they lack positive value: they turn out to have been not worth the effort of obtaining or safeguarding, and they might even count as evils which it would be better to be without.\(^3\) To the extent that \( X \) is absent from the life of a person or community, their life is, strictly speaking, devoid of value, however impressive their other possessions. It is not the case that, lacking \( X \), they still have some good but less than the maximum.

This ancient perspective invites (although it does not logically necessitate) the identification of the highest good as *wisdom*: the wisdom to manage the other goods well: to live well from them and by means of them and to make good choices for how to get and use them. Wisdom, it is often held, includes or is even in some sense identical with standardly recognized virtues such as courage, justice, moderation, etc. In the absence of wisdom and the virtues, the presence of the other so-called goods adds no value to the agent’s life and can even pave the way to disaster for her or him. If the point of seeking these objects is to have more good in one’s life, vicious or foolish agents might just as well stop seeking—not that they are aware of their situation. If most of their existence (like most human existence in general) is a matter of going after those so-called goods as genuine goods, then most of their existence is a failure, whatever their own view of it and however comfortable they might be with themselves.

This is the perspective from which Aristotle says in his treatise on justice that although people pray for and pursue the non-moral goods (as we would call them)\(^4\) their prayer and concern should instead be that these goods be goods for them (*Nicomachean Ethics* V, 1129b1–6). He is not saying that they should pray for the goods to be good for them in the way in which certain foods are good for us because they nourish the body. He is saying that people should pray and be concerned that they themselves become such that those commonly desired things should, in their hands, or in their orbit, be of genuine value—truly desirable—in the sense indicated above. (In this sense, nourishing food might not be “good for,” i.e. not a genuine good as possessed by, some people; this would be the case with those who use their physical strength for evil deeds.)

There can be no doubt that for Aristotle it is moral virtue (which on his account entails practical wisdom) that we should seek and pray for as the good that “confers” value on the non-moral goods. He states this clearly near the end of the *Eudemian Ethics*:

A good [i.e. virtuous] person is one for whom [i.e. in the hands of whom] the natural goods are good. For the goods that people fight over and that seem to be greatest—honour and wealth and bodily excellences and successes and powers—are good by nature but can be harmful because of people’s dispositions. For neither a fool nor someone who is immoderate or unjust would get any benefit from operating with <those things>, any more than the sick person would from the healthy one’s diet or the weak and maimed from the adornments of one who is well or who is unimpaired.

\[1249a26–34\]

So Aristotle definitely sees virtue and wisdom, or the lack of them, as what controls or determines the true value of the non-moral goods in an agent’s life.
At this point let us take stock. The overall topic of this chapter is luck in relation to happiness according to Aristotle, where “happiness” is simply a way of referring to the highest good (see NE I, 1095a14–20). But for some time now we have been discussing (1) the idea that what makes a certain good the highest good is its role as condition of value for the other goods. And we have seen how it is fairly natural to assume (2) that the condition of value for the other goods is nothing other than virtue and wisdom. We have also seen that Aristotle accepts this assumption. But (1) and (2) together entail that virtue and wisdom just are happiness. Yet virtue and wisdom need not be accompanied by much, at all, of the other goods. It is possible to be virtuous and wise—it is possible to be actively virtuous and wise—even if one is poor and sick. So is a person in that position happy? In other words, are virtue and wisdom by themselves a sufficient condition for happiness, the very highest good? This would be a paradoxical claim indeed. It implies that if the person in question became healthy and prosperous they would be no better off than before, since the highest and best good was theirs already. Is this outrageous position Aristotle’s?6

The answer is no. We have been exploring just one ancient criterion for whether something is the highest good. But this criterion—conferring value on the non-moral goods—was not the only approach for identifying the highest good. In fact, Aristotle sets it aside in favor of a different criterion (or set of criteria), namely completeness and desirability. According to this emphasis, the true highest good, whatever it is, must not lack anything, and nothing else can be more desirable than it (see Nicomachean Ethics I, 1097a15–b21).7 Aristotle does not give up (2) above, namely the tenet that the real value of the non-moral goods depends on their possessor’s virtue and wisdom. But he rejects (1). For he recognizes that someone might live wisely and virtuously and yet be short of important natural goods, since a wise and virtuous life might happen also to be a life of pain or hardship or extremely limited opportunity. Aristotle, along with common sense, regards such shortages as mattering. Such an existence, however virtuous, is undesirable, unfulfilled, and incomplete by comparison with its better endowed counterpart. And so, along with common sense, Aristotle sees happiness as including a good measure of non-moral goods. He still regards virtue and wisdom as a non-negotiable element of happiness—even as its central element—but they are not by themselves a sufficient condition (see NE I, 1095b30–1096a2). The non-moral goods too have a necessary place in human eudaimonia.

This complex position has interesting implications for the relation of happiness to luck. Questions of whether, how, and to what extent happiness depends on luck generate questions of whether, how, and to what extent the two main components of Aristotelian happiness—moral goodness and the non-moral goods—respectively, depend on luck. If the answers come out different for the two types of component, this would help to explain why in the culture there were conflicting opinions on whether being happy is or is not a matter of being lucky: people on either side were focusing on just one of what Aristotle sees to be radically distinct aspects of happiness. The ability to explain and resolve the conflict would of course be an important point in favor of his view.

As we begin to enter the discussion of this in detail, it is worth noting that what has emerged as Aristotle’s position has two rather surprising implications. In the first place, if the non-moral goods do not add genuine value to a life unless it is a life of active virtue and wisdom, then (arguably) their opposites such as poverty, ill-health, insecurity, loneliness, do not bring genuine bad or evil except to a life of active virtue and wisdom: but then it follows that a wicked or morally foolish person cannot, strictly speaking, be lucky or unlucky to lose or gain the non-moral so-called goods and evils. This is on the assumption that turns of luck, good and bad, do make one’s life go genuinely better or worse. So when we wish each other good luck and hope for good luck in our own enterprises, we are, according to this austere philosophical vision, presupposing that we and those others are good people, ones for whom strokes of what are commonly held to be good luck and bad luck add genuine good or evil to life. If morally evil persons could clearly recognize the nature of their own moral condition, they would see that if they remain in this condition they have no reason to care whether so-called good luck and bad luck come their way. This is the first surprising implication.
The second one follows from the completeness criterion for happiness. “Complete” by itself is a highly indeterminate concept, and “complete life” is not much better. How complete is complete? For a life to be eudaimon must it be so through and through from beginning to end of adulthood without any downturns? That might seem too demanding. On the other hand, eudaimonia is certainly not something that flickers in and out of a life in short and easily transient bursts. Perhaps the most rational position is that a life is eudaimon only if it is eudaimon for some very substantial part of itself, and, in particular, only if it remains so right up to the moment when it is rounded off by death. We feel a strong tug toward the sage Solon’s dictum “Do not say ‘happy’ of the living, but only once the end (telos: the word also means ‘completion’) is reached” (EE I, 1219b6–9). The force of the proverb is not merely due to a rather academic synthesis between (a) an abstract notion of eudaimonia as something essentially complete and (b) the verbal point that life is finished, hence in a certain sense complete, only at death. It is due to the fact that, however good a person’s life might be while still ongoing, irreversible disaster can strike the part that is still to come. We have a sense that if a life takes this shape it is somehow a mistake to say retrospectively that the person was eudaimon earlier. Hence we think that however good an ongoing life might be now, we should wait to see whether it continues good to the end before calling it eudaimon. This is Aristotle’s position in the Eudemian Ethics, and it seems not to rest on any assumption that disaster, if it does strike, was already being brewed from within the apparently good part of the person’s life. If we assumed that, we could easily allow that the apparently good part was not really good, whether through a moral flaw in the agent or some hidden source of non-moral trouble on the side of the natural goods possessed. Thus we could easily allow that such a life had never in fact been eudaimon. But Aristotle does not rest his Eudemian agreement with Solon on any such consideration. The point is that if misfortune wholly from the outside wrecks a life, then the good earlier part, although truly good while it lasted, does not count as eudaimon or as instantiating eudaimonia. After all, the person could only, if at all, be said to have been eudaimon during the good part because then they did not know that they would live to see their life in ruins—and there is something very un congenial in the idea that the presence of eudaimonia, the pinnacle and glory of human life, should essentially depend on its supposed enjoyer’s cognitive limitation. So perhaps it is right to predicate eudaimon of a life or a person only if the life ends well.

But this generates the second surprising implication, namely that if we want to make the predication unconditionally, and if we want it to be more than a lucky or unlucky guess, we must withhold it until we can make it only retrospectively and in the past tense—when the life in question is over. Alternatively, we must frame it as the apodosis of a conditional: “S is eudaimon now, but only if he or she ends well.” Aristotle does not explicitly consider this second option, but it is clear that he would find it an uncomfortable straitjacket. For he and his culture have a definite place for the categorical predication where the referent is an individual. In several places Aristotle discusses what seems to have been a recognized topic: the difference between the speech-acts of praise, encomium, and eudaimonismos or felicitation (NE I, 1101b10–27; EE II, 1219b8–16; cf. Rhetoric I, 1367b27–36). There is no hint that praise and encomium of individuals are only to be expressed in conditional sentences: such half-hearted statements would hardly be praise and encomium, and the same surely holds for felicitation. Moreover, categorical felicitations would typically have been addressed to the person concerned even if simultaneously to a wider audience as well. They cannot therefore typically be cast in a past tense reserved for use only when the person concerned no longer exists.

In the Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle distances himself from Solon’s edage. He reflects on it and its implications at length, in Book I, 1100a1–1101b9. Here, too, he takes very seriously the completeness criterion of eudaimonia, but now he looks for ways to sidestep Solon’s embargo. But first he disambiguates it. It might be taken to mean (a) that only the dead can properly be said to be eudaimon, i.e. to be it now, when dead. But this is absurd and cannot be Solon’s meaning, because, as Aristotle has emphasized, eudaimonia is not only essentially complete and lacking in nothing: it is also essentially activity (NE I, 1098a4–17; b30–1099a7; EE II, 1219a38–39; 1219b16–20)—not just possession of wisdom and virtue, but their active exercise. And the dead are not active. (They are not even
potentially active.) So Solon must have meant (b) that in order to be on the safe side we must wait to predicate *eudaimón* until the moment comes when we can only couch the accolade in the past tense. But Aristotle is not now satisfied with this restriction. He rejects it in a dense passage:

So if we must look to the end and call someone blessed (*makarizomen*)<sup>10</sup> *then*, not because he is happy (*eudaimón*) but because he was so before, how is it not absurd to refrain from truly saying of him, *when* he is happy, what is the case—the reason *<for refraining>* being that one does not wish to felicitate (*eudaimonizein*) the living because of the changes *<that can happen>* and because one has assumed that happiness is something stable and not at all easily changed, whereas often the same persons undergo wheelings (*anakukleisthai*) of fortune?

The argument seems to be: those who wait until *S* is dead before saying, in the past tense, that *S* was happy only speak truly because it *was independently the case* that “happy” applied to *S* during a significant part of *S*’s life continuing up to *S*’s death. (The retrospective felicitator does not, by his speech act, retrospectively make it the case that “*S* is happy” was true in the past.) Therefore when *S* was alive it would have been true to say “*S* is happy” during the relevant part of *S*’s life. Therefore if *S* is alive now and definitely exhibiting the truth-condition for “happy” (namely wise and virtuous activity with a decent measure of the natural goods), it is proper to say now that *S* is happy.  

This argument and its aftermath show that Aristotle assumes that the truth of applying “happy” to *S* during *S*’s lifetime does not depend on whether *S* continues happy to the grave. That is, he assumes that happiness is not such an all or nothing thing that logically I have it now only if I have it in the time leading up to when I die. In making this assumption he may be thought to beg the question against Solon’s dictum. But notice that those who embrace the dictum need to do a better job of formulating their reason for doing so. They accept the dictum because of the well-known wheelings of fortune (*NE* I, 1100b4). These are not small variations but major ups and downs, heart-gripping to the spectator. But how are we to describe a spectacular downward wheeling—a catastrophe in which someone crashes from the heights to the depths—if we are not allowed to say that what he or she fell from was *happiness*? Obviously the person is not happy after the catastrophe, and if for an abstruse reason about the mere possibility of future disaster he or she did not count as happy before, what great change (cf. 1100a7) has taken place—from what to what?

Aristotle’s rejection of Solon’s adage seems to conflict with something he says at the start of the Nicomachean discussion:

> [T]here are many changes and all kinds of turns of fortune in the course of a life, and it can happen that one who enjoys the greatest prosperity is overtaken in old age by great disasters, as in the Trojan tales about Priam. Someone who encounters turns of fortune like that and who dies wretchedly (*athlos*) is not called happy by anyone. Should we then refuse to call any other human being happy, but follow Solon’s injunction to look to the end?

Certainly the notorious case of Priam, a good, noble, and extremely wealthy king who came to spectacular grief culminating in a terrible death, is a good place for launching the whole debate with Solon. If our analysis above is on the right track one might have expected Aristotle to wind up saying or implying that even Priam *was* happy up to the time of his downfall. But what he says here goes against that. He asks whether it follows from our reaction to the case of Priam that we should accept Solon’s position for all *other* human beings. In short, he seems to take it for granted that Solon is right about Priam but possibly wrong about others. Is this coherent? Perhaps it is. What we react to in Priam’s case is the whole well-known story with the dreadful end written in. Perhaps we cannot think of or refer to Priam without including Priam’s terrible end in our conception of him. So perhaps we imagine
that if we had met Priam in his days of prosperity, we, with our conception, would not have been able to say “Well, he’s happy now, whatever the future holds” because we, now, are unable to think of him as heading toward an unknown future. It certainly seems in some way logically repugnant or inappropriate to think of him as happy now if built into our notion of the him in question is the story of the horrible end hanging over him. The Solonians take our reaction to Priam’s case as a ground for withholding “happy” from living persons in general. But this is bad reasoning, since currently living persons are not legendary characters whose whole life stories we already know.

The discussion so far of Aristotle’s Nicomachean reaction to Solon’s adage has developed out of the very natural but vague assumption that happiness is something complete, which some participants in the debate interpreted so as to make it seem that no part of a life can count as happy unless the life ends (is completed) in happiness. However, Aristotle has an additional diagnosis of what makes this sort of view superficially attractive. His thought is that we are right to take happiness to be a stable condition (cf. 1100b2–3)—and from this we pass to the false conclusion that lost happiness could never have been real happiness.

For Aristotle the stability of eudaimonia is in contrast to the variability of luck. If, as some hold, eudaimonia were the same thing as good luck (NE I, 1099b7 ff.), or if changes in the former tracked changes in luck, then, since in the ordinary course of life luck in small ways goes to and fro between good and bad from day to day or hour to hour (at four o’clock I broke the heel of my shoe, but at five thirty I was just in time to get a seat on the commuter train), it would follow that the same person oscillates from moment to moment between eudaimonia and misery, changing like a chameleon. In fact, it is altogether wrong to think of eudaimonia and its opposite as tracking chance (1100b4–8). (It tells us something about the difference in meaning between eudaimonia and “happiness” as we often use it today that Aristotle can rely on his immediate readers to find it absurd that one might swing into and out of eudaimonia and its opposite as easily as one swings from annoyance at breaking the heel to relief at getting the seat.)

Aristotle now identifies the basis of the intuition that eudaimonia is stable. It is that eudaimonia’s supreme determinant is activity of virtue. For the virtues, which are nothing but dispositions to be active in certain ways at any opportunity, are the most stable and longest lasting of human qualities (NE I, 1100b12–20; II, 1105a32–3). Hence virtuous activity, the central and determining component of eudaimonia, is a steady, continuous, and spontaneous feature of the virtuous person’s entire waking life regardless of possessions and circumstances. Moreover, eudaimonia is flexible. Below a certain level of natural goods it is impossible, but active virtue ensures that agents adjust wisely to what they have got, making them more likely to maintain eudaimonia, not just virtue, under acceptable even if no longer grand conditions.

It is not easy to state precisely what it means to say that virtuous activity is the supreme determinant of eudaimonia. It is not by itself a sufficient condition since a certain abundance of the natural goods is needed too, and virtue or virtuous activity has, at best, limited control over that. Perhaps one can put the point by saying that eudaimonia is not a dance to the music of fortune, but a dance to the fortune-independent and fortune-transcending music of virtue, despite needing conditions that virtue alone cannot secure. Thus eudaimonia can be lost through serious misfortune, but the person who loses it never thereby becomes a wretch (athlios). For the true wretch stands at the other end of the moral universe from the eudaimon. The wretch is one who does hateful and vile deeds, and it is not possible for anyone who really was once eudaimon to fall as low as that. One may exchange good fortune for bad, but one cannot exchange virtue for moral ugliness. In closing his Nicomachean discussion of luck and eudaimonia Aristotle seems to make a distinction between eudaimonia and blessedness (makariotés). He leads up to it by saying:

So what is wrong with calling eudaimon the person who is active in complete virtue, and who is adequately equipped with the external goods not for some random stretch of time but for a complete life?

1101a14–16
From other passages beginning with the “What is wrong?” formula we know that nothing is wrong; this is a rhetorical question. We should also, I think, take it to be proposing a very abstract definition of *eudaimonia*, one that leaves open the interpretation of “complete life.” However, the next sentence envisages an interlocutor who pushes for the “up until death” interpretation: “Or should we add that he also will live like this and will end his life on the same terms?” (16–17). Aristotle responds:

Well, since the future is hidden to us, and if we posit that *eudaimonia* is a completion and complete in every way—given this, we shall call those living persons blessed (*makariot*) who have, and will have, the things mentioned; but <we shall call them> blessed as human beings.\(^{16}\)

Here Aristotle says that if we want to interpret the completeness of *eudaimonia* so that it entails “up until death” (and he surely finds this understandable since it was his own view in the *Eudemian Ethics*) we should, by stipulation, substitute the term *makariotēs* to act as distinctive label of this logically far more demanding ethical profile.\(^{17}\) This leaves us and him free to predicate *eudaimon*, now, of people who are living now, and whose future is therefore unknown to us and could turn out drastically different from the good life they now enjoy.

As we have seen, the complex Nicomachean discussion partly rests on a contrast between the virtuous-activity component of *eudaimonia* and the variability of luck in respect of the natural goods. The point is not that the virtuous-activity component does not vary—of course it does in its specifics, in response to the agent’s various commitments and relationships—but it does not, like the same person’s luck, veer between being good and being bad. In addition, it is not a matter of luck that the virtuous agent, when active, is actively virtuous rather than actively vicious or actively mediocre. (For that to be possible it would have to be possible for the same agent to be both virtuous and vicious or mediocre, like an athlete skilled in both high jump and high dive, with its being a matter of luck which disposition gets triggered on a given occasion.) A passage of virtuous activity directed at making a difference in the world can be frustrated by bad luck; hence it depends for success on the lucky absence of bad luck. But the virtuous activity itself (the “trying”), as distinct from the intended result, wholly depends on the agent and so is invulnerable to luck. (Here we are on the brink of being able to argue that if being the good that confers value on the other goods—when they are present—were an adequate criterion for happiness, then identifying the value-conferrer with virtuous and wise activity means that human happiness would be wholly immune to luck.)

Nothing, however, in the foregoing discussion touches the question of luck in acquiring a virtuous disposition in the first place. At NE III, 1113b6–1114b25, Aristotle argues on a number of grounds that individuals are voluntary sources of their own ethical dispositions whether good or bad. One of his main concerns here is to oppose the asymmetrical view of Socrates and Plato that we are bad only involuntarily but good voluntarily. Another is to oppose the view that our ethical responses are wholly due to our genetically inherited nature, or to the play of external circumstance on this nature. In the end he comes out with the cautious assertion that “we ourselves are, in a way, co-causes of our own <moral> dispositions” (1114b2–23). The context shows that the other co-causal factor here is our genetically inherited nature.

But elsewhere Aristotle stresses the vital importance of good upbringing for developing a virtuous character (NE II, 1103b23–25; 1104b11–13; X, 1179b29–1180a4). One could put this by saying that even though an individual’s virtue-building behavior must involve her or his voluntary input at every stage (good upbringing is a matter of getting the child to want or be willing to do the right things), good parents or guardians are absolutely necessary “co-causes” not only at the beginning but for a long time after that. But since it was in no way under my control whether I had good parents or guardians, wasn’t it only by my past good luck that I became the virtuous person I now am, even if, as explained above, my present virtuous activity is an expression only of me and not at all dependent
Sarah Broadie

on present good luck? And in that case, if I also satisfy the other conditions for being *eudaimōn* isn’t my *eudaimonia* today ultimately due to my luck as a baby?

Aristotle does not formulate this question (discussed today under the label of constitutive luck). A possible line of response for him would be to say that it is simply not a problem. The problem of allowing for the real possibility of human happiness while recognizing its vulnerability to luck comes from the thought that *eudaimonia* ought to be in some strong sense complete, together with the fact that a person’s good luck can change. But, according to Aristotle, statements in the past tense are necessarily true or necessarily false because nothing can change their truth-value (*NE* VI, 1139b5–11). Even if it was by luck that I started life in a good home, this piece of luck is changeless now. Nothing can take it away from me, so on this score I am invulnerable. Aristotle might also consider that what we call “constitutive luck” is not luck at all. The thought would be that ascribing good or bad luck presupposes as its locus an agent with definite projects in the world to which the categories of success and failure apply, and with value-laden aspirations for a good life (The word *eutuchēs,* “fortunate,” has connotations of success or hitting the mark.) But the so-called luck of starting life with good parents or good guardians is not something that happened to such an agent. It happened to what was only a potential agent, a creature that was completely indeterminate morally speaking. So it was not the case that the baby was lucky (or in the opposite circumstance unlucky), even though what happened to it was both a good thing and something over which it had absolutely no control. It would also be a mistake to think of the young products of good, bad, or “random” upbringing as lucky or unlucky results in relation to agents such as parents or supposed guardians or, in general, the older generation. This is because we and Aristotle think it the responsibility of older generations to bring up their children well. This operation, then, and its products (although one can only speak very generally) is in the sphere of what human beings have some control over, so to that extent it is not in the sphere of luck.

Notes

1 Aristotle also discusses luck, chance, and the fortuitous in the very different context of scientific explanation: see *Physics* II, chs. 4–8.
2 But the last paragraph of this chapter suggests a qualification of this point.
4 Aristotle sometimes calls them “the goods without qualification (or: in general)” (*haplōs*). This means that “goods” is a short-hand initial label picking out the things that everyone desires but leaving it open whether, for the life of a given individual or community, possession of them adds genuine, as opposed to apparent, value to that life. He also at times calls them “the natural goods,” “the external goods,” and “the goods of fortune.”
5 Translation follows the Oxford Classical Text of Walzer and Mingay.
6 Somewhat later, this became the official position of the Stoics.
7 This is the highest good in something like the sense of Kant’s *bonum consummatum,* whereas the unconditioned condition of the value of all other goods is Kant’s *bonum supremum (Critique of Practical Reason* 2.2).
8 For the story surrounding Solon’s dictum see Herodotus, *History* I, 30–33.
9 This is by contrast with a general class as in the Beatitudes “Blessed are the poor,” or in Horace and Vergil “Beatus ille qui procul negotiis” (“Blessed the one who is far removed from burdens and cares” and “Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas” (“Happy the one who has been able to learn the causes of things”).
10 Here as in many places *makarios* and *eudaimōn* are synonyms, but at 1101a17–21 he seems to reserve *makarios* for the *eudaimōn* who continues so to the end. See below in the main text.
11 Translations from the *Nicomachean Ethics* mainly follow the Oxford Classical Text of Bywater.
12 This argument raises distinct questions of the predication’s veridicality and its epistemic justification, but Aristotle does not treat them separately. The vices too cannot just be laid aside or shaken off; see *NE* III, 1114a12–21 and VII, 1150b29–32 where vice is contrasted with acrasia as an incurable versus curable condition.
13 Virtues, like skills, are built up through practice of the relevant activity (*NE* II, 1103a17–b23; *EE* II, 122a39–b5), and Aristotle might well think that even when attained they are reinforced—again like skills—through practice. Virtue is therefore strongly self-maintaining because it is not possible (as it is with skill) to possess it yet choose not to exercise it when one can.
Aristotle on Luck and Happiness

15 The interpretation is disputed and so is the text at 1101a17. I here follow Irwin in reading "epei dē" rather than "epeidē" (Irwin 1985).

16 I.e. our use of “blessed” does not imply that they are gods.

17 It is not clear whether we should assert on condition or make a conditional assertion, i.e. (1) say of someone dead that they were, when alive, *makarios*, but say it only on condition of our now knowing that their life was good up to the end, or (2) say of someone currently living well that they are now *makarios* provided they continue living well until death.

18 In fact, Aristotle takes it for granted as a piece of common sense that the task of political leaders is to make the citizens virtuous (*NE* I, 1099b30–32). The last chapter of the *NE* (X, 1079a33–1081b23) is a discussion of how best to effect moral education in society.

19 For completeness we should mention *Eudemian Ethics* VIII, ch. 2 (= VII, ch. 14) where Aristotle considers the question of what one might call “natural luck.” Some agents seem to be lucky by nature in that they regularly succeed in achieving their ends despite being foolish and thoughtless. But is it right to call this “luck” or is it really something else? Aristotle’s discussion is difficult, and seems to go to and fro on the question. See Kenny (1992: ch. 6) for some helpful elucidation. The topic of *EE* VIII.2 belongs to ethics considered as the general study of living well, since the naturally lucky are successful about the external goods, and having these is certainly part of living well. But it is clear that such agents are not candidates for *eudaimonia* since they lack wisdom and virtue.

References