

CHAPTER 1: LUCK ANCIENT AND MODERN

Introduction

What is the significance of the unforeseen, the uncontrollable, and the extraordinary—or what many people would call luck? As observers of political life, and as citizens ourselves, what should we know about luck, if anything? One prominent answer to this question right now is that all “successful” individuals should grasp that they themselves are lucky—that they are not mythical self-made men and women but ordinary creatures of chance. Robert Frank makes this argument in *Success and Luck: Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy*. Frank relies on scholarship in economics and psychology to reveal luck’s influence on economic success and distributions of wealth.¹ But his takeaway point is normative. Acknowledging the role of luck in his or her own successes, the reader of *Success and Luck* is supposed to say, in effect, *there but for great good luck go I*. Clearly the author hopes that knowledge of luck’s shaping power will serve as both a wellspring of humility and a spur to generosity.² Frank joins a chorus of writers inside and outside the academy—from Martha Nussbaum to Barack Obama, from Ronald Dworkin to Danielle Allen—who invoke luck as kind of a regrettable social entropy that stands in the way of egalitarian distributive justice and healthier democratic societies.³

Without doubting the commitment to equality that animates these luminaries, I wonder whether their account of luck passes muster, and whether it offers scholars and citizens adequate materials for understanding the political significance of luck. One gets the impression from the contemporary discourse that human experience can be divided into two fields. On one hand, there is the field of human agency, in which we exercise significant control over our actions through deliberation. On the other hand, there is the field of luck, in which events simply befall us no matter what we know or do. According to Nussbaum, “what happens to a person by luck will be just what does not happen to a person through his or her own agency, what just *happens* to him, as opposed to what he does or makes.”⁴ And Dworkin has encapsulated this view in a memorable image: brute bad luck strikes, at the limit, like “a falling meteorite”—in the manner of an unpredictable, uncontrollable, and devastating external force.⁵

¹ Frank, *Success and Luck*, esp. 40–68.

² *Ibid.*, 101–102: “if people who acknowledge luck’s role in their lives are indeed more likely than others to feel grateful for any successes they’ve enjoyed, they’re also more likely to share some of the fruits of their efforts to support the common good.” See also Frank, “Are You Successful?,” which concludes as follows: “So try to engage your successful friends in discussions about their experiences with luck. In the process you may increase their willingness to support the kinds of public investments that will enhance the next generation’s odds of success. And you will almost surely hear some good stories.”

³ Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*; Nussbaum, “Equity and Mercy,” esp. 111, n. 55; Obama, *Dreams from my Father*, 94–95; Obama, “Howard University Commencement”; Dworkin, “What Is Equality? Part 2,” 293–304; Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 320–50; Allen, *Cuz*.

⁴ Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 3.

⁵ Dworkin, “What Is Equality? Part 2,” 293.

None of these authorities has explained, however, why he or she assumes that luck refers to something “out there” in the world that resists deliberate human action from outside. Is it not possible that invocations of luck primarily reflect our own internal limitations and preoccupations as agents? Indeed, in my view, luck is better understood as a psychological phenomenon. What we talk about when we talk about luck are the intellectual and emotional reactions of human beings themselves as they run up against the limits of their own knowledge and power. When human beings prove unable to foresee or to control events that appear to be significant for their own purposes or flourishing, then luck is invoked to describe what has happened. Perhaps luck is an intoxicating illusion that threatens to obscure underlying realities, excuse wrongdoing, provoke powerful emotions, and cloud judgment. By approaching the idea of luck as both a psychological phenomenon and a ubiquitous rhetorical trope (rather than as a constitutive principle of the world), this book challenges the contemporary consensus.

There is ample textual support in early modern political thought for such a skeptical reassessment of luck. Consider Machiavelli’s well-known imagery of *fortuna* in Chapter 25 of *The Prince*. Near the beginning of the chapter, Machiavelli borrows a striking image from the *Quattrocento* humanist Leon Battista Alberti, likening *fortuna* “to one of those violent rivers which, when they become enraged, flood the plains, ruin the trees and buildings, lift earth from this part, drop in another. . .” (P 25).⁶ For Alberti, human beings endure serious misfortune by swimming in the direction of the current or, better yet, by climbing into boats provided by God to the virtuous.⁷ Machiavelli puts the image to his own purposes:

it is not as if men, when times are quiet, could not provide for [flooding rivers] with dikes and dams so that when they rise later, either they go by a canal or their impetus is neither so wanton nor so damaging. It happens similarly with fortune, which demonstrates her power where virtue has not been put in order to resist her and therefore turns her impetus where she knows that dams and dikes have not been made to contain her. (P 25)⁸

Although the flooding of a river might appear to be bad luck, Machiavelli urges the reader to see it as a natural and necessary event that admits of prediction and control to a great extent—like the seasonal flooding of the Arno or the Nile.⁹ To put the point in a more philosophical register, for Machiavelli, fortune represents the ambiguous relation of nature to human happiness prior to the emancipation of efficacious human power over and against nature. As Claude Lefort has

⁶ I use the Mansfield translation of *The Prince* and the Mansfield-Tarcov translation of the *Discourses*. References to Machiavelli are inlaid in the text. Both Pitkin and Newell have persuasively established the link between the river images in Alberti and Machiavelli. See Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman*, 143; Newell, “How Original Is Machiavelli?,” 625.

⁷ Alberti, “Three Dialogues,” 35–38.

⁸ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 98–99.

⁹ Wootton, “Fortune to Feedback,” 26: “It is worth remarking that Machiavelli had practical experience of hydraulic engineering: together with Leonardo da Vinci, he had been involved in a plan to divert the Arno so that it no longer flowed through Pisa, thus cutting off Florence’s longstanding enemy from maritime trade.” See also Masters, *Machiavelli, Leonardo, and the Science of Power*.

written of this passage: “if we judge Fortune to be sovereign, it holds us in fact beneath its power, and we are dispossessed of our freedom; if we rely on our own strength, it diminishes, and the area of our freedom and knowledge increases.”¹⁰ Machiavelli goes on to extend the metaphor, indicting Italy as a “country without dams and without any dike” (*P* 25). Inundated by foreign powers such as France and Spain, Italy could have been “diked by suitable virtue” (*P* 25). In the extended metaphor, fortune’s flood has been reduced to the absence of virtue among Italian princes—their failure to cultivate their own arms and a political culture of self-reliance as opposed to one of faith in and subservience to the Church.¹¹ The chapter’s famously shocking conclusion contains a second image that supports these points. There fortune emerges not as a Roman goddess but as a woman, whose humanity leaves her susceptible, disturbingly, to physical and sexual domination by “virtuous” men.¹² These images of flood and rape together demote fortune from agential force to epiphenomenon or excuse. As Machiavelli writes elsewhere: only “where men have little virtue, [does] fortune show its power” (*D* II.30.5). Machiavelli thus explodes the two-fields approach to luck, since the field of luck turns out, on reflection, to represent merely the obverse of efficacious human power.

While I have been influenced by Machiavelli’s writings on fortune, this book is not about Machiavelli. His demystifying view of luck is familiar, confirmed by scholars from Leo Strauss to Quentin Skinner.¹³ The standard presentation of these issues in classical political thought is equally well-known: whereas Machiavelli urges the conquest of fortune, Greek thinkers generally genuflect to it. According to Martha Nussbaum, the entire ancient Greek philosophical and literary tradition—from Homer through the tragedians to Aristotle (with the notable exception of Plato)—emphasizes the vulnerability of human flourishing to corruption or destruction through extreme bad luck.¹⁴ For Bernard Williams, it is Sophocles and Thucydides in particular who deliver the “bad news”—obscured by the subsequent influence of Plato, Aristotle, and Christianity, not to mention the Enlightenment—that human reason and well-being are, ineluctably, “at risk to chance.”¹⁵ And Simone Weil views Homer’s portrayals of serious

¹⁰ Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, 195.

¹¹ Machiavelli’s flooding river is a biblical and apocalyptic image. See Kahn, *Machiavellian Rhetoric*, 24; McQueen, “Machiavelli’s Savonarolan Moment,” 920–22.

¹² To be sure, the rape image resonates in multiple directions. Pitkin observes that the goddess *Fortuna* evokes the Virgin, and she suggests that Machiavelli may intend to offer a blasphemous comment on the power of the Virgin to intercede with God on behalf of human beings. Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman*, 48; cf. Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 178. The image also brings to mind the rape of Lucretia, out of which the Roman republic was born. Here is another possible reading: even a more or less apolitical accident, such as the rape of Lucretia by Sextus, may have the greatest political consequences—if that accident is exploited by an impetuous nonetheless prudent individual, as was Lucius Junius Brutus. In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli argues that Brutus channeled the outrage that the Romans felt on behalf of Lucretia toward the institution of the Roman kingship (*D* 3.2.1).

¹³ For example, Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, esp. 209–221; Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Vol. 1, esp. 119–22, 125, 138. See also Newell, “How Original Is Machiavelli?,” 612–34.

¹⁴ Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, *passim*.

¹⁵ Williams, “Fictions, Pessimism, Ethics,” 52; *Shame and Necessity*, 161–64

misfortune in war as the core of Greek ethical wisdom and a precursor to the philanthropic teaching of the Gospels.¹⁶ Clearly pessimistic reflections on the sway of bad luck in human affairs have a place in ancient Greek thought. As we will see in Chapter 4, Sophocles and Herodotus offer searching and complex accounts of the influence of luck on the circumstances and outcomes of action and even on the constitution of the individual human character.

Much less familiar, however, is the skeptical, psychological, and specifically political approach to luck that I find in certain Greek political thinkers—namely, Thucydides, Euripides, and Aristotle, whose thought comprises the chief subject matter of this book. Refusing to reify luck, Thucydides, Euripides, and Aristotle doubt that luck should be understood as a cause of change by itself (on par with nature or human action). Consequently, luck talk is cheap: often it obscures more than it explains, conceals more than it reveals. As a rhetorical *topos*, luck's power indicates its emotional appeal, with the appearance of good luck stoking hope and the appearance of bad provoking fear. Because perceptions of good or bad luck render human beings more frenetic than phronetic, luck emerges as a source of intoxication or paralysis, an internal obstacle to efficacious agency. Yet, for all that, and precisely because of its psychological significance, Thucydides, Euripides, and Aristotle attend to the illusion of luck as a signal source of error and confusion in political life. Skeptical of luck as a form of philosophical or historiographical knowledge, these thinkers nevertheless foreground luck as a window onto the human soul. What they see through this window, moreover, they hold up as a guide to thought and action.

Like Machiavelli, these Greek thinkers can help us to question the two-fields view of luck and to imagine prudential, responsible, and courageous responses to catastrophe. However, and to their credit, they do not anticipate the Florentine's exhortation to conquer fortune. For Thucydides, Euripides, and Aristotle, skepticism about the power of luck does not entail the pursuit of mastery. Likewise, even as they cast luck as an illusion, these Greek thinkers do not anticipate Sigmund Freud in picturing a future without illusions.¹⁷ In their view, the intelligibility of the world, behind the many illusions to which human beings succumb, does not by itself justify quixotic and possibly dangerous projects of enlightenment and scientific control. On the contrary, human recalcitrance and unreason are themselves aspects of the intelligible world. What attaches human beings to the illusion of luck is our inability fully to control the passions, including our hopes and fears, our longing for meaningfulness, and our ham-fisted explanations of suffering inflicted by human beings themselves. That said, sobriety need not take the form of complacency, conservatism, or withdrawal. Thucydides, Euripides, and Aristotle restore luck to the domain of action—for the sake of understanding, accountability, and agency.

¹⁶ Weil, *War and the Iliad*, 34–35.

¹⁷ Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, 30–31. Beiner defends reading Freud as a part of the conversation of political philosophy in *Political Philosophy*, xxx–xliii.

Language, Imagery, and Conceptual History

The scholarly literature on luck bristles with images, metaphors, thought experiments, and literary examples.¹⁸ Consider the work of Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel on the topic of “moral luck”—the paradoxical idea that the influence of luck on actions or identities does not necessarily nullify moral responsibility. In their initial articles on this topic, Williams and Nagel discuss a fascinating yet bewildering array of concrete examples: the child who wanders into the path of an oncoming taxi; the bird that flies into a bullet; and the counterfactual outcomes of Anna Karenina’s affair with Vronsky and of Gauguin’s abandonment of his family for the sake of his painting.¹⁹ Add to these examples the many familiar images of luck—including the *bona dea*, the wheel of fortune, the ship’s rudder, the horseshoe, and the black cat.²⁰ Could it be that the haziness of the idea itself invites these enigmatic and manifold representations?

True, many philosophers and political theorists have attempted to provide more precise analyses and definitions of luck. In *The Taming of Chance*, Ian Hacking shows that the theorization of luck, chance, and probability was a central philosophical and social-scientific project in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²¹ That project has continued apace. Even so, the thinkers who have devoted themselves to the study of luck offer clashing definitions of the term.²² For Williams, as for Alasdair MacIntyre, luck refers to what is unpredictable;²³ for Hacking, to what

¹⁸ Rescher, *Brilliant Randomness* is a compendium of such illustrations; see especially the chapter titled “The Different Faces of Luck,” 70–86.

¹⁹ See Williams, “Moral Luck,” 117–24; Nagel, “Moral Luck,” 137–46. There is nothing wrong with these examples in and of themselves, but their bewildering variety suggests that the idea of luck remains somewhat obscure for the authors. For analogous examples of luck’s influence on political events, see the introduction to Shapiro and Bedi, *Political Contingency*, 1–3.

²⁰ See Rescher, *Brilliant Randomness*, 8–12. On the classical iconography of luck (*tuchē*) and fate (*moira*), see Eidinow, *Luck, Fate, and Fortune*. On the Renaissance iconography of fortune or luck (*fortuna*), see Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman*, 140–44; Cassirer, *Individual and Cosmos*, 120; Parel, *Machiavellian Cosmos*, 63–85.

²¹ Hacking, *Taming of Chance*, 4.

²² For a provocative and well-known account of probabilistic thinking in academia and popular culture, as well as on Wall Street, see Taleb, *Black Swan*. Note the various responses to Taleb published in the *American Statistician*, especially Lund, “Revenge of the White Swan,” 189–92. American culture is a certain kind of “risk culture”: see Douglass and Wildavsky, *Risk and Culture*; Giddens, “Risk and Responsibility,” 1–10. Cf. the fascinating essays on the ancient Greek idea of *eikos*—what is likely or probable—in Wohl, *Probabilities, Hypotheticals, and Counterfactuals*; and Hammer, “Cultural Construction of Chance in the *Iliad*,” 126.

²³ Williams, “Moral Luck,” 128. Williams features examples of moral luck in which agents regret what they do even though they deliberated well, or in which they deliberated poorly but still accept the results of their actions. For Williams, luck seems to refer to outcomes of human action that could not have been foreseen. Similarly, in *After Virtue*, MacIntyre finds “four systematic sources of unpredictability in human affairs” (90): “radical conceptual innovation” (90); “the unpredictability of my future by me” (96); “the indefinite reflexivity of game theoretic situations” (97); “trivial contingencies can powerfully influence the outcome of great events” (100).

is highly improbable, or even random;²⁴ for Nagel, to what is uncontrollable;²⁵ for Dworkin, to what is both uncontrollable and unintentional;²⁶ for Richard Rorty, to what is contingent.²⁷ There is little agreement, moreover, about the appropriate conceptual terminology: while some scholars refer exclusively to “luck,” others prefer “chance,” “fortune,” or “contingency.” Surveying these various areas of confusion, a skeptic might wonder whether luck refers to a unitary concept, or whether these overtones should be distinguished via a more differential terminology.²⁸

As a case-in-point, consider Martha Nussbaum’s classic *The Fragility of Goodness*, which, like this book, returns to ancient Greek philosophy and literature to understand the place of luck in human experience. Although *Fragility* contains indispensable interpretations of Aristotle and the Attic tragedians, Nussbaum consistently works with a broad and reified notion of luck. Luck is equivalent to “external happening,” a term which seems to encompass the totality of phenomena that resist human control.²⁹ Disease, murder, broken friendships, strong emotions, and impossible choices (or so-called “tragic binds”) all count as instances of bad luck for Nussbaum.³⁰ That almost every unfortunate event could be seen to fall under this umbrella serves Nussbaum’s ethical purpose—to urge humility, contemplation, and compassion through attention to what she identifies as our ineliminable human fragility.³¹

What recommends the political, psychological, and prudential approach to luck that I find in the thought of Thucydides, Euripides, and Aristotle, is, in the first place, their more precise reflections on the idea of luck itself. Only when we recognize that luck is not “out there” in the world but instead refers to events or circumstances that we regard as unpredictable,

²⁴ Hacking, *Taming of Chance*, 10.

²⁵ Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 3–4. Nagel, “Moral Luck,” 138: “Prior to reflection, it is intuitively plausible that people cannot be morally assessed for what is not their fault, or for what is due to factors beyond their control.” As Nagel’s initial statement on the possibility of moral luck, this line clearly identifies luck as what is uncontrollable. See also Barry, “Is It Better to Be Powerful or Lucky? Part 1,” 184.

²⁶ Dworkin, “What Is Equality? Part 2,” 293; Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 444.

²⁷ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 31, 51, 60.

²⁸ Interestingly, it is common to view luck as (potentially) a good thing that attaches to particular people (for example, a gambler). Chance, by contrast, is often held to be simply uncontrollable. See Friedland, “On Luck and Chance,” 267–82.

²⁹ For the phrase “external happening,” see *Fragility of Goodness*, 2, 10, 78, 317, 332.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 397–98 (disease), 334–35 (murder and impossible choices in the cases of both Oedipus and Agamemnon), 326 (emotion), 343–44 (broken friendship). See also *Fragility of Goodness*, 3: “to eliminate luck from human life will be to put that life, or the most important things within it, under the control of the agent (or of those elements in him with which he identifies himself), removing the element of reliance upon the external and undependable.” In this line luck seems to refer to the totality of phenomena external to human agency, and even to certain uncontrollable elements within human beings. Notice the important difference between the view that luck refers to one kind of external force and the view that luck refers to every kind of force that resists human control. Though both views are questionable, the latter is expansive to the point of incoherence. For Nussbaum, luck is everything and nothing.

³¹ Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 43, 121.

uncontrollable, yet meaningful can we begin to clarify the constellation of philosophical and political problems that surround luck—such as the effects of ostensible good or bad luck on political agency, on ethical responsibility, on political change, on explanation and causation, on catastrophe, and even on the constitution of the individual human character. Equally important, whereas Nussbaum simply endorses tragic truisms such as the Solonian view that a man cannot be called happy until he is dead, my chosen thinkers approach the topic of luck from the perspective of citizen-theorists who aim not only to contemplate bad luck but to contend with it.

My own attempt to define luck begins with Aristotle's dense account of *tuchē* in *Physics* 2.4–6.³² In this text, Aristotle raises a question even more basic than *what is luck?*, namely, *what kind of thing is luck?* For Aristotle, luck inheres in human speech—and in the intellectual beliefs and psychological orientations that inform speech—though luck also has the potential to motivate action in turn. Aristotle's categorization of luck as a description of action is an important and contested philosophical point in its own right.³³ When we recognize that luck exists “in speech” rather than “in deed,” as Aristotle might have said, then we can eschew both the Charybdis of reification (e.g., luck is a cosmic principle or a meddling goddess) and the Scylla of smug dismissal (e.g., the Humean view that because luck is not a cause properly so-called, it should be dismissed as a vulgar mistake by philosophers and all educated people).³⁴

More precisely, and as we will see, Aristotle explores the ordinary view of luck as something unpredictable, uncontrollable, and mysterious, whose impact is felt when a lucky event fulfills a choice or saves a life, or when an unlucky mishap thwarts a choice or destroys someone's flourishing altogether (*Phys.* 2.5.197a5–6, 26–27).³⁵ The connection to human choice and flourishing is key. It is this connection that explains why Aristotle hives off the more human-focused term luck from impersonal chance (*automaton*), which he uses to pick out unpredictable, uncontrollable outcomes in nature—the proverbial tree falling in the forest (*Phys.* 2.6.197a36–

³² In returning to Aristotle's *Physics*, I follow the example of political theorists who have attended to the philosophical foundations of Aristotle's ethical and political thought: Salkever, *Finding the Mean*, 13–56; Frank, *Democracy of Distinction*, 17–49; and Dietz, “Between Polis and Empire,” 275–93. Yet scholars have not grasped the importance of the account of luck in the *Physics* for understanding the role of luck in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*.

Nussbaum's *Fragility of Goodness* would have benefited from attention to the *Physics*; see also Yack, *Problems of a Political Animal*, 242–67. At the same time, I engage with the helpful literature in ancient philosophy on these issues: Dudley, *Aristotle's Concept of Chance*; Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause, and Blame*; Cooper, “Aristotelian Responsibility,” esp. 284–90. See also Bolotin, *An Approach to Aristotle's Physics*.

³³ In Chapter 2, I question readers of Aristotle who attribute to him a “causal realist” or “ontological” notion of luck. See the introduction to that chapter and Freeland, “Accidental Causes,” 62. “Causal realist” is her term; she would lump my interpretation in with those of “pragmatist” interpreters.

³⁴ Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 54: “Though there be no such thing as *chance* in the world; our ignorance of the real cause of any event has the same influence on the understanding, and begets a like species of belief or opinion.”

³⁵ Unless otherwise noted, translations of Aristotle's *Physics* refer to Apostle, *Aristotle's Physics*, or to the Greek of the Oxford text, edited and revised by Ross.

197b20). So too Aristotle distinguishes luck from contingency (*to kata sumbebēkos*), understood as the conjunction of two or more elements or events in an unusual way that is not self-explanatory and could have been otherwise (*Phys.* 2.5.197a1–10). Aristotle’s anthropocentric approach to *tuchē* justifies its translation as “luck.” His approach also justifies the centrality of luck—as opposed to chance or contingency—to my own argument. The term “luck,” which must always be good or bad for someone, grounds this concept in ordinary speech and emotion.

Moreover, Aristotle’s account of luck as a common opinion that refers to outcomes *both* strikingly unpredictable *and* uncontrollable improves upon contemporary philosophical accounts, many of which identify either unpredictability or uncontrollability as luck’s defining feature. For example, Williams argues that it is a matter of luck whether Gauguin realizes his dream of becoming a famous painter (which requires, at least in Gauguin’s mind, that he abandon his family and devote himself to his art). Williams’s point is that the outcome of Gauguin’s life-changing project is unpredictable and therefore at the mercy of luck.³⁶ An Aristotelian would reply that the outcome of Gauguin’s project depends to a great extent on actions that Gauguin himself controls through his deliberations and daily activities. Whether Gauguin becomes a famous painter may be unpredictable, but it is hardly uncontrollable, and for that reason it cannot be considered a matter of luck alone.³⁷ Conversely, whereas Nussbaum, Dworkin, Nagel, and others define luck as what is uncontrollable, it would be strange to say that all uncontrollable events happen through luck. Neither tomorrow’s sunrise nor my eventual death are lucky or unlucky events because both are perfectly predictable. The criteria of meaningful unpredictability and uncontrollability together define luck better than either criterion alone.

Notice, however, that Aristotle does not simply record common opinion (see *NE* 7.2.1145b2–7). Having attempted to make sense of luck as a piece of folk wisdom, Aristotle follows pre-Socratic philosophers such as Democritus by arguing that strictly speaking luck does not count as a cause in its own right—that luck itself causes nothing (*Phys.* 2.5.197a10–12). In this way Aristotle does justice to luck as a commonly held belief while defending the philosophic view that the motions of human beings and nature admit of determinate explanations in principle. Altogether, Aristotle’s conceptual vocabulary provides a suitable first cut at the ideas of luck, chance, and contingency, and it can shed light on the less self-conscious usages of these ideas today.

Contemporary Approaches, Ancient Alternatives

First published in a 1948 issue of *The New Yorker*, Shirley Jackson’s short story, “The Lottery,” is provocative and perfunctory.³⁸ In the space of a few pages, a small village, apparently American, selects by lot and brutally stones to death one of its own citizens. Jackson leaves ringing in the ears of the reader the protests of the unlucky victim: “‘It isn’t fair, it isn’t right,’

³⁶ Williams, “Moral Luck,” 117–127.

³⁷ Also consider the question: if Gauguin were to succeed, then what would he think about his career in retrospect? Surely not that he was merely lucky. Although Gauguin might acknowledge that his success was once unpredictable and unlikely, it is hard to imagine that he would not claim credit for it and take pride in it. See Aristotle, *NE* 3.1.1110b18–20 and my reflections on voluntariness, responsibility, and regret in Chapter 2.

³⁸ Jackson, “The Lottery,” 291–302.

Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her.”³⁹ What this story accomplishes, thematically, is contested.⁴⁰ Judith Shklar notes that the piece was written during the McCarthy era and could be read as a parable of political persecution.⁴¹ What lies beyond contestation, however, is the story’s association of bad luck and injustice. The conceptual association of bad luck and injustice is ubiquitous in contemporary political thought and practice. Liberals, conservatives, and mainstream political theorists agree on this much: no one deserves what happens through dumb luck; consequently, distributive and retributive outcomes should be defined over and against those determined by luck alone.

While the contemporary political discourse on luck and injustice features widespread agreement about the unfairness of arbitrary distributions or punishments, it is also marked by heated disagreement along party lines about whether such distributions are in fact arbitrary or earned. We tend to disagree, in other words, about the relative influence of luck and choice on the lives of ordinary people. In a *New York Times* Op-Ed published in 2005, Matt Miller reports that he polled liberal and conservative Americans on the question: “which matters most in determining where people end up in life?” The poll provided just two possible responses to this question—either luck or effort. Miller writes that “liberals or Democrats overwhelmingly said luck; most conservatives or Republicans said individual effort.”⁴²

The liberal side of this debate harmonizes with a prominent literature in contemporary political theory. So-called “luck egalitarians” theorize democratic societies that aim to neutralize the effects of luck on the lives of individuals as a matter of distributive justice.⁴³ For example, Richard Arneson has argued that technologies of governance and administration can identify and compensate individuals whose bad luck in the social and natural lotteries inhibits their life prospects.⁴⁴ Importantly, Arneson and other luck egalitarians contend that the state need not attempt to neutralize the effects of all kinds of luck. Following Dworkin, luck egalitarians frequently distinguish between “brute luck” and “option luck.”⁴⁵ Whereas bad brute luck befalls individuals irrespective of their choices and past actions, bad option luck arises out of

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 302.

⁴⁰ The story generated a firestorm of controversy when it appeared; while no one could grasp Jackson’s point, everyone seemed to be disturbed or offended by it. See Franklin, “‘The Lottery’ Letters.”

⁴¹ Shklar, “Injustice, Injury, and Inequality,” 30.

⁴² See Miller, “Taking Luck Seriously”; Frank, *Success and Luck*, xi: “How important is luck? Few questions more reliably divide liberals from conservatives.”

⁴³ For early articulations of this approach to theorizing distributive justice, see Dworkin, “What Is Equality? Part 1,” 185–246; Dworkin, “What Is Equality? Part 2,” 283–345; Cohen, “On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice,” 906–944; and Arneson, “Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare,” 77–93. Elizabeth Anderson coined the term “luck egalitarianism” in her striking overview and critique of this literature, “What Is the Point of Equality?,” 287–337. See also Barry, “Reassessing Luck Egalitarianism,” 136–50; Knight, *Luck Egalitarianism*.

⁴⁴ Arneson, “Luck Egalitarianism,” 43–44.

⁴⁵ Dworkin, “What Is Equality? Part 2,” 293.

“calculated gambles” or risky behavior that individuals themselves have chosen.⁴⁶ Although luck egalitarians argue about the exact cut between brute luck and option luck, they affirm Dworkin’s basic point—that the effects of bad brute luck should be mitigated by state assistance. Luck egalitarians thus envision a well-ordered democratic society in which each individual fully controls his or her own destiny, precisely because through compensating individuals for uncontrollable bad luck everyone will (hypothetically) start in the same place.

However, the charge of quixotism haunts luck egalitarianism. Consider the argument that a claim to state assistance should trigger a fine-grained analysis of the past actions of the claimant. In Arneson’s view, this kind of analysis is necessary to determine whether the individual’s disadvantageous situation arose out of bad brute luck (e.g., a congenital disability) rather than out of his or her own misguided choices (e.g., a risky business decision).⁴⁷ Yet, as Yascha Mounk has written, “for a real-world state bureaucracy to answer such intricate hypothetical questions about millions of citizens would—even if we were willing to tolerate the associated normative costs, including the requisite invasion of privacy—be all but impossible.”⁴⁸ In fact, the extreme rationalization and bureaucratization of political life could increase the apparent influence of luck on the lives of individuals.⁴⁹ The practical problems involved in implementing luck egalitarian principles would likely lead to their uneven or arbitrary application; in place of the arbitrariness of good or bad luck we would have the arbitrariness of bureaucrats.

What is more, the normative costs that Mounk mentions in passing are themselves quite high. Elizabeth Anderson has shown that a society embodying luck egalitarian principles would fail to secure the relations of equality, liberty, and respect that have always defined admirable democracies. By compensating some people for their perceived physical or mental deficiencies on the grounds that these qualities are pieces of bad luck, the democratic society imagined by the luck egalitarians could lead these “unfortunates” to believe that they are less worthy and less capable than their peers, undermining their self-respect and sapping their energy for citizenship.⁵⁰ Luck egalitarianism evokes the Tocquevillian nightmare of “administrative centralization” and “soft despotism.”⁵¹

⁴⁶ “A person is exploited when unfair advantage is taken of him, and he suffers from (bad) *brute luck* when his bad luck is not the result of a gamble or risk which he could have avoided.” Cohen, “On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice,” 908. Cf. Scheffler, “What Is Egalitarianism?,” 18.

⁴⁷ Arneson, “Luck Egalitarianism,” 28–32.

⁴⁸ Mounk, *Age of Responsibility*, 23.

⁴⁹ For example, Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” esp. 4–5; and the commentary of Beiner, *Political Philosophy*, xliii–lv.

⁵⁰ On what Anderson calls “the problem of paternalism,” see especially “What Is the Point of Equality?,” 305: “to require citizens to display evidence of personal inferiority to get aid from the state is to reduce them to groveling for support.” Frequently, the luck egalitarians endorse paternalistic policies—and hence inequality. On the need for maintaining relations of equal respect in the welfare state, consider Ignatieff, *Needs of Strangers*.

⁵¹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 88–89, 646–673.

On a philosophical level, moreover, luck egalitarianism is animated by a questionable albeit pervasive view of just deserts, which G.A. Cohen expresses as follows: “anyone who thinks that initial advantage and inherent capacity are unjust distributors thinks so because he believes that they make a person’s fate depend too much on sheer luck.”⁵² Or in the words of Dworkin: “That crucial boundary between chance and choice is the spine of our ethics and morality, and any serious shift in that boundary is seriously dislocating.”⁵³ The morality that Dworkin dubs “ours” has a Kantian provenance and a Rawlsian legacy. For Kant, the supreme value of morality reflects the singular rational purity of the good will.⁵⁴ Because the goodness of the good will consists in its free and rational commitment to the moral law, its goodness cannot be affected in any way by what Kant calls “contingency.”⁵⁵ Contingency, luck, chance—these are oil to the water of morality.⁵⁶ When contemporary political theorists follow Rawls in supposing that what happens through luck is necessarily “arbitrary from the moral point of view,” they are drawing upon a Kantian conception morality, especially its dismal view of luck.⁵⁷

It was precisely in order to attack Kantian and Rawlsian approaches to the topics of luck, moral responsibility, and just deserts that Williams first proposed the idea of “moral luck.”⁵⁸ Whereas Kantian morality identifies the putatively unconditioned act of willing as the only legitimate source of moral responsibility, Williams, Nagel, Nussbaum, and others have shown that it is commonplace to subject to moral judgment agents whose actions or identities appear to have been influenced by luck.⁵⁹ These thinkers have theorized (at least) three types of moral luck—circumstantial luck, resultant luck, and constitutive luck.⁶⁰ In their view, concrete examples show

⁵² Cohen, “On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice,” 932. See also Temkin, *Inequality*, 13. Cf. Hurley, “Luck and Equality,” 59: “the idea of neutralizing bad or good luck provides no independent reason to favor equality as the principle of distribution.”

⁵³ Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 444. See also Dworkin, “Equality, Luck and Hierarchy,” 193; Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, 70.

⁵⁴ See Kant, *Groundwork*, 17.

⁵⁵ For example, see Kant, “On the Common Saying,” 69.

⁵⁶ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 19. But cf. Athanassoulis, *Fortune’s Web*, 100–34.

Athanassoulis contends that Kant’s attention to the role of habituation in moral life has been overlooked and misunderstood.

⁵⁷ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 63, 221–27; Hurley, *Justice, Luck, and Knowledge*, 1; Williams, “Postscript,” 251: “the point of this conception of morality is, in part, to provide a shelter against luck, one realm of value (indeed, of supreme value) that is defended against contingency.”

⁵⁸ Williams, “Moral Luck,” 116–17, 126–30.

⁵⁹ Well-known contributions to this literature include Williams, “Moral Luck”; Nagel, “Moral Luck”; Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*; Statman, ed., *Moral Luck*; Athanassoulis, *Fortune’s Web*. But the literature is now vast, and it extends into disciplines other than analytical philosophy. For an article in political theory (with a critical bent) that draws upon the idea of moral luck, see Breiner, “Democratic Autonomy, Political Ethics, and Moral Luck,” 550–574.

⁶⁰ Nagel provides the earliest taxonomy in his “Moral Luck.” Note, though, that in addition to circumstantial luck, resultant luck, and constitutive luck, Nagel includes a fourth category—causal luck. This fourth category is unhelpful since luck understood as a description (rather than as a cause of events) is perfectly compatible with determinism. Nagel, “Moral Luck,” 146–49; and Statman, “Introduction,” 5–21.

that we experience moral emotions ourselves and elicit the moral judgments of others on account of actions undertaken in lucky or unlucky circumstances (circumstantial luck), on account of actions issuing in lucky or unlucky effects (resultant luck), and even on account of aspects of our own identities shaped through good or bad luck (constitutive luck).

Without saying so explicitly, Williams implied that the idea of moral luck harkens back to Greek political thought and literature.⁶¹ And he was right: Thucydides' *History*, among other texts, contains rich and paradigmatic episodes that prefigure the idea of moral luck. For example, in 427 BC, the Athenians decreed the execution of the entire Mytilenean citizenry as punishment for its attempt to revolt from the Athenian empire (3.36.1–2). Having regretted the cruelty of their decision, however, the Athenians voted on the following day to revise it, sparing the Mytilenean demos. Since Athenian triremes carrying the first decree had already left, albeit reluctantly, for Mytilene, it was “by luck” (*kata tuchēn*) that a second set of triremes encountered no contrary winds and arrived in the nick of time to stop the massacre (3.49.3; cf. 7.2.4).⁶²

The Mytilenean episode evokes moral luck of the resultant type: were it not for a confluence of factors, such as the direction of the wind and the dilatoriness of the first set of triremes, the Athenians would have executed the Mytilenean demos. Compared to the Spartans, whose execution of the Plataeans Thucydides juxtaposes to the Athenians' pardon of the Mytilenean people (see 3.68), the Athenians appear to have eschewed indiscriminate and violent revenge, at least in the end.⁶³ But how different the Athenians would have appeared had the message of reprieve failed to arrive in time! In that case, the Athenians may well have been judged morally responsible for the annihilation of Mytilene, as they were later responsible for the atrocities committed at Scione (5.32.1) and Melos (5.116). Such a drastic change in our moral judgment of the Athenians seems to hinge on luck—hence the paradox of “moral luck.”

In fact, though, the treatment of these issues found in Greek political thought is far superior to Williams's moral luck framework. For Williams, the idea of moral luck suggests an “oxymoron.”⁶⁴ His main point is negative: he wants to show that the Kantian theory of specifically moral responsibility is dishonest, stultifying, and ultimately wrong.⁶⁵ Williams referred to morality, questionably, as “our peculiar institution”; whatever one thinks of that shocking formulation, it clarifies Williams's aversion to Kantian morality—in contradistinction to Aristotelian ethics, which he championed.⁶⁶ But Williams himself does not offer an account of Aristotelian ethical responsibility to rival Kantian moral responsibility. He even suggests that such an effort might be impossible. In *Shame and Necessity*, Williams outlines “the basic

⁶¹ For example, Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 67–74.

⁶² In Chapter 3, I will argue that Thucydides' invocations of luck always sit side-by-side with more precise explanations of the events at issue.

⁶³ On this episode and its place in the broader *History*, see Connor, *Thucydides*, 91 ff.

⁶⁴ Williams, “Postscript,” 251.

⁶⁵ “Williams fashions himself a debunker, who sets out to unmask the self-delusional picture of human beings as autonomous, self-legislating agents.” Balot, “Recollecting Athens,” 104.

⁶⁶ Williams dubs Kantian morality “the peculiar institution” in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 174. See Pippin's reflections on this coinage in “Williams on Nietzsche on the Greeks,” 166–67.

elements of any conception of responsibility”: “cause, intention, state, and response.” But he goes on to write that “there is not, and there never could be, just one appropriate way of adjusting elements to one another . . . just one correct conception of responsibility.”⁶⁷ This statement is true in one sense: different areas of human experience demand different conceptions of responsibility (e.g., causal, ethical, legal, and political responsibility). Is it not possible and necessary, though, to think through and to specify these various conceptions of responsibility?

With Aristotle as my guide, I try to do some of this work in Chapter 2. In the first place, I turn to *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1, where Aristotle argues that ethical judgments assigning praise or blame presuppose a more basic causal account of the deeds at issue.⁶⁸ Aristotle shows that agents knowingly initiate many actions that might seem to occur in lucky or unlucky circumstances or to issue in lucky or unlucky effects (*NE* 3.1.1111a22–23). When we see, with Aristotle, that actions apparently influenced by luck still count in many cases as actions performed by the agent, then we will be able to explain more precisely why many of these actions elicit ethical emotions and judgments, including regret, praise, or blame. By doing justice to Aristotle’s expansive account of causal responsibility, I investigate the ancient Greek argument that most nearly anticipates the paradox of moral luck, even as I distinguish Aristotle from Williams, on the one hand, and from contemporary scholars, on the other, who assimilate Aristotle to Kant by locating in the *Nicomachean Ethics* a theory of specifically moral responsibility.⁶⁹

In addition, Williams grounds the existence of moral luck in his observations of ordinary emotional reactions to actions apparently influenced by good or bad luck without sufficiently acknowledging that these reactions could be confused or punitive.⁷⁰ As we will see in Chapter 3, Thucydides lays bare pathological discourses on luck, responsibility, and justice that infect the politics of both democratic Athens and oligarchic Sparta.⁷¹ The Athenians repeatedly use or

⁶⁷ Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 55.

⁶⁸ In Chapter 2, I follow Cooper, “Aristotelian Responsibility,” 296: “For Aristotle, to be responsible for an action is a clear-cut, factual matter of the action’s origins: if it was originated by any of an agent’s desires, or a decision, taken together with its thought, then it is voluntary and the agent is responsible for it. . . . Questions of praise and blame do legitimately arise once the action is rightly judged to be voluntary. . . . Meanwhile, *responsibility* is established and not disputed.”

⁶⁹ For example, Irwin, “Reason and Responsibility,” esp. 134; Meyer, *Aristotle on Moral Responsibility*; Bobzien, “Choice and Responsibility in *Nicomachean Ethics* iii 1–5,” 85; Furley, “Aristotle on the Voluntary,” 60; Korsgaard, *Constitution of Agency*, 192–93.

⁷⁰ On this point, see Pippin, “Williams on Nietzsche on the Greeks,” 300: “from a Nietzschean perspective, Williams seems more interested in *expanding* the essentially Christian notion of individual responsibility, *insisting that we must also bear the burdens as individuals of what we unintentionally do!*” (emphasis in the original).

⁷¹ That the idea of luck was of special significance to Thucydides is evidenced by the fact that influential volumes—or important parts thereof—have been written on this topic. For example, Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence*; Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 163–64; Parry, *Logos and Ergon*, esp. 181–82, 186, 192; Orwin, *Humanity of Thucydides*, esp. 25 n. 28, 205; Stahl, *Man’s Place in History*, 75–102. I challenge Williams, Parry, Stahl and others who pigeonhole Thucydides as, *tout court*, a pessimistic witness to bad luck and civilizational decline.

dismiss the idea of luck in accordance with their own self-serving purposes. For example, terrified by the onset of the plague at Athens, the people invoked bad luck and wallowed in fear, while they simultaneously blamed Pericles for this downturn in their fortunes (2.59–64).⁷² Success, though, always had many fathers at Athens. The Athenian leader Cleon later claimed credit for his crazy and improbable victory at Pylos (cf. 4.39.3, 5.7.3, and 5.11.2). That victory inflated the confidence of Cleon and the whole Athenian demos, paving the way for the disastrous expedition to Sicily (4.65.4, 7.71.7). Luck may be more often abused than well-used, as leaders and citizens attempt to claim credit, deflect blame, and “spin” their deeds. In fact, credulity regarding luck and punitive moralism go together: at the root of both dispositions is, Thucydides shows us, a longing for meaningfulness, for justice.

Still, there remains a vexing problem proposed by the moral luck theorists—that of constitutive luck.⁷³ Are we vulnerable to luck not just through our actions but also in the constitution of our individual characters? Are human beings responsible for their characters? If not, if character is (somehow) fate, how then do virtuous individuals acquire their virtue (and vicious human beings their vice)? Because these questions challenge the skeptical thrust of my argument, I take them seriously, examining in Chapter 4 the more traditional and pessimistic depictions and accounts of bad luck and reversal in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Herodotus’ *History*.⁷⁴ On my reading of Sophocles’ tragedy, Oedipus himself—that self-professed “child of *tuchē*”—illuminates the Heraclitean dictum, “a human being’s character is his fate” (*ēthos anthrōpōi daimōn*).⁷⁵ In fact, the tragedy suggests that luck’s shaping power is unintelligible except as a fateful dispensation of jealous gods. While Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* dramatizes this conception of fate, Herodotus eventually pushes his readers to question it. At least, I trace a rhetorical and pedagogical movement in Herodotus’ text from Solonian deference to fate at the beginning of the work toward Themistoclean skepticism about fate and celebration of human freedom (and democracy)

⁷² My translations and transliterations of Thucydides refer to the Oxford Classical Text, edited by Jones and revised by Powell. Wherever possible, I use the translation of Woodruff, *Thucydides on Justice, Power, and Human Nature*. Because Woodruff has only translated selections of the *History*, I frequently rely instead on the recent translation of Mynott, *Thucydides*, and I modify this translation as necessary.

⁷³ On constitutive luck, see Latus, “Constitutive Luck,” 460–75.

⁷⁴ Citations of Herodotus refer to the Grene translation unless otherwise noted. I have also consulted the Oxford Classical Text of Herodotus edited by Wilson.

⁷⁵ Citations of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* refer to the Lattimore translation unless otherwise noted, though I often substitute translations by Berg and Clay and by Ahrens Dorf and Pangle. My own translations and transliterations refer to the Oxford Classical Text edited by Lloyd-Jones and Wilson. Not least because the literature on this tragedy is so vast, I begin with the two lines mentioned above: Oedipus’ self-description as the “child of *tuchē*” and the Heraclitean fragment “character is fate.” The critics with whom am I most closely in dialogue are: Euben, *Tragedy of Political Theory*, 96–129; Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization*, 207–248; Saxonhouse, “Tyranny of Reason”; Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes*; Gregory, “Oedipus at the Crossroads”; Rusten, “Oedipus and Triviality”; Ahrens Dorf, *Greek Tragedy*, 48–84; Lear, “Knowingness and Abandonment,” 183–203; Goux, *Oedipus, Philosopher*; Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy*; Vernant, “Ambiguity and Reversal”; Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*.

at the end.⁷⁶ Chapter 4 counterbalances the main argument, making a case for constitutive luck, even as it reveals tensions and ambiguities among ostensibly traditional Greek pessimists.

Euripides' *Trojan Women*, the subject of the fifth and final chapter, can help us to explain why a critique of traditional Solonian wisdom—that bad luck is inescapable and that human excellence consists above all in courage or manliness—has political implications. In *Trojan Women*, traditional tragic tropes of bad luck and reversal vie with more precise explanations of the plight of the eponymous heroines. Which words measure up to the deeds of the war? A discomfiting possibility arises: invocations of bad luck excuse and conceal the domination of the powerless by the powerful, letting the latter off the hook and failing to remind the former of their agency, however circumscribed.⁷⁷ What is more, because the Greeks' excessive courage or manliness brings about the suffering of the Trojan women, it may not make sense to echo Solon in identifying courage as the best response to ostensible bad luck. How can we reconceptualize courage, severing its connections to domination, cruelty, and machismo? Does there exist a courage of the conquered, perhaps even a feminine courage, more appropriate to citizens than to warriors, which still motivates steadfastness amid calamity? By staging critiques of luck and courage in *Trojan Women*, Euripides raises these questions. In my interpretation, the Trojan women themselves emerge as resilient survivors and frank speakers. Surviving disaster and indicting wrongdoing, they also evoke energetic yet disillusioned democratic citizens.⁷⁸

On Method

This book is a highly textual study in the history of political thought. Seeing texts, thinkers, and ideas as clearly as possible is my aim; toward this end, I also engage extensively with relevant scholarship and contribute as much as I can to ongoing debates among students of Greek political thought. And yet, for all the book's textualism, my desire to think about luck's place in political life arises out of contemporary issues in theory and practice. Luck is in the air; its ascendancy in today's political discourse motivated me to return to thinkers who might help me

⁷⁶ I depart from commentators for whom Herodotus sustains his pious wonder at bad luck throughout the *Histories*. For example, Lang, *Herodotean Narrative and Discourse*, 64–66; Shapiro, “Herodotus and Solon”; Evans, *Herodotus, Explorer of the Past*, 44–50; Russo and Simon, “Gambling with Demeter.” Instead, I follow scholars who complicate commonplaces about fate, reversal, and divine jealousy by attending to Herodotus' complex historiography, his skeptical and innovative account of custom, his political psychology, and his pedagogical and rhetorical purposes. See Pelling, *Herodotus and the Question Why*, 110–113; Benardete, *Herodotean Inquiries*, 20–21; Baragwanath, *Motivation and Narrative*, 108–10, 178–79; and Schlosser, *Herodotus and the Anthropocene*.

⁷⁷ Some scholars caricature Euripides as a pessimistic and strikingly traditional exponent of the power of bad luck—for example, Kovacs, “Gods and Men,” 176; Kovacs, *Euripides: Troades*, 57; Havelock, “Watching *Trojan Women*”; Poole, “Total Disaster.”

⁷⁸ I emphasize the virtuous activity—not simply the suffering—of the Trojan women. Cf. Murray, *Trojan Women*; Sartre, “Why *Trojan Women*”; Cartledge, “Deep Plays.” Nearer to my own approach are Burian, “Introduction”; Croally, *Euripidean Polemic*; Goff, *Euripides: Trojan Women*; and Saxonhouse, “Men, Women, War.”

to understand luck as both a contemporary preoccupation and an enduring problem.⁷⁹ In beginning with the current horizon while attempting to overcome it in the end, I follow Nietzsche's comment on "the antinomy of philology" in his (unfinished) *We Philologists*:

Philology as knowledge of the ancient world cannot, of course, last forever; its material is exhaustible. What cannot be exhausted is the always new adjustment every age makes to the classical world, of measuring ourselves against it. If we set the philologist the task of better understanding *his own* age by means of antiquity, then his task is eternal.—This is the antinomy of philology. *The ancient world* has in fact always been understood only *in terms of the present*—and should *the present* now be understood in terms of the ancient world?⁸⁰

A whole methodological orientation toward classical antiquity lies nascent in this aphorism. In the first place, Nietzsche inveighs against presentism. Anachronism will dog any study that makes no attempt to inhabit the thought of the past, asking its questions, employing its language and ideas. It is impossible to experience and judge the presence of the past unless one escapes the overbearing presence of the present. Yet what would motivate someone to escape the present if not thinking critically about the present? The antinomy of philology means that thinking here and now must motivate the attempt to think with the alien thought of the classical past—for the sake of better understanding ourselves here and now. Rather than view Greek political thought as an exhaustible knowledge-mine, a finite "resource" to be exploited for contemporary theorizing, Nietzsche proposes an unending dialogue between the present and the classical world, a dialogue for the sake of self-knowledge.⁸¹ This book attempts to construct such a dialogue.

As for my choice of texts, I have tried to offer a synoptic picture of the skeptical, psychological, and political approach to luck that I see in the thought of Thucydides, Euripides, and Aristotle. Many of the texts and reflections contained in this book extend beyond political theory narrowly defined. For good reason: *ta politika* encompassed more than the public sphere of the liberal democratic state. Whereas liberal thinkers from John Locke to John Rawls have sought to jettison soul-craft from politics, the capaciousness of politics as practiced in the classical polis and examined in Greek political thought comes to light in the words of Plato's Athenian Stranger: politics is "the art whose business it is to care for souls."⁸² Precisely because the ancient thinkers view luck not merely as a static concept but as a political pathology and rhetorical trope, my inquiry into luck must treat issues as diverse as the emotions and the virtues, citizenship and leadership, causation and explanation, atrocity and responsibility. What is more, because my chosen thinkers write in many genres, I treat texts as varied as Aristotle's *Physics*

⁷⁹ This approach is Aristotelian: I begin with the common opinions (*endoxa*) as starting points for philosophical investigation into luck's place in ethical and political life. Contemporaries who walk a similarly Aristotelian line include Salkever, *Finding the Mean*; Balot, *Courage*; Saxonhouse, *Free Speech*; and Frank, *Democracy of Distinction*.

⁸⁰ Nietzsche, "Notes for *We Philologists*," 296.

⁸¹ Schlosser, *Herodotean Realism*, 16: "the history of political thought does not serve as a resource so much as a partner in thinking."

⁸² Plato, *Laws* 650b (trans. Pangle). On the self-conscious rejection of soul-craft in liberal political thought, see Beiner, *Civil Religion*.

and *Politics*, Thucydides' *History*, and Euripides' *Trojan Women*. Still these differences of form and substance point back to a common starting point. Like the spokes of a wheel, the distinctive styles and questions of Thucydides, Euripides, and Aristotle emerge out of a shared attempt to understand the human soul in action without either forgetting human weakness and error or lapsing into complacent conservatism about the possibility of virtuous activity. Thinking with Thucydides, Euripides, and Aristotle, we can set a similar task for ourselves.