

FROM THE EDITORS

COINCIDENCE?

Pascal's observation that had Cleopatra's nose been shorter, the whole face of the earth would have changed¹ points out not only to the significance of romantic liaisons within the realm of politics, but also to the impact of coincidence, or chance, upon history. Among those who learned about it the hard way was Oliver Cromwell, Pascal's contemporary, who dreamt about ravaging all Christendom and was stopped by a little grain of sand which lodged in his bladder². Should the impact of chance be that dramatic, chaos would prevail in the world.

The other extreme is the idea of absolute necessity and the claim that no one is capable of avoiding their fate, so if someone is doomed to kill their father and marry their mother, they will do so regardless of where they might try to run away. On these grounds, the illusion of freedom we experience results from our ignorance of the causes which actually determine our actions. The view in question was given a philosophical interpretation by Jacques the Fatalist, who argued that whatever happened in the world had been forever "written up above."³

According to an intermediary standpoint, random events occasionally trigger sequences of inevitable outcomes. A literary image reflecting such a view may be found in Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, where Annushka's spilling sunflower oil results in the death of Berlioz. The literato who prides himself on his rationality slips on the cobblestones and falls under a streetcar, thus finding out, in his final moment, that no one can escape their fate. While it all seemed to be "a stupid coincidence"⁴ or a satanic joke, the events were triggered not only by coincidence, but also by necessity.

¹ See Blaise P a s c a l, *Pensées*, 32, in Blaise Pascal, "*Pensées*" and *Other Writings*, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 10.

² See P a s c a l, *Pensées*, 622, 136.

³ Denis D i d e r o t, *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*, trans. Michael Henry (London: Penguin, 1986), EPUB.

⁴ See Mikhail B u l g a k o v, *The Master and Margarita*, chapter 3, "The Seventh Proof," trans. Mirra Ginsburg (New York: Grove Press, 1995), EPUB.

Coincidence, or chance, counted among the most ambiguous philosophical concepts,⁵ plays a key role also in disciplines such as physics, biology, history, sociology, and statistics.⁶ The notion of chance is no less significant in religion and ethics, since the circumstances in which an action is performed have a bearing upon its moral appraisal. In its basic sense, however, an accident is considered within the realm of metaphysics as an event which has no cause and thus cannot be comprehended or explained,⁷ and which, consequently, puts the existence of a cosmic order into doubt. Aristotle was more careful while defining chance and considered it as an event which happens neither routinely nor necessarily, and as such, as an untypical, extraordinary occurrence at the intersection of various causal sequences.⁸ Due to its so conceived nature, chance cannot be a proper object of science, which studies typical and anticipable phenomena. On the grounds of the pan-logical models of the world developed in modernity, chance, understood in the above described way, is irrational, and therefore it must be excluded even as a mere possibility. However, chance (or coincidence) may be conceived also in a weaker sense, as an occurrence which, much as it defies the laws of nature, is sufficiently rare to be ignored, since it does not interfere with the course of the affairs in the world, even less so, whenever it does not serve any purpose⁹.

In contemporary literature, coincidence, or chance, is valued positively, since philosophers tend to consider it as an inevitable factor in the development of the world: although the laws of nature are not marked by absolute necessity and, as such, are contingent, they preserve their basic stability.¹⁰ Individual occurrences which do not follow the laws of nature do not cause chaos precisely because they are rare: it is because they are untypical that

⁵ See Janina Kotarbińska, “Analiza pojęcia przypadku: Przyczynek do słownika filozoficznego,” in Janina Kotarbińska, *Zagadnienia z teorii nauki i teorii języka* (Warszawa: PWN, 1990), 59. See also Dariusz Łukasiewicz, *Opatrzność Boża, wolność, przypadek: Studium z analitycznej filozofii religii* (Kraków and Poznań: Fundacja “Dominikańskie Studium Filozofii i Teologii,” Wydawnictwo Polskiej Prowincji Dominikanów “W drodze” and Kolegium Filozoficzno-Teologiczne Polskiej Prowincji Dominikanów, 2014), 363.

⁶ See *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, s.v. “Chance versus Randomness” (by Antony Eagle), Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive, Spring 2021 Edition, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/chance-randomness/>.

⁷ See Łukasiewicz, *Opatrzność Boża, wolność, przypadek*, 376 and 387.

⁸ Aristotle considers accidental phenomena in terms of chance (spontaneity). See Aristotle, “Physics,” 195b31–198a35, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, The Revised Oxford Translation (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), vol. 1, 25–30.

⁹ See Łukasiewicz, *Opatrzność Boża, wolność, przypadek*, 388 and 391f.

¹⁰ See Quentin Meillassoux, “Potentiality and Virtuality,” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Smicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 224–36.

they do not intervene with the course of the world. While we cannot be certain that future occurrences will resemble the past ones (anything may happen in a universe which allows for chance), the chance may nevertheless be that the world will remain stable. One might venture to say that there is a chance there will be no chance.¹¹

Chance may be perceived also as a factor which determines evolution of the natural world. Michał Heller argues that chance is not only predictable, but also calculable, and therefore the probability of its occurrence in the world may be estimated. Thus random occurrences are by no means vacuous, rather, they serve the development of nature, in particular, whenever they happen in non-accidental locations.¹² The above statement is not merely an adroit paradox. On the contrary, it points that there is as much “spare room” in nature as it is needed for the laws of physics to govern natural processes.¹³ In other words, chance is necessary precisely for the system of nature to function expediently and allow for new phenomena.¹⁴ Thus the world manifests itself as a complex structure which surpasses the dichotomy between chaos and determinism: ultimately, what is viewed as chance in the light of certain laws of physics turns out a natural result of the working of other laws of physics.¹⁵ Incorporating a moral perspective into the discourse, one may add that the structure of nature itself enables the functioning of free will.¹⁶

While acknowledging the role of chance in a human life, we need to avoid any recourse to human-oriented teleology,¹⁷ since one can hardly imagine that the reason why nature manifests a mathematical structure is that human beings might pursue their goals. On

¹¹ See *ibidem*.

¹² See Michał Heller, *Filozofia przypadku: Kosmiczna fuga z preludeum i codą* (Kraków: Copernicus Center Press, 2011), 177–85. For a good summary of Heller’s ideas see Dariusz Łukasiewicz, “Przypadek i prawdopodobieństwo a zagadnienie opatrności Bożej w filozofii przypadku Michała Hellera,” *Filo-Sofija* 2014, no. 2 (25): 197–207.

¹³ See Łukasiewicz, “Przypadek i prawdopodobieństwo...”: 204.

¹⁴ See *ibidem*.

¹⁵ See Heller, *Filozofia przypadku*, 103.

¹⁶ “Chance is necessary for new occurrences and new beings (including the cosmic and the biological evolution) to appear in nature and it is part of God’s design, which is simultaneously a mathematical design, the concept of chance being in itself mathematical due to its relevance to probability and to the laws of physics. Chance is then perfectly incorporated in the ‘Great Mathematical Matrix.’ Moreover, if we refer to what moral theology holds, we need to observe that the matrix in question must allow for the existence of free will in the universe.” Łukasiewicz, “Przypadek i prawdopodobieństwo...”: 204. Translation by Dorota Chabrajska. Heller rejects theological fatalism, i.e., the thesis that God’s foreknowledge makes chance, as well as free human choices, necessary. According to Heller, God’s foreknowledge embraces the knowledge of future chance (free) occurrences precisely as a chance (free) occurrences. See *ibidem*: 205.

¹⁷ See Łukasiewicz, *Opatrzność Boża, wolność, przypadek*, 373.

the other hand, one must not ignore the existential significance of chance occurrences which occasionally decide about one's life or death. For instance, needless to say that only two hundred years ago the existence of any person living today was highly improbable, in particular in view of the fact that our great-grandfathers and our grandfathers were made to become soldiers in wars in which they could have easily perish childless. On the other hand, from our perspective, it may seem that all the events in history took a special course so that we (rather than anyone else) might be born in this world. In this sense, a sequence of chance occurrences may be interpreted in the vein of historical necessity.

Chance occurrences play an equally important role in our actual lives. For instance, had someone not rebooked their flight, they would not have been killed in a plane crash and would be alive today. Had someone else not gone to a birthday party many years ago, they would have not met the love of their life and would not be a parent to wonderful children and a grandparent to equally wonderful grandchildren today. They might have other children and other grandchildren, yet the ones who live in our world today would not have been born. The above examples show that even a slightest detail may—just as Cleopatra's nose did—change the whole face of the earth.¹⁸ While a chance occurrence might seem a charming adventure, it may as well ruin someone's life. And this is true not only about fatal catastrophes which cause a sudden and unexpected loss of the lives of one's closest persons, but also about seemingly happy accidents, such as a huge lottery win or a sudden rise to fame, which turn out too big a burden to carry. Interestingly, while we tend to see the working of doom in the events that destroy our lives, in cases of happy coincidences we readily attribute the merit to ourselves. The fact remains, however, that in both types of situations we should speak of a sequence of chance occurrences on which we have no bearing rather than of events for which we carry responsibility. Religious people may invoke Divine Providence in such contexts and claim that God has either granted them mercies they have not deserved or justly punished them for their trespasses. Still, having accepted their outlook, one cannot claim the existence of chance occurrences: if there is personal God who addresses human beings by means of signs which can be recognized in nature or history, no whims of fate are possible.¹⁹ Those in turn who

¹⁸ In view of the above, one may hardly wonder why people speculate what would have happened, had Napoleon defeated Russia or had Adolf Hitler been accepted by the Academy of Fine Arts.

¹⁹ Therefore, I tend to question Dariusz Łukasiewicz's view that the providential design of the omnipotent and omniscient God embraces also occurrences which apparently have no cause, defy any laws, have no goal, and are unpredictable, and that if such occurrences not only are possible, but actually happen, they are part of God's design (see Ł u k a s i e w i c z, *Opatrzność Boża, wolność, przypadek*, 392f.). The reason why

question the existence of any kind of personal Transcendence, may—in order to protect themselves from the workings of chance in their lives—adopt the standpoint of the Stoic indifference, yet not in the sense of abandoning all emotions, but in that of readily accepting anything that might happen.

Regardless of the existential strategies we adopt in order to counteract the negative results of chance, we cannot but acknowledge the fact that a human life resembles a double-edged image. On the one hand, whatever happens to us seems—as Jacques the Fatalist argued—a making of necessity, yet on the other hand it may be considered as a result of our own free actions (as his companion claimed). According to the former, everything is written up above, and no lamentations will help our condition: one cannot change one’s doom. According to the latter, no one knows what has been written up above, so we may as well believe everything depends on our free decisions. While it is a paradox, both Jacques the Fatalist and his master might be right: “– And what did they do there? Jacques said whatever it was written up above that he would say and his master whatever he liked. And they were both right.”²⁰

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Łukasiewicz’s standpoint is too optimistic is that occurrences which have no apparent cause cannot be attributed to God as their source. Likewise, occurrences which are unpredictable by principle make it impossible to believe that God knew whether or when they would take place. And if they have no goal, they cannot be part of the divine plan by definition.

²⁰ D i d e r o t, *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*.