Fortune and Moral Goodness

In recent years moral philosophers have paid increasing attention to the effects of luck—both good and bad fortune—upon human action. While fortune might at first seem of only tangential interest, reflection upon its impact quickly reveals both its pervasiveness and critical importance. How much, for example, has the fact that we were born into a stable political environment, to good parents who loved and educated us, with particular talents and affinities, contributed to our moral character? Usually the answer is a great deal; thus a great deal of our moral character depends upon good conditions of which we are not the origin. As health is one of the most important goods of fortune, those seeking to adopt the Catholic ethic in regard to health care should understand how good and bad fortune relate to moral goodness. Three issues are of foremost concern: (1) what those outside the Catholic tradition are saying about fortune or luck; (2) what the Catholic position itself is; and (3) what Evangelium Vitae, the Holy Father's recent encyclical on life issues, teaches about the redemptive value of the misfortune of ill health.

Consider someone who is bound, by dint of the way the world has happened to arrange things, to make a difficult blameworthy decision? Usually the answer is a great deal; thus a great deal of our moral character depends upon good conditions of which we are not the origin. As health is one of the most important goods of fortune, those seeking to adjust the Catholic ethic in regard to health care should understand how good and bad fortune relate to moral goodness. Three issues are of foremost concern: (1) what those outside the Catholic tradition are saying about fortune or luck; (2) what the Catholic position itself is; and (3) what Evangelium Vitae, the Holy Father's recent encyclical on life issues, teaches about the redemptive value of the misfortune of ill health.

The Tragic View

It would be a view of life that is essentially tragic, that is as tragedy has been defined by Professor Martha Nussbaum. In her widely influential volume The Fragility of Goodness (Cambridge University Press, 1986), Nussbaum outlined an argument which both integrated and gave a dramatic new voice to the inclusivist view of the human good prominent in moral philosophy over the past few decades. Inclusivism upholds that the best human life is one "inclusive of everything that is truly valuable for its own sake (everything without which the life would be incomplete and lacking in value)" (FG 297). So as justice, friendship, good music, and human life itself are goods truly valuable for their own sake, the best human life will seek to obtain them all, and many other such goods besides. The core of the inclusivist view, however, is the thesis that such intrinsically valuable goods are basically incommensurable. To say that two goods—e.g., life and the economic well-being of one's spouse—are incommensurable is to say there is no common measure by which one can decide which of the goods is to be chosen in a situation of conflict. One is neither better than nor equal to the other. So if the intrinsically valuable good of life is in conflict with the intrinsic good of providing for one's spouse, and the two goods are incommensurable, then there is no way for our patient to resolve his conflict and evade blameworthy action. What is noteworthy for our purposes is the tremendous power the inclusivist view of the human good accorded to fortune. Fortune retains the power, all by itself, to force an agent into a situation in which he must act blameworthy. Thus a world in which serious illness can bind us to evil is a world in which human goodness is remarkably vulnerable and fragile.

Against the Tragic View

The most disturbing aspect of Nussbaum's argument is her claim that it is "roughly, an Aristotelian one" (FG 10). While it is true that Aristotle understands the goods pursued by human action to be incommensurable in one sense, we must be careful how we understand this. We must first recognize there are two senses of commensurability. One is when goods are compared according to a single measure. This is the kind of commensurability Nussbaum claims to find in Plato, for whom all goods are good only insofar as they are instruments toward one supreme good: philosophical contemplation. Nussbaum is loathe to attribute this brand of commensurability to Aristotle and rightly so. But for Aristotle, there exists another sort of commensurability by which the panoply of goods pursued by human action is ordered according to principles of subordination and superorientation. The economic well-being of one's spouse might then be commensurated, ordered, to the good of life if human life is deemed as intrinsically more worthwhile than economic well-being. This kind of commensurability does not, as Nussbaum fears all commensurability must, reduce the economic well-being of one's spouse to that of life. On the contrary, it respects the intrinsic value of both goods while at the same time recognizing the place each holds in an overall pattern of goods.

Fortune comes into play, as Aristotle argues in his Nicomachean Ethics (1.8), in two supplementary ways. First, as providing instruments for the possibility or greater efficacy of virtuous activity: the virtue of liberality, for instance, is not possible without disposable resources, which come to a person in part at the whim of fortune. Second, fortune supplements human action in providing certain advantages such as good birth, satisfactory children, and physical beauty, the lack of which sullies perfect happiness. In short, good fortune can be considered as the sine qua non of the full realization of human good.

The Catholic Tradition

For the Catholic ethical tradition, the overall pattern of goods is secured by the natural law, which is man's finite participation in God's eternal law. According to the natural law, man's happiness is found above all in virtuous activity. The human good, therefore, is
essentially something we control, for only we can originate our own virtuous activity. Virtuous activity, moreover, is ordered according to principles of subordination and superordination. Justice and friendship, for example, are subordinated to the activity of speculative wisdom, while the activities of all the natural virtues are subordinated to those of the three theological virtues. Even among the theological virtues one of them, caritas, enjoys a distinct priority over the others.

What, then, is the Catholic view of fortune? First of all, it must be clear that fortune cannot by itself be determinative of the moral quality of an act or of the goodness of a human life as a whole. The goodness of a human life is determined by how well that life is ordered to virtuous activity, and moreover, to the highest kinds of virtuous activity.

With all this in mind, let us return to the patient contemplating whether to commit physician-assisted suicide. On the Catholic view, the misfortune of ill health has not pushed this person into a corner from which there is no blameless escape. That is not to say the man's decision will be an easy one. Far from it. But it does mean his decision can be a right and honorable one.

First of all, if it were the case that his illness did not saddle his spouse with an enormous debt, or if he were not gravely ill, then clearly his situation would call him to exercise the virtue of courage and endure his pain. The good of his wife's present economic good fortune must be subordinated to the good of life. However, our example emphasized that his prolonged (and only alleviating) treatment would saddle his spouse with an enormous economic burden which would seriously threaten her well-being. In such a situation, the Church does accept the discontinuance of medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome of the procedures taken. Thus it is legitimate for the dying husband and his wife to order their goods differently, and so refuse to pursue, in the words of the Catechism, "overzealous" care.

_Evangelium Vitae_

In either situation, in fact, we see the good of life given special regard, with the virtue of courage called upon to protect it. Both the great dignity of human life as well as the appropriateness of courage for our times were highlighted by Pope John Paul II in _Evangelium Vitae_. Here the Pope boldly pronounced that the life of each human being serves as a manifestation of God's own living presence, a trace of his glory. Man is thus "not the master of life nor is he the master of death. In life and in death, he has to entrust himself completely to the 'good pleasure of the Most High,' to his loving plan" (Ev #46).

John Paul II is asking us to understand that the life we live, including the good health we enjoy or the bad health we suffer, is not properly our own. Most properly it is God's plan made manifest in us, one we are not at liberty to manipulate for our pleasure. In this light moments of sickness, even of grave suffering, are cast in a redemptive glow. "Certainly the life of the body in its earthly state is not an absolute good for the believer, especially as he may be asked to give up his life for a greater good" (EV #47). That greater good is of course the good of charity, when we lovingly join our sufferings to those of the suffering Christ, thereby making up what is lacking in those sufferings for the sake of the faithful. In this way, luck is gathered up in God's providential care: "How can anyone think that even a single moment of this marvelous process of the unfolding of life could be separated from the wise and loving work of the Creator, and left prey to human caprice" (EV #44).

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