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21L.017 The Art of the Probable: Literature and Probability
Spring 2008

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This list of questions is a compilation of all the questions drawn from different instructors.

1. Give a careful account of Aristotle's four causes and explain the relationship among them in such a way as to make it sound as if Aristotle had a plausible view of what is natural. What does Aristotle mean by "cause" (*aitia*, plural *aitiai*)? Whatever they are, they have to do with change and are inherent in the nature of things. Do we believe that particular kinds of change are sometimes inherent properties of things? Or is change induced by externalities? Or both?
2. Compare Aristotle's view of luck with the reflections that end Cardano's story of how he gambled and lost his shirt (and other garments as well) but applied himself thereafter to master luck and won back everything. What view would Cardano take of Aristotle's distinction between luck and chance, should he have been presented with the text of the *Physics* as we have it? What view of the nature of things is implied by his final reflection upon mastering luck in life and mastering luck in games of chance and what do you suppose Aristotle would have thought about Cardano's views if he could have read them?
3. Aristotle distinguishes between luck (tuche) and spontaneity or chance (automaton), arguing that the former is a special case of the latter; luck is the kind of chance that can operate only in human affairs because it is the kind of chance which looks as though it is connected with what we have done as agents responsible for our actions when really it is just something that happens to us. How well does this distinction apply to the case of Oedipus in Sophocles' drama? What does the success or failure of its application tell us about the play? Keep in mind (although our English translation does not do justice to the fact) that ideas of happiness and unhappiness, success and failure, reaching your appropriate end or avoiding it, are most often expressed in the Greek text by words that are variants of the Greek word for luck.
4. "Oedipus the King is not a drama of fate, although unavoidable (therefore 'fated') events lie in the background of the play. Granted, the past that overwhelms Oedipus is odd from our point of view, but in a sense, the past is always 'fated,' and we are all liable to Oedipus's fate insofar as we are all liable to discovering that something we did has taken on dreadful qualities in the light of events subsequent to our doing it. In this connection, we can say that the action of Oedipus the King is not the spectacle of a man who becomes a puppet in the hands of the gods (or at least Apollo) but rather the spectacle of a man freely choosing, from the highest motives, a series of actions which lead to his ruin." Present arguments on one or even both sides of this issue.
5. Narratives are often said to balance two opposed functions: on the one hand, the regularity, familiarity and predictability of a structure; and, on the other, the novelty and unexpectedness of events, of random occurrences. Focusing either on Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* or Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in relation to the accompanying texts you have

read, write an essay that considers how the play expresses, combines and balances these functions.

6. Outline the stages of Pascal's argument about wagering on God's existence, and comment on their consecutiveness. What sort of person would, do you think, be receptive to it? In answering the question consider the following: It has been said that Pascal was not actually offering an instrument to encourage belief but rather illustrating the nature of the notion of *expectation* as it applied to reasoning about probability. What is your view? The eighteenth-century philosopher Diderot dismissed the argument by saying that it would serve as well to inculcate belief in all sorts of gods and not just the God of Christianity. (*An Imam might argue as much.*) In contrast, his contemporary Voltaire thought that it was unsuited to the importance of the subject to use arguments appropriate to the practice of gambling in discussing it. Comment on one or both of these opinions.

6. Pascal's wager concerning God is centrally involved with the question of how to make a rational decision to act under conditions of uncertainty. In light of Pascal's argument, write an essay that examines the problem of the decision of whether and how to act in *Hamlet*. In what ways do Pascal and Shakespeare represent what it means to be rational, and how do they treat the relationship between rationality and decision-making?

8. Try to give a careful account of any of the propositions about God that Leibniz thinks he has refuted in his abridged *Theodicy*. Put the best face that you can upon the propositions and upon Leibniz's refutation and try to show what issues are involved in them and whether the quarrel between them makes sense.

7. In the *Physics*, Aristotle asserts that "[i]t is absurd to suppose that purpose is not present in nature because we do not observe the causes deliberating" (8). Consider the case(s) made for design/divine purpose in the work of one or two of the following authors: Leibniz, Newton, Pope. On what ground(s) do these authors insist on the underlying justice of events (such as the presence of randomness or evil in the world) whose causes are obscure? What is or what should be the relation of faith to determinate knowledge founded in experience? What kinds of knowledge are we capable of acquiring to assess the likelihood of purposes that are beyond our power to comprehend in full?

8. In a fragment of his *Pensées*, Pascal writes:

What a chimera, then, is man! What a novelty! What a monster, what a chaos, what a contradiction, what a prodigy! Judge of all things, imbecile worm of the earth; depository of truth, a sink of uncertainty and error; the pride and refuse of the universe!

Hamlet says:

What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? (II.2.273-8)

And here is Pope, from the *Essay on Man*:

When the proud steed shall know why man restrains

His fiery course, or drives him o'er the plains;
When the dull ox, why now he breaks the clod,
Is now a victim, and now Egypt's god:
Then shall man's pride and dulness comprehend
His actions', passions', being's use and end;
Why doing, suff'ring, check'd, impell'd; and why
This hour a slave, the next a deity. (Epistle I)

Taking any two of these quotations, and reading them in the context of the texts from which they are taken, discuss. Contrast and compare them.