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### FORTUNATE MISFORTUNE REVISITED: FURTHER REFLECTIONS

In a previous work (SMILANSKY 1994/2007), I considered the philosophically neglected phenomenon of “Fortunate Misfortune” (or FM). This follows from the way in which sometimes what seems an obvious misfortune turns out, in fact, to be actually good fortune. The paradox, in a certain class of cases, is this: if a seemingly unfortunate aspect of a life has proven to be beneficial overall, then it has not been a real misfortune. However, certain aspects of actual lives seem to be obvious misfortunes, irrespective of what follows. Often, both saying that the life aspects under consideration are misfortunes and denying that they are seem unacceptable. Simply saying that they have been both a misfortune and not a misfortune would not do: the question which concerns us is whether something has been an unfortunate, regrettable occurrence. We shall understand this question at least initially in the “overall” or “at the end of the day” sense and, as we shall see, the difficulty does not result from ambiguity or indecision. There are here two opposing views, and in cases amenable to a decision, we rightly seek a reply. In the present paper I aim to survey some of the conceptual, moral and social implications of cases of Fortunate Misfortune. This will be mostly done in the form of questions, exploring the perplexities FM brings up and the challenges it hence poses for further work.

Before considering the questions and implications, we need to understand better the nature of FM. Individual and collective cases of FM are not rare. People can be born with or confronted later in life with physical, psychological, social or cultural deficiencies or handicaps that, in themselves, are unwanted. Those might be genuine shortcomings (such as being deaf) or they

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might be neutral differences that function in adverse ways only because of the attitudes of others (as when ethnicity is a basis for discrimination), but in any case the person is apparently confronted by misfortune. In certain cases, however, such deficiencies or handicaps prove to be highly conducive to the (seemingly unfortunate) person who has had to confront them: overcoming a physical disability might facilitate the development of athletic abilities that would otherwise not have developed; poverty can lead to increased motivation and focused concentration which result in great future success; the need to overcome social obstacles and barriers drives one towards flexibility and creativity; a period of illness or injury, or a loss, can lead to reflection from which a beneficial radical change of one's life follows; loneliness and rejection may lead to a deeper capacity for emotion and a heightened sensitivity. Sometimes the misfortune might lead to a totally different path in life, but this is not necessary, one might just become a different sort of (say) writer than one would have become, in all likelihood, otherwise; or the relevant fortunate change might be only internal.

Cases of FM involve, then, both an apparent misfortune and an apparent good fortune, that seem not only apparent but such that we (as evaluators) would be loath to reject either evaluation. Both elements are intimately connected in some way and, crucially, the good fortune would not in all likelihood have occurred but for the misfortune. The most perplexing cases of FM are those in which a number of specific conditions are met. I have discussed and defended these in detail in the abovementioned discussions, and here will present only the most important factors:

- The misfortune is, by comparison with the good fortune, not trivial. Breaking a leg and as a result meeting and marrying the doctor, with whom one then goes on to live happily ever after, does not count as a case of really perplexing FM, for the misfortune pales in comparison to the benefits it produced. This is, of course, counter-factual: we are assuming in such cases that one would not have had an even better marriage if one had not met and married the doctor. Breaking a leg is unpleasant, but in this context it is, surely, merely a blessing in disguise. But many years of suffering in childhood (followed by good fortune) would be a case of FM.<sup>1</sup>

- The connection between the misfortune and the ensuing good-fortune is "of the right kind". In "ideal type FM" the misfortune is deeply involved

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<sup>1</sup> Likewise, we are not concerned with cases where an apparent misfortune prevents an even greater misfortune, which would have otherwise occurred, from occurring. Given that those were realistically the only two possibilities, there is nothing paradoxical about the fortunate nature of the state of affairs where the lesser evil materialized.

with the ensuing good fortune and not accidental. If some instance of very bad fortune was in fact a causal condition of buying the winning lottery ticket that radically changed one's life for the better, then this may be a case of FM. But more interesting are cases in which the misfortune transformed the person and through this led to the ensuing good fortune (a striking example is Victor Frankl, whom I quoted in the original FM paper). In other words, cases in which the misfortune had a fundamental, *formative* impact on the person in a way that made him, overall, fortunate. For in such cases the misfortune proves serendipitous in a non-accidental way, deeply influencing the person (in what may prove to be fortunate) rather than just happening to him or her; hence the puzzle of the role of the misfortune goes deeper.

- Such cases need not involve agency: it suffices, for example, that a person's capacity for receptiveness or sensitivity was transformed through the misfortune in a way that later proves beneficial to her. But a particularly interesting set of cases are those where the misfortune—by its influence on the character, motivation and contexts in which the person developed—produced the good fortune through the person's agency. The centrality of the role of agency in personhood makes these cases especially interesting, for FM then deeply involves what the person does, in how she chooses to act and leads her life.

- The purported FM person recognizes that she is such or, at least, would concur with the view that she is the beneficiary of FM if she thought about it carefully. By contrast, if, say, she does not share another person's view that the grim years of her childhood were "worth it" in leading to her later triumph, but would give everything in the world for her childhood to have been less unfortunate, then we do not have a true case of FM. For certain purposes we might decide not to follow the subjective judgment of the person, but the cases where the FM person recognizes herself as an FM person and, as it were, "accepts" the misfortune as having been "worth it" in order to have the good fortune, affirming that she takes the whole situation as, overall, positive, are the more interesting ones.

Cases of FM are far from rare: it is common for people to be better off as a result of what seemed at the time to be a terrible blow, and many will acknowledge that, while the misfortune was substantial, if it had not taken place they would not have ended up where they are, where they are happy to be, all things (including the original misfortune) considered. They affirm the

misfortune in the sense that they prefer being in a state such as they would not have ended up as being in, but for the serious misfortune.<sup>2</sup>

Most examples of FM in life would seem to follow from passive happenings or states (disability, poverty, social barriers, loneliness), which prompt one to action (overcoming the misfortune, creativity, sensitivity) or simply lead subsequently to fortunate events. But we could also include more active factors such as tendencies of character and actions, which would significantly broaden the scope of the phenomenon under discussion. For instance, one could say that Oscar Schindler's vices, such as being a habitual liar and manipulator as well as a *bon vivant* were essential for his success in rescuing the Jews during the Second World War, since the rescue essentially involved successfully fooling the Nazi officers.<sup>3</sup>

FM is also prevalent collectively: the need to overcome environmental hardship or social oppression has been historically crucial in the formation of groups, even nations, in ways in which many of their members may be happy to be. The Dutch, whose proverbial national character and ingenuity are said to have benefited greatly from the encroachment of the sea and the need to deal with it, are only one example out of many. The Jewish case, throughout the long, often both heroic and tragic history of the Jewish people, is even more dramatic. Jewish collective survival in the face of the disappearance of its enemies (including Babylonians, Assyrians, Hellenics and Romans), the heights of cultural achievement in the face of national loss and endless persecutions in the diaspora, individual triumphs when (and often as a result of) discrimination and hatred, have been widely recognized. We must be careful here, however, for the bad fortune of some compensated by the

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<sup>2</sup> We have avoided here the complexities of identity. In some situations, we could not ask some of the questions that we have been asking because the very identity of the person was transformed by the FM in a way that made the questions impossible to answer. In other cases, FM might help to formulate important questions about identity and rationality: for example, when a person knows that but for the misfortune he would have been significantly different but still discernibly himself, and while he now prefers the combination misfortune + outcome, he also recognizes that had he not been transformed by the misfortune, his preferences and evaluations of the comparative states would have been different (see e.g. HARMAN 2009). Here we have not gone into such further complications.

<sup>3</sup> Regarding causal relations between unfortunate and fortunate events, there is room for the exploration of different cases, such as direct and non-accidental relations, a double effect (when the same event has both fortunate and unfortunate effects), as well as non-causal and non-accidental relations between the two. Think, for instance, of a medical doctor, who becomes a morally much better person, and a more sensitive one in a positive sense, although at the same time a traumatized person, during the time of war. Here all the effects are roughly simultaneous. Our evaluation of such a case as an instance of FM is likely to be complex.

good fortune of their descendants is not perplexing in a way that we find when both the misfortune and the “greater” good fortune occur in the same lives.

The paradox of Fortunate Misfortune, as explained in the first paragraph of this paper, and the ways of dealing with it (SMILANSKY 1994/2007; SAINSBURY 2009; SNEDDON 2012) are not our direct concern here; we wish to inquire after possible developments and implications. Some of the following topics seem to me particularly interesting, and in need of further investigation. The next paragraph sums up the issues raised in the original article, in question form, and then the numbered discussions will go beyond it.

The phenomenon of FM at once problematizes the very notion of *what is a misfortune*. Since that notion does philosophical, moral and social work, this by itself is already important. How can X be a misfortune when it has proven to be beneficial? But can it not be a misfortune, if it involved great, long-term or even permanent physical or mental suffering, such as pain, longtime despair, or humiliation? These seem intrinsically bad. Is it not manifestly mistaken to deny obvious misfortune, as well as being insensitive and, indeed, cruel? And is not this sustained even when the misfortune turns out to be instrumentally good, at least in case of great, intrinsically bad, initial misfortune? Or is it on the contrary mere confusion to do so, once it is understood that the misfortune was eventually fortunate? Do not the overall great resulting benefits trump the only-seemingly misfortune? How should one view the misfortune of others who have been unfortunate in such (fortunate) ways? And what attitude ought one to take to the misfortune, if one is an FM person—that is, when one understands that, if the misfortune had not happened, one would have been worse off? Moreover, what attitude ought we to adopt towards the FM person (including ourselves, if we are such) in light of the ambiguity in the misfortune?

On this basis, we can now turn to exploring further questions that rise out of FM and its implications.

1. Cases of FM present serious difficulties in evaluating *who are the disadvantaged*. It seems but commonsense to think that those who have suffered greatly in the past have been disadvantaged, and this is even more so with those who have obvious disadvantages at present (say, the blind or those who are in constant pain). A large dose of suffering, humiliation, limitation or iniquity in one’s life surely is a disadvantage. However, for those individuals in whose case the misfortune has proven to be a good fortune, typical judgments of being disadvantaged may not apply. After all, they are *better off* overall, because of the purported misfortune. This is not an error, but the nature of FM: there is a misfortune, but it has been beneficial. On the

other hand, denying the misfortune as a factor requiring compassion, compensation and so on also seems highly problematic. It is natural to think that we should treat the FM as unfortunate and, hence, as disadvantaged in some sense, *irrespective* of what has happened as a result of the transformation of this grave misfortune into something else. But how *can* they be disadvantaged if they are better off and, moreover, better off as a result of the disadvantage?

2. Similarly problematic in this context would be the urge to *equalize*, as distinct from the wish to take care of those who are disadvantaged. For many cases of FM involve people who have suffered grave inequality compared to others. This, atypically, has been turned around in a particular instance, but morally and socially the victims would seem to be clearly on the “receiving end” of any equalizing endeavor. For example, their childhood has been terrible, and much worse than that of others; they suffer from a continuous disability from which others are spared; or they have been victimized and discriminated against on account of their race or gender. However, now they are better off than most others. As such, they would seem to be on the side of those who ought to give to others, if an egalitarian orientation is taken seriously. Compensating the better-off FM will just increase inequality. There might be localized situations where even the better off might have a claim to be taking a disproportionate share of social resources (say, medical care), but for egalitarians those better off due to FM create a problem. Once again, we are pulled here in two opposite ways by cases of FM.

3. These points illustrate the fundamental difficulty that cases of genuine, important FM pose for the issue of *justice*. Justice is of course multi-faceted and its nature is controversial. But if distributive justice, for example, is supposed to track equality, or to compensate the worse off, then we can readily see that FM people, who might have been victims of the greatest misfortune, and perhaps even of the malevolent intentional harm of others, nevertheless purportedly have very low priority in terms of such notions of justice, for their current situation—in part due to the misfortune they suffered—is better than most relevant others.

4. Moreover, many of the most striking cases of FM are particularly interesting because they involve an unusual amount of *meritorious agency*—deliberation, choice, action, effort, perseverance, mental toughness and responsibility. Almost everyone in a given neighborhood and familial environment has been overwhelmed by the misfortune: by the poverty, violence, poor education, absence of positive role models, emotional neglect, or the sheer grimness of the struggles of daily life. The FM person, however, overcame

all this, at least in the sense that he managed to produce sufficient good out of it to make it FM. Moreover, he took the very conditions that buried others, and heroically transformed them into wings for his own flight. It would seem to be required that we evaluate him as someone who has a triple call on our sympathy and respect: (i) as a bearer of original misfortune through no fault of his own,<sup>4</sup> (ii) as an achiever of high attainment, and (iii) as someone who has transformed the first into the second through his efforts. This seems relevant to many evaluations and reactions, including justice. It makes, for instance, any call upon him to pay for enhancing the conditions of others even more problematic. Particularly, of those who turned out less unfortunate while we assume that they are, to some extent, responsible for this.

5. But beyond the connection between agency and merit, the salience of agency in such cases of FM brings up in dramatic and existential fashion questions of *fate, luck, choice and effort*. Going beyond the usual complexities of life, many cases of FM combine those elements in perverse and striking ways. Typically, individual control gives way to the power of brute forces, and agency flourishes only as such forces recede. But not here. Fate confronts a person with a great misfortune, with apparently very bad luck. But largely through choice and effort she can transform matters into a good fortune. The roles of luck and agency are great here. Moreover, they are often perversely entwined: such force of character and such radical choices would not have emerged but for the fate of confronting the bad luck, while the power of fate and luck might be shown in the very triumph of agency. It is not only that, surprisingly, things came out well, in the end, but that there is a drama combining brute harmful fate with heroic overcoming and triumph that is, nevertheless, inherently tied to this fate.

6. Beyond issues of determining the status of the FM as disadvantaged and of what “egalitarian compensation” will require, and the roles of agency and luck, there is the issue of the attitude we ought to take towards the FM person. The FM pro tanto merit great appreciation, when they have transformed a misfortune into good fortune; and in particular when this is done through their unusual initiative and effort, as we have seen. They also ought to get our compassion, for having had to confront the misfortune in itself, and for having had to deal with it and, as it were, to sink or swim. Typically, one confronts in such cases a great misfortune, which one had not chosen,

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<sup>4</sup> The misfortune in FM can also, at least in part, be the fault of the agent, while retaining the feature of FM, but this would complicate matters, and our evaluation would be contextual. That her fault was also involved might increase the misfortune and, perhaps, our evaluation of the credit owed to the agent who has overcome it.

one is “thrown” into a potentially tragic situation, and needs to save oneself. The compassion needs to be held on to even if the person later is triumphant and happy. When as often bad memories persist, this merits further compassion. Whatever we come to think about the issue of compensation, for example, the compassion is less “open for negotiation”, it is owed as a matter of humanity. What the transformation into FM should do, however, is to eliminate an element of pity, which (in contrast to compassion) often involves looking down on the victims.

7. Cases of FM also bring up in an interesting way the role of *knowledge* and of one’s emotional *attitude* concerning one’s life. What, for example, is the point at which one decides whether a misfortune has been good-fortune and whether one is a FM? At the end of one’s life, or at least in some retrospective position which is seen as privileged? Or through some adding of the separate contemporary judgments about the different portions of a life, and then averaging them? Or in a different way? And how does the *timing* of the evaluation affect the existence of FM, or at least realization that it exists? Here it might be argued that FM only emerges from an implausible “bird’s-eye” view of the whole of life. After all, if we think about things chronologically, in the “middle of the plot” we only have misfortune, and if we look only at the end the resulting good fortune will seem overwhelming. The verdict of FM requires a combined inclusive perspective, but this may seem mere confusion. In reply we might point out the importance of such an overall estimate in many people’s lives, for instance in their search for meaning; it is not some artificial construct. But we also need not go so far: it is sufficient to think about the role that misfortune plays in people’s call upon others for compassion, or in the demand that it affect distribution, to see that taking such a broad perspective is personally and morally necessary.<sup>5</sup>

8. We also need to take up the way in which “thinking makes it so”: how one views what was (or is) a grave misfortune is crucial in creating FM, at least in the way that we have been considering it. We must beware of too much emphasis on “the power of positive thinking”, but with FM such power does seem to come out in a striking way. Sometimes FM emerges from the effect of the misfortune on the person’s thinking, sometimes the good fortune depends upon taking the right attitude towards the misfortune, and sometimes FM exists, and the role of thinking is to help the person achieve a

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<sup>5</sup> Thinking of how people’s lives go beyond their death would enrich our evaluation, what happens to one’s ancestors for example might matter; see e.g. SMILANSKY (2021).



mature acceptance of the misfortune (and indeed a sort of reconciliation with it) as part of the overall life.

9. Would we want to say that *everything* can be turned into good fortune, all things considered, so that, given a misfortune, at worse it will be FM? That is surely too strong, for some misfortunes, such as losing all one's children, clearly cannot be "redeemed" whatever happens, and cannot be turned into a FM. Moreover, we must be careful not to set too high a standard of expectations, so that if a victim of misfortune fails to convert it into FM, we do not conclude that this is his responsibility and he is blameworthy or criticizable. In cases of severe misfortune, converting it into FM is a great attainment for the victim, and not something that can be widely expected of everyone in similar circumstances. Nevertheless, the possibility and potential for FM need to be remembered, and those who succeed can be positive models for others. Such FM heroes show to some extent a "Teflon effect", in which the "stain" does not destroy the object, because it is, metaphorically, made of Teflon. Commonly the memory of the harm and some negative effects may remain alongside the later triumph, and in this way the Teflon metaphor needs to be used with care. For, in cases of FM, there is usually a genuine misfortune that is not erased when it leads to greater good fortune. And yet, in FM cases involving great misfortune the misfortune does not succeed in overcoming the victims, and they use it in order to improve their situation, turning it into good fortune.<sup>6</sup>

10. Questions of *rationality* and *irrationality* can also be looked at in the examination of Fortunate Misfortune. Pitfalls of denial and self-deception lurk here in complex and particularly forceful ways: in the dissonance of the FM state, the tendency to deny either the misfortune, the good fortune, or the necessary connection between them, can sometimes be found. In certain cases, we might want to say that a person who sees herself as an FM is irrationally "positive": the misfortune, we feel, cannot be a good fortune, there is insufficient good to be extracted to compensate for what was (or is) a huge misfortune. Conversely, an unwillingness to take a misfortune as, overall, fortunate might also lead us to view someone as irrationally "negative", perhaps when the ensuing good fortune seems objectively to be comparatively overwhelming. However, and particularly in cases where both the misfortune and the good fortune are very substantial, we must be wary of rushing to such judgments. One understandable tendency—which nevertheless needs to

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<sup>6</sup> For the reverse "Teflon effect" in which victimizers and other wrongdoers remain unstoppable and unpunished despite their wrongdoing, see SMILANSKY (2013).

be resisted—would be to deny the role of the misfortune in getting the good fortune, either because it is perceived as decreasing the merits of the agent, or because it might affect matters such as the compensation she thinks she deserves for the initial misfortune, or for her efforts. But rationally we can, as we saw, take account of these matters, while acknowledging the necessity of the misfortune in generating typical cases of FM.

Another question is whether one may agree that one is better off overall as a result of some factor, but could still *rationally* prefer that this factor had not intervened, that is, prefer to have remained *less* well off. In the original discussion (SMILANSKY 1994/2007b) I bypassed this issue, through assuming that the relevant people would say that they are happy to be better off, overall, and in a sense therefore accept the misfortune insofar as it is a condition for their good fortune. It might be thought that when the agent says that she'd rather not have had the misfortune even if it means sacrificing the overwhelming good that came with it, it is because she believes that without the misfortune, other opportunities, for other sorts of fortune, would have been open to her, and she trusts that she'd have done well in those situations and forged an even happier life. But that would not be in keeping with the original puzzle of FM as we posed it. The misfortune is a condition of the person's being as well off as she is; this is defintial of FM as we are using the term. It is important to note the possibility, which seems to me not necessarily irrational, of opting for the less good state of affairs overall, namely, in our context, less of a misfortune even at the price of lesser or no good fortune (and a lesser overall situation in terms of the relevant value). This is a wide-ranging topic that, like other issues we are noting, cannot be discussed here in detail but it seems to be important, as it flies in the face of widely assumed views about rationality and maximization (such as in utilitarian theory).

11. These issues are connected to the question of *perspectives*. Is there a privileged point of view of evaluation concerning the reality of FM? Is it a perspective seen from the first person or from the third person or both equally, that might settle whether something counts as an instance of FM? Another way to ask the question is this: can the subject of misfortune wrongly identify something as a case of FM? In my original discussion (SMILANSKY 1994/2007b), I set up the FM and made my life easier by focusing on the subjective assessment of the purported victim of FM. But while we would certainly wish to take account of the views of the person as crucial data, and should for example be wary of imposing our view that there has been a good fortune in the face of the victim's opposition, I do not think we

can plausibly deny that an external, third-person input into the issues of FM can make sense, and be useful.

I also think there is strong pressure to follow Aristotle and to conclude that we cannot judge anything a misfortune until its subject is dead, and thus that the proper unit of evaluation is a whole life. If we ask, for example, “But how can they have been unfortunate if they are better off and, moreover, better off as a result of the purported misfortune?” then we must accept that many things can later turn out not to be a good fortune, even at the very end, hence affecting the overall evaluation. Although, admittedly, if a misfortune has led to overall good fortune and some years have passed, it seems only a remote probability that the original misfortune will somehow later erase the good. On the other hand, we know that the end-of-life perspective can introduce various forms of bias, for it depends upon people’s idiosyncratic memory, people may give disproportionate weight to the later parts of their lives, and the like. And so, while waiting to the end of life in order to “have all the data in” has its advantages and would be sensible—a richer more complex evaluation, which can overcome the potential bias of an end-of-life perspective, should be more adequate.<sup>7</sup>

12. The comparison between FM and the philosophical (rather than more simplistic folk) notion of moral dilemmas can also be fruitful (see STATMAN 1993; cf. SAINSBURY 2009). If, all things considered, some action A is the right thing to do, how can it be (if it is) that A still has a feature that is not morally satisfactory, that counts as a “moral cost”? One standard reply is that the bad feature does not lose its intrinsically negative value. Others might counter that the overall judgment necessarily subsumes the part that pointed in another direction. The analogy with FM seems compelling, but its significance would need to be further investigated. Often some “remnant”, some remaining presence of the misfortune continues to be present, even when the ensuing good fortune emerges, and the necessity of the bad fortune for it to emerge is recognized. That “remnant” will be, indeed, typical as a mark of a genuine grave misfortune, which although it has led to the good fortune, has also been a deep and unforgettable misfortune; and its presence as an unfortunate aspect of life (say, in memory) continues to be there.

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<sup>7</sup> Even after a person has died we cannot be certain that a misfortune was a FM because this involves knowing what would have happened if the misfortune had not occurred. It may be that the initial misfortune makes possible some great benefits but that if it had not occurred, some other event (perhaps even a more initially unfortunate one) would have enabled the person to have an even better life than she had with the FM. Yet in cases where the F element in FM has been great, we can be fairly sure. In any case, we are assuming that cases of FM indeed have a robust F element.

13. A further topic concerns the evaluation of those who *caused* the misfortune, in those cases in which the misfortune is caused by agency, particularly by wrongdoing. Surely we do not want to give any moral or social allowance to, say, racists or anti-Semites, even if there are cases where black people or Jews have benefited as a result of the misfortunes inflicted on them. The ensuing good fortune was the very opposite of the intention of the perpetrators. Similarly, an abusive parent or husband whose attitude and behaviour were crucial in leading a woman to independence and self-realization would not deserve credit for the successful result. And yet here as well FM often matters. Even in these cases involving wrongdoing, the misfortune's turning into FM may be somewhat redemptive for the wrongdoer. It can be said that in such cases the bad people have had good moral luck—at least the results of their evil have not materialized in ways that are bad. They have not, in fact, been harmful overall. To the extent that we take into account not only bad intentions and actions but results (as in certain interpretations of moral luck), then the evaluation will be less severe. I hold that moral luck is an “existential paradox” (SMILANSKY 2007a, 4–5), that is, paradoxical but true, and so believe that there can be genuine good moral luck. It may be unjust that one's demerits are mitigated by moral luck, which is not due to one, but such fortunate effects for the wrongdoer of the FM of his victim, seems to me real. Others, particularly those who reject moral luck, or focus on intentions, would disagree here.

14. FM sometimes complicates *remorse*. Should the need for remorse not be transformed—although surely not given up altogether—when action that was intended to harm someone has proven to be beneficial to the intended victim? One has in fact benefited the person that one should feel remorse for trying to harm. If one is now pleased that one's past target is better off as a result of one's attempt to harm her, then it is natural for there to be a sense in which one is ashamed of one's past intention and action. But there can hardly be the sort of accompanying horror at the consequences of what one has done, that usually accompanies remorse. And perhaps there might even be a reluctant pleasure that one has played a beneficent role, however perversely, since things have turned out for the best.

15. *Forgiveness* as well might be affected. Might victims forgive more easily when, while it cannot be said that nothing bad was done to them, and while surely the wrongdoers do not deserve any gratitude, the results, overall, are acceptable or indeed better? Those who set out to harm them had bad intentions, and that would need to be forgiven; many might find that difficult. Indeed, it cannot be said that the FM in itself provides any rational rea-

son to forgive the intentions. But in cases of FM, the *actual harm* does not need to be forgiven in the way it normally would need to be (if it is to be forgiven) because, while there might have been some actual harm, the act that caused the harm was on balance beneficial. Another way in which this point can be seen concerns resentment. There is a close connection between forgiveness and resentment (see MURPHY 1988), and in FM, there is no harm (at least on balance) to be resented. Unless we focus only on intentions, in cases of FM there is, at the very least, less to forgive. The attitude of the wrongdoer towards the FM in itself might be, of course, highly telling here and so, if the wrongdoer is relieved and glad that the initial harm became a FM, this may and arguably should make it easier for us to forgive her.

Forgiving is also made easier by FM, and sometimes may be indeed called for, in cases where no evil intentions were present, but still the person was wronged or initially severely harmed. For example, when a young woman is restricted to a highly limiting traditional education because her parents think that is the best thing for her, or a young man is strongly pushed to pursue a career that is wrong for him for similar reasons, then there might be a lot to forgive. When things have turned out well, as in FM, forgiveness should be easier.

16. In any case, going back to cases of intended harm, one's overcoming of the misfortune that the other has inflicted is already a victory over that other; and this can be relevant to issues of *revenge*. There is a particularly triumphant feeling for those who have suffered FM as a result of being wrongly targeted by others, like a ju-jitsu fighter who uses the force of the opponent in order to defeat him. While a victim of another's evil-doing might be consumed by the desire to retaliate against whoever harmed her, in cases of FM this has already to some extent occurred: it makes it easier to say to oneself that "Living well is the best revenge"; one can go on in one's life and be released from the concerns with revenge, concerns which might emotionally take a toll on one. And this is strengthened in many cases of FM, for, we recall, the good life *results* from the would-be misfortune inflicted by another. The perpetrators who treat us malevolently have wrongly intended and aimed for our harm, but their machinations have backfired, and they have in fact ended by benefiting us. The decline of the urge to get back at those who aimed to unjustly hurt us may not in fact occur. Deriving the good-fortune from the malevolent intended harm of our accidental benefactors can be seen as a sort of revolt against them, and our success need not be seen as closing the metaphorical account. One may still not think that the best revenge is living well, but rather that *the best revenge is revenge*. And

morally we would not want to say that the mere reality of FM forces any would-be victim to give up on any revenge seeking. But, again, FM may, not unreasonably, be seen *as* poetic revenge, as defeat for our would-be enemies, reducing if not omitting the need for anything further.

17. The reverse of such feelings of triumph on the part of the would-be victims can appear, particularly in cases of FM, in others. Victimiziers can of course be particularly exasperated at having their plans foiled, at having, against their intentions, actually contributed to the lives of those whom they tried to harm; and perhaps even at having it widely known that they have contributed in such a way, which is the reverse of what they are about. Perhaps even more interesting, however, are negative responses of others, who are not directly participating. Both individuals and collectives who have been unfortunate but managed to turn the misfortune into overwhelming good fortune are often envied, and can generate particular hostility. Their success sheds a negative light over the performance of others in similar circumstances. Even more broadly, FM individuals and collectives can be resented for having triumphed over their extreme adversity, which can be taken as making the lesser adversity faced by others, and any success they might have, as far less significant and impressive. These sorts of responses may be stronger, the stronger the original misfortune has been.

18. Finally, a comparison of FM with its opposite, namely Unfortunate Good Fortune (UGF), would be interesting (see the case of “spoilt Zelda” in SMILANSKY 2007, 16). In UGF, a significant element of a life that in itself, and typically, is a good fortune, proves to be unfortunate overall. Similar questions to those that we have already raised would emerge, but the structure of the replies may often be different. For example, in UGF the good-fortune might more easily seem negligible, in the light of its crucial role in establishing the overall unfortunate result, while in FM we are more reluctant to dismiss the misfortune. Hence cases of UGF, while indicative of the perversity of fate, would often seem less paradoxical than cases of FM. The attitude that others might merit is also asymmetrical. If growing up in a loving, trusting home has proved unfortunate in, say, making one unsuspecting and vulnerable to unexpected adversity later in life, one might still feel gratitude towards one’s parents, and one’s love for them might only *grow* as a result of the realization how very different and less meritorious many other people are, even though in fact the parents have inadvertently harmed one. In such a case, to one’s sadness at how one’s life has turned out despite the initial good-fortune might be added sadness for one’s parents, who know that their efforts to be benefactors have backfired.

To conclude. We have seen one and a half dozen ways in which questions, perplexities, paradoxes and implications can emerge from the initial paradox of FM. Both FM in itself, and its philosophical, moral, psychological and social implications, are unusually salient and fruitful, and require further attention. This survey has been only programmatic. There is need for further conceptual analysis, and for work within normative and applied ethics, moral psychology and other areas. The continuing neglect of this topic is unacceptable. I hope that this paper will help encourage such research and reflection.

In a broader way, that a single paradox can generate such richness is a testimony to the philosophical importance of paradoxes and related phenomena, concerning morality and meaning in life.<sup>8</sup> While a few paradoxes have generated a wealth of discussion, particularly in population ethics, this remains an exception rather than the rule. The philosophical neglect of such features of our thought and world is unfortunate.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Concerning my own work, see also e.g. SMILANSKY (2007a), SAINSBURY (2009), SNEDDON (2012), SMILANSKY (2013), SMILANSKY (2022). The latter is a broad survey of the role of paradoxes in the meaning in life issue. The most widely discussed moral and existential paradoxes are in population ethics (e.g. the Nonidentity Problem and Repugnant Conclusion) and moral luck; the literature on both is immense.

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#### FORTUNATE MISFORTUNE REVISITED: FURTHER REFLECTIONS

##### Summary

In a previous work I considered the philosophically neglected phenomenon of "Fortunate Misfortune" (or FM). This follows from the way in which sometimes what seems an obvious misfortune turns out, in fact, to be actually good fortune. The paradox, in a certain class of cases, is this: if a seemingly unfortunate aspect of a life has proven to be beneficial overall, then it has not been a real misfortune. However, certain aspects of actual lives seem to be obvious misfortunes, irrespective of what follows. Often, saying both that the life-aspects under consideration are misfortunes and denying that they are, seem unacceptable. In the present paper I aim to survey some of the conceptual, moral and social implications of cases of Fortunate Misfortune. This will be mostly done in the form of questions, exploring the perplexities FM brings up and the challenges it hence poses for further work.

**Keywords:** misfortune; fortunate misfortune; disadvantage; rationality; moral paradoxes; Smilansky.

#### SZCZĘŚLIWE NIESZCZĘŚCIE PRZEMYŚLANE NA NOWO: DALsze UWAGI

##### Streszczenie

We wcześniejszych tekstach omówiłem pomijane przez filozofów zjawisko „szczęśliwego nieszczęścia” (SN). Wiąże się ono z tym, że niekiedy coś, co wydaje się jawnym nieszczęściem, przyjmuje faktycznie szczęśliwy obrót. Paradoks, występujący w określonej klasie przypadków, jest następujący: jeśli na pozór niefortunny aspekt życia okazuje się w ostatecznym rozrachunku dobrodziejstwem, to nie był prawdziwym nieszczęściem. Jednakże pewne aspekty życia wydają się jawnymi nieszczęściami, niezależnie od tego, jakie mają następstwa. Powiedzenie zarówno, że rozważane tu aspekty życia są nieszczęściem i zaprzeczenie, że nimi są, wydaje się często nie do przyjęcia. W tym eseju przedstawiam wybrane pojęciowe, moralne i społeczne konsekwencje przypadków szczęśliwego nieszczęścia, stawiając pytania, rozważając zagadki, do których prowadzi SN oraz formułując wyzwania, z którymi trzeba się będzie zmierzyć w przyszłości.

**Słowa kluczowe:** nieszczęście; szczęśliwe nieszczęście; niekorzystne położenie; racjonalność; paradoksy moralne; Smilansky.