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Nussbaum on the Place of Luck in Moral Dilemmas: A Case Study of the Tragedy Agamemnon

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Abstract: This paper takes the ancient Greek tragedy Agamemnon as its research subject, starting with an analysis of Agamemnon's moral choices. It compares Socrates' and Aristotle's views on "goodness" and luck, and centers on the theories in Martha Nussbaum's The Fragility of Goodness to clarify why we should acknowledge the role of contingent luck in moral dilemmas. The study finds that although Agamemnon falls into a moral dilemma between family and the city-state due to bad luck, and his moral failure stems from non-subjective factors, he still bears responsibility. This is because the practice of "goodness" requires the joint action of virtue, external goods, and luck; however, the contingency of luck can hinder the achievement of happiness, while bad luck can temper virtue. In conclusion, Nussbaum reveals the limitations of human life and the fragility of "goodness": moral luck serves as a touchstone to test virtue, and people must strive to uphold virtue in dilemmas to pursue happiness.

Keywords: Nussbaum; Agamemnon; Luck; Moral Dilemmas; Fragility of Goodness

1. Introduction

As the opening work of Aeschylus' trilogy, Agamemnon is a classic ancient Greek tragedy. Nussbaum argues that throughout the story—whether it is the cause and effect of the war, the gods' teasing of humans through the choices they offer, or Agamemnon's moral duties to his family and the city-state—the tragedy of Agamemnon ultimately lies in the moral dilemma imposed on limited humans by bad luck that exceeds the limits of human endurance. In the face of such luck, humans are powerless.

2. Nussbaum's Judgment on Agamemnon's Choice Between Moral Duties to the City-State and Family

Delving into the details, the tragedy extends beyond Agamemnon's moral dilemma and Clytemnestra's choice between avenging her daughter and remaining loyal to her husband; it is also an accusation against the unpredictability of fate and a sense of helplessness in the face of inescapable bad luck. The fear evoked by tragedy is nothing but the feeling of powerlessness and insignificance we experience when confronted with the overwhelming force of fate [1]. The success of the goddess Artemis' revenge and the sorrow of humans being unable to defy the gods' orders reveal two truths: compared to the gods, the finiteness and vulnerability of mortal humans are the root causes of the inevitable tragedy of falling into moral dilemmas; furthermore, they show how difficult it is to achieve "goodness" in real-world practice.

Agamemnon's tragedy unfolds in the "Age of Heroes," beginning with the watchman's pleas to "pray to the gods" and "be delivered from hardship." Here, two desires for liberation from bad luck are planted, which foreshadow the entire tragedy.

First, praying to the gods. Throughout Agamemnon, there are numerous instances of obeying the gods' orders, praying for their blessings, and engaging in dialogues intertwined with the gods. The tragedy arises between humans and gods because the gods fail to understand humans' dilemmas or bring good luck when humans are trapped in moral predicaments; meanwhile, humans cannot defy the gods' orders to escape the predicaments of fate. Their prayers to the gods are filled with faith but yield no results.

Second, seeking deliverance from hardship. The watchman sees Agamemnon—returning victorious from the Trojan War—as a savior who "has luckily freed me from this suffering." He hopes the king's return will end his life of bad luck and bring good fortune. Little does he know that the return of the king, who sacrificed his daughter to win the war, marks the start of

the tragedy.

The seeds of the tragedy were sown even before Agamemnon's expedition: the vengeful goddess Artemis, enraged by the past incident of eagles preying on hares, demanded that Agamemnon sacrifice his daughter to calm the violent storms and allow his ships to sail through. Faced with the life of his own daughter on one hand and the risk of defying Zeus' order to campaign (if he remained stranded and unable to advance) on the other, Agamemnon was trapped in a moral dilemma between his duties to his family and the city-state, and he suffered immense agony.

No matter what choice Agamemnon made, the inevitability of tragedy could not be avoided. However, Nussbaum argues that this "helplessness" does not exonerate Agamemnon of blame. The essence of tragedy lies in the fact that even though characters like Agamemnon suffer moral failure due to non-subjective and uncontrollable factors, they still cannot escape responsibility for the consequences.

What makes Agamemnon's moral dilemma "terrifying" is that he clearly knows that whichever side he chooses to fulfill, he will betray the other ethical commitment and abandon the other moral duty—yet he must still make a choice to avoid defying the gods' orders. "Zeus deprived Agamemnon of the right to choose, but this does not exempt Agamemnon from the guilt caused by his mistake" [2], even though his moral dilemma arose from the gods' playful manipulation of his fate. At this moment, his desire to "pray to the gods" becomes an irony, for he is merely "a tool chosen by Zeus."

If the bad luck brought by the gods' trickery marks the start of Agamemnon's tragedy, his death after returning home from the war forms the logical conclusion of the tragedy. With the decline of matriarchal society, the development of productivity, and the emergence of private ownership, patriarchal society gradually made power, warfare, and praise for heroism the themes of the era. Agamemnon's departure for war left Clytemnestra, the queen, in power—a situation that aroused dissatisfaction among the watchman, the herald, and even the servants, simply because she was a woman. For patriarchal society, this was undoubtedly a challenge and an act of usurpation of power. Unable to refuse her authority, they longed for Agamemnon's return to "deliver them from hardship." As the watchman says at the beginning: "The light of fire will bring news from Troy, telling of the war's victory. I do this only because I am commanded by her—the woman with a man's mind." And: "I mourn the misfortunes of this household and lament that its rule is not as good as it once was. Now, may good luck come and free us from toil; may the fire in the darkness bring good news!" [3] Unexpectedly, upon his return, Agamemnon was killed by Clytemnestra—the very queen whom people in patriarchal society saw as an usurper.

Like Agamemnon, Clytemnestra was trapped in a moral dilemma: choosing between avenging her daughter and remaining loyal to her husband. The difference, however, is that Clytemnestra's dilemma was not limited to "luck"; her desire to avenge her daughter was rooted in Agamemnon's cruelty toward their child. Clytemnestra did not blame Agamemnon for prioritizing his duty as a king over his role as a father; instead, she resented his utter disregard for family affection and the brutal manner in which he sacrificed their daughter [4]. As mentioned earlier, Agamemnon was innocent in the moral dilemma brought by bad luck, but this did not mean he was "blameless." He still had to atone for his moral failure.

Agamemnon, a valiant warrior, overcame countless obstacles to win the Trojan War. Even the hardships of the journey could not stop his return, and he was regarded as a heroic king by all. Yet this heroic king, who had not fallen to the swords of war, was killed by Queen Clytemnestra—who covered his head with a fishing net and stabbed him. "This is what I did—and I do not deny it—to ensure he could not escape his fate: I covered him with a seamless net, like catching a fish. It was a precious robe that brought death. I stabbed him twice; he groaned twice, and his limbs went limp. As he fell, I struck a third blow, an offering to Zeus below, the protector of the dead, to fulfill my vow" [3]. Here, Clytemnestra's words reveal the cause and effect of the tragedy: she understood that Agamemnon had fallen into a moral dilemma due to unfavorable luck, yet she condemned him and punished him for ruthlessly betraying his family duties. She questioned: "Now you sentence me to exile, to be hated by the citizens and cursed by the public; but you did not oppose this man at all back then. At that time, he did not care—he killed his own child, my dearest daughter, whom I bore in agony, as casually as killing a single animal among a flock of woolly sheep. He sacrificed her to calm the

storm blowing from Thrace. Shouldn't you have exiled him and punished him for this crime?" [3] Agamemnon could never have anticipated such an end, even though he clearly recognized his own guilt. His fate had long been foretold in the chorus' chant: "We sing a dirge, a dirge—may good fortune come" [3]. The most typical tragic element in Agamemnon lies in this duality: he was doomed to destruction, innocent yet guilty—a undeniable tragic figure.

3. The Contingent Role of Luck and External Goods in Moral Dilemmas

The tragedy of Agamemnon reminds us that we should acknowledge the role of luck in moral dilemmas, learn lessons from bad luck, and better cultivate our virtue. In moral practice, factors of luck that are completely beyond the agent's control can greatly influence the corresponding moral evaluation and moral responsibility, and such luck is referred to as moral luck. [5]. When an agent, influenced by moral luck, is forced to take actions that result in moral failure in other areas, they fall into a moral dilemma.

Socrates denied the role of moral luck, arguing that virtue is what truly matters and that luck cannot diminish the value of goodness. However, Socrates' conclusion applies only to the essence of goodness; it is insufficient to guide us in addressing real-life moral dilemmas. In contrast, Aristotle indirectly acknowledged the role of moral luck in his discussion of the "practice of goodness." Nussbaum pointed out the limitations of the essential "goodness" in practice and, combined with the concept of external goods, explored how we should construct a good life and achieve happiness.

3.1 The Obstacle of Luck's Uncertainty to Human Pursuit of Happiness in the Empirical Sphere

Aristotle argued that the desire for nobility and dignity is oriented toward goodness. This desire is a spiritual manifestation of virtue and possesses stability. Actions, however, are different: they involve differences and uncertainties. Unlike "correct actions," "noble actions" are far more difficult to achieve because they require the agent to possess "virtue." In other words, to perform a good and noble action, the agent must first have sufficiently noble virtue; second, a certain element of luck is also required. For a person with noble virtue, the difficulty does not lie in taking actions oriented toward goodness, but in whether luck will favor them—allowing them to achieve "goodness" without harm or falling into moral dilemmas.

Nussbaum affirmed Aristotle's view and further proposed that due to bad luck, certain virtues valued by people often lead agents with "sufficiently noble virtue" (rather than flawed ones) into dilemmas where it is impossible to fulfill moral duties without failure. In such dilemmas, the demands of one's character conflict with the need to preserve one's own life—and thus, with the possibility of continuing to practice virtue [4]. In the face of such contingent luck, "virtue" loses its self-sufficiency and instead reveals its fragility.

Aristotle regarded "happiness" as the highest good, for it is desired for its own sake and is a "good thing." He defined "happiness" as: a prosperous life combined with virtue; or a self-sufficient life; or the most pleasant life combined with security; or a life of abundant property and numerous slaves, with the ability to protect and utilize them [6]. This definition builds on the ideas of Socrates and other predecessors. Aristotle further argued that "happiness" must consist of noble birth, good looks and health, friends, children, wealth, honor, luck, and virtue related to "goodness." He believed that these internal and external traits together form the conditions for a person to be capable of practicing "goodness"—especially the security that power and luck bring to life.

Aristotle maintained that happiness is guided by the activity of perfecting virtue (i.e., internal goodness), but this is not sufficient. It requires the support of external goods such as health, wealth, good looks, and friends. Noble actions rely on these external goods as means, and they also require good luck. However, these conditions are not easily obtained. As previously noted, acquiring these external goods also depends on luck—thus, happiness is contingent. The practice of "goodness" also involves uncertainties: whether we can obtain the necessary external goods, and whether good luck will accompany us on the path to happiness.

When discussing the good luck required for external goods (as proposed by Aristotle), Nussbaum analyzed that practical mistakes can arise from reasons unrelated to moral evil, yet still exert a significant impact on the value of life [4]. As Aristotle stated: "Good things also exhibit uncertainty, for they often harm people:

today, some are ruined by wealth, while others lose their lives due to courage" [7]. We may possess noble virtue and sufficient external goods, but we cannot be certain of having good luck. This does not mean, however, that we can obtain happiness merely by praying for good luck.

Aristotle illustrated this point with examples: "Today, some are ruined by wealth, while others lose their lives due to courage." Happiness must include external goods controlled by good luck, but it is still dominated by the activity of perfecting virtue [8]. Therefore, in the practice of "goodness," there is always the possibility that luck will fail us—forcing us into moral dilemmas where "loyalty and righteousness cannot both be fulfilled." For instance, wealthy people have better conditions to help the poor resolve financial crises and gain honor, yet they may face bankruptcy due to unlimited charitable giving or be framed out of jealousy for their reputation as benefactors. Courageous people will help those in danger—such as rescuing someone drowning—but they risk losing their own lives in the process.

These two examples from Aristotle sufficiently demonstrate that the "practice of goodness" differs from the "essence of goodness." In real-world practice, "goodness" cannot be achieved merely through good intentions—or what Kant called a "good will." As Aristotle put it: "The practice of virtue requires many external things, and the more noble and perfect the practice, the more external things it needs" [7]. The exploration of the "practice of goodness" is analogous to the attitude of craftsmen and geometers toward right angles: geometers need to explore its essence and truth, while craftsmen only need it to be suitable for their work. Similarly, the "practice of goodness" is like a craftsman's use of right angles—it does not need to be perfectly "true," but it must adapt to reality. Therefore, when addressing moral dilemmas, we cannot view "goodness" purely through the lens of abstraction; instead, we must consider its "uncertainty."

3.2 The Enhancing Role of Luck and External Goods in Achieving Happiness

Based on Aristotle's theory that "goodness" is practice-oriented and thus focuses on human real-world activities, we must acknowledge the role of moral luck from the perspective of empirical facts. Humans cannot exist beyond their own finiteness; luck is a crucial constitutive factor that participates in and even determines our current lives. It often creates problems and dilemmas for a good life. As long as we have a clear understanding of the completeness of human life, we cannot ignore the impact of luck—there is no reason to regard contingency beyond the agent's control as an "alien" force [9].

Good luck can promote the practice of "goodness," while bad luck can hinder it. Nevertheless, neither is fundamental to the actions or goals of pursuing happiness through the practice of "goodness." As Aristotle argued: "All who have not lost the ability to approach virtue can acquire it through learning or effort. If happiness is better obtained through effort than through luck, we have reason to believe this is the way to achieve it. For it would contradict the order of things if the greatest and most noble of all things were subject to luck" [7].

Whether a person can obtain an environment and guidance to cultivate virtue, and whether they can turn virtue into a habit or trait through external goods, undoubtedly depends on the support of luck. However, it would be absurd to attribute all these causes and effects solely to luck. The primary condition for living a good life is to be a good person, but this is not sufficient—external conditions are needed to supplement it. These external conditions create a gap between "being a good person" and "living a good life," and such external conditions rely on luck. Additionally, the primary condition for being a good person is to possess good character and put it into practice—yet luck also influences the cultivation of character. In short, luck affects the entire process of humans pursuing their ultimate life goals, and this process becomes fragile because it is exposed to luck [10].

Humans cannot solely rely on the favor of luck, but happiness is also difficult to achieve without any luck at all. Only when fate withstands the test of time can one be called happy. As Aristotle noted: "When people say they are happy, they are expressing the hope that they will be happy in the future. As we have said, happiness requires complete goodness and a lifetime of time. For life is full of changes and uncertainties; even the luckiest people may encounter misfortunes in old age, like Priam in the epics. Yet no one would call a person who suffers such misfortunes and dies in agony happy" [7].

Furthermore, virtue alone cannot fully achieve happiness: "Virtue as a goal is not perfect either. A person may possess virtue but never put it into practice throughout their life. Moreover, a virtuous person may endure the greatest hardships—thus, no one would call such a virtuous person happy" [7]. Therefore, happiness also requires the assistance of external goods. For a virtuous person, living a restrained and productive life is the best way to practice virtue.

Clearly, virtue requires the support of luck and the assistance of external goods to achieve happiness. However, true happiness is stable, while luck is uncertain—thus, happiness cannot depend on the presence or absence of luck. The proper use of good luck and external goods in the pursuit of happiness is also a form of "goodness," but ultimately, the achievement and goal of happiness are attained through "virtuous activities."

When summarizing Aristotle's views on the role of luck in moral responsibility, Nussbaum argued that happiness is the highest good obtained by virtuous people through the practice of "goodness," using good luck and external goods as means. Although humans are finite and vulnerable, bad luck is not entirely a disaster—unless it is a devastating "calamity" like Agamemnon's tragic misfortune. The best outcome an agent can achieve is to face the suffering they must endure; this is a natural expression of their noble character, rather than suppressing these natural responses out of blind optimism [4]. It is precisely in the struggle against bad luck that agents can better demonstrate their virtue. Bad luck not only enriches their life experiences but also helps them better understand and cherish the hard-won good life [9]. In other words, achieving happiness is inseparable from active human engagement [11]. Those who can attain happiness will not easily abandon their virtue due to bad luck, poverty, powerlessness, or loneliness. Thus, luck and external goods are undoubtedly necessary for happiness, but the essential factor remains the ability to engage in "virtuous activities."

4. The Fragility of Goodness and Moral Responsibility

Aristotle regarded Agamemnon's choice as a "mixed action"—something between voluntary and forced. Such actions may be forgiven, but they do not exempt the agent from guilt, nor do they deserve praise. As he explained: "Sometimes it is hard to decide what to sacrifice, what to choose, or what to endure to gain something. But it is even harder to stick to the decision once made. For in such cases, the expected outcome is always painful, and the forced action is always shameful. This is why those who resist coercion are praised, while those who submit are condemned" [7].

Agamemnon was "forced" because the moral dilemma he faced exceeded the limits of human endurance. His choice was "voluntary," however, because he insisted that sacrificing his daughter was justified—even casting aside his guilt and treating his dying daughter with excitement and impulsivity.

4.1 Nussbaum's Condemnation of Agamemnon

In her book The Fragility of Goodness, Nussbaum put forward the view that "Agamemnon was helpless in his choice during the moral dilemma, yet guilty in the process." His guilt did not stem from his betrayal of family duties, but from his state of mind when faced with sacrificing his daughter. He should not have, after recognizing his helplessness in choosing, feeling sorrow for losing his daughter, and fearing defying the gods' order to campaign—engaged in internal struggle, made a choice, and then tried to exonerate himself from guilt. He showed no remorse at all; he even "lost" his virtue: he thought of his father-daughter bond for only a moment, then immediately convinced himself that his choice was justified. As described in the text: "Her pleas, her cries of 'Father,' and her virgin life were all ignored by those warlike generals. After praying, her father told his attendants to lift her up like a lamb and press her onto the altar—while she knelt faithfully before his robe—and to hold her beautiful mouth shut, lest she curse his household"[3]. At this moment, Agamemnon had disregarded Iphigenia's humanity, seeing her only as a lamb to be slaughtered. He even feared that she would curse him: "The only act in which he recognized her as a human being, not an animal, was ordering someone to hold her mouth shut to prevent her from cursing his family" [4]. There was no sorrow in him for the eternal separation from his daughter.

From the moment he made his choice, Agamemnon struggled internally. Although he

felt pain and hesitation, he still chose to "maximize benefits" in his helplessness. Nussbaum argued that at this point, Agamemnon was already doomed to guilt—for his true words contradicted his so-called "pain": "It is reasonable to urgently demand the sacrifice, to shed my daughter's blood to calm the storm! May all go well" [4].

In other words, Agamemnon's tragedy was a moral dilemma caused by the unpredictable bad luck of fate, but his guilt arose from the change in his attitude toward his daughter's sacrifice. Emotions are the foundation of a good human life, and a life without emotions hardly resembles a life that is truly human. Meanwhile, in certain situations, we must have corresponding emotions to respond correctly; failing to respond emotionally would be inappropriate[12]. From initially thinking, "Which option is not painful?" to later hoping, "May all go well," he deduced the inevitability of his action amid sorrow, convinced himself that his choice was correct, and thus felt relieved. As Nussbaum analyzed: "Agamemnon seems to hold two beliefs: first, if his decision is correct, then the action he chooses must also be correct; second, if the action is correct, then it is reasonable to desire to carry it out—even to be enthusiastic about it" [4]. This shift in "will" was the deeper cause of Agamemnon's moral failure. He should not have fixated on justifying his actions and emotions. Even if he had pondered questions like "Why would the gods trap me in such a moral dilemma?" or "Even though I am helpless, how can I treat her—my daughter—like an animal for sacrifice, without any sorrow or remembrance of our past bond?" his guilt would have been far less than it was for convincing himself of the justification and correctness of sacrificing his daughter.

According to Nussbaum, Agamemnon's greatest guilt in this moral dilemma was his failure to exhibit the emotions that a virtuous person should feel when trapped in such a predicament. "The best outcome an agent can achieve is to face the suffering they must endure; this is a natural expression of their noble character, rather than suppressing these natural responses out of blind optimism. And the best we—the chorus—can do for the protagonist is to respect the dangerous situation he faces, respect his response to it based on his noble nature, and regard the events he experiences as a reflection of the possibilities of human life" [4].

If Agamemnon had been able to foresee his own fate like Cassandra, would he still have faced his daughter's sacrifice so calmly? If he had shown remorse at that point, would his sorrow later have been for his own inescapable death, or for his daughter's sacrifice—given his earlier excitement at the thought that sacrificing her was the right choice? However, there was no sign of such a change in Agamemnon's mindset. Thus, he did not show the remorse that a person of noble character should feel when facing such a dilemma; he should not have rushed to carry out the sacrifice as if he had discovered a truth. A virtuous agent with noble character should always be aware that they are in a situation where mistakes are inevitable, and should feel and express the emotions that are appropriate to the situation. Agamemnon failed to do this. Therefore, he remained morally accountable for his actions.

4.2 The Contradictions and Conflicts of Responsibility in Moral Dilemmas Caused by Luck

Nevertheless, even though Agamemnon was guilty, it does not mean he is unworthy of sympathy. He could have avoided such a dilemma, but bad luck brought him devastating ruin—trapping him in a game of the gods, where he was teased and tormented. "We see Zeus pushing an innocent person into a situation where no matter how he chooses, he cannot escape guilt. Such a situation may be hard to accept in terms of practical logic, but it is not unheard of from the perspective of life experience" [4].

The choices in moral dilemmas evoke our sympathy because such tragedies occur in ordinary forms in our daily lives. For example, a woman torn between caring for her child and pursuing a career also falls into a moral dilemma and may complain about her bad luck. Our sorrow for Agamemnon's unpredictable fate does not mean we ignore his guilt of betraying family duties for the sake of the city-state's collective interests—like the chorus did (even though the chorus also expressed sorrow for Agamemnon's loss of his daughter). Instead, this tragedy "reflects" similar moral dilemmas, thereby revealing human finiteness: "We see that in human life, when faced with life-or-death situations and all choices are limited by necessity, humans can easily and skillfully replace humans with animals, animals with

humans, and strangers with loved ones" [4]. Agamemnon merely obeyed the gods' orders faithfully, yet he had to bear the devastating disaster alone, ultimately losing his life as a result of his actions.

"Choice" implies that multiple possibilities can be realized, but Agamemnon's dilemma left him with only five courses of action: suicide; fleeing; disbanding the expedition; stubbornly waiting for good weather; or obeying the order to sacrifice [13]. The tragedy lies in the fact that all the choices available to Agamemnon were unpleasant or dangerous—none were positive.

Agamemnon deserves sympathy and forgiveness because his unavoidable guilt did not stem from an inherently evil nature. Aristotle argued that in the face of great disasters, humans may have their inherent good character overwhelmed by suffering. Nussbaum believed that moral contingency determines the achievement of moral goals to a certain extent—including whether good people are rewarded for their goodness. Thus, moral activities do not always develop in the direction people expect, rendering ethics and morality fragile [14].

The choices made in moral dilemmas are "terrifying" rather than "blameless," because no one can make a completely reasonable choice in such extreme situations when practicing "goodness." For a person with inherently noble character, such suffering can even be a devastating blow—which is why it is "terrifying." Therefore, Nussbaum emphasized the "gap between having good character and living a good life."

Agamemnon was not a person without good character. He merely followed the path that most people with Greek values believed was determined by honor, justice, piety, and the primary obligation of subordinating his own and his family's lives to the common good [13]. It is precisely in the contradiction between inevitable dilemmas and the freedom to choose that his noble character is revealed.

The reason luck holds a moral status is not only that it traps us in moral dilemmas time and time again, but also that the practice of "goodness" continues to be affected by the bad luck that caused a previous moral dilemma. We may make choices that minimize losses in a moral dilemma, but the sorrow we feel ensures that our choices are not fully rational. In other words, after making the choice and regaining clarity, we cannot easily escape the shadow of that dilemma—it may affect our future practice of pursuing "goodness." As Nussbaum stated: "Even if Orestes made the best possible choice in his situation, what he did—what he did with a clear mind—was still an unforgivable sin. He could not continue to live as if nothing had happened" [4].

From this, we can see that the freedom to choose and the inevitability of dilemmas are not incompatible—because the practice of "goodness" is full of contradictions and conflicts. Thus, "goodness" is fragile in reality. This fragility arises from human finiteness: disasters, illnesses, and death constantly remind us of our vulnerability. Compared to independence and self-sufficiency, vulnerability is the eternal state of human existence—a fate we cannot escape [15]. Luck and the course of events are beyond the control of our reason, yet we must still take responsibility for them. Therefore, true "goodness" is difficult to achieve in practice. It is not a truth that can be discovered merely through reason guiding good intentions—especially since humans cannot possess complete and pure reason.

5. Conclusion

Tragedy reveals the limitations of human life and the fragility of "goodness" in practice. Yet it is precisely this fragility that makes moral luck a touchstone to test and temper our good character in dilemmas. Nussbaum argued that although virtue is the most essential factor for happiness, to achieve happiness, one must engage in practice aimed at "goodness." A good person may be blamed when faced with bad luck, but this does not mean they have chosen to tend toward evil; rather, it is a case of "well-intentioned but severely limited misjudgment." According to Nussbaum, this "misjudgment" explains that biased choices in dilemmas arise not from bad character, but from the gap between having good character and living a good life.

Even if happiness is not a gift from the gods, it can still be attained through cultivating good life habits and virtue—and such happiness is still sacred and far better than happiness obtained through the favor of luck. Similarly, although the practice of "goodness" is limited, difficult, and fragile, it still shines brightly. It is worthy of our pursuit, even after we have endured the hardships of moral dilemmas.

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