



## Chance and Fortune

Charles De Koninck

---

Volume 1, Number 1, 1945

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019746ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019746ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

Publisher(s)

Laval théologique et philosophique, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (print)

1703-8804 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

Cite this article

De Koninck, C. (1945). Chance and Fortune. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 1(1), 186–191. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019746ar>

## QUODLIBETA

*Nous publierons sous cette rubrique les questions qui nous auront été faites par écrit et nous tâcherons d'y répondre. Toute lettre doit être signée portant l'adresse de l'expéditeur. Les lettres anonymes ne seront pas lues. Le nom de l'expéditeur sera publié, à moins qu'il ne demande expressément le contraire.*

### I. Chance and Fortune

December 13, 1944.

My Dear Mr. De Koninck:

In connection with some research I am doing on Saint Thomas' Theory of chance, I have been studying your articles, «Réflexions sur le Problème de l'Indéterminisme,» in the *Revue Thomiste*, 1937. On page 243, you quote the following statement of Saint Thomas: «Et sic possumus accipere aliam differentiam inter casum et fortunam, quod eorum quæ sunt a casu, causa est intrinseca, sicut eorum quæ sunt a natura; eorum vero quæ sunt a fortuna, causa est extrinseca, sicut eorum quæ sunt a proposito.» (Commentary on II Physics, Lect. X, a. 10). Because you emphasize the underlined words, I am hoping that you may have an explanation for a difficulty I have found in this tenth lecture of Saint Thomas.

In paragraph 8, Saint Thomas writes: «Deinde cum dicit: *Quare manifestum est*, etc., concludit ex præmissis quod in iis quæ simpliciter fiunt propter aliquid, quando non fiunt causa eius quod accidit, sed fiunt causa alicuius extrinseci, tunc dicimus quod fiunt a casu. Sed a fortuna dicimus illa fieri tantum de numero eorum quæ fiunt a casu, quæcumque accidunt in habentibus propositum.» Here Saint Thomas says that events happening «a casu» have an extrinsic cause. However, in paragraph 10, as we have just seen, he seems to contradict this. My attempt at an explanation is as follows:

*Casus* has a generic meaning which includes *fortune* and a specific meaning which signifies something different from *fortune*. Saint Thomas says, «omne quod est a fortuna est a casu, sed non convertitur.»

According to Aristotle, *casus* in its specific sense is divided into:

- 1) events of which the cause is external, that is, those results which can be traced to nothing in the nature itself of the thing to which the chance events happen. Aristotle gives two examples:
  - a) a tripod falls so as to form a seat. (If a cube fell, it would, according to its nature, have to form a seat.)
  - b) a horse saves itself by turning off on a certain road.

- 2) events of which the cause is internal. Aristotle gives no example. (Ross maintains that Aristotle does not mean monstrous births because they are not «and-like» results.—*Aristotle's Physics* by W. D. Ross, page 524—However, Saint Thomas gives a monstrous birth as an example.)

Both Aristotle and Saint Thomas agree that *fortuna* is used properly of those only who act voluntarily.

Do you think it is possible that in paragraph 8 Saint Thomas merely summarizes Aristotle's teaching, using *casus* in its generic sense, while in paragraph 10, he uses the term *casus* in the second of its two specific meanings only? Perhaps Saint Thomas was not interested in events that happen *a casu* in the first specific meaning of *casus*, that is, in the chance happenings of inanimate objects, of beasts, and of infants.

Very Sincerely Yours,

.....

December 18, 1944.

Dear...

If you deem it necessary, I will write a detailed commentary on the two texts you refer to, but it is quite probable that your difficulties can be solved by carefully reading these texts in the light of what had been previously established concerning chance and fortune. So, for the present, I will confine myself to writing out at length what St. Thomas states briefly in nn.8 and 10 of lesson 10. From the grammatical point of view my «explanation» will be atrociously involved, but this difficulty can easily be overcome by reading it over a couple of times.

(8) From what has been previously shown [*and mindful of the fact that, as has been stated in n.2 of this lesson and shown in n.7, «casus est in plus quam fortuna», so that, provided we retain the generic imposition of the term chance, we may say that all that comes about by fortune comes about by chance, but not the converse*] we may infer that whenever, in those things which come about [*think of Socrates going to the market*] for the sake of an end intended [*to buy cabbage*] by the agent [*whether the agent be nature or intellect and will does not matter at the present*], an end other than the end intended is actually achieved [*the collection of a debt, either plus or without the cabbage*] by those very things brought about for the sake of the end intended [*i.e. by Socrates' going to the market to buy cabbage*], we see that these very things were also, although unintentionally, being brought about for the sake of [*causá*] the unintended end [*they led to the collection of the debt as well as to the cabbage. Remember what has been shown in lesson 8, n.9: in chance, an end is attained without being intended, so that it 'might' have been the end intended*]\*; this unintended end [*the collection of the debt*]

\*How does misfortune, either proper or metaphorical, fit in with this idea, since one would not pursue what comes about by misfortune? The answer is that what happens by misfortune is reducible to an end.

is of course extrinsic to the intended end (*the cabbage*), just as it is extrinsic to the intention of the agent [*Socrates' determination to have cabbage*] and extrinsic to those things which actually attained this end, since they were not intentionally brought about for the sake of this end [*the going to the market is intrinsically ordered to the cabbage; the going to the market for the sake of collecting a debt is, in the present case, extrinsic to the former, so that the same «going» has two aspects*]; whenever this occurs we say that those things which come about for the sake of an end not intended [*in the present example Socrates' going to the market to collect a debt*], came about for this end by chance. However, we cannot attribute to fortune all those things which come about in such a way [*for, as we have seen in the immediately preceding n.7, they sometimes occur in things acting by nature alone*]: among the number of things which come about for some end by chance [*taken here as a genus*], we attribute to fortune only those which occur to agents endowed with wilful design.

(10) We have so far distinguished chance and fortune as genus and species, but the difference is the greatest when we consider chance in those things which come about, not by an intellectual agent, but by nature as opposed to intellect [*that is by an intrinsic principle as opposed to an extrinsic one; see lesson 1 of this book, nn.2 and 5 as well as n.4 of the present lesson*], for this kind of chance is distinguished from fortune as one species of chance [*i.e. as one species of the genus chance*] from another species of chance [*so that in this consideration, chance and fortune divide the genus chance, they have their own difference with respect to the same genus, they are the extremes of the same genus*]. For when in the operations of nature [*all that brings about Socrates*] something is brought about other than what was intended by nature in her operations or not in conformity with what was intended [*as when a sixth finger is produced*] we do not attribute this to fortune as if the acting cause were an intellectual agent [*for Socrates is not generated by intellectual action and wilful action as such but by nature*] [*it is true that the sixth finger might be called a misfortune for Socrates, as may be gathered from n.5 of this lesson*], but we attribute it to that which is *pure chance*, that is, chance without being fortune, chance as specifically distinct from fortune [*just as what is 'only' animal is distinct from man, not merely as animal, but as irrational, as brute*]. And thus we can see another difference between chance and fortune when taking them as species of the same genus: the cause [*and by cause we mean, this time, the cause which efficiently brings about the casual effect, as will be brought out more clearly in the following n.11 and not, as in n.8, the cause for the sake of which; note the difference between «causa alicujus extrinseci» and «causa aliqua extrinseca»*] of those things which are by pure chance [*that is chance as a species distinct from fortune*] is an intrinsic cause just as the cause of those things which come about by nature. [*For, if nature, as opposed to art, say, is an intrinsic cause and, if those things which come about by pure chance, come about by the operations of nature although they are not intended by nature in these operations, then chance too is an intrinsic cause, notwithstanding the fact that the casual cause considered as such is formally distinct from nature operating formally as*

*nature, that is, as a determinate and finite cause acting for an end intended by determinate operations]. On the other hand, the cause of those things which are by fortune is an extrinsic cause just as the cause of those things which come from wilful design. [For, if the intellect and will are extrinsic principles of the work, and if the things that actually come about by fortune, come about by the operations of the intellectual agent as voluntary agent, then, what is actually achieved in these voluntary operations without having been intended, will be said to come from an extrinsic cause of the effects which come from it both as from a «cause finita et determinata» and as from a «causa infinita et indeterminata»].*

Efficient and final causality are diffinitive parts of chance and fortune. Fortune is «causa per accidens, i.e. infinita et indeterminata [quæ reducitur ad genus causæ moventis], in his quæ fiunt secundum propositum propter finem in minori parte»; pure chance is «causa per accidens in his quæ fiunt secundum naturam propter finem in minori parte.» The final cause insinuated by either of the definitions, as conjoined to or taking the place of, the final cause mentioned, is an extrinsic one, not in the ordinary sense where the final cause, as opposed to the formal and material cause, is extrinsic, but extrinsic in the sense I explained in the expansion of n.8. However, the cause which is reduced to the genus of moving cause is extrinsic in the case of fortune, because fortune *is* the intellectual agent; it is intrinsic in the case of pure chance, because this species of chance *is* nature as productive of effects not intended—having nevertheless the nature of an end—and rare.

Now as to what you say further on in your letter: «According to Aristotle...» I think that from the very definition of pure chance and from what I have added may be seen that the division you suggest is not called for at this point. The kind of external and internal cause involved in chance events, which you indirectly refer to, does not concern pure chance as such. See on this point St. Thomas II Contra Gentes, c. 30, «Tertio vero est... etc». Cajetan's commentary on the Ia Pars, q. 115, a. 6 will be extremely helpful.

I have some difficulty in seeing just how you understand the examples you refer to. But here is, I think, how they should be understood. When the three-legged stool falls, it is most unusual for it to fall back on its three legs so that it is in the right position to be sat upon. Now when this happens, we cannot say that it fell back on its three legs *for the sake of being in the right position to be sat upon*, as if the right position were the intended end of the fall. When this does happen as the result of the fall of a tripod, we attribute it to chance. As in all cases of chance, we must consider finality. Most authors go completely off on this point.—The «Case of the falling cube» is indeed quite different. Unlike a stool, the cube is not necessarily made to serve as a seat. However, even if it were, the case would still be different, since falling in the right position could not be due to chance: chance would have no chance! But even here you could not say that it fell as it did for the purpose of being sat upon. We're getting into a quagmire (where our cube might fall in a most unsuitable position!) and had better get back to a more sedate question.

When you say that «If a cube fell, it would, according to its nature, have to form a seat», I wonder if you are establishing any intimate connection between this «nature» and «nature» as it should be understood when we speak of chance. Nature may be taken in many ways. (Metaph. V, c. 4, lesson 5). Nature as understood in this Book II and defined in the first lesson, is only one meaning of the term, but it is the one we should understand when speaking of chance: «principium et causa motus et quietis...» as well as «ratio cujusdam artis, scilicet divinæ, indita rebus qua ipsæ res moventur ad finem determinatum». (Lesson 14, n.8). It is a kind of Ersatz-reason in things so that, having no intellect proper, they may still act for a determinate end. It would not, therefore, be enough to understand nature here as we take it when speaking of the nature of a circle, or even as when speaking of the nature of man meaning thereby the what-it-is signified by the definition. (This does raise a difficulty concerning the cubic seat and even more so concerning the tripod since both are artificial things. But I'll not go into that unless you want me to.)

From what I have said in my expansion of nn.8 and 10 of lesson 10, you see that the tripod and the horse are examples of pure chance events, whose cause is therefore intrinsic. St. Thomas mentions another instance, an instance which already had raised doubts in St. Albert who says, at this point: «Ego tamen in isto exemplo non multum video proprie esse casum, nisi large sumatur; et ideo etiam ipse Aristoteles talia etiam nata in libro de *Animalibus* vocat occasio nata et non casualiter nata. Casus enim est causa per accidens. Occasio enim minus dicitur quam causam, et est, ut diximus, quando propter aliquod accidens aliquid causatur, sicut in moribus dicimus aliquem dare occasionem quando innuit vel negligit aliquid propter quod aliquis damnificatur». (II Phys., Tract. II, c. 17, c.f.)

The example in St. Thomas is therefore a difficult one, but it is not erroneous since, if we go back not merely to the determinately knowable reasons for monstrosity, but back to the first cause in nature of these very reasons, we can apply the definition of pure chance.

When you say «Both Aristotle and Saint Thomas...» you are right as far as the present treatise is concerned. But the term fortune is not always taken for the species. Just as in the *Physics* the denomination of the genus is taken from the species which concerns the natural philosopher, so in the *Ethics* the denomination of the same genus is taken from the species which concerns human actions.» «...Fortuna, ... quæ est causa per accidens, præter intentionem agentis, sub qua etiam comprehenditur casus.» (III *Ethic.*, lect. 7, n.466).

As to «Do you think...», I should say that St. Thomas follows closely Aristotle's development which, as to the order, could hardly be more logical and rigorous. They move gradually toward chance as a species. But why should pure chance be given such brief treatment and fortune dwelt upon at length, for fortune is not proper to natural beings, and it is common to all created intellectual agents? The natural philosopher is really interested in pure chance alone, not for the sake of knowing thoroughly its

nature [that belongs to the metaphysician], but in order to know what causes he can gather his science from. The second Book of the Physics is about the causes of the science of nature. But there happen to be two kinds of causes there: «manifestæ et immanifestæ». (Lesson 7) Now, what is the «causa sine ratione» in natural things? To make that clear for the purpose of the natural philosopher, we are compelled to use as an instrument of approach something which is more knowable to us and more easily analysed, namely fortune, where we know well and directly what action for an end is and what kinds of end are actually reached, etc.; just as in the first Book we dwell at length on «musicus et immusicus» and use examples taken from art to manifest, through comparison, what matter is.

To see the importance of the problem of pure chance in this Book, one must move on to the problem of nature's action for an end and to the problem of necessity in nature, which depend entirely on that brief conclusion of lesson 10.

I hope this will be helpful. If it does not meet your difficulties, I shall be glad to answer further questions.

Sincerely yours,

C.D.K.

---