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## **Analysis of the Meaning of the Word ‘Coincidence’ in the Context of the Problem of Moral Luck<sup>2</sup>**

### **I. Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to show which meanings of the word ‘coincidence’ can be applied to the problem of moral luck. This is not about a general formulation according to which coincidence is something beyond the control of the perpetrator (as most authors writing about moral luck believe), but about definitions of the concept of randomness that can be used in the problem of moral luck. To simplify the argument, the article assumes the identification of the word ‘luck’

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with the word ‘coincidence’. This simplification is allowed by the literature on the subject, which uses both notions interchangeably.<sup>3</sup>

The reason for the presented research is the fact that in the debate on the problem of moral luck, the understanding of coincidence is usually limited to the generalization under which it is an event beyond the control of the perpetrator. Yet not all actions beyond the control of the subject are accidental. Similarly, not every coincidence can be described as being beyond the total control of the subject. Hence, the proposed study seems to be expedient. It is also worth noting that the aim of the article is not to provide a solution to the problem of moral luck.

The first part of this paper will briefly discuss the nature of the problem of moral luck, the types of moral luck, and the consequences of recognizing the role of luck for morality. In the second, necessarily much more extensive part, definitions of coincidence will be presented. This part will also argue which of demonstrated definitions of coincidence can be used in the analysis of the problem of moral luck. The article will be completed with a conclusion.

## II. The Problem of Moral Luck

According to one of the main promoters of the problem of moral luck, T. Nagel, we can talk about moral luck, ‘Where a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control, yet we continue to treat him in that respect as an object of moral judgment, it can be called moral luck. Such luck can be good or bad’.<sup>4</sup> According to Nagel, the following distinction is important for understanding moral luck,

The driver, if he is entirely without fault, will feel terrible about his role in the event, but will not have to reproach himself. Therefore this example of agent-regret is not yet a case of moral bad luck. However, if the driver was guilty of even a minor degree of negligence — failing to have his brakes checked recently, for example — then if that negligence contributes to the death of the child, he will not merely feel terrible. He will blame himself for the death. And what makes this an example of moral luck is that he would have to blame himself only slightly for the negligence itself if no situation arose which required him to brake suddenly and violently to avoid hitting a child. Yet the negligence is the same in both cases, and the driver has no control over whether a child will run into his path.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> B. Williams, *Moral Luck* [in:] *Moral Luck*, ed. by D. Statman, New York 1993, pp. 35–55; T. Nagel, *Moral Luck* [in:] *ibid.*, s. 57–71.

<sup>4</sup> T. Nagel, *Moral Luck...*, s. 59.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

However, a situation in which a driver without any involvement of, for example, his own recklessness or negligence runs over a child, is not for Nagel an example of moral luck.<sup>6</sup> In the literature one can find various types of moral luck. The most common is the classification proposed by Nagel,

One is the phenomenon of constitutive luck — the kind of person you are, where this is not just a question of what you deliberately do, but of your inclinations, capacities, and temperament. Another category is luck in one's circumstances — the kind of problems and situations one faces. The other two have to do with the causes and effects of action: luck in how one is determined by antecedent circumstances, and luck in the way one's actions and projects turn out.<sup>7</sup>

Speaking about the influence of coincidence on morality, Nagel and B. Williams also point to the role of coincidence in gaining knowledge on a certain topic. This is the so-called epistemic luck. According to this concept, what a person knows also in terms of morality depends initially on upbringing, education, i.e. factors largely independent of the subject. One can imagine situations in which knowledge of moral principles, e.g. 'Do not steal', depends on whether or not a person has passed on this principle to a given subject. Moreover, epistemic luck concerns what we know about our own and others' intentions. That a given subject can convince himself whether he is, for example, patient or not, whether he is industrious or not is largely beyond his control. It is not he, for instance, who generates the situations requiring patience or diligence. He encounters them, they happen to him. It is possible that the subject will never be in a situation that reveals to him some of his qualities. If he does not know about it, it will be difficult for him to respond to that trait. For example, if he has no occasion to be aggressive, it will be difficult to change this potential unrevealed aggressiveness. As proponents of moral luck believe, epistemic luck can affect the moral judgment of the subject's action in the way that the subject does something immoral but he does not know it is immoral; or he does not know how to change his action.<sup>8</sup> The problem of the relation between luck and knowledge in the context of moral luck was also brought about by H. Ravitch, R. Foley and K.W. Kirkwood, among others.<sup>9</sup> Thus, if in practice we make moral judgement about the actions of a given subject

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>8</sup> A. Schinkel, *The Problem of Moral Luck: An Argument Against Its Epistemic Reduction*, 'Ethical Theory and Moral Practice' 12 (2009), pp. 267–277.

<sup>9</sup> H. Ravitch, *Knowledge and the Principle of Luck*, 'Philosophical Studies' 30 (1976), pp. 347–349; R. Foley, *Epistemic Luck and the Purely Epistemic*, 'American Philosophical Quarterly' 21 (1988), pp. 87–97; K.W. Kirkwood, *Of Luck Both Epistemic and Moral in Questions of Doping and Non-Doping*, 'Ethic in Progress' 11 (2020) 1, pp. 77–84.

in spite of the fact that they were influenced by a factor beyond his influence, we just allow for the influence of coincidence on this judgement.

The consequences of recognising the rightness of such an evaluation for ethics and morality are quite radical. According to N. Richards, in moral judgement we are guided by the principle that no blame can be attached or credit given if someone is not in control of a situation.<sup>10</sup> We are talking here about the so-called principle of control. According to D.K. Nelkin, the principle of control dictates that moral responsibility could only be attributed if the subject had control over the action.<sup>11</sup> Whenever the effects, the causes or the circumstances of the subject's action were influenced by luck (conceived as something beyond the control of the perpetrator) and the subject is judged morally for that action, a contradiction arises. For, on the one hand, only actions that are under control of the subject can be judged while, conversely, we judge actions which are influenced by coincidence, that is, by events that are not under control of the subject. In the debate on moral luck, this contradiction is sometimes called the paradox of moral luck.

Consequently, the coherence of ethical theories assuming the principle of control can be undermined. As Nagel writes,

If the condition of control is consistently applied, it threatens to erode most of the moral assessments we find it natural to make. The things for which people are morally judged are determined in more ways than we at first realize by what is beyond their control. And when the seemingly natural requirement of fault or responsibility is applied in light of these facts, it leaves few pre-reflective moral judgments intact. Ultimately, nothing or almost nothing about what a person does seems to be under his control.<sup>12</sup>

Recognition of the all-embracing influence of coincidence on human characters, moral endowments, circumstances of action and moral judgements may even lead to questioning the sense of attributing moral responsibility in general.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> N. Richards, *Luck and Desert* [in:] *Moral Luck...*, p. 167.

<sup>11</sup> D.K. Nelkin, *Moral Luck*, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 26 January 2004, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/moral-luck/> [accessed 23.2.2016].

<sup>12</sup> T. Nagel, *Moral Luck...*, p. 59.

<sup>13</sup> D. Statman, *Introduction...* [in:] *Moral Luck...*, pp. 2–3; B. Williams, *Moral Luck...*, p. 52–54; cf. also P. Strzyżyński, *Wybrane konsekwencje trafu moralnego dla etyki, koncepcji społecznych i religijnych*, 'Teologia i moralność', ed. by A. Pryba, vol. 26, Poznań 2019, pp. 211–233.

### III. Definitions of Coincidence

In this context, it is important to analyze the possible meanings of the word 'coincidence' in the problem of moral luck. For, as it has already been mentioned, the concept of luck/coincidence used by the authors writing about the problem of moral luck is not specified, except to say that there is no control over the action in question. And, as it will be shown, the word 'coincidence' has more meanings than the one underlined in the discussion of moral luck. In order to scrutinise this issue, it will first be necessary to analyse the concept of coincidence. The analysis will be based on the works of J. Kotarbińska and D. Łukasiewicz.<sup>14</sup>

Kotarbińska distinguishes between several meanings of the word 'coincidence'. The distinctions proposed by the author will be supplemented by definitions proposed by Łukasiewicz.<sup>15</sup> The remarks of both authors will serve as a starting point for investigating whether a given concept of coincidence can be applied to the problem of moral luck.

The first understanding of coincidence that Kotarbińska mentions is to regard it as something unknowable. As she writes,

Sometimes, for example, one makes the nature of accidental events dependent on the state of our knowledge. Sometimes we mean events whose causes we do not know, although we believe that such causes do exist; at other times we mean events that seem to us to be excluded from the natural laws as these laws are not yet known to us.<sup>16</sup>

If one were tempted to make a definition, it might look like this: **Coincidence**<sub>0</sub> =<sub>df</sub> event Z is considered to be accidental due to the lack of knowledge as to the occurrence or existence of the causes of event Z. This understanding of coincidence the author calls subjectivist.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> J. Kotarbińska, *Analiza pojęcia przypadku. Przyczynek do słownika filozoficznego* [in:] ead., *Z zagadnień teorii nauki i teorii języka*, Warszawa 1990, pp. 58–76; D. Łukasiewicz, *Opatrzność Boża, wolność, przypadek*, Poznań 2014. Many philosophers before Kotarbińska spoke about coincidence, however this author gives the most definitions of coincidence; cf. P. Strzyżyński, *Problem of relation between luck and morality in selected ancient philosophers*, 'Filozofia Chrześcijańska', ed. by K. Stachewicz, vol. 14, Poznań 2017, pp. 109–140. Neither Kotarbińska nor Łukasiewicz specify whether their proposed definitions of coincidence are real, nominal or, for example, regulative. Due to the nature of explaining the word 'coincidence', they can be considered nominal definitions. Conversely, due to the role of ordering the meaning of the word 'coincidence', definitions, especially Kotarbińska's, can be described as regulative.

<sup>15</sup> D. Łukasiewicz, *Dodatek: Semantyka przypadku* [in:] id., *Opatrzność Boża...*, pp. 363–393.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

With regard to the problem of moral luck, it should be noted that Nagel and Williams address the problem of making decisions under conditions of uncertainty, that is, lack of knowledge about future states, which in turn makes it impossible to be certain about the final outcome of a decision. If one assumes that: a. part of this uncertainty are as yet unknown regularities of nature, which may influence the outcome of actions of a given subject; b. in spite of the influence of something unknown at the moment of making the decision, one will evaluate this action from a moral point of view; then it seems that luck in the problem of moral luck can be conceived as **Coincidence**<sub>0</sub>.

The question can also be raised whether epistemic luck, which, as mentioned, is also an example of moral luck, can be defined as **Coincidence**<sub>0</sub>. In one place in his article Nagel states, 'It may be true of someone that in a dangerous situation he would behave in a cowardly or heroic fashion, but if the situation never arises, he will never have the chance to distinguish or disgrace himself in this way, and his moral record will be different'.<sup>18</sup> And such occasions are, from the perspective of the subject in question, accidental, since he cannot foresee them.

Coincidence here can be understood as completely beyond control, beyond even the subject's ability to foresee. However, it is not a question of predicting unknown regularities of nature, but regularities of the subject's own behaviour. Undoubtedly, in this sense, coincidence affects human morality, unequally distributing the possibility of demonstrating one's own character or acquiring moral merit. If we assume that this awareness and even the acquisition of some merit are needed by the subject for the further development of his morality (e.g. virtues), then the influence of coincidence is obvious. Nevertheless, it does not have to be the influence on the moral evaluation of a given action.

According to Kotarbińska, one can also speak of coincidence as something objective, relativised to an event or set of events,

[...] event  $Z_i$  is considered here as accidental due to event  $Z$  (earlier, as it seems, or contemporary with  $Z$ ) if and only if  $Z$  depends as a necessary condition on some logical sum of conditions (earlier than  $Z$  or contemporary with it; e.g. on the sum of:  $Z_1$  or  $Z_2$  ... or  $Z_n$ ), of which event  $Z_i$  is one of the components. It is also possible that a narrower understanding is at play here, where it is additionally required that both event  $Z$  and  $Z_i$  occur or, moreover, that from among the events constituting a given sum only event  $Z_i$  occurs.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> T. Nagel, *Moral Luck*..., pp. 65.

<sup>19</sup> J. Kotarbińska, *Analiza*..., pp. 61–62. In coincidence 4, referring to the words 'one of the components' Kotarbińska writes as follows, 'In a particular case, event  $Z$  may depend as a necessary condition on event  $W$ , more general than event  $Z_i$ , e.g. if:  $W$  consists in  $A$  being  $B$ , event  $Z_i$  consists in  $A$  being  $C$ ,  $C$  being a subordinate term to  $B$ . For example, in order for a given solid to move in a direction from west to east, it is necessary for the solid to be subject to actions whose

Łukasiewicz gives this definition the name **Coincidence**<sub>1</sub>.<sup>20</sup>

Just as in the previous case the concept of coincidence was referred to the concept of a prior event, in the next term it is referred to natural laws,

Event Z is called here accidental due to such natural laws always and only if this event is not determined by any prior events by virtue of these very natural laws. If, as in the above quotation, it is a question of coincidence in history — relativisation is usually carried out with reference to historical laws.<sup>21</sup>

In Łukasiewicz's notation it is **Coincidence**<sub>2</sub>.<sup>22</sup>

Both of the above understandings of coincidence are difficult to apply to the problem of moral luck as although they speak of a causal relation, they do not speak of a sequence of causes and effects that would be cognisable and predictable. Consequently, it would be difficult to talk about attribution of responsibility, since there would be no connection between the event and the causation of the subject through this predictability.

In the context of laws of nature, Kotarbińska states that we can speak of two slightly different notions of coincidence. In the first one, 'event Z is accidental due to event Z<sub>i</sub> if and only if Z<sub>i</sub> is not a sufficient condition nor a necessary component of a sufficient condition, nor, finally, a necessary condition of event Z by virtue of the laws of nature'.<sup>23</sup> In Łukasiewicz this is **Coincidence**<sub>3</sub>.<sup>24</sup> Like **Coincidence**<sub>2</sub>, this definition due to the impossibility of connecting the causation of the subject with the event, cannot be used in the problem of moral luck. This lack of connection results from the impossibility of predicting the event since it is not possible on the basis of natural laws.<sup>25</sup>

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resultant would have such a direction. It is irrelevant whether the resultant will be the result of one or another system of component forces. The number of these forces, their magnitude and direction are, in the understanding under consideration, accidental due to the motion of the solid in the direction from west to east'.

<sup>20</sup> D. Łukasiewicz, *Opatrzność Boża...*, p. 367, 'Coincidence<sub>1</sub>=<sub>df</sub> event Z<sub>i</sub> is considered accidental due to event Z (earlier or contemporary with Z) if and only if Z depends as a final condition on a certain logical sum of conditions earlier than Z or contemporary with it (for example, on the sum: Z<sub>1</sub> or Z<sub>2</sub>... or Z<sub>n</sub>), of which event Z is one of the components'.

<sup>21</sup> J. Kotarbińska, *Analiza...*, pp. 62–63.

<sup>22</sup> D. Łukasiewicz, *Opatrzność Boża...*, pp. 367–368: 'Coincidence<sub>2</sub>=<sub>df</sub> event Z is called accidental due to certain definite laws always and only if this event is not determined by any previous events by virtue of these very laws'.

<sup>23</sup> J. Kotarbińska, *Analiza...*, p. 64.

<sup>24</sup> D. Łukasiewicz, *Opatrzność Boża...*, pp. 369–370: 'Coincidence<sub>3</sub>=<sub>df</sub> event Z is accidental due to event Z<sub>1</sub> if and only if Z is neither a sufficient condition nor a necessary component of event Z by virtue of certain laws'.

<sup>25</sup> In coincidence 7, p. 64 Kotarbińska cites Schopenhauer as similarly understanding coincidence. He states: 'Everything that is accidental is only relatively accidental. For [...] every event

The second approach talks about randomness not because of a different event, but ‘about randomness of coexistence of events due to such natural laws’.<sup>26</sup> Kotarbińska also states that the connection during ‘two or more events (contemporaneous or consecutive) is accidental if and only if none of these events constitutes a sufficient condition or a necessary component of the sufficient condition of the remaining events’.<sup>27</sup>

In this context, we can also mention randomness of an event ‘determined by a set of events (earlier or contemporary with the event in question) whose connectivity in time is accidental (in one of the three meanings just indicated), in other words — being the result of “the intersection of the independent action series”’.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, it will be accidental that a falling roof tile kills a passerby, and that Napoleon suffers defeat as a result of exceptionally harsh winter in Russia. In both cases there was coincidence in time of independent events.<sup>29</sup> Łukasiewicz defines this concept of coincidence as follows, ‘**Coincidence**<sub>4</sub> =<sub>df</sub> event  $Z$  is a chance event due to events  $Z_1$  and  $Z_2$  earlier or contemporaneous with the event in question if and only if events  $Z_1$  and  $Z_2$  belong to independent but intersecting causal chains’.<sup>30</sup> Łukasiewicz also notes that this concept of coincidence is closest to the term ‘coincidence’ or ‘accident’ as unfortunate or momentous coincidence.<sup>31</sup> The fact that a child runs out into the street under the wheels of a car is also accidental. His actions are an independent sequence of cause and effect in relation to the actions of the driver. From the point of view of the child and the driver, randomness consists in a collision with a sequence of actions of another independent subject. Generalizing this example, it can be said that especially in the luck of circumstance, effect and cause, this luck can be equated with **Coincidence**<sub>4</sub>.

In the group of examples of understanding ‘luck’ as coincidence of otherwise independent events, Kotarbińska included such an understanding in which randomness consists in the occurrence of a third independent event. An example could be a gas attack which does not lead to a foreseen and causally connected effect due to the appearance of a strong wind.<sup>32</sup> Kotarbińska puts this understanding in the formula, ‘The coexistence of events A and B is considered accidental if

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is necessary in relation to its cause. Conversely, it is accidental in relation to everything else, with which it possibly comes into contact in time and space’ — A. Schopenhauer, *O wolności i ludzkiej woli*, tłum. A. Stögbauer, Warszawa 1902, p. 102.

<sup>26</sup> J. Kotarbińska, *Analiza...*, p. 64.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 65–66.

<sup>30</sup> D. Łukasiewicz, *Opatrzność Boża...*, pp. 372–373.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 373.

<sup>32</sup> J. Kotarbińska, *Analiza...*, pp. 66.



and only if by virtue of the laws of nature A should have occurred together with C while it occurred in the company of B — due to the interference of the so-called interfering conditions'.<sup>33</sup> Łukasiewicz notes that Kotarbińska does not specify for whom these events cause a change of expectations.<sup>34</sup> As one can guess, what Kotarbińska is referring to is rather the general possibility of expecting planned events to happen, which turn out not to happen because of another unforeseen cause that nevertheless acts according to the laws of nature. Łukasiewicz defines this concept of coincidence as 'counterfactual coincidence'.<sup>35</sup> He defines coincidence understood in this way as follows, '**Coincidence**<sub>5</sub> =<sub>df</sub> event Z (the coexistence of Z<sub>1</sub> and Z<sub>2</sub> is accidental due to the occurrence (truthfulness) of a counterfactual conditional period whose predecessor states the non-occurrence of an obstructive condition and whose successor states the combined occurrence of Z<sub>1</sub> and Z<sub>2</sub> by virtue of certain laws'.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, coincidence can be applied to the problem of moral luck since a chance event may be the result of the superposition of an obstructive event on a given anticipated sequence. In particular, causal luck and effect luck may be the result of the interplay of intervening factors. Coincidence understood in this way can also be combined with understanding of coincidence as resulting from ignorance. Ignorance may be the reason for not foreseeing these interfering conditions.

Łukasiewicz defines the understanding of coincidence in which a relatively trivial cause has much greater effects as based on case asymmetry.<sup>37</sup> Łukasiewicz explains this coincidence as follow, '**Coincidence**<sub>6</sub> =<sub>df</sub> event Z is accidental due to the fact of causal asymmetry between event Z<sub>1</sub> (cause) and event Z<sub>2</sub> (effect)'.<sup>38</sup> Since an event affecting moral judgement can be a small cause that has momentous consequences, **Coincidence**<sub>6</sub> can be taken into account in moral luck analyses. A child running out after a runaway ball in itself is something of little consequence, but as a cause of falling under a car it takes on much greater significance. However, this will not be a relevant definition for analyses of the problem of luck, since the magnitude or smallness of causes and effects do not directly determine the attribution of responsibility, guilt or moral merit.

According to Kotarbińska, coincidence, in turn, as something unique can be spoken of by 'adherents of a doctrine which assumes that certain events (e.g. those which constitute a peculiar distinctiveness of the organic world) depend, among other things, on certain non-physical factors (e.g. on entelechy or on

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> D. Łukasiewicz, *Opatrzność Boża...*, pp. 375.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 376.

supernatural forces)'.<sup>39</sup> The assumption that the laws of nature do not apply to the non-physical world is necessarily present here.<sup>40</sup> This kind of coincidence is not taken into account in the modern view of the relationship between morality and coincidence, the view called the problem of moral luck. Coincidence, on the other hand, played a role in the thought of the ancient philosophers insofar as they admitted (as did the Greek dramatists) the possibility of the intervention of supernatural forces in the course of things. It also plays a role in the recognition of moral luck in religious concepts, as Zagrzebski points out.<sup>41</sup>

In Kotarbińska's deliberations there appears a problem of expressing natural laws by general sentences, and individual cases by individual sentences according to the idea that laws should be universal, and thus they should be expressed by general sentences. According to Kotarbińska, the situation is slightly different if one takes the view that causal relations can be expressed only by unitary sentences, and general laws are only something derivative, only an approximation.<sup>42</sup> It is also connected with the understanding of cause.<sup>43</sup> According to Kotarbińska, two main meanings can be distinguished here, 'Firstly, the one according to which event  $Z_1$  is the cause of event  $Z_2$  only if  $Z_2$  depends on  $Z_1$  as a sufficient condition by virtue of natural laws; secondly, the one according to which the possession of a cause by an event does not at all imply that this event falls under natural laws'.<sup>44</sup> Łukasiewicz describes the first formulation of the cause as nomological. The second formulation is idiographic.<sup>45</sup>

In the context of Kotarbińska's remarks, Łukasiewicz notes that despite the fact that in principle laws are ascribed a nomological character, it is possible to point to two notions of coincidence that take into account this universality of laws. In the first one,

certain events fall under statistical laws, i.e. laws describing behaviour of certain objects of 'aggregative' (mass) character or status. In this case laws of this type do not determine the course of individual events or any relations between individual

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<sup>39</sup> J. Kotarbińska, *Analiza...*, p. 67.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> L. Zagrzebski L., *Religious Luck*, "Faith and Philosophy" 3 (1994) 11, s. 397–413.

<sup>42</sup> J. Kotarbińska, *Analiza...*, p. 67.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> D. Łukasiewicz, *Opatrzność Boża...*, p. 377. The idiographic understanding of causality is expressed by the author as follows, 'Event  $Z_1$  is the cause of event  $Z_2$  in the idiographic sense if and only if  $Z_1$  is not the cause of event  $Z_2$  in the nomological sense. In other words, event  $Z_1$  is the cause of event  $Z_2$  in the idiographic sense if and only if  $Z_1$  is a sufficient condition for  $Z_2$ ', *ibid.*

events of a certain kind. An example of this kind of events is the toss of a coin: heads is independent of tails.<sup>46</sup>

Coincidence in this context is referred to as nomological statistical one (**Coincidence<sub>7</sub>**). In the second, on the other hand, it is assumed 'that the laws (of nature) apply only to repeatable events, and do not extend to non-repeatable events, i.e. to events found in singular sentences'.<sup>47</sup> This is nomological idiographic coincidence (**Coincidence<sub>8</sub>**).<sup>48</sup> Conceiving laws in a unitary way is characteristic for the above-mentioned second understanding of cause as not falling under laws.

Returning to coincidence as something unique, Łukasiewicz offers a definition, '**Coincidence<sub>9</sub>** =<sub>df</sub> individual and unique event  $Z_2$  is a chance event if and only if there is no individual and unique cause for it (corresponding event  $Z_1$ )'.<sup>49</sup>

The problem of moral luck, as it is most commonly understood, is based on the principle of control as the basis for the attribution of responsibility, and concerns events in which the relation between the action of a subject and the impact of coincidence is mentioned. Prediction as an example of such a connection presupposes that things and events happen this way and not that way. In order for such a belief to arise, there must be a recurrence of the event or sequence of events or an analogous arrangement of elements to which the otherwise known recurrence can be transferred. Therefore, in the case of events that are unique and have no cause, it will be difficult to talk about the problem of moral luck. Hence, of the definitions from seven to nine, none can be used as the meaning of the word luck.

Referring in turn to the constancy of events, Łukasiewicz offers the following definition of coincidence, '**Coincidence<sub>10</sub>** =<sub>df</sub> event  $Z$  is random if and only if the frequency of its occurrence within certain definite sufficiently numerous classes of events is not constant'.<sup>50</sup> For the problem of moral luck, this definition may be relevant insofar as being subject to statistical laws is equated with being able to predict and which allows for controlled action.

Another attempt to define what coincidence is refers to a group of probable but mutually exclusive events. As Łukasiewicz writes, '**Coincidence<sub>11</sub>** =<sub>df</sub> event  $Z$  is accidental if and only if its occurrence in a certain class of events is one of the mutually exclusive possibilities whose appearance is equally probable (has an identical measure of probability)'.<sup>51</sup> An example of such coincidence is the throw of a dice which gives the same probability for each of six numbers.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 378.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 380.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 382.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 383.

There are also approaches that consider unlikely events as random. As Łukasiewicz puts it, ‘**Coincidence**<sub>11</sub> =<sub>df</sub> event Z is accidental if and only if the probability of its occurrence is very small’.<sup>52</sup> Such an understanding of coincidence is also mentioned by Heller, who defines this smallness as a measure of probability smaller than one.<sup>53</sup>

Probability can be understood as objective (ontological) and subjective (epistemic), depending on how it is determined. Epistemic probability, according to Łukasiewicz, ‘is a measure of our ignorance about the actual state of things’.<sup>54</sup> Objective probability, on the other hand, is ‘a measure of indeterminacy or underdetermination of an event or sequence of events occurring in nature’.<sup>55</sup> Both probabilities also apply to past events. In this context Łukasiewicz talks about coincidence in the subjective and objective sense. Coincidence in the subjective sense, ‘**Coincidence**<sub>14</sub> =<sub>df</sub> event Z is accidental if and only if «agent» ascribes to the sentence a small or only less than certainty degree of belief, and nevertheless the event of which the sentence speaks occurs in reality’.<sup>56</sup> Conversely, coincidence in the objective sense he defines as, ‘**Coincidence**<sub>13</sub> =<sub>df</sub> event Z is accidental in the objective sense if and only if the measure of its indeterminacy or underdetermination is less than one’.<sup>57</sup> According to Łukasiewicz, **Coincidence**<sub>14</sub> can be reconciled with ontological determinism.

For the problem of moral luck as connecting the action of a subject with a chance event, the possibility of predicting an event turns out to be important. Hence, defining coincidence in terms of probability seems useful but rather in terms of subjectivity than objectivity. It is difficult to give an objective measure of the probability of life events.

An event may also be causally necessary but unknown due to our lack of knowledge, ‘We lack knowledge of the factual causes of the event, even if we know the laws applicable to the field of the occurrence of the event, or it may be causally necessary by virtue of laws we do not know’.<sup>58</sup> Łukasiewicz thus concludes that the occurrence of an event in the epistemic sense is the result of human ignorance. The lack of knowledge can be apprehended as subjective or objective impossibility of prediction. In the first situation, coincidence can be defined as follows, ‘**Coincidence**<sub>15</sub> =<sub>df</sub> event Z is accidental if and only if it is unpredictable’.<sup>59</sup> In the case of objective unpredictability, Łukasiewicz proposes

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> M. Heller, *Filozofia przypadku. Kosmiczna fuga z preludium i codą*, Kraków 2012, p. 95.

<sup>54</sup> D. Łukasiewicz, *Opatrzność Boża...*, p. 384.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 385.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 386.

the definition, '**Coincidence**<sub>16</sub> =<sub>df</sub> event Z is accidental if and only if it is objectively unpredictable'.<sup>60</sup> An example of coincidence understood in this way is the decay of radioactive elements. It is possible to establish a probability distribution for the decay of these elements, but it is difficult to determine when a particular atom will decay.<sup>61</sup> The point here is unpredictability from the point of view not so much of the individual, but impossibility of predicting at all. Per analogiam, in the case of moral luck, we talk about an event which is unpredictable from the point of view of any perpetrator. Total unpredictability means impossibility of influencing the course of events, for example through some form of prevention. Therefore, perpetration and control of actions cannot be combined with such an understanding of the case, if it is assumed that control over an action is connected with awareness of the course of things. Consequently, with such an understanding of coincidence, the question can be raised as to the rationale for attributing moral responsibility. Hence, **Coincidence**<sub>15</sub> cannot be used in the problem of moral luck. Coincidence, understood as subjective unpredictability, seems to mean that a given subject objectively cannot foresee a given event not because of some omission, but because of a lack of knowledge or experience. An example would be the ability to foresee a landslide of rocks after being hit by a car. What is foreseeable for some people, e.g. a geologist, does not have to be so for others, e.g. an ordinary driver.<sup>62</sup> **Coincidence**<sub>16</sub> understood in this way goes beyond the subjective possibility of foreseeability and hence cannot be taken into account in the problem of moral luck. Foreseeability is connected with awareness and control over the course of things. The subjective capacity to foresee is, however, problematic insofar as it is difficult to determine what a subject must be able to foresee.

According to Łukasiewicz, one can talk about pure coincidence not only in case of the above objective unpredictability, but also when the event in question is without cause. Coincidence understood this way can be defined as follows, '**Coincidence**<sub>17</sub> =<sub>df</sub> event Z is accidental (is pure coincidence) if and only if it has no cause, no explanation or is not determined by the force of any law'.<sup>63</sup> According to determinists, there are no such events while according to indeterminists, they do occur. In this context, coincidence could only occur in an undetermined world. This does not mean that there could be a problem of moral luck because in an indeterminate world any causality would be impossible. Assigning responsibility would also be impossible for every causation/control of actions,

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 387.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> M. Otsuka, *Moral Luck: Optional, Not Brute*, "Philosophical Perspectives" 23 (2009), pp. 373–388, here: p. 381.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.; D. Łukasiewicz, *Opatrzność Boża...*, p. 387.

their initiation must be based on certain factors acting in the same way. It would be impossible to speak, to walk or to perform the simplest actions, if the tongue, the larynx and the whole body did not work according to repetitive mechanisms. Nagel could not have posed the problem of causal relevance or effect if it were not for the subject's assumption that action is based on repetitive mechanisms, for example that faulty brakes always brake slower. That is what their inefficiency is. It is therefore possible to argue that the attribution of responsibility for actions must be based on the predictability of effects and causes and therefore, on repeatability of regularities of the physical world, which is connected with its determination. Hence, considering the problem of coincidence in the context of the opposition determinism-indeterminism obscures the picture of the problem. Thus, it is better to consider the problem of luck in terms of control/causality. It follows from the foregoing that the problem of luck in the problem of moral luck cannot be understood as **Coincidence**<sup>17</sup>.

The last group of meanings of the term coincidence is connected by Kotarbińska with the notion of purposefulness. In this, in her opinion, rather common view, events are called accidental if they are not intentional. Depending on the understanding of intentionality an event may be unintentional if e.g. it is not intended by anyone. Łukasiewicz defines coincidence in this way, '**Coincidence**<sub>18</sub> =<sub>df</sub> event Z is accidental if and only if it is not the result of the intentional action of any agent'.<sup>64</sup>

In the context of the problem of moral luck, the above definition of coincidence is connected with the boundary condition of this problem existence, namely, with the action of a given subject, which is directed at a different effect, other than the one which appears as a result of the occurrence of a causal tragedy, effect or circumstance. Thus, this definition can be applied in the analysis of the problem of moral luck.

Furthermore, we can talk about coincidence in terms of intentionality in the context of evolutionary adaptation observed in nature. A given feature of a living organism is accidental if it does not guarantee adaptation to living conditions, or even hinders such adaptation.<sup>65</sup> Łukasiewicz expresses it similarly, '**Coincidence**<sub>19</sub> =<sub>df</sub> event Z consisting in the occurrence of a certain trait A in a specimen of a given species or within a species is accidental if and only if this trait is not useful for the given specimen or species'.<sup>66</sup> Kotarbińska also men-

<sup>64</sup> D. Łukasiewicz, *Opatrzność Boża...*, p. 388.

<sup>65</sup> J. Kotarbińska, *Analiza...*, p. 73.

<sup>66</sup> D. Łukasiewicz, *Opatrzność Boża...*, p. 389; J. Kotarbińska, *Analiza...*, p. 74; It is worth adding here that the notions of expediency and coincidence in reference to evolution can also be used quite the opposite. This is what Futuyma states about the purposefulness of evolution, 'The adaptations (of organisms to the environment — note of the author) apparently have a purpose: weaver ants behave as if their purpose were to build a nest... In modern biology, the development, physiology and behaviour of organisms are considered to be the result of purely mechanical pro-

tions such an understanding of randomness where intentionality is understood as a feature of such objects in which 'what happens in their parts depends on the internal structure of the whole'.<sup>67</sup> Random, purely mechanical or blind are those objects which depend in their existence and functioning on external factors. As Kotarbińska notes again, 'randomness is considered the antithesis of intentionality', although in a different sense of intentionality.<sup>68</sup> Łukasiewicz specifies, '**Coincidence**<sub>20</sub> =<sub>df</sub> event Z (object) is accidental when and only when it is not a functionally ordered whole, independent of the action of the external environment'.<sup>69</sup> Since the problem of moral luck concerns the actions of subjects and not biological processes, the above two definitions do not apply to the concept of luck.

Intentionality can also be understood as something involuntary that gives the impression or is interpreted as a voluntary, purposeful action. Łukasiewicz defines this understanding of luck as follows, '**Coincidence**<sub>21</sub> =<sub>df</sub> event Z is accidental if and only if it appears as an intentional and purposeful action of a subject capable of intentional action, and is the result of the action of an impersonal mechanism'.<sup>70</sup> In the context of moral luck, this definition can be useful when we talk about the attribution of intention or control to a given subject by the observers of his actions when, at the same time, it is possible that his actions did not have the intentions that are attributed to them, or are the result of the influence of psychic mechanisms on the subject that he does not control.

Last in this group is understanding coincidence as something irrelevant to some X. Being relevant, however, can have two meanings, Kotarbińska believes. In the first one, the word 'essential' means as much as possessing features essential for the scope of a given name.<sup>71</sup> According to Łukasiewicz, this type of understanding essentiality (the essentialist type) makes us conceive coincidence in this

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cesses, consisting in the interaction between the instructions contained in the genetic programme and environmental factors'. About intentionality, on the other hand, this author states that it is not at all a concept needed in modern biology. The complexity and functional adaptation of living organisms arise 'in a completely purposeless process of natural selection'. In the process of natural selection, 'organisms with traits that contribute to their survival or reproductive rate are replaced by organisms lacking those traits and therefore having poorer survival or reproducing at a slower rate. This process has no predetermined purpose, just as the purpose of erosion is not to shape mountains. The future cannot have material effects in the present. The concept of purposefulness is therefore not needed in biology (or in any other exact science)', D. Futuyama, *Ewolucja*, tłum. J. Radwan, Warszawa 2005, p. 252.

<sup>67</sup> J. Kotarbińska, *Analiza...*, p. 74.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., coincidence 29, p. 74.

<sup>69</sup> D. Łukasiewicz, *Opatrzność Boża...*, p. 390.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> J. Kotarbińska, *Analiza...*, p. 75.

way, ‘**Coincidence**<sub>22</sub> =<sub>df</sub> event Z (the possession by object x of feature P) is accidental if and only if feature P does not belong to the definition of (real) object x’.<sup>72</sup>

In the other sense, significant is what is important for a given thing or matter. Therefore, accidental are those events or situations which are not important, e.g. historically.<sup>73</sup> Essentialism, understood in this way, treats coincidence as ‘**Coincidence**<sub>23</sub> =<sub>df</sub> x is accidental if and only if it does not meet the criterion of significance set by competent researchers or is objectively meaningless’.<sup>74</sup> Both of the above definitions do not apply to the problem of moral luck since the problem of accidentality of a feature in the concept of a thing and whether this feature fulfils the criterion of importance are not relevant here.

Concluding the enumeration of possible meanings of coincidence based on Kotarbińska’s text, Łukasiewicz remarks that a more thorough discussion of the issue of coincidence would require an analysis of, among other things, mutual relations between the listed meanings, as well as an addition of meanings that have not yet been enumerated. One of such supplements he proposes to call combinatorial or composite, which was created by combining several previously mentioned meanings. This is a rather radical and unambiguous understanding of coincidence, ‘**Coincidence**<sub>24</sub> =<sub>df</sub> event is accidental if and only if it has no cause, is not subject to any laws, is purposeless and irreducibly unpredictable’.<sup>75</sup>

As we can see, the set of meanings of the term coincidence is extensive. According to Kotarbińska, this ambiguity is ‘very extensive, [...] and very troublesome. It often muddles the numerous discussions that surround the term, contributing to many an apparent controversy, based on purely verbal misunderstandings’.<sup>76</sup>

The analyses presented above have made it possible to clarify the understanding of the term ‘luck’, after having identified it with coincidence and after having introduced the assumption that the problem of moral luck concerns those situations in which there is a link between the action of the subject and a chance event. This link can take the form of negligence, omission, failure to foresee or ignorance of the consequences of actions.

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<sup>72</sup> D. Łukasiewicz, *Opatrzność Boża...*, p. 391.

<sup>73</sup> J. Kotarbińska, *Analiza...*, p. 75.

<sup>74</sup> D. Łukasiewicz, *Opatrzność Boża...*, p. 392.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 393.

<sup>76</sup> J. Kotarbińska, *Analiza...*, p. 75.



#### IV. Conclusions

As a result of the conducted research the following can be concluded:

1. Not all notions of coincidence from Kotarbińska/ Łukasiewicz's compilation are applicable to the problem of moral luck:

a. some of the notions of coincidence have no connection with the subject's action at all, and therefore have no connection with the problem of moral luck. To this group belong those concepts which address, for example, the absence of intentionality in evolution or the meaning for the perpetrator. The purposiveness of evolution has nothing to do with an action judged in moral terms. Similarly, the greater or lesser importance of an event does not relate to causation and attribution of moral responsibility.

b. some concepts of coincidence talk about a total ignorance of the regularities of nature, hence it is difficult in their context to speak of the possibility of foreseeing the consequences of actions by the perpetrators, which seems to be a condition of control over action.

c. not every coincidence from Kotarbińska/Łukasiewicz's enumeration can be described as being completely beyond the subject's control, because if the definition mentions the possibility of foreseeing the effects of an action, then it refers to at least a partial possibility of controlling the action. Hence, in the problem of moral luck it should also be clearly stated whether we talk about coincidence whose occurrence could have been foreseen by the perpetrator.

2. On the basis of the above 1c. a further analysis can be made which may prove to be relevant to the solution of the problem of moral luck.

This is because most authors writing about moral luck define luck/coincidence as something beyond the control of the perpetrator. However, such a definition of coincidence does not take into account what was shown above, i.e. that in the case of several definitions of coincidence, according to Kotarbińska/Łukasiewicz, the possibility of foreseeing the consequences of actions is mentioned. Thus, it seems that one cannot speak of a complete lack of control of the subject in every accidental situation. Similarly, in the examples of accidental events given in the debate on moral luck and evaluated morally, one can speak of the possibility of their prediction. This is also supported by the following observations arising from getting acquainted with works on moral luck:

a. the authors do not consider as an example of the influence of moral luck the situation in which the perpetrator (e.g. the driver) without any previous negligence, consumption of alcohol, etc., leads up to a bad effect (e.g. drives over a pedestrian who has run into the street). At the same time, as an example of the impact of moral luck, the authors consider the situation in which the driver was negligent in some way before the unfortunate event. Negligence, failure to foresee some event opens the actions of the perpetrator to the action of coincidence. It can be generalised that

moral luck is present when there is a causal link between the accidental event and taken by the perpetrator. It is not, however, a relation of cause and effect intended and controlled by the perpetrator. Nevertheless, it is possible, in the case of negligence, recklessness or lack of foresight, to speak of a certain form of events initiation.

b. Sverdlik rightly argues that it is absurd to place moral blame or merit on someone if it should depend, for example, on the flight of a bird. This leads S. Sverdlik to limit the problem of moral luck to those situations in which there is, however, some kind of control.<sup>77</sup>

c. M.J. Zimmerman's analysis of the problem of moral luck postulates a division into limited and unlimited control. The events described as examples of moral luck are rightly described by this author as being under limited control. Thus, he assumes that the perpetrator has some form of control.<sup>78</sup>

On the basis of the above, it may be concluded that in case of at least lack of circumstance, cause and effect, it is not the case that the influence of coincidence is completely beyond the control of the perpetrator. If so, then the contradiction between the principle of control and the practice of attributing moral responsibility to the perpetrator of an action that was supposedly beyond his control ceases to be a contradiction. As a consequence, the so-called paradox of moral luck ceases to be a paradox. As a result, the consequences of the possible influence of coincidence on morality need not necessarily be as dramatic as, for example, undermining the sense of attributing moral responsibility.

3. On the basis of analyses of the notion of coincidence according to Kotarbińska/Łukasiewicz, epistemic and constitutive luck can be interpreted as examples of coincidence understood as being completely beyond the control of the perpetrator. Then it is difficult to speak of causal responsibility of a given subject. Consequently, it is also impossible to talk about moral responsibility as resulting from negligence (e.g. repairing a car) or failure to foresee something foreseeable. As a hypothesis, it is assumed here that epistemic and constitutive luck do not so much affect the attribution of responsibility to a given subject, but rather shape its moral endowment. It is possible to mention the subject's responsibility for what he does with this moral endowment. The remarks just made, however, require a separate, more detailed and thorough examination.

The considerations presented above allow for a more precise approach to the problem of moral luck. To confine oneself to the understanding of luck/coincidence as something beyond the control of the subject may introduce ambiguity into the understanding of the problem of moral luck itself. It is also possible and requires further research that the consequences of moral luck may be unduly broadened.

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<sup>77</sup> S. Sverdlik, *Crime and Moral Luck* [in:] *Moral Luck...*, pp. 181–194.

<sup>78</sup> M.J. Zimmerman, *Luck and Moral Responsibility* [in:] *Moral Luck...*, pp. 217–233.

## **Analiza znaczenia słowa „przypadek” w kontekście problemu trafu moralnego**

### **Streszczenie**

Celem artykułu jest wykazanie, które znaczenia słowa 'przypadek' można zastosować w kwestii trafu moralnego. W pierwszej części artykułu pokrótce omówiono istotę problemu trafu moralnego, rodzaje tego trafu oraz konsekwencje uznania roli trafu/przypadku dla moralności. Druga część zawiera definicje przypadku. W tej części zaprezentowano również argumenty za tym, które z przedstawionych znaczeń przypadku można wykorzystać w analizie zagadnienia trafu moralnego. W zakończeniu artykułu pojawia się sugestia ograniczenia znaczenia i roli tzw. paradoksu trafu moralnego.

### **Słowa kluczowe**

traf moralny, przypadek, zasada kontroli, odpowiedzialność moralna, paradoks trafu moralnego

### **Keywords**

moral luck, coincidence, rule of control, moral responsibility, paradox of moral luck

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