

CONTENTS

Preface xi

Introduction	1
1 “Death Is Always Beside You on the Mountain”	4
<i>A Puzzle About Risk</i>	4
<i>Risk and Probability</i>	6
<i>Looking Ahead</i>	9
2 Thinking About Risk	13
<i>Introduction</i>	13
<i>Disentangling How We Talk About Risk</i>	13
<i>Perceived Risk and Actual Risk</i>	18
<i>Keeping Track of the Variables</i>	20
<i>Taking Stock</i>	24
3 How Not to Solve Our Puzzle	26
<i>Introduction</i>	26
<i>Health and Safety</i>	26
<i>Illusory Risk</i>	28
<i>Risk-Reward</i>	30
<i>Summing Up</i>	32

viii CONTENTS

4	Authenticity Risk	34
	<i>The Universality of Our Puzzle</i>	34
	<i>Flourishing and the Meaningful Life</i>	35
	<i>Authenticity Risks</i>	42
	<i>Moral Luck and Authenticity Risk</i>	48
	<i>Authenticity Risk and Honnold's Ascent</i>	53
	<i>Broadening Our Puzzle</i>	56
5	Fragility	58
	<i>Resolving Our Puzzle</i>	58
	<i>Lotteries and Fragility</i>	61
	<i>Fragility and Risk</i>	65
	<i>Our Puzzle About Risk, Redux</i>	69
	<i>Reasonable Risks</i>	72
	<i>Admirable Risks</i>	75
	<i>Authenticity Risk, Redux</i>	77
6	Pushing One's Luck	80
	<i>Introduction</i>	80
	<i>Luck, Risk, and Perspective</i>	81
	<i>The Fragility Theory of Luck</i>	82
	<i>How Luck and Risk Differ</i>	86
	<i>Luck, Risk, and Subjectivity</i>	89
	<i>How to Earn Your Good Luck</i>	93
7	The Importance of Achievements	97
	<i>Introduction</i>	97
	<i>The Nature of Achievement</i>	97
	<i>The Value of Achievements</i>	103

CONTENTS ix

	<i>Achievements and Luck</i>	110
	<i>Risky Achievements</i>	115
8	Knowledge and Fragility	118
	<i>Introduction</i>	118
	<i>Knowledge Excludes Fragility</i>	118
	<i>Epistemic Achievements and Veritic Luck</i>	124
	<i>Knowledge and Epistemic Achievement</i>	128
	<i>Knowledge and Risk</i>	133
	<i>The Nature of Knowledge</i>	134
9	Risk in the Wild: Existential, Sporting, Aesthetic, and Legal Risk	143
	<i>Introduction</i>	143
	<i>Existential Risk</i>	144
	<i>Sporting Risk</i>	147
	<i>Aesthetic Risk</i>	153
	<i>The Arithmetic of Criminal Justice</i>	156
	<i>Legal Evidence and Legal Risk</i>	160
10	Tempting Fate	164
	<i>Glossary</i>	167
	<i>Notes</i>	175
	<i>References</i>	189
	<i>Index</i>	197

Introduction

SADLY, MY MOTHER, Daisy Pritchard, passed away recently. She had lived into her late eighties. She had been married almost sixty-five years and had many grandchildren who adored her. Her final weeks were spent surrounded by members of her large family, who held her hand, chatted to her, and sang to her (and she sometimes sang back). While it was, of course, very sad to see her go, this was a fitting end to a good life.

My mum's death got me thinking about some of her many aphorisms. One of her most overused sayings was that one should never tempt fate. What she meant by this was something quite specific—roughly: don't provoke the gods! So, for example, never say that everything is wonderful or that you've never been happier or that your life is perfect, because if you do, then the gods will hear this and send a bolt of lightning in your direction. Suddenly things won't be so "hunky dory" for you. Despite the title of this book, I tend to heed my mother's advice on this score, at least in the specific way that she meant it.

Nonetheless, there is a broader sense of tempting fate that I think we ought to embrace. This is the idea that we should be willing to take some quite large risks in our lives. I don't mean by this that one should dangle off the side of a skyscraper every once in a while, as some thrill-seekers do these days (though, as we will see, there is a place in what I propose for at least some activities along these lines). I'm thinking rather of the kinds of major risk-taking

that are involved in living a life in keeping with the things that one cares most deeply about. This includes such important life choices as switching career, getting married (or divorced!), having kids, moving to another country, setting up a business, and so on.

All of these choices involve a large dose of risk, since if you choose badly, then it could potentially severely hamper your life. You could switch careers and find that you have made a terrible mistake, one that cannot be simply undone. Or you could get married only to find that you are now saddled with someone who makes you miserable. One could, of course, lead an overly cautious life and so avoid risks of this kind, but that also brings risks. There is, as the economists say, an opportunity cost involved in not taking the plunge. If you don't switch careers, you could be stuck with your unfulfilling job for the rest of your life, and if you choose to stay single you could be faced with a lonely, unfulfilling existence. Furthermore, if the reason why you don't follow your heart is simply because of your fear of the consequences if things go wrong, then that is likely to haunt you.

The point is that we have to take risks if we are to live authentic lives in which we are true to our deepest values. It is only by taking these risks that we are able to flourish, living the kind of meaningful lives that we all desire, not just for ourselves but for others too (especially our loved ones). In this sense, tempting fate is simply something that we all have to do, as even avoiding this kind of risk is itself a form of tempting fate (and is likely to produce the worst of all outcomes).

The million-dollar question is how one should go about tempting fate in a reasonable way. Clearly, not all ways of making decisions of this kind are sensible. Someone who decides to move country and leave all his roots behind on a whim is clearly not making a wise decision. If things happen to work out well for him, then that is more a matter of luck than judgment. But noting that such fundamental life choices require suitable reflection doesn't help us much unless we know what it is that is meant to guide this reflection.

The problem is that our standard way of thinking about risk—in terms of probability—doesn't work. It generates puzzles and leaves us in a muddle. This is why we need a new theory of risk (along with its neighboring notion, luck). This is what I hope to offer in this book. As we will see, in order to capture risk, we need to primarily understand it not in terms of probability but in terms of what I call *fragility*. Only with the fragility theory of risk in hand can we resolve our puzzles. In particular, this theory can explain why taking large risks can be reasonable, and even sometimes admirable, even though in general risk is something that one ought to minimize. Armed with the fragility theory of risk, we will finally know how to tempt fate without incurring the wrath of the gods.

INDEX

Page numbers in *italics* refer to figures and tables.

- abilities, skills and, 130. *See also* skill(s)
- achievement, 97; archer, 98–99, 111–14;
 - archery competition, 114–15; assessing value of, 105–6; authenticity risks, 108–9; background luck, 112; conception of, 182n5; definition, 167; driving test, 104; environmental luck, 112–13; epistemic, 185n18; epistemic, and knowledge, 128–33; epistemic, and veritic luck, 124–27; exercising skill as, 99–100; failure in, 103; Federer as tennis player, 101; fictional serial killer (Hannibal Lecter), 103–4, 106, 108; flourishing life, 107–10; Honnold's, 110, 109–10, 166; intervening luck, 111; luck and, 110–15, 115; McCauley of film *Heat*, 104, 105; nature of, 97–103; recovering from brain injury, 106–7; risky, 115–17; skill of spotting enemy planes, 130–31, 185n15; theory of, 100, 101–2; value of, 103–10; world-class athletes, 107
- actual risk, 22; definition, 167; Honnold's perspective, 93; perceived risk and, 18–20, 55–56
- admirable risks, 75–77; aspects of, 77; final value, 77; necessity, 77; skill, 77
- advertising, UK rules on false and misleading, 178n1
- aesthetic risk, 143, 153–56; Formula 1 (F1) drivers, 153–54; Honnold's free solo climb, 154
- alcohol consumption, liver disease and, 16
- anti-luck intuition, 184n6
- anti-luck plus cognitive agency theory of knowledge, 138
- anti-luck theory of knowledge, 135; cognitive skills and abilities, 136; definition, 167
- anti-luck virtue epistemology, 186n22
- anti-risk virtue epistemology, 186n22
- aphorisms, 1
- archer: achievement and luck, 111, 112; achievement of, 98–99; dog intercepting arrow, 124–25; environmental luck, 113–14; Robin Hood in competition, 114–15
- arithmetic of criminal justice, 156–60; legal risk, 157; term, 156
- authenticity risk(s), 10, 34–35, 58; achievement, 108–9; actual and perceived risk, 151–52; aspects of, 77–79; career change example, 42–43, 51–52; crucial properties of, 42; decision-making, 56; deepest values, 40–41, 42, 44, 52–53; definition, 167; emigrating to another country example, 43–44; final value, 79; flourishing and

- authenticity risk(s) (*continued*)
 - meaningful life, 35–42; Gauguin’s actions, 49–50; going away to university example, 44–47; Honnold’s ascent, 53–56; life-changing decision, 57; measurement of, 55; moral luck and, 48–53, 80; necessity, 78, 79; recognizing the massive risks in, 47–48; skill, 78, 79; trade-offs between values, 41–42; transformative experiences, 177n3
- authentic life, flourishing and, 38–39
- background luck, 112; definition, 167–68; intervening luck and, 112–13
- bank robbery, *Heat* (film), 73–74
- barn facade enthusiast, environmental epistemic luck, 126–27, 134, 184n14
- belief(s): cats on the bed, 137; divine helper supporting, 135–36; jurors, 120; knowledge and, 183–84n4; newspaper confirming, 121–22; parents’, about son, 120–21; robust true, 141–42
- Blackstone, William, on criminal justice system, 157
- Blackstone’s ratio, 157
- brain injury, achievement in recovery, 106–7
- Breaking Bad* (TV series), 180n9
- Burns, Robert, “To a Mouse,” 178n9
- car accident, good luck and bad luck, 84, 89
- career change, authenticity risk example, 42–43, 51–52
- cats, beliefs about, 137
- Chernobyl* (HBO TV series), 186–87n4
- children, safety devices for, 67–68
- Clooney, George: character, 181n12; Soderbergh remake, 180n10
- cognitive agency: abilities and skills, 136; robust epistemic success and, 141–42
- cognitive agency theory of knowledge, 136, 137; definition, 168; robust, 140
- Cold War, 144
- COVID pandemic, actual and perceived risk, 152
- criminal justice: arithmetic of, 156–60, 163; corroborating evidence, 158, 160; evidential burden, 162; fallibility of, 160; false confession, 159; legal evidence and risk, 160–63; preponderance of evidence, 161; signed confession, 159, 160
- de minimis risk, 182n9
- De Niro, Robert, *Heat* (film), 73–74
- depth, risk, 10–11
- depth of risk, 70; definition, 168; term, 70
- divine helper, supporting beliefs, 135–36
- driving test, achievement, 104
- Dr. Strangelove* (film), 144
- Ebert, Philip, on treatment of risk event, 175–76n1
- El Capitan: Honnold earning luck, 93–96; Honnold’s free solo climb of, 4–5, 8, 10, 11, 54, 56, 75, 79, 80, 109, 164; Honnold’s risk-taking on, 115–16; Honnold’s sporting risk, 149, 152; regular Joe’s attempt to free solo climb, 29, 60, 70; risk of death, 83, 86, 87
- emigrating to another country, authenticity risk example, 43–44
- environmental epistemic luck, 125, 185n20; definition, 168–69; example, 126–27; intervening and, 184n11
- environmental epistemic risk, veritic risk, 133–34
- environmental luck, 113–14; definition, 169; intervening and, 183n7;

- knowledge and epistemic achievement, 129
 epistemic achievement, 124;
 definition, 169; knowledge, luck and, 129; veritic luck and, 124–27
 epistemology, 184n5; contemporary, 184n8; debates in, 119–20
 ethical luck, 51
 evidential risk, term, 176n3
 existential risk, 143, 144–47
- F1 drivers. *See* Formula 1 (F1) drivers
 factual knowledge, 183n1
 Federer, achievement of tennis player, 101
 final value: admirable risks, 77;
 definition, 169; description of, 36;
 distinction between instrumental value and, 37–40
 Fleming, Alexander, luck of discovering penicillin, 123–24
 flourishing life, 177n2; achievements for, 107–10; Greeks on being moral, 51
 flying on a plane, risk and, 17
 Formula 1 (F1) drivers: aesthetic risk, 153–54; injuries, 187n7; reasonable risk, 72, 73; Senna as F1 titan, 151–52; sporting risk, 147–52
 fragility, 58; definition, 169–70;
 lotteries and, 61–65; probability and, 67, 69, 179n3; risk and, 3, 65–69; term, 179n3
 fragility theory of luck, 82–86, 118, 181n3; definition, 170
 fragility theory of risk, 3, 10, 11, 12, 58–59, 88, 118, 143, 145, 166, 188n17; aesthetic risk, 153–56; arithmetic of criminal justice, 156–60; definition, 170–71; existential risk, 144–47; legal risk, 160–63; sporting risk, 147–52
Free Solo (documentary), 75–76, 175n1
 free solo climbing, death-defying, 147.
 See also Honnold, Alex
- Gauguin, Paul: achievement, 108;
 authenticity risk, 154–55; pursuing artistic ambitions, 49–50
 Gettier, Edmund, on theorizing knowledge, 185–86n21
 Great American Novel, 155, 156
 Greek mythology, eyesight of
 Lynceus, 131–32
 guilt, as legal notion, 187n11
- hand sanitizer, post-COVID, 5
 health and safety, risk minimization, 26–27
Heat (film), 73–74, 76, 77; McCauley as thief, 74, 75–76, 77; McCauley in, 180n11; McCauley's achievement, 104, 105
 Highsmith, Patricia, short story on nuclear war, 186n2
 Hodgson, Paul, showcasing artwork, 187n9
 Holmes, Sherlock, knowledge and epistemic achievement, 128
 Honnold, Alex: achievement, 105, 109–10, 166; actual and perceived risk, 93; admiring, 6, 26–27; aesthetic risk, 154; amygdala of brain, 176n3; authenticity risk and ascent of, 53–56; climbing skills of, 102; earning luck, 93–95, 96; *Free Solo* (documentary), 75–76; free solo climb of El Capitan, 4–5, 8, 10, 11, 31, 32, 40, 48, 54, 56, 59, 79, 80, 149, 164, 175n1; health and safety, 27; illusory risk, 28–30; level of risk, 92; longevity of, 60–61; personality, 6; podcast interview, 177n2; on risk of free solo climbing, 176n4, 179n5; risk-reward, 32; risk-taking, 165–66; risky achievements, 115–17; skill and preparation of, 71–72, 94, 96; sporting risk, 147, 149, 152. *See also* El Capitan
 Hunt, Ethan, *Mission Impossible*, 139

- ideology, 178n8
- instrumental value, 182n4; definition, 171; description of, 36; distinction between final value and, 37–40
- intervening epistemic luck, 125; definition, 171; environmental and, 184n11; example of, 125–26
- intervening epistemic risk, veritic risk, 133–34
- intervening luck, 111; background luck and, 112–13; definition, 171–72; environmental and, 183n7; knowledge and epistemic achievement, 129
- “It Could Be You!” (slogan), UK national lottery, 62
- knowledge: anti-luck plus cognitive agency theory of, 138; anti-luck theory of, 135; belief and, 183–84n4; cognitive agency theory of, 136; defining in terms of robustness, 135; epistemic achievement and, 128–33; epistemic achievements, luck and, 129; excluding fragility, 118–24; factual, 183n1; luck and, 124; nature of, 134–42; notion of, 128; propositional, 183n1; risk and, 133–34; robust cognitive agency theory of, 140; theory of, 142, 185n19
- Kubrick, Stanley, film *Dr. Strangelove*, 144
- Lecter, Hannibal (fictional), achievements of serial killer, 103–4, 106, 108
- legal risk, 143, 157; legal evidence and, 160–63
- level of risk, 176n1, 182n9
- life: deepest values of, 39, 40–41; flourishing and meaningful, 35–42. *See also* meaningful life
- liver disease: alcohol consumption and, 16; risk, 15–16, 16
- lottery: connection to risk, 66; forming belief about ticket, 121–22; fragility and, 61–65; fragility of the risk event, 66–69; fragility of ticket, 118–19; having a losing ticket, 85–86; judging event to be lucky, 83–84; level and depth of luck, 95–96; level and depth of risk, 70–71; losing as unwanted event, 71; luck and buying a ticket, 112; probabilistic theory of luck, 85; UK national, 62; “winner” of, 66; winning as unwanted event, 66–67
- lottery case, 62; definition, 172; fragility, 61–65
- luck: achievements and, 110–15, 115; assessment, 81–82; background, 112; bivalent, 84; differences of risk and, 86–89; environmental, 113–14, 129; fragility theory of, 82–86, 118; gaining knowledge, 123; good or bad, 84; Honnold’s, 93–96; intervening, 111, 129; knowledge and, 124; moral luck, 80; notion of, 80; orthodox theory of, 14; perspective of risk and, 81–82; probabilistic theory of, 85; risk and, 80, 178n7, 182n8; subjectivity of risk and, 89–93; threshold of, 88, 89, 95; valence of lucky event, 89–90; veritic, 120
- lung cancer, risk of, 15
- Lynceus, Greek mythology figure, 131–32
- Mann, Michael, *Heat* (film), 73–74
- Massa, Felipe, injuries of, 187n7
- meaningful life: final value, 36; flourishing and, 35–42; instrumental value, 36
- Mission Impossible* (TV series and movies), 139
- modal account of luck, 181n3
- modal account of risk, 179n3

- moral luck, 178n5; authenticity risk and, 48–53, 178n6; ethical luck and, 51; phenomenon, 80; philosophical debate about, 48–49; theory of, 48
- Murderhorn, The, Homer of *The Simpsons*, 98, 107, 116
- National Geographic, *Free Solo* documentary, 175n1
- Navarro, Jesus, on luck and risk, 181n1
- necessity: admirable risks, 77; reasonable risks, 74
- nuclear football: risk associated with, 21; US president, 186n3
- nuclear holocaust, risk associated with, 21
- nuclear reactor, Chernobyl, 146
- nuclear strike, United States and Soviet Union, 144
- nuclear war, US president, 186n2
- observational capabilities, spotting enemy planes, 130–31, 185n15
- Ocean's Eleven* (film), 76, 180n10, 180–81n12
- Olympic Games: robust possibility of winning, 63–64; unlikely event of winning, 67
- opportunity cost, risk and, 2
- Pacino, Al, *Heat* (film), 73–74
- patriotism, 38, 178n8
- penicillin, luck of Fleming's discovery, 123–24
- perceived risk, 55; actual risk and, 18–20, 55–56; definition, 172; Honnold's perspective, 93; reasonable assessment of risk, 176n3
- Pitt, Brad, Soderbergh remake, 180n10
- plane: luck assessment, 90–91; risk assessment of getting on, 90; risk evaluation, 87–88
- polar expedition: Scott's, 97, 102, 103; Shackleton, 103
- Pritchard, Daisy, death of, 1
- probabilistic theory of luck, 85
- probabilistic theory of risk, 7, 8–9, 14, 15–16, 18, 145, 165; definition, 172–73
- probability: fragility and, 179n3; risk and, 6–9
- propositional knowledge, 183n1
- psychology, judgments about risk, 178–79n2
- puzzle: broadening our, 56–57; fragility and probability, 69–72; health and safety response, 27; resolving our, 58–61; risk, 4–6, 10; risk-reward ratio, 30–32; summing up, 32–33; universality of our, 34–35
- reasonable risks: aspects of, 74–75; necessity, 74; skill, 74; unavoidable-ity, 72–73; value of, 73, 74
- resultant luck, 177n5
- risk: admirable, 75–77; aesthetic risk, 143, 153–56; assessment, 81–82; authenticity, 10; choice and, 2; depth of, 10–11, 70, 94; differences of luck and, 86–89; existential risk, 143, 144–47; fragility and, 65–69; fragility theory of, 3, 10, 11, 12, 88, 118; free soloing, 179n5; ignorance of, 180n6; illusory, 28–30; keeping track of variables, 20–24; knowledge and, 133–34; legal risk, 143, 160–63; level of, 14, 94; luck and, 178n7, 182n8; nature of achievements, 11; notion of, 80; perceived and actual, 18–20; perspective of luck and, 81–82; probabilistic theory of, 7, 8–9, 14, 15–16, 18; probability and, 6–9; puzzle about, 4–6, 10; reasonable, 72–75; risk-minimization, 71–72; risky achievements, 115–17; sporting risk, 143, 147–52; subjectivity of luck and, 89–93; tempting fate, 1–2, 164–66; ways of talking about, 13–17

- risk assessment, risk-reward ratio, 21–23
- risk evaluation(s), 17; getting on a plane, 87–88; taking stock, 24–25
- risk event, 6–7; activity and, 15; definition, 13–14, 173; likelihood of, 69–70; term, 175n3; toddler-proofing house, 67–68; unwanted, 91
- risk-minimization, Honnold, 71–72
- risk perception, psychological work on, 176n5
- risk puzzle, health and safety response, 26–27. *See also* puzzle
- risk-reward ratio, 21–23; definition, 173; puzzle, 30–32
- risk-reward response, puzzle, 30–32
- risk-taking: admirable risks, 75–77; Honnold's, 165–66
- Robin Hood, archery competition, 114–15
- robust: fragility as opposite of, 63; term, 184n8
- robust cognitive agency theory of knowledge, 140; definition, 173
- robustness: definition, 173; term, 179n3; true beliefs, 139–40
- Russian Roulette, game of risk, 82
- safety. *See* health and safety
- safety devices, children, 67–68
- Scott, Robert Falcon, South Pole and, 97, 102, 103
- Scottish legal system, 187n13
- Senna, Ayrton: authenticity risk, 155; sporting risk, 149–52
- Shackleton, Ernest, polar expedition of, 103
- signed confession, criminal justice, 159, 160
- significance condition, theory of luck, 182n10
- Simpsons, The* (television), Homer attempting climb of The Murderhorn, 98, 107, 116
- skill(s): abilities and, 130; admirable risks, 77; Honnold's preparation and, 71–72; reasonable risks, 74; spotting war planes, 130–31
- sniper's bullet: risk of death, 81, 86–87; scenario of, 83
- Soderbergh, Steven, 180n10
- South Pole, Scott and, 97, 102, 103
- Soviet Union: *Chernobyl* (HBO TV series), 186n4; United States and, 144
- sporting risk, 143, 147–52; Formula 1 (F1) driver, 147–52; Honnold, 147, 149, 152
- subjectivity, luck, risk and, 89–93
- Suffolk sheep, intervening epistemic luck, 125–26, 134
- tempting fate, 164–66; overused saying on, 1; risk and, 2; sense of, 1–2
- theory of luck, significance condition on, 182n10
- thermometer, temperature readings, 139, 142
- “To a Mouse” (Burns), 178n9
- Tolstoy, Williams on Anna Karenina in novel by, 50–51, 55–56
- trade-offs between values, lives involving, 41–42
- transformative experiences: authenticity risk, 177n3; term, 178n7
- true beliefs, robustness of, 139–40
- United States: nuclear war and, 146; Soviet Union and, 144
- university attendance, authenticity risk example, 44–47

- valence*, lucky event, 89–90
- value(s): achievements, 103–10;
 - admirable risks, 77; aesthetic, 49–50; assessing achievement, 105–6; deepest, 39, 40, 42, 44, 52–53, 54, 57; distinction between instrumental and final, 37–40; final, 36; ideological commitments, 38; instrumental, 36; patriotism, 38; reasonable risks, 74; tradeoffs between, 41–42
- variables, probabilistic theory of risk, 20–24
- veritic luck, 120, 184n8; definition, 173–74; epistemic achievements and, 124–27; features of environment, 138
- veritic risk, 133; definition, 174;
 - intervening and environmental epistemic risk, 133–34
- virtue epistemology, 185n18
- war zone, risk of death, 81
- Williams, Bernard: on Anna Karenina in Tolstoy's novel, 50–51, 55–56; on ethical luck, 51; on theory of moral luck, 48; treatment of moral luck, 49
- world-class athletes, achievement of, 107
- World War II, spotting enemy planes, 130–31, 185n15
- Yosemite National Park, 4. *See also* El Capitan; Honnold, Alex