Moral Luck and Accepting Responsibility in Paul Auster's *Sunset Park*

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This essay makes a partial defence for the late Paul Auster's *Sunset Park* in relation to negative criticism that the novel received around the time of its publication. The theoretical framework applied is to view the novel as a literary example of the positions taken within the unresolved philosophical debate around 'moral luck'[1] being articulated through the process of storytelling. The 'Problem of Moral Luck' as conceived by Thomas Nagel (1979) is a perceived conflict between the view that people should only be held morally accountable for things that are under their control and everyday moral judgments that seem to hold people morally accountable for things which are not under their control. Nagel identified four different types of moral luck, three of which, it is argued, are relevant to *Sunset Park*

The first of these is resultant moral luck. This refers to occasions where we hold people accountable for the results of their actions when the results of their actions are not under their control. For example, if there are two speeding motorists but only one of them has the misfortune to have a child run out in front of them, then they are typically held morally blameworthy for the death of the child, even though what is under their control is identical to the motorist who is fortunate enough that a child has run out in front of their car. Then there is circumstantial moral luck, which relates to holding people morally accountable for their actions, even though their actions are dependent on the circumstances they find themselves in and the circumstances are beyond their control. For example, we may hold a soldier responsible for their war crimes, even though had they not lived in a time of war they may have led a blameless life.

Constitutive moral luck concerns morally judging people for their character, even though the factors which have shaped their character – their genetics, their formative experiences, the time and place into which they are born – are outside of their control. Finally, causal moral luck is the term used for holding people morally accountable despite the fact that their actions are determined by antecedent events, and as such are not under their control. Andrew Latus (2014) argues that this form of moral luck is redundant, as the same issues are addressed by a combination of circumstantial and constitutive moral luck. For the purposes of this paper, we will adopt a similar position and not address this as a separate category for consideration.

All of the above applies to the western focus of this paper (British academics analysing an American novel). Cultures that are more fatalistic may not consider the problem that luck poses for moral responsibility. Within western thinking philosophers have taken various approaches to try and resolve this dilemma. There are those who deny the existence of moral luck by arguing that although luck influences the outcome of our actions, what we hold people morally accountable for are the factors which are under their control (Richards, 1986, Rescher, 1993, Rosebury, 1995, Thomson, 1993, Williams, 1976, Wolf, 2001). One form of this argument maintains that cases where it appears that people are being considered morally blameworthy for things which are not under their control are cases in which they are being held accountable for what can really be known about the situation (Richards, 1986; Rescher, 1993; Rosebury, 1995; Thomson, 1993). For example, if there are two

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speeding motorists but only one of them has a child run out in front of them, then it appears, if we consider the motorist who hits the child more blameworthy, we are judging the motorist for what is not under their control. However, it is argued that we are judging the motorist who hits the child for their dangerous driving, and the evidence of their dangerous driving is the fact that they were unable to avoid the child that ran into the road. There is no such evidence for the other driver, as they did not hit anyone, which justifies the different level of blame we ascribe.

Another approach is to accept the presence of luck in our moral judgments and either revise our moral practices to reflect this fact (Browne, 1992) or argue that the control principle does not have the central role in our judgments that it is often thought to have (Walker, 1991). Susan Wolf (2001) draws a distinction between the rationalist and the irrationalist position on the problem of moral luck. The rationalist believes that one should only be held accountable for what is under one's control. Therefore, in the case of two speeding motorists, if one of them has a child run out in front of them and they hit and kill them, while the other is more fortunate and no child runs into their path, they should be judged equally. The irrationalist position is to judge them based on the consequences of their actions. This would mean that the motorist who kills the child deserves more blame than the one who is lucky enough not to have a child run into their path. Wolf attempts to reconcile these positions by arguing that the two motorists are equally blameworthy, but that the one whose actions resulted in the death of a child should accept a greater sense of blame for themselves due to the special connection they have to the consequences of their actions.[2]

The next section will provide a context to Auster's fictional oeuvre generally and then in relation to luck, chance and personal responsibility, as this is an area that academics, critics and readers generally have repeatedly found to be at the heart of his fiction. This will culminate with an overview of *Sunset Park* drawing criticism at a time when critics were questioning the repetitive nature of Auster's fiction. Having provided this author-centred context to compliment the theoretical framework outlined above, the final stage of the essay will be the analysis itself, in which positions taken, supported and criticised within the novel will be compared to the positions taken by the philosophers mentioned above concerning 'moral luck'.

Paul Auster's fiction has been analysed by critics in contexts related to metafiction, post-modern philosophy, life writing and Jewish-American socio-historical contexts for many years. Fror example, Mark Brown (2007, p.26) argued that Auster's concern is primarily with loneliness and/or connectedness in the postmodern metropolis, citing his links to Reznikoff, Rakosi and Oppen in terms of the Objectivist project to 'locate the poet between the material world and the verbal world'. Tom Theobald (2010, p.69) related Auster's prose to the writing of Sartre, Camus, Blanchot and Merleau-Ponty, in terms of the existential dilemmas facing his protagonists.

Most of his novels are set in a recognizable American historical moment and include several persistent themes and traits. For example, the protagonists are usually male, American and share other similarities with their author, such as being writers or other kinds of artists, or attending colleges and inhabiting New York neighbourhoods at times when it is known that Auster did the same. Auster also often inserts passages that detail historical events or political perspectives alongside the private lives of his characters. It is almost certain that many of the events and incidents described in *The Invention of Solitude* are taken directly from Auster's own experience. The use of a second person narrative and a 'character' called 'A' have led some to the conclusion that this book should not be looked upon as straightforward autobiography, but rather as a generic experiment. This left Auster with the option of distancing himself from actions, emotions and motives for which we have only his word. Thus Brendan Martin (2008, p.11) argued that 'Auster removes the mantle of authorial control and encourage [sic] his readership to question the concept of conventional truth'.

Furthermore, Auster, throughout his oeuvre, developed his interest in chance, particularly the difficulty of planning and building for the future whilst knowing that this can be disrupted without warning by random events. In *The Red Notebook* Auster describes at the age of 14 being in close

proximity to a boy who was struck by lightning. This random 'act of God' style intervention re-emerges as a meta-text (Dashiel Hammet's *The Maltese Falcon*) in *Oracle Night* and then again in Auster's *4-3-2-1*, a novel that is a padded 'Sliding Doors' narrative based entirely on the premise of what might have happened to the protagonist had he turned different metaphorical corners at different times. All of the above invites author centred or biographical readings of Auster's fiction, because so often 'real' events from his extensive autobiographical non-fiction writing are reconfigured into his fiction. Auster also gave many interviews in which he confirmed positions taken by protagonists and narrators relating to historical events in his fiction as matching his own.[3] However, the constant unsubtle metafictional flourishes of his fiction act as a kind of literary caveat to such straightforward or literal approaches.

In Auster's earlier career this was largely appreciated by academics who were grateful that his novels were handy for teaching literary theory and fans and critics who found his Vietnam era spirit and slick, noir narratives 'cool'. However, from the late 1990s Auster was on the receiving end of some negative reviews, particularly concerning the repetitive nature of his fiction. Joanna Briscoe, reviewing *Invisible*, stated that Paul Auster had 'created what amounts to his own, self referential fictional world over the years'. This is particularly the case as far as the perhaps self-mocking presence of 'a notably gorgeous and intellectually gifted Jewish American, born in the same year as Paul Auster' is concerned (Briscoe, 2009).

The division between critics who had bought into Auster's recognizable fiction and those who expressed their boredom with its repetitions peaked with the publication of *Sunset Park*. Some critics praised Auster's engagement with real world issues such as financial recession and evictions in America and Auster's attempts to create characters not of his own generation. Brandon Robshaw (2011), for instance, praised the novel in the following terms: 'There are no minor characters in Auster's world – everyone has a rich, complicated biography and inner life, and their own dilemmas to deal with'. Others were less convinced. For instance, a review in the *New Yorker* (2010) argued that events in *Sunset Park*:

> would fit comfortably into any of the author's previous works, as would shopworn observations like "The entire story of his life hinges on what happened that day." Auster's usual motifs—a figure who disappears from his own life, a prominent role for chance and coincidence, an obsession with baseball and old movies—eventually take over the novel, with familiar results.

Arifa Akbar (2010) noted that Auster's 'old man cycle' of novels was over and that his young, ethnically diverse characters are 'hastily imagined', while Rodney Welch (2010) added that:

> In the end, "Sunset Park" feels like a needless bid for relevancy, an attempt to engage with the post-crash, post-literate, homeless culture, rigged to let Auster address whatever was on his mind when he sat down to write. He even shuts down the book for five pages to extol the virtues of PEN International. The result is a very moody "mood of the country" novel, a book of many parts that never really cohere in a satisfying way.

This essay in part agrees with the critics who found *Sunset Park* repetitive in terms of Auster's preoccupations and themes and found the broader demographic spectrum of characters who interact with the main protagonist contrived and unconvincing. *Sunset Park*, like *The Brooklyn Follies*, branches out from the main or central characters, giving voices to other tangential characters through their own chapters. The back stories of Alice Bergstrom, Ellen Brice and Mary Lee Swan do present as a very clumsy and tortured attempt to insert female perspectives into the novel. This could be judged as an attempt to respond to criticism of male authored fiction generally, however Auster here only proved what many of his critics already felt – that his fictional imagination and projection of perspective were limited by gender. His earlier novels which stayed true to that, including *The New York Trilogy*, *Leviathan* and *Moon Palace,* certainly come across as authentic in their characterisation, despite the obvious metafictional games and autobiographical teasing.

The central narrative arc of the novel revolves around Miles Heller's trajectory from academic high achiever and future star to recluse and blue-collar worker in Florida and finally living as a squatter with an eclectic group in Sunset Park, New York, set against the backdrop of his childhood and one chance event that changed everything. *Sunset Park* is saturated in examples of chance, happenstance and coincidence relating to characters external to the novel, that defy expectation and belief, sometimes juxtaposed with examples of people who are said to have orchestrated their own downfall by poor decision making (41–42). The central characters of the novel, Miles Heller and his father Morris in particular, are heavily preoccupied with this. A baseball player's promising career ends because of an injury, but the same injury keeps him out of World War II (164). Another character nicknamed "Lucky" cheats death on several occasions, but also misses opportunities because of chance, before finally running out of luck (299). Other characters' lives change course because of sudden, unexpected bereavements. The caveat, as throughout Auster's fiction, is in place – life is random and unpredictable. Nobody can fully control their outcomes through their actions. However, as will be argued below, this novel does feature a much more nuanced debate concerning moral luck and personal responsibility, through the story of Miles Heller, who at the age of 16 accidentally kills his stepbrother Bobby during a minor family squabble by pushing him and causing him to be hit by a car.

Regardless of any 'changes' in the historical setting and generational characteristics of Auster's central characters, *Sunset Park* continues Auster's tendency towards self-explanation in fiction and non-fiction that David Brauner (2001) diagnosed in Jewish fiction generally, and the motif of self-defence that Brauner found in Philip Roth's fiction specifically.[4] This is particularly the case in Auster's writing that is read as being related to the demise of his first marriage, to the writer Lydia Davies, largely caused by Auster's ambition to live as an author, and the knock-on effect that this had on their son, Daniel. What endures in the reader's mind from the passage in *Hand to Mouth* (1997, 108–26) in which Auster narrates this period of his career, in spite of the immense distress that his divorce caused him (along with his separation from his son Daniel and the death of his father in 1979), is his abject lack of regret for the sacrifices that he made for his career. This is often matched in his earlier fiction of the 1980s and 1990s, with protagonists' outcomes being heavily guided by chance events and their choices largely supported (or at least rarely criticised) through narrative interventions. What is different in Auster's later writing, is that there is an increased tendency towards representing and dwelling on remorse and prolonged suffering for mistakes, as exemplified in *Sunset Park,* in which the young protagonist pays repeatedly for one youthful misjudgement.

It is in relation to this, that this essay will investigate the way in which Auster's 'repetitive' motif of chance interacts with the equally repetitive themes of personal responsibility for and consequences of choices made by the individual in *Sunset Park*. It is not the intention to apply this to an author-centred reading. As outlined above, others well might. However, the analysis in this essay applies directly to the text, with no prurient or salacious judgement applied. It must be kept in mind as the philosophical positions are discussed, that we are addressing fiction, and metafiction at that.

The scenario regarding Bobby's death meets Nagel's criteria for both resultant moral luck and circumstantial moral luck. The result was Bobby's death, which the reader is initially told was an unforeseeable accident. However, we are later told that Miles is unsure whether he heard the car coming (25) before he shoved his brother and reminded of Miles's tendency towards rage (131). In any case, Miles shoved his brother in the midst of a verbal altercation and his brother died as a result. The key circumstance was that 'he had been walking on Bobby's right side instead of his left' (19). If this had not been the circumstance (circumstantial moral luck) or had Bobby being pushed not resulted in him being hit by a car (resultant moral luck), the incident 'would have been forgotten in no time at all' (19–20).

Miles is unable to forgive himself or see himself as not responsible for Bobby's death and as a result withdraws from his previously structured and future oriented life. He becomes a withdrawn and

reclusive character who responds to chance and random events generally by making the topic a fetish or a hobby that he half seriously researches and taking an ascetic approach to life, without ambition and having as few wants and needs 'as humanly possible' (6). This, and Miles's rage towards Bobby on the day of the accident, is strongly related to his upbringing (constitutive moral luck), which is covered in depth in the fourth chapter. His mother left him and his father, causing Miles to feel like 'a black speck in a world made of snow' (68). His father Morris states that by the time Miles attached to his stepmother Willa, 'it was probably too late' (28). This is made more complex by Bobby's actions that had angered Miles prior to the shove, and which were a circumstantial result of Bobby's irresponsible and fatalistic attitude, related to his own constitutive circumstances of his father's random death and his mother preferring Miles to him. Of the two, at the time, it is Miles who is more connected to personal responsibility for his actions.

Having re-engaged with life somewhat through his relationship with Pilar, for whom he does hope for a better future, Miles once again finds himself having to withdraw after intervening in an incident of police brutality during an eviction from the squat in Sunset Park. Like the incident with Bobby, and another earlier incident which caused him to flee Florida, this is a spur of the moment incident which relates to circumstantial moral luck but is again underpinned by Miles's rage when he reacts by punching a police officer. He has never fully disconnected from the notion of luck as a defining factor in his outcomes, having seen meeting Pilar as 'a small piece of luck he stumbled across one afternoon in a public park, an exception to every rule' (13). He then described having to leave Florida after being assaulted as 'another fluke in a world of flukes and endless mayhem'. Finally, as he flees legal justice for assaulting the police officer in Sunset Park, he reiterates his original, pre-Pilar philosophy:

> '…he wonders if it is worth hoping for the future, and from now on, he tells himself, he will stop hoping for anything and live only for now, this moment, this passing moment, the now that is here and then not here, the now that is gone forever' (308).

Miles's attitude towards the situation is an example of the paradox of the problem of moral luck, as despite acknowledging the role that luck played in his situation, he is earnest in his wish to take responsibility for his actions and to punish himself if the legal system does not. This demonstrates that he can hold the paradoxical position of both believing that the events that led to Bobby's death were largely outside of his control, at the same time as holding himself completely responsible. However, other characters in the novel such as Bobby's mother Willa, either see the event as an accident and do not hold Miles responsible, or, in the case of Miles's father Morris, adopt the position of denying the problem of moral luck, by only holding Miles responsible for what is under his control and as a result seeing the incident as 'banal', an 'adolescent spat' (276).

However, Morris also offers another position which hints at a more nuanced approach which could be analysed in light of Wolf's (2001) position in relation to moral luck. Wolf argues that despite the fact that we should adopt a rationalist approach and only hold people blameworthy for what was under their control, people should still accept a greater sense of responsibility for themselves for harm that results from their actions, even if this resulting harm is not under their control. Accordingly, despite Morris not holding Miles responsible for Bobby's death, he still thinks Miles 'must be forgiven' (277). He acknowledges that the sense of responsibility that Miles feels is appropriate despite him not being blameworthy, and that this sense of responsibility needs to be addressed by forgiveness. Such a position may seem incoherent for those who seek to deny the existence of moral luck in such cases (Richards, 1986; Rescher, 1993; Rosebury, 1995; Thomson, 1993), as they would argue Miles can only be held accountable for what is under his control. However, as a reader, we would surely feel differently about Miles if he did not take on this sense of responsibility and only took responsibility for the actions that were under his control, dismissing it, as Morris does, as 'banal', an 'adolescent spat' (276). The sense of responsibility that Miles feels is what Wolf (2001) describes as a 'nameless virtue' (13), taking responsibility for what results from our actions rather than just what we had intended.

Other characters in the novel take a stance regarding continuing to take personal responsibility for the future despite the possibility of random events dictating outcomes. Morris Heller strongly argues that mistakes can be rectified when he discusses trying to recover his marriage after infidelity (172) and when he tells Miles to 'stand up and face the music' (306). Bing Nathan works to find reassurance in his principles and repeated patterns of everyday life (73–75). Even Miles rants about the results of the Bush administration's policy in Iraq (46) and in relation to a story about two men who reacted differently to bad luck states that: 'It's a question of character [...] every man is different from every other man' (44–45). He understands the difference between intention, premeditation and moral luck, but is ultimately unable to forgive himself. This is the paradox of personal feelings of guilt and responsibility versus theoretical morality that is at the centre of the novel's plot.

An additional level of complexity to Miles's struggle with moral luck, responsibility, guilt and penitence is his problematic relationship with Pilar Sanchez. At first blush this relationship may appear exploitative because Pilar is much younger than Miles and technically underage in the state of Florida. He takes a pedagogical, Henry Higgins style approach towards her, from their first meeting when he is 'impressed' that she reads 'for herself' rather than following curriculum requirements (10). Later he appoints himself her reading mentor, recommends texts (49), and almost decides from the beginning that he will correct his own wasted potential through her, that he will career counsel her towards good exam results, a good college and a high-status career rather than her own stated ambition to be a registered nurse (11–12). He makes assumptions about what she should want. On face value, the relationship sounds manipulative and controlling, but Miles is reconnecting to ambition, hope and just outcomes without guilt by supporting someone from a disadvantaged background towards success through hard work. This relationship serves to further illustrate that Miles can understand moral luck and that people should move through life purposefully despite its random potential, but that he cannot apply this to himself.

Having analysed the central event and plot line in *Sunset Park* in relation to the philosophical debate around moral luck, this essay now concludes with a partial defence of the novel and Auster's work generally in relation to criticism that has been levelled against him, as discussed above. American fiction in general has continuously been viewed through the lens of Philip Rahv's (1940) influential statement that American novelists show a "unique indifference...to ideas generally, to theories of value, to the wit of the speculative and problematical" (360). Compare this to Sean O'Hagan's take on Paul Auster (2004) in which it is outlined that Auster is popular in France, where 'metafiction' is admired, but less revered in America where critics feel that those who undertake such experiments know that 'the harder it is to be pinned down on any idea, the easier it is to conceal that one has no ideas at all' (35). The paradox here is that novelists are sure to be shot down by critics whether they attempt to engage with political and philosophical issues through realistic representation or whether they eschew this in favour of metafictional forms that appear to deflect a grounded approach to morality and personal responsibility.

Paul Auster's *Sunset Park* can be read as a peevish retaliation to this predictable critical response to his work and to the sheer inevitability of not being able to please everyone. Auster's entire fictional oeuvre, as outlined above, has persistently featured metafictional flourishes and disclaimers from his narrators and characters, and has repeatedly returned to themes of chance, luck and responsibility. Following the criticism of Joanne Briscoe (2009) among others about his previous novel, Auster appeared in *Sunset Park* to have responded by creating Miles, a character who is everything Briscoe slated. Almost everyone in the novel, male or female, is attracted to him. His sophistry and ascetic thinking in response to a random life changing event are a hyperbolic parody of Auster's earlier protagonists. An example of this is through Morris's perspective, recalling the earnest and self-serious younger Miles constructing a trite reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird* based on the idea that 'until you are wounded, you cannot become a man' (186). Miles is far more hysterical than, for example, Benjamin Sachs in *Leviathan*, but essentially he trots out the same schtik. His relationship with Pilar

was surely intended to raise judgemental eyebrows and the extent to which he takes himself seriously was surely intended test readers' sympathy.

Miles is not the only character within the novel to appear ludicrous precisely at the point of giving their ideas an elevated status. Morris Heller and Bing Nathan are especially prone to this. Morris's equation of blue-collar work to 'hell' when considering Miles's penance surely plays up to stereotypes of Jewish Americans (276–77). Bing is introduced as the 'warrior of outrage, the champion of discontent' (71), but this grandiose language is undercut by the narrator's actual descriptions of him as a 'sloppy' person (75) who resorts to 'petty' acts of rebellion (72). He is nonetheless shown to be treacherous in stealing one of his fellow squatters' boyfriends, however even this is brushed aside as a misguided attempt to explore his deep attraction to Miles (290–91).

In reacting to this, critics may have taken Auster a little too seriously and forgotten that *Sunset Park* is a novel, not a philosophical tract or a pitch to resolve a contentious moral, political or legal issue. Indeed the novel, even in the present day, is still in Trilling's (1950) terms a potential defence for the idiosyncratic self and possibly the last bulwark in contemporary culture against sanctimony. Malena Watrous (2010) in anticipating the flood of criticism towards the novel partly defended *Sunset Park* by pointing out that Auster was 'right that the rules of fiction should be bent. Writers not always determined to please the reader are the ones who break new ground'. It is fair to point out that *Sunset Park* falls a long way short Bakhtin's (1984) conception of a Dostoyevskian novel, and that Auster does not succeed in representing the ideas of all of his characters in terms of how the younger (and in particular the female) characters are conceived and imagined. However, there is a genuinely dialogic aspect around the theme of moral luck that brings fiction's own representational power of inner and outer dialogue to the serious philosophical topic. Whilst pushing the boundaries of credibility, even by his own standards and whilst thumbing his nose at his detractors, Auster presented within *Sunset Park* a compelling fictional exploration of the unresolved and quite possibly unresolvable philosophical debate around moral luck. Predictably and disappointingly, his critics overlooked this and simply pointed out that he had once more reverted to old tropes and tired themes.

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Notes

[1] The modern debate on the problem of moral luck was sparked by the paper B. A. O. Williams & T. Nagel (1976). Moral Luck. Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume 50 (1):115–152.

[2] A detailed overview of the problem of moral luck can be in Nelkin, Dana K. (Spring, 2023) "Moral Luck", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/moral-luck/>.

[3] See for example 'In Conversation: Paul Auster with John Reed', The Brooklyn Rail, August/September 2003, pp. 23–24.

[4] See Brauner, Chapter 2: 'The Trials of Nathan Zuckerman, or Jewry as jury; judging Jews in Zuckerman Bound', in *Philip Roth*, pp. 21–45.

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