

# Commentary on Perspective I: The Humanistic Dimensions of Probability

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The first perspective offered in this book is situated in the historical origins of probability as well as differences in the philosophical bases of probability theory. The four chapters in this section address origins, epistemology, paradoxes, games, modelling of probability and different pedagogical approaches grounded in the *classical*, the *frequentist* or the *subjectivist* approach. The aim of this commentary is not to regurgitate or summarize the content of the chapters, but to ground the first perspective offered in this book within a humanistic framework of mathematics.

The humanist tradition in mathematics education attempts to situate or ground the development of mathematical ideas to the people involved in their conception, and in particular to describe the motivation and context within which the ideas developed. To paraphrase Flusser, the more humanistic aspects of mathematics are the ones that are more fruitful in the sense that “Euler’s imperfection (which turns an otherwise perfect piece of workmanship into a work of art), raises many new questions” (p. 5). The origins of probability can be traced to old myths in different cultures in which divination or gambling games are mentioned, often resulting in a catastrophic loss or gain. For example, in the Indian epic Mahabharata (~1500 B.C.), a kingdom is lost in a dice game which results in exile for the losers. This is not the only instance of “gambling” in ancient Indian culture. The Rig Veda, an old religious scripture contains what is called the Gamblers (Ruin) Hymn in which the dire consequences of playing dice games are extolled in the words, *Cast on the board, like lumps of magic charcoal, though cold themselves they burn the heart to ashes!* Other ancient cultures like the House of Ur in Babylon also developed board games, such as precursors to what is popularly known as backgammon today. Native American cultures in North and South America also independently developed a rich tradition of games

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