The Story of Chance: German Literature and Probability Theory in the 19th and 20th Centuries

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Modern probability theory represents a unique phenomenon in the history of mathematics, in that it emerges abruptly in the mid-17th century. Since its genesis, mathematical probability has colonized virtually every area of both science and everyday life, changing our very definitions of 'rational' and 'normal', and fundamentally transforming our images of nature, society and the human being. This paper presents a project exploring the reception of mathematical probability theory in German-language literature through the 19th and 20th centuries. Arguing that literature has represented (in content) and internalized (in form) the fierce conceptual and epistemological debates regarding the nature of probability itself, it will analyse aspects of how German literature has portrayed, critiqued and (within its own ambit) reproduced the ways in which mathematical probability has changed the frameworks within which we conceptualize knowledge. It will give a brief history of the emergence and ascendancy of mathematical probability theory and discuss how German-language writers analysed and assimilated key stages of the theory’s development while seeking means to represent both the interactions between the individual and mass society, as well as the cognitive processes of individual human beings.