Ahab's Mercy

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Recommended Citation

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Besieged by a relentless white whale an enraged and anxious Captain Ahab decided that perhaps he could appease the beast by sacrificing two of his crew to the churning sea. He gathered everyone amidship and ordered Tashtego, Queequeg and Daggoo, the three of his crew who were most rumored to be speaking of mutiny, to come before him. He then brought forward his chief mate Starbuck and said to him "I have chosen these three as candidates to be fed to the great white whale, but because I am merciful I will spare one of them. I am charging you with the task of randomly selecting the two who are to be thrown overboard." Moments later because Tashtego was slightly more apprehensive than the others of ending his life in the mouth of the beast he begged Starbuck to tell him if he was the one who would be spared. Though Starbuck did not feel comfortable answering such an inquiry, he did tell Tashtego all he could say was that Daggoo would not be spared. Though the answer relieved Tashtego somewhat, since he figured his chance to be spared had now increased from 1/3 to 1/2, another member of the crew, who was preternaturally fluent in matters of probability, pointed out to his fellow seamen that in actuality Starbuck's response suggested the likelihood Tashtego was among the two who were to be fed to the whale remained 2/3. Asked why he had come to such a conclusion he replied thusly:

> Since Starbuck is a good fellow, Tashtego should have already known that Starbuck would have given him the name of somebody else who had been chosen to be thrown overboard. Tashtego prior to hearing from Starbuck estimated his chance of being thrown overboard to be 2/3, the same as both Queequeg and Daggoo. Since Starbuck said Daggoo would be thrown overboard it's either because Queequeg (1/3 chance) or Tashtego (1/3 chance) would be spared and the Queequeg/Dagoo coin flip Starbuck made came up Daggoo (1/2 chance; for a total of 1/6 chance Daggoo was named was named because Tashtego will be spared). Hence after hearing that Daggoo will be thrown overboard the estimate of Tashtego's chance of being spared is half that of Queequeg. This means his chances of being spared, now knowing Daggoo isn't, again are 1/3, but Queequeg has a 2/3 chance of being spared.