

Ethics // Spring 2026

Handout 5

Moral luck: Williams

IMMUNITY TO LUCK. Does the ethical value of our life depend on luck? With ancients, it is clear that it does. Oedipus is condemned, but his actions were predetermined in advance by fortune. At least in large part, if not wholly, he was condemned, and was remorseful, because of the facts outside of his control. The same may be said, e.g., of King Saul in the Old Testament.

Modern views sought to purge luck and make it irrelevant for the evaluation of life and actions. We summarise them as follows: 21

- (1) No-luck: The valuable part of character is motive, rather than talents or powers. Similarly, in actions, we evaluate intentions rather than outcomes.

How does this eliminate luck? Because the capacity for moral willing is available to every agent—to every one capable of minimal rational thought.

WILLIAMS'S CLAIM. One way in which No-luck views can be challenged is by emphasising the conditioning of the will itself. This is *constitutive luck*. By metaphysical arguments Kant claimed to show that, next to empirical selves eminently subject to luck (e.g., because of their inherited psychological dispositions), there are pure selves that are not subject to empirical determinations and hence to luck. If these metaphysical constructions are discarded, as they usually are in the modern debate, we are left with the rule of fortune reaffirmed. 21

But these concerns with constitutive luck are not Williams' (instead, they become the focal point of Nagel's essay).

What *is* Williams's problem? Even if immunity to constitutive luck is granted, more has to be claimed on behalf of No-luck. If morality is just one value among many, then there is nothing much that would motivate us to be moral. Rather, morality should be given some special significance—to the effect that only through morality one becomes immune to luck. Morality is thus liberating. It liberates us from the oppression of contingencies. Consequently, if there is a possibility of regret, it should relate only to the moral value of the agent's actions, to their intentions.

Williams challenges these latter claims. It is possible to experience regret over non-moral facts, over the circumstances beyond one's control and independent of one's will. More than that: regret over morally relevant aspects of the action sometimes *results from* the regret over circumstances beyond one's control.

GAUGUIN. Consider a painter ('Gauguin') who abandons his family in order to pursue his artistic vocation in Tahiti. So here is an agent who sacrifices moral value for the sake of some other value, artistic value in this instance. It is important for Williams' argument that Gauguin is not your next-door amoralist for whom morality (= 'the claims of others') have no pull. Moral values are among his values, and this sets up the possibility of conflict and of the deep uncertainty in his decision. His possible regret over his actions depends in large part on his artistic success. That is, Gauguin is liable to experience regret in proportion to his artistic success. However, artistic success is something that cannot be predicted in advance, and something that depends on the circumstances beyond Gauguin's control. 22

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Williams claims that the justification of Gauguin's choice depends *entirely* on the success of his project. If Gauguin fails, he will have no reasons to cite in justification of his success. 23

RETROSPECTIVE JUSTIFICATION. What kind of reasons justifying his choice could Gauguin give? The first feature of Gauguin's presumed justification is that it cannot be provided in advance. Gauguin would not be able to know whether he succeeds or not, before the actual success or failure. So any justification will be *retrospective*. 24

Yet in this case the reasons he gives cannot be, according to the No-luck conception, moral reasons. This is because those reasons will have to include a reference to how things contingently turned out—and thus a reference to luck.

INTRINSIC AND EXTRINSIC LUCK. There are two fundamental ways in which Gauguin may have failed in his project. He may have failed, in the first place, through some kind of injury or disease that would have prevented him from ever reaching Tahiti or from leading an active life. That is when we say ‘it was none of his fault’. Strictly speaking, it might still be (he did not take precautions, did not get vaccinated etc.). But clearly these happenings would not be relevant to the project. Gauguin’s qualities which played a role in the events of this kind would not play a role in the evaluation of the original project. So these events are a matter of *extrinsic luck*.

On the other hand, Gauguin may have also failed because he was not built to be a great painter. The journey to Tahiti may have revealed precisely that. In this case Gauguin fails for reasons relevant to the evaluation of the project. And he fails, moreover, through a fault of his own—his own inadequate perception of his powers (those powers that are again relevant to the project). This is, then, *intrinsic luck*.

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Williams insists that both kinds of luck are necessary for the success of the project and for the ‘actual justification’, but only intrinsic luck (or rather, lack thereof) is necessary for ‘unjustification’. As I understand the idea, when we evaluate the project in retrospect, we take into account both of kinds of luck. Yet in evaluating the *decision*, i.e. the choice made in the past, we only take into account the intrinsic kind of luck:

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- (2) ‘My project failed, because I was injured’: a sensible factual statement.
- (3) ‘My choice was wrong, because I was not a good painter’: a sensible normative statement.
- (4) ‘My choice was wrong, because I was injured’: not a sensible normative statement.

To sum up:

- (5) **Intrinsic luck:** Luck that is internal to the project itself. In Gauguin’s case, this is the luck of being a truly gifted painter. Only a failure of intrinsic luck can unjustify the agent’s decision.

Extrinsic luck: External accidents, such as an injury on the way to Tahiti, that prevent the project from completing. While such luck determines whether the agent is justified, it does not unjustify the decision in the same way an internal failure of talent does.

Now to complicate the matters further, the locus of intrinsic luck may also be external. Gauguin’s intrinsic luck is largely internal to his own talent. It is a relation between Gauguin’s abilities and dispositions. But the case of Anna Karenina illustrates that *intrinsic* luck can lie partly *outside* the agent. Anna’s failure is not an extrinsic misfortune like an accident. It is a failure at the heart of her project, her relationship with Vronsky. Therefore, it counts as intrinsic luck (or lack thereof). However, by its very nature it also depends on Vronsky and a myriad of her interactions with him. To this extent, it is ‘external’ affected by factors beyond her control. See Figure 1.



REGRETS. Corresponding to the two kinds of luck, we have two notions of regret. Generally, I can regret how things turned out. In this sense I can regret that my grandfather was in labour camps long before I was born. But there is another species of regret (‘agent-regret’) which I only experience with regard to my own actions: e.g., I agent-regret that I offended my friend.

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Yet things are more complicated than this. Can I not agent-regret the actions beyond my control, as in the case of a lorry driver? Ultimately, I think, Williams concludes that in these situations there is an initial experience of agent-regret which, upon reflection, can and should be replaced by regret *simpliciter*.

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Question 1. Explain the reasons for compensation in the cases of regret *simpliciter* in pages 28–29.

PRACTICAL DELIBERATION. In line with the No-luck conception, we may think that a perfectly rational deliberation must be such that it will never provoke agent-regrets (‘Rawls’ injunction’). But we now see why this claim should be false. It is false, first, because it ignores the presence of luck. No-one is immune to luck, whether extrinsic and intrinsic.

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There is another dimension of the problem, too. Justification of the choices is always done from the current perspective. Their subsequent evaluation, and the evaluation of the projects, is done from the later standpoint. The *standards* of evaluations on these two occasions may differ. If they do not, this again should be due to luck.

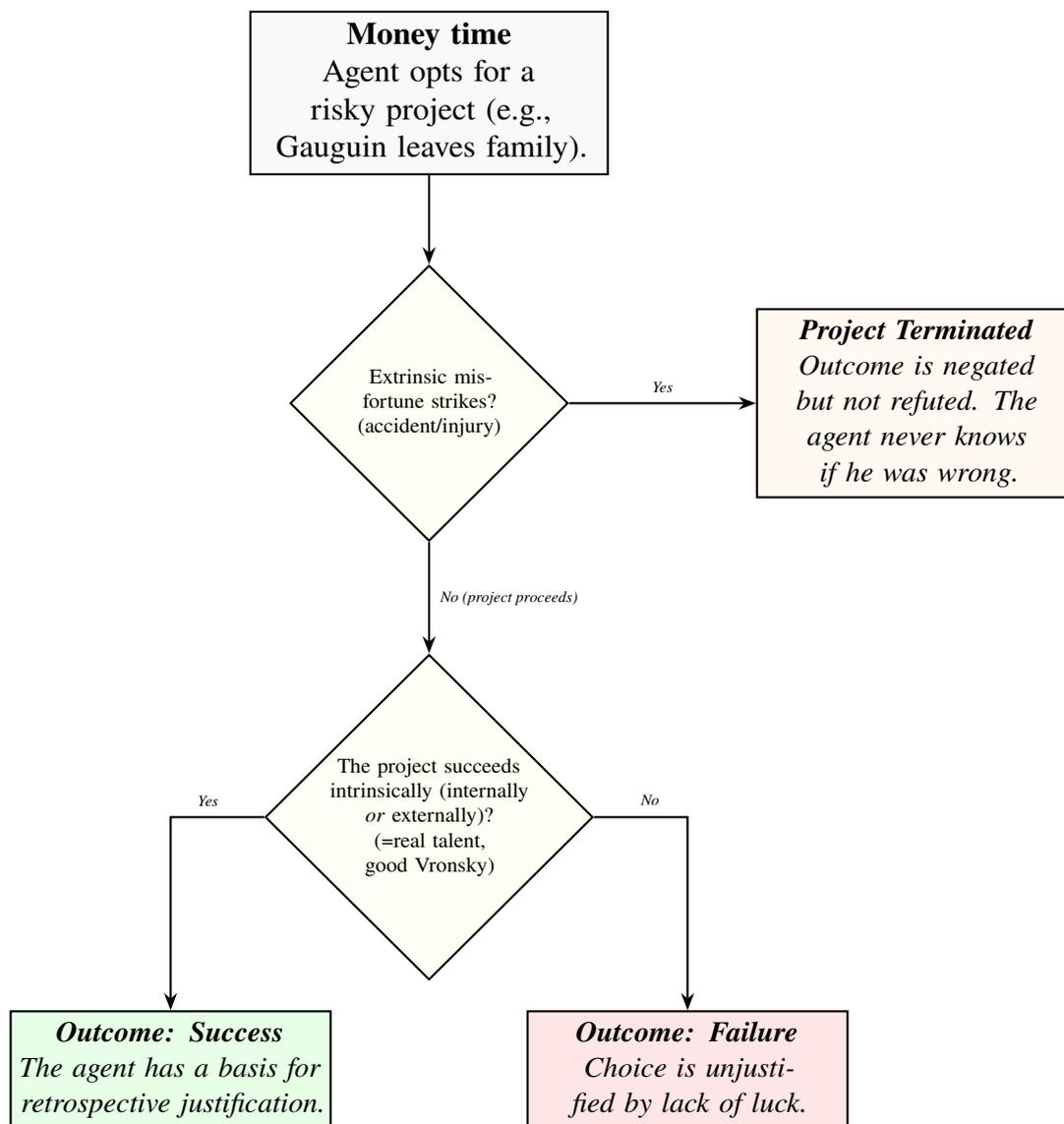


Figure 1: Retrospective justification

AN OPINIONATED POSTSCRIPT. Let me cut through Williams' argumentative machinery and go back to the example of the lorry driver and a child. Williams says:

The lorry-driver may act in some way which he hopes will constitute or at least symbolise some kind of recompense or restitution, and this will be an expression of his agent-regret. 28

The key word here, for me, is 'symbolise'. Again, the driver is said to offer his compensation because it has 'some reparative significance other than compensation'. 29

Surely, however, if the driver seriously believed that a compensation was due, he wouldn't have limited himself to symbolic actions. And yet, in this kind of situation, symbolic actions are precisely what will do the trick.

Two themes come together here. First, the fundamental irrationality of agent-regret in this situation. As we understand the causal structure of the world, the driver bears no responsibility, and blaming him is rationally unwarranted. But second, our attitudes do not track this rational understanding. We think that the driver is 'associated' with the child's death in the way in which a bystander is not. The driver is 'unclean', tainted by the death. Hence a symbolic compensation is due. Or to put it explicitly in anthropological terms, the driver, his car are both 'tainted' by the fatal accident. His ritual status has changed, and what we now describe as a 'symbolic compensation' is more accurately described as a 'ritualistic expiation'.

Williams' observations, therefore, should be taken (also) as highlighting the inescapable presence of irrational belief systems deeply embedded in our interactions with the world, and with others in particular. These beliefs can't be reconciled with the rationality of moral theories. See Figure 2

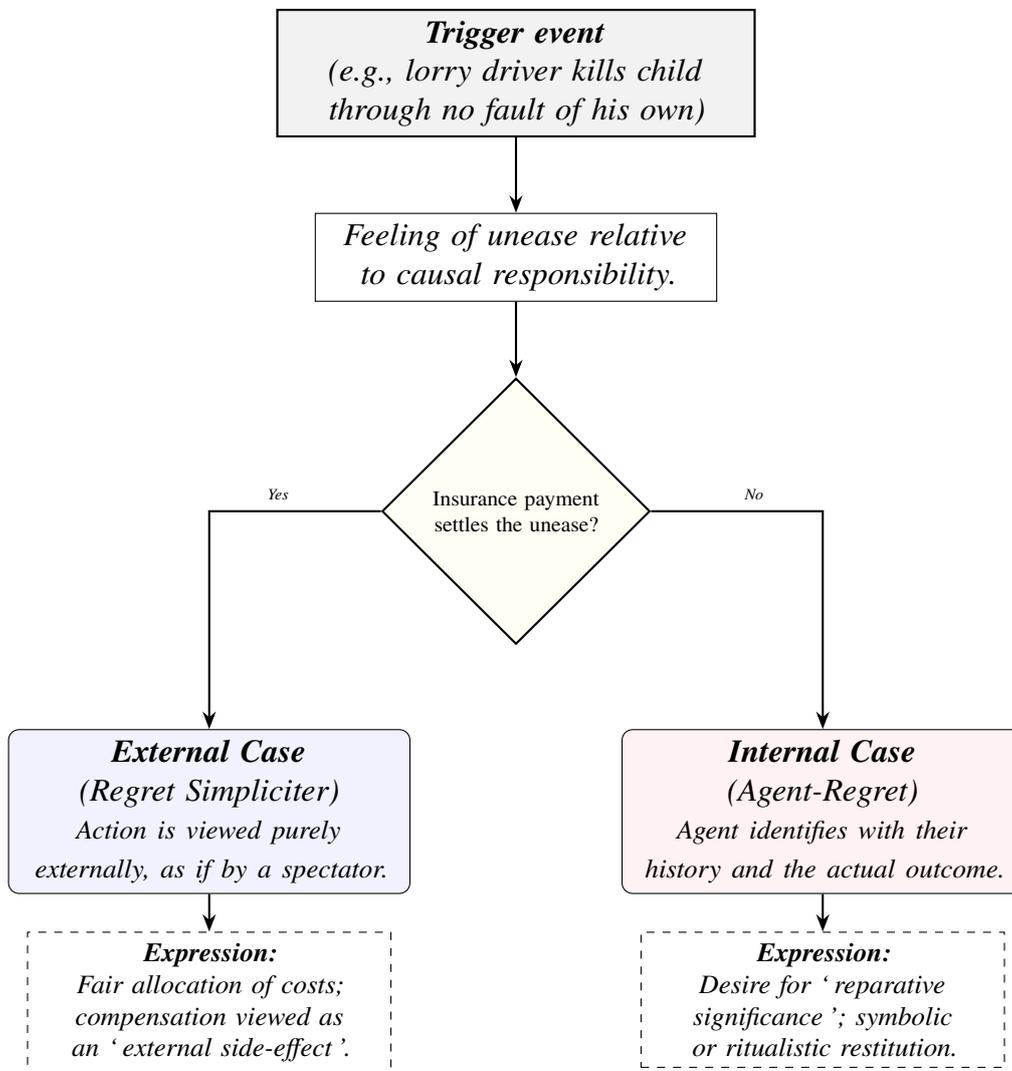


Figure 2: Anatomy of regret

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