

Introduction to Philosophy II // Spring 2017

Handout 17

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, make it irrelevant for the evaluation of life and actions. We summarise them as follows:

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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 who is capable of minimal rational thought.

Question 1. Compare this view described by Williams with the Kantian views on freedom and morality.

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, there are pure selves that are not subject to empirical determinations and hence to luck. If these metaphysical constructions are discarded, we are left with the rule of fortune reaffirmed.

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But these concerns are not Williams' (instead, they become the focal point of Nagel's essay). What is Williams's problem? Even if immunity to moral luck is granted, there is more that 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 the spirit to be moral. Rather, morality should be given 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. More than that: regret over morally relevant aspects of the action sometimes stems 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. 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.

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

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*.

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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*.

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. ‘My project failed, because I was injured’: that is a sensible claim to make. Yet in evaluating the *decision*, i.e. the choice made in the past, we only take into account the intrinsic kind of luck. ‘My choice was wrong, because I was not a good painter’: a sensible statement. ‘My choice was wrong, because I was injured’: not a sensible statement.

Question 2. Narrate the Anna Karenina scenario in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic luck.

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 experience with regard to my own actions. Thus I agent-regret that I offended my friend.

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*.

Question 3. Explain the reasons for compensation in the cases of regret *simpliciter* in pages 124–125.

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.

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.