

Handout on Thomas Nagel, “Moral Luck”

From Mortal Questions (1979)

I. The Problem: Control as the Basis of Moral Judgment

- **Kantian Premise:** Morality is grounded in the *will*, not outcomes. Good or bad luck should not affect moral judgment. A good will is "good in itself," even if it fails to accomplish its ends (p. 3).
- **Basic Intuition:** We are not morally assessable for what is beyond our control.
 - Distinction between *moral judgment* and *evaluation of states of affairs* (p. 25).
 - Lack of control due to coercion, ignorance, or accident typically *excuses* moral judgment.
- **The Problem: Much of what we do is shaped by factors beyond our control.** Yet we continue to make moral judgments in these cases.
 - This leads to a tension: **If we take the control condition seriously, nearly all moral judgment is undermined.**

“Ultimately, nothing or almost nothing about what a person does seems to be under his control.” (p. 26)

II. The Concept of Moral Luck

- **Definition:** *Moral luck* occurs when a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond their control, yet we still treat them as morally assessable (p. 26).
 - **Nagel’s Core Claim:** The more fully we apply the idea that moral responsibility requires control, the more we see that it threatens the legitimacy of most moral judgments.
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III. Four Types of Moral Luck (p. 28)

1. **Resultant Luck** – luck in how things turn out.
2. **Circumstantial Luck** – luck in the situations one faces.
3. **Constitutive Luck** – luck in who one is (character, temperament).
4. **Causal Luck** – luck in how one is determined by antecedent conditions.

Each of these dimensions challenges the idea that moral responsibility requires control.

IV. Detailed Analysis of Each Type

1. Resultant Luck (Luck in Outcomes)

- **Examples:**
 - Negligent driver who hits a child vs. one who doesn't (p. 29).
 - Gauguin leaves his family: judged differently depending on whether he becomes a great painter (p. 28).
 - Revolutions: judged in part by historical success (p. 30).
- **Tension:** We feel it's unjust to judge based on luck, yet we do so.
- **Nagel's Insight:** Our judgments are *objective and timeless*, even if they incorporate outcomes.
 - The hypothetical: "If the baby drowns, it's awful; if not, merely careless" (p. 31).

2. Constitutive Luck (Who We Are)

- **Kantian View:** Only the will is morally relevant; temperament is morally irrelevant (p. 32).
- **Nagel's Counterpoint:** We do morally assess people for envy, vanity, cowardice—even when they act well.
 - These traits are largely beyond control but are central to *who we are*.
 - Example: Conceit that is never expressed still warrants moral judgment (p. 33).

3. Circumstantial Luck (What We Face)

- **Key Case:** German citizens under the Nazi regime had opportunities for both moral greatness and failure—others did not (p. 34).
 - Their moral record is shaped by the historical moment.
- **Moral Implication:** Whether one's character is tested depends on factors beyond one's control.
 - "Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest..." (p. 34).

4. Causal Luck (Determinism and the Will)

- **The Deeper Question:** If our actions and characters are caused by factors beyond our control, are we *ever* morally responsible?
 - Even our inner acts of will are shaped by our upbringing, biology, etc.
 - **Result:** The area of genuine agency shrinks to an "extensionless point" (p. 35).
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V. Responses and Tensions

- **Compatibilist Strategy:** Accept that responsibility applies to what we actually do, even if determined. This preserves moral judgment but explains little (p. 36).
 - **Nagel's Concern:** This response ignores why the problem arises at all. It doesn't explain our deep unease with attributing responsibility when control is lacking.
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VI. The Paradox at the Heart of Moral Luck

- **Two Competing Views:**
 - The *external view*: we are merely parts of the world, subject to cause and effect.
 - The *internal view*: we are agents, subjects of pride, guilt, shame, and responsibility.
- **Nagel's Claim:** We cannot abandon either view.
 - When we try to isolate what we do from what happens, *nothing is left*.
 - Yet we persist in judging ourselves and others as agents—not just as bearers of events.

“Those acts remain ours and we remain ourselves, despite the persuasiveness of the reasons that seem to argue us out of existence.” (p. 37)

VII. Philosophical Significance

- **Parallel to Epistemology:** Just as knowledge becomes threatened by lack of control over belief, moral responsibility is threatened by lack of control over action (p. 27).
- **Nagel's Conclusion:** The problem has no clear solution. It reflects a **fundamental tension in the concept of moral agency**.
 - The *internal conception of agency* resists the erosion of responsibility—but we cannot justify it in fully rational terms.
 - The result is a persistent philosophical paradox, not merely a mistaken theory.