Rik Peels - *A Modal Solution to the Problem of Moral Luck*

I. The Problem of Moral Luck

Peels begins with a puzzle that has animated much of the literature on **moral luck**—cases in which factors outside an agent's control seem to influence our moral judgments of that agent:

> **Illustrative Case (p. 73):** Tom and I both recklessly shoot at targets, knowing children are nearby. Only my bullet strikes a child who darts out unexpectedly. I am blamed more than Tom—yet we performed the *same* reckless act. *Is this fair?*

This example foregrounds a **trilemma** Peels identifies at the heart of the problem of moral luck:

1. One is not blameworthy for what is beyond one's control.
2. Events due to luck are beyond one's control.
3. We (rightly) blame people for events due to luck.

> These **prima facie plausible claims** appear **inconsistent**—they cannot all be true at once.

II. The Proposed Solution: Degree vs. Scope

Peels aligns himself with what he calls the **Degree/Scope Response**:

- **Scope**: The range of events one is blameworthy for.
- **Degree**: The intensity or severity of blameworthiness.

> *Thesis:* Bad luck can **expand the scope** of one's blameworthiness (e.g., to include unintended consequences), but it **does not increase the degree** of blameworthiness.

Applied to the shooting case: Tom and I are equally reckless, so the *degree* of our blame is the same. But since my recklessness led to death, my *scope* of blame includes that consequence.

Objection: Reductio Ad Absurdum

This strategy appears to lead to absurdities. For instance:

- If *Fred* would have behaved recklessly too but didn't show up due to car trouble, is he *equally blameworthy*?
- If *Bert*, whom I've never met, might have done the same had we become friends, is he *also* blameworthy?
- Or more starkly: Am I as blameworthy as a Nazi officer in a far-away possible world, just because I *would have* acted similarly in those circumstances?

Such worries threaten to **collapse distinctions** between real agents and merely possible agents.

III. The Modal Analysis of Luck

Peels responds by proposing a **modal account of luck**, drawing heavily from **epistemological discussions** of luck (e.g., in analyses of knowledge):

Modal Definition of Luck (p. 77):

> **An event E is lucky/unlucky for person S at time t iff**
>
> 1. *S lacks control* over E at t.
> 2. *E is significant* for S at t.
> 3. *E occurs in the actual world*, but fails to occur in a *wide class of nearby possible worlds*.

- This notion of **"nearby possible worlds"** is crucial: Luck is contextual, and only events that *easily could have failed to occur* count as lucky/unlucky.
- Events in **distant possible worlds** (e.g., me as a fifteenth-century Aztec priest) are *irrelevant* to assessing luck in the actual world.

Conclusion: We're not blameworthy for merely being such that we would perform heinous acts in *distant* possible worlds—because those scenarios are *too dissimilar* to count as morally relevant.

IV. Applying the Modal Solution to Moral Luck

Peels uses this modal framework to **revise the Degree/Scope response** and avoid the reductio:

- **Moral luck** only occurs when an event:
    - Is beyond our control,
    - Is significant to us,
    - Occurs in this world but not in most nearby worlds.

This analysis, Peels claims, **rescues** the intuitive pull of each thesis in the trilemma:

- We *aren't* more blameworthy just because something bad happens (i.e., **degree stays the same**),
- But the **scope** of what we're blamed for *can* vary with consequences,
- And we *can still blame* people for those consequences (properly)—they're morally relevant, just not luck-increasing in degree.

Crucially: What happens in *distant possible worlds* (e.g., where I'm born a Nazi or an Aztec priest) is not relevant, because those worlds aren't **modally nearby**.

V. Responses to Objections

Peels takes on four objections to his view:

Objection 1: Blameworthiness *simpliciter*?

Peels argues we can be blameworthy *in virtue of being such that* we would do X in certain contexts, even if we don't do it. He rejects the idea of "blameworthiness simpliciter" as mysterious.

Objection 2: Wouldn't everyone become blameworthy?

Peels distinguishes *types* of counterfactuals: Being blameworthy for *a set of nearby possible scenarios* doesn't mean we're blameworthy for what we'd do in **radically different** circumstances.

Objection 3: Still, isn't character formation out of our control?

Here Peels introduces the idea of **control over who we are**—via our actions in *this* world. We're responsible if our *actual conduct* would freely lead to wrongful acts in nearby counterfactual scenarios. But we're **not responsible** for what we'd do in extremely different (far) worlds.

> *Thought experiment:* If Jenny could take a time machine to Nazi Germany and would freely commit atrocities, then she's blameworthy *for being such that* she would do so. But if the scenario is too far-fetched (distant world), it doesn't count.

Objection 4: Don't we blame people *more* if bad outcomes occur?

Yes, but that doesn't imply **greater degree** of blameworthiness. It may be due to:

- Irrational emotion (resentment),
- Epistemic certainty (we *know* what happened),
- Educational/legal reasons for differential treatment.

VI. Conclusion

Peels ultimately **defends the compatibility** of all three moral luck theses by:

1. Drawing a sharp **modal boundary** between nearby and far-off worlds.
2. Asserting that **degree of blame** is rooted in choice and reasons-responsiveness—not luck.
3. Allowing **scope** to vary with actual consequences, without inflating moral responsibility.

> **Modal Thesis:** Moral luck only affects our judgments when the relevant events occur in **nearby possible worlds**. Events in far-off counterfactuals do not count, and thus the reductio is blocked.