Handout: Duncan Pritchard – Moral and Epistemic Luck (2006)

I. The Problem: Is There Really Such a Thing as Moral Luck?

Initial Tension

- The classic puzzle, posed by **Nagel** and **Williams**, suggests that moral judgment *seems* to violate a basic principle:

  We should not morally assess agents for factors beyond their control.

- Yet, **real-world moral judgments often do just that**—hence, the problem of **moral luck**.

Pritchard's Thesis

- The core **problem** with the debate as framed by Nagel and Williams is:
  1. They offer **no coherent account of luck**.
  2. They **conflate** the problem of *moral luck* with the **analogous but distinct** problem of *epistemic luck*.
- Pritchard argues that when we clarify what luck really is, **moral luck becomes far less compelling**.

II. Clarifying the Concept of Luck

Luck ≠ Lack of Control (only)

- Common assumption: Luck = lack of control.
- But this is insufficient: **not everything beyond our control is "lucky"** (e.g., planetary orbits).

Pritchard's Modal Account of Luck:

> A lucky event occurs in the actual world but not in most *nearby possible worlds* where relevant initial conditions are the same.

- E.g., winning a lottery = lucky because in most nearby possible worlds, you don't win.
- Implication: **Luck involves modal fragility**—an event's not occurring in most similar possible worlds.

III. Reassessing Nagel's Argument for Moral Luck

1. Resultant Luck

- *Example*: The drunk driver who kills a pedestrian vs. the one who doesn't.
    - Both are equally reckless.
    - But only one causes death—do we morally assess them differently?

Pritchard's Response:

- We do not necessarily hold them morally different *as agents*.
- Our judgments often reflect *sympathy* or *legal necessity* (e.g., manslaughter vs. reckless driving) but not a clear moral distinction.
- Further, the drunk driver case varies circumstantial elements: sometimes the outcome is genuinely lucky, sometimes it's predictably bad.

> If luck *alone* is doing the explanatory work, the case must be controlled carefully. Otherwise, we are *not isolating luck*, but other features like character, motive, etc..

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2. Circumstantial Luck

- *Example*: The Nazi officer vs. the peaceful German who emigrated in 1930.
- Same person, different circumstances = radically different moral record.

Pritchard's Critique:

- Either:
    - The "peaceful" agent wouldn't have acted immorally if in Germany → **no luck involved**.
    - Or he *would* have → **no moral difference**, but this undermines Nagel's point.

- Either way, the **example fails to show moral luck exists** in the way Nagel wants.

IV. Williams and the Role of Epistemic Luck

Williams's Gauguin Case

- Gauguin leaves family to become a painter. If he succeeds, he is retrospectively justified. If he fails, he is not.
- This seems to show that *justification* depends on **how things turn out**, which are subject to luck.

Pritchard's Interpretation:

- The issue here is not moral luck—it's **epistemic luck**.
    - Specifically: whether Gauguin can know, *at the time*, that he is making the right choice.

V. Two Types of Epistemic Luck

1. Veritic Luck

- **Definition**: You get a *true belief* in the actual world, but in most nearby possible worlds where you form the belief the same way, it's false.
    - Classic example: **Gettier cases**.
- Externalist theories (e.g., reliabilism, safety) try to *rule out* veritic luck.

2. Reflective Luck

- **Definition**: From the *agent's internal point of view* (i.e., what they can know by reflection alone), it's lucky that the belief is true.
    - Even if the belief is safe externally, **internally it's not secure**.
- This is the type of luck the **sceptic exploits**.

Pritchard: Reflective luck is what undermines our confidence in rational justification, not moral status per se.

VI. Diagnosing the Confusion

How Nagel and Williams Conflate the Two Domains

- Both smuggle in *epistemic scepticism* under the guise of moral assessment.
- This gives the illusion that our moral judgments are undermined by luck.
- But really, we're troubled by **the possibility that we don't know whether our moral judgments are justified**—an epistemic concern.

> "What Williams and Nagel take to be a problem for moral judgment is, in fact, a form of scepticism about *knowing* whether we are morally justified."

VII. Conclusion: No Problem of Moral Luck?

- Pritchard's **modest claim**: the examples offered by Nagel and Williams *fail* to demonstrate a genuine problem of moral luck.
- **Stronger implication**: There may *not* be a coherent problem of moral luck at all.
- **Philosophical Upshot**: The real issue is **reflective epistemic luck**, which remains a live problem in epistemology—and one with ethical import:
    - We can't confidently justify life-changing choices from *within* our own perspective.

Supplement: Key Concepts and Philosophical Vocabulary

- **Modal fragility**: The idea that something is "lucky" if it does not occur in most similar possible worlds.
- **Veritic Luck**: Truth without reliable belief-forming conditions (e.g., Gettier).
- **Reflective Luck**: Luck from the standpoint of what is internally accessible to the agent.
- **Internalism/Externalism**: Debates over whether justification requires factors accessible by reflection (internalism) or just reliable mechanisms (externalism).
- **Scepticism**: The philosophical problem arising from the impossibility of ruling out error from reflection alone.