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# Handout on Bernard Williams' "Moral Luck"

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## I. The Problem of Moral Luck

- Traditional moral philosophy has often sought to insulate moral value from luck.
- Kantian ethics, in particular, holds that **moral worth is determined by the unconditioned will**, independent of external contingencies.
- If morality is to be fully **rational and just**, it must be immune to luck:
  - Moral judgments should not depend on external circumstances.
  - Justification for actions should be internally derived.
- However, Williams challenges this notion by exploring **how moral judgments are in fact shaped by luck**.

## II. What is "Moral Luck"?

- Williams defines luck **generously but intelligibly**—a factor beyond an agent's control that still affects moral evaluation.
- He distinguishes between different types of moral luck:
  1. **Resultant Luck** – The consequences of actions often determine moral judgment (e.g., successful vs. failed intentions).
  2. **Circumstantial Luck** – The moral choices available to an individual are shaped by external circumstances.
  3. **Constitutive Luck** – One's character, dispositions, and capacities are themselves shaped by factors outside one's control.
  4. **Causal Luck** – The deterministic nature of cause and effect makes all actions dependent on prior conditions.
- These forms of luck **undermine the Kantian ideal** that morality is immune to contingency.

## III. The Case of Gauguin

- Williams presents the example of **Paul Gauguin**, the artist who abandoned his family to pursue his artistic vision.
- Was he morally justified in his decision?
  - **If he succeeds** and creates great art, he may be justified.
  - **If he fails**, his decision appears unjustifiable.
- Williams argues that **justification here is retrospective**—it depends on the outcome.
  - This contradicts the idea that morality should be evaluated **only at the time of decision-making**.
  - It introduces **moral luck** into how we evaluate past actions.

## IV. The Case of Anna Karenina

- Williams extends his analysis to Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, who leaves her husband and

child for Vronsky.

- Like Gauguin, her justification depends on success:
  - If her new life flourished, she might justify her choice.
  - If it fails (as it does), her decision seems **regrettable and wrong**.
- **Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Failure:**
  - **Intrinsic failure:** The project itself fails (e.g., the relationship collapses).
  - **Extrinsic failure:** External obstacles prevent success (e.g., an accident).
  - Only intrinsic failure **invalidates** the justification.

## V. Agent-Regret and Moral Responsibility

- **Agent-regret:** A unique kind of regret where a person **personally identifies** with their past actions.
  - Example: A truck driver accidentally kills a child; even if not at fault, he feels responsibility.
- This contrasts with spectator-regret (third-person detachment).
- Williams argues that moral agents cannot **completely extricate** themselves from luck.

## VI. Moral Luck and Rational Justification

- **Standard models of rational justification assume prior deliberation determines justification.**
- However, Williams challenges this, arguing **success or failure retrospectively shapes moral judgments**.
- Traditional consequentialist/utilitarian perspectives **fail to capture** this dynamic:
  - A utilitarian might claim Gauguin's choice was good if his art was valued by society.
  - But Williams argues that the **moral agent's self-assessment** is what ultimately matters.

## VII. The Challenge to Moral Theory

- If luck pervades moral judgment, **then morality is not fully autonomous from contingency**.
- Williams critiques the notion of a **moral order immune to luck**:
  - Morality, as traditionally conceived, assumes **justice demands an even playing field**.
  - If luck affects morality, then **our moral judgments may be less absolute than we assume**.
- This skepticism **shakes the foundations** of traditional moral theories, particularly Kantianism.

## VIII. Conclusion: The Limits of Morality

- Williams **does not reject morality outright**, but argues for a more **realistic** conception.
- The presence of luck **demands a re-evaluation of how we judge actions** and justify decisions.

- This leads to a broader philosophical question: **If morality is subject to luck, is it as central to human life as we assume?**
  - If moral luck is inescapable, **we may need a more modest, pluralistic view of morality.**
  - Perhaps moral evaluation should be **contextual rather than absolute.**

## **Key Takeaways**

1. **Moral luck undermines the Kantian ideal of unconditioned moral judgment.**
2. **Retrospective justification plays a crucial role in evaluating moral choices.**
3. **Cases like Gauguin and Anna Karenina illustrate how success or failure reshapes moral evaluation.**
4. **Agent-regret shows that even unintended consequences create moral responsibility.**
5. **Williams challenges the idea that morality is fully rational and justifiable in isolation from external factors.**