

Handout: Susan Wolf — *The Moral of Moral Luck*

The Problem: The Puzzle of Moral Luck

At the heart of Wolf's essay is the *problem of moral luck*, a concept first articulated by Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel. The core issue is this:

- **Moral Luck:** Situations where an agent's moral status (how much blame/praise they deserve) is affected by factors *beyond their control*.
- **Puzzle:** It violates a deeply held commitment of moral theory—that **moral responsibility must be confined to what lies within the agent's control**.

Wolf's target is one especially intuitive and pervasive type of moral luck:

Resultant luck, or "luck in how things turn out."

Paradigm Case: The Two Truck Drivers

- Both drivers are equally negligent (e.g., skipping a brake check).
- One hits and kills a child; the other drives home without incident.
- Intuitively, we judge the first more harshly. But **should we?**

This scenario lays the foundation for a broader philosophical tension:

- On the one hand, we want **moral judgments to reflect will and intention alone**.
- On the other, we **do** judge based on outcome, often quite powerfully.

The Two Positions

1. The Rationalist Position

- **Claim:** Equal moral fault = equal blame. Outcome doesn't matter.
- Morally proper judgments rely on the agent's intentions, choices, and degree of fault—not results.
- **Examples:**
 - Failed murder \approx successful murder (if intent and effort are the same).
 - Reckless drivers with different outcomes = equally blameworthy.

Wolf's Challenge to Rationalism

- The rationalist position is intuitively justifiable, but it feels *eerie* and emotionally *detached*.
- Wolf contends it is *incomplete*, not *false*: it fails to capture a morally significant dimension of experience.

2. The Irrationalist Position

- **Claim:** The driver who kills the child deserves *more* blame.
- Why? Because he *did something worse*: he caused a death.
- The force of this position is intuitive but lacks philosophical justification—because the harmful outcome was due to luck, not greater fault.

Wolf's Critique

- The argument may rest on a *linguistic sleight-of-hand*: saying "he killed a child" sounds like he's *more culpable*, but that conflates causation with moral responsibility.

- Third-party observers often try to *soothe* the guilt of the unlucky agent, which suggests we don't truly *endorse* the irrationalist view from the outside.
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Wolf's Proposal: A Middle Path

Wolf's goal is to **reconcile** our conflicting intuitions:

- From the **impartial observer's view**, rationalism wins: blameworthiness = fault.
- From the **agent's own perspective**, a richer moral response seems appropriate when harm occurs.

Key Insight:

There is something morally important in the agent's subjective acknowledgment of outcomes, even if luck played a role in those outcomes.

Introducing the “Nameless Virtue”

Wolf argues that we need a moral concept to capture what's right about the irrationalist impulse without giving up rationalist justice.

What is this Virtue?

- **Taking responsibility for consequences**, not just actions.
- It involves *owning* what happens because of your agency—even when those outcomes are partly due to luck.

Examples:

- Offering to pay for a broken vase even if the break wasn't fully your fault.
- Apologizing for unintentionally hurting someone.

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- The unlucky truck driver feeling deep remorse and needing to *do something* to respond to the death.

This isn't *guilt* in the rationalist sense. Nor is it irrational shame. It's a virtue that blends:

- **Moral character** (generosity, humility),
 - **Psychic health** (a deep sense of living in and being affected by the world).
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Philosophical Payoff: Living with Contingency

Wolf suggests that:

- To *wholly detach* ourselves from the outcomes of our actions (as the pure rationalist might) is to deny a part of who we are.
- We are **beings-in-the-world**—not just minds or wills isolated from effects.
- Denying the connection between self and consequence amounts to an unhealthy abstraction from moral reality.

Thus:

- The rationalist is *right* about blame.
 - But *wrong* to insist this exhausts all that matters in moral life.
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Two Responses to Emotional Disparity

Wolf explores two interpretations of how differing *emotional responses* (e.g., self-blame) can still align with rationalist moral assessment.

1. Guilt vs. Agent-Regret (Williams's view)

- **Guilt** tracks *fault*.
- **Agent-regret** tracks *outcomes* tied to the self.
- The unlucky driver feels more regret (not more guilt), and that's appropriate.

2. Emotional Complexity View (Wolf's preference)

- Real emotional life is messier than discrete categories allow.
 - Self-blame is shaped by both fault and outcome.
 - The *amount* of guilt one feels is not perfectly tied to faultiness—it is **indeterminate**, shaped also by moral luck.
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Concluding Moral

Wolf's final takeaway is subtle:

- A just moral life requires balancing:
 - **Justice and fairness**, which require ignoring luck.
 - **Moral character and human engagement**, which call us to feel and act based on what happens—even by chance.

"A morally conscientious approach to life... must strike a balance between... limiting the significance of that which is independent of the power and the quality of our wills [and] maintaining our connection to the social and physical world." (pp. 18)
