Handout: Michael J. Zimmerman — Moral Luck: A Partial Map

The Problem: Responsibility and obligation have been conflated

Zimmerman addresses a central tension in contemporary moral philosophy: **to what extent should luck—events beyond our control—influence moral assessments?**

The key problem: Can moral responsibility and moral obligation both be influenced by luck? If so, how? And if not, what distinguishes them in terms of their susceptibility to luck?

Zimmerman's Project: A Partial Rectification and Mapping

Zimmerman critiques the focus on *hypological* (responsibility-based) moral judgments in the moral luck literature, arguing that *deontic* (obligation-based) judgments have been unjustifiably neglected. His goal is to offer a **partial map** that:

- Clarifies the distinction between hypological and deontic judgments.

- Shows **how each relates differently to luck** depending on types of control involved.

I. Framing the Concepts: Hypological vs. Deontic Judgments (pp. 586–589)

- **Hypological judgments** concern *moral responsibility*, both **culpability** and **laudability**.

- **Deontic judgments** concern *moral obligation*, typically phrased as what one **ought** to do.

- **Mistaken assumption:** The two are interchangeable. E.g., "One is responsible if and only if one violates an obligation."

Zimmerman *rejects this*. Why?

- **Excuses** (responsible but did no wrong) and **accuses** (did no wrong but thought one was) show that **responsibility and obligation can diverge**.

- **Responsibility** is retrospective; **obligation** is prospective.

Conclusion: The way luck affects each type of judgment will likely differ.

II. Five Types of Control (pp. 590–594)

Zimmerman identifies five types of control relevant to moral assessment:

1. **Partial vs. Complete Control**: Complete control is unattainable. All our control is partial.

2. **Basic vs. Comprehensive Control**:

   - Basic = capacity to choose.

   - Comprehensive = absence of external coercion (e.g., Alf giving money under gunpoint lacks this).

3. **Deliberate vs. Coincidental Control**:

   - E.g., randomly guessing a safe's code: you *can* open it, but not *intentionally*.

4. **Direct vs. Indirect Control**:

   - Indirect control occurs via controlling something else (e.g., drunken actions controlled via prior decision to drink).

5. **Regulative vs. Guidance Control** (from Frankfurt):

   - **Regulative**: ability to choose between alternatives.

　　　　○ **Guidance**: capacity to act from one's own reasons, even without alternatives.

These distinctions frame how *luck* factors in differently across obligation and responsibility.

III. Deliberate Control and Obligation (pp. 594–596)

Key argument: *You can only be morally obligated to do what you can do intentionally.*

- **Example:** If you don't know the safe's code, it's absurd to say you are morally obligated to open it—even if doing so would save a life.

- **Moorean consequentialism** fails here, since consequences are often unforeseeable.

- Zimmerman: obligation depends on **foreseeable** consequences + **intentional** action.

Takeaway: Luck (in the form of lacking deliberate control) undermines obligation—but less so responsibility, which can still be attributed through beliefs and intent.

IV. Direct vs. Indirect Control and Moral Judgments (pp. 596–602)

- **Culpability is tied to direct control**: The assassin who fires but hits a bird is no *less culpable* than the one who succeeds.

- The **scope** of responsibility differs, not its **degree**.

But obligation behaves differently:

- **Doctors using Rube Goldberg machines** to administer medicine are indirectly obligated regarding each step.

- **Indirect obligations are essentially empty**—they carry no independent normative weight.

Conclusion: Obligation can pertain to things **indirectly controlled**, but responsibility cannot.

V. Regulative vs. Guidance Control (pp. 602–603)

- **Obligation requires regulative control** (ability to do or not do X).

- **Responsibility** does **not** require this, thanks to Frankfurt-style cases:

    - As long as the agent *believes* they have alternatives, responsibility can be attributed.

This is another axis along which *moral luck* plays out differently.

VI. Moral Dilemmas and Luck (pp. 603–605)

Zimmerman distinguishes:

- **Obligation-dilemmas**: No way to avoid doing wrong.

- **Responsibility-dilemmas**: No way to avoid being culpable.

He **rejects obligation-dilemmas** (because 'ought implies can'), but allows for **responsibility-dilemmas**, e.g., cases where:

- An agent believes all their options are wrong, and

- That belief isn't culpable in itself.

This suggests *life can be tragic*—we may incur guilt despite doing no wrong.

VII. Responsibility *Tout Court* (p. 605)

Zimmerman introduces the possibly radical idea of:

Responsibility without responsibility for anything.

If someone *would* have acted wrongly but didn't (due to external intervention), we may still see them as culpable *tout court*.

Result: Responsibility is **agent-centered**, hence more vulnerable to counterfactual luck. Obligation is **act-centered**, tied to actual options.

VIII. Final Summary (pp. 606–607)

Key findings:

Type	Requires Deliberate Control?	Requires Regulative Control?	Can be Indirect?	Susceptible to Luck?
Obligation	Yes (for resolution)	Yes	Yes	In *resolution*, yes
Responsibility	Yes	No (guidance suffices)	No	In *incurrence*, yes

Disparities:

- **Resolution of obligation** is luck-sensitive (e.g., dependent on external causal chains).

- **Responsibility** can be incurred without action—only counterfactual intentions.

- Only responsibility allows for *tout court* judgments.