

Nagel on Moral Luck

Ryan Doody

April 23, 2014

Moral Responsibility and Moral Luck

1. Consider the following story.

The Truck Driver and the Accident. A truck driver, Bill, is driving down his road on a rainy night. Several weeks ago, Bill should have taken his truck in to the shop to have his breaks tuned up. He was busy, though, and put it off. Suddenly, a pedestrian darts out into the road. Bill slams on the brakes, but he cannot stop in time. The truck hits the pedestrian, who, consequently, is severely injured. Had the truck's brakes been tuned-up, however, the truck would have been able to stop before hitting the pedestrian.

Something terrible happened: a pedestrian was severely injured. Is Bill *morally responsible*?

2. **Moral Responsibility**

People cannot be held morally responsible for what is not their fault, or for what is due to factors beyond their control.

Consider Truck Driver Bill:

- o The pedestrian was severely injured because (1) Bill did not tune-up the truck's brakes and (2) the pedestrian was in the road at the time that Bill was.
- o Tuning-up the truck's brakes was something under Bill's control.
- o The pedestrian being at the road at that time is something *outside* of Bill's control.

3. **Moral Luck**

"Where a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control, yet we continue to treat him in that respect as an object of moral judgment, it can be called *moral luck*."

Moral Luck can be either good or bad.

"[W]e feel that the appropriateness of moral assessment is easily undermined by the discovery that the act or attribute, no matter how good or bad, is not under the person's control."

Here's a way to see this.

(1): had Bill tuned-up the brakes, the pedestrian would not have been severely injured.

(2): had the pedestrian not been in the road at that time, the pedestrian would not have been severely injured (in fact, Bill wouldn't have injured anyone!)

Four Varieties of Moral Luck

1. **Constitutive Luck**

The kind of person you are; your inclinations, capacity, temperament.

2. **Brute Luck**

The kind of problems and situations you face; the circumstances in which you find yourself.

3. Luck in Determination

The ways in which your actions are determined by antecedent circumstances.

4. Option Luck

The way your actions and projects turn out.

Moral Luck and Economic Justice

Inequality is, often, due to factors beyond our control. Does the *kind* of luck leading to inequality matter? Consider two different cases:

- **The Horse Race.** Alma and Carl go to the track. Carl places a large bet on a horse. Alma doesn't place any bets; she prefers to merely watch. Carl's horse doesn't win. Carl loses a lot of money. Alma now has more money than Carl does.
- **The Tornado.** Derek and Ebert live in the same neighborhood. They are equally wealthy. A Tornado forms and, sadly, destroys Derek's house. Ebert's house is undamaged. Derek is now significantly less well-off than Ebert is.

The first story involves *Option Luck*; the second story involves *Brute Luck*.