

Moral Luck (Nagel)

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Moral Responsibility and Moral Luck

A Story. 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 could 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. Had the truck's brakes been tuned-up, however, the truck would have stopped before hitting the pedestrian.

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

Moral Responsibility. You are *morally responsible* for doing something if it is appropriate to praise you or blame you for having done it.

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

Here's a consequences of this principle: We should not morally assess Person A differently from Person B if the only differences between them are due to factors beyond their control.

Bill vs Alice. Consider Truck Driver Bill:

- The pedestrian was 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.
- Tuning-up the truck's brakes was something under Bill's control.
- The pedestrian being at the road at that time is something *outside* of Bill's control.

Now consider Truck Driver Alice — she is in the exact same situation as Bill, except the pedestrian darts out in to the road 5 minutes before she gets there.

Moral Luck. There is a tension between our normal practice of morally assessing people and The Control Principle.

"[W]hen we blame someone for his actions we are not merely saying it is bad that they happened, or bad that he exists: we are judging *him*, saying he is bad, which is different from his being a bad thing." [pg. 25]

Here's a way to see this:

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

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

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*. [pg. 26]

Moral Luck can be either good or bad.

Is Moral Luck appropriate? Shouldn't you only be assessed for what was under your control?

Four Varieties of Moral Luck

1. **Constitutive Luck.** The kind of person you are; your inclinations, capacity, temperament.
2. **Circumstantial Luck.** The kind of problems and situations you face; the circumstances in which you find yourself.
3. **Causal Luck.** The ways in which your actions are determined by antecedent circumstances.
4. **Consequential Luck.** The way your actions and projects turn out.

Examples: personality traits depend on genes and upbringing, education, where you were raised, who raised you.

Examples: citizens of Nazi Germany, Vietnam, being in "the right place at the right time".

The Free Will Problem: If the laws of nature plus the initial conditions (plus all the events leading up to your decision) causally necessitate that you do what you do, then everything that we do will depend on factors beyond our control.

Examples: Truck driver, drunk driver, attempted murder, letting the bath-water run, Chamberlian, American Revolution.

Nagel's View on the Problem

Nagel doesn't think we should give up THE CONTROL PRINCIPLE. Should we conclude, then, that no one is ever morally responsible for what they do? Nagel doesn't think we should do that either. What's the solution to the problem, then?

I believe that in a sense the problem has no solution, because something in the idea of agency is incompatible with actions being events, or people being things. But as the external determinants of what someone has done are gradually exposed, in their effect on consequences, character, and choice itself, it becomes gradually clear that actions are events and people things. **Eventually nothing remains which can be ascribed to the responsible self, and we are left with nothing but a portion of the larger sequence of events, which can be deplored or celebrated, but not blamed or praised.** [pg. 37]

Nagel puts the dilemma this way:

1. *Internal Conception:* We are unable to view ourselves as just objects in the world. We extend this view to others.
2. *External Conception:* But we also come to recognize that we are parts of the world, which cannot be separated from it.

These two views of ourselves cannot be easily reconciled.