

Moral Luck

Jeff Speaks

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Nagel's aim is to expound a skeptical argument about our ordinary moral assessments of agents. His idea is that there is a certain condition which we ordinarily think that agents have to meet in order for us to be able to judge them. The problem is that agents never really satisfy this condition. The problem is that this seems to indicate that there is something incoherent in our scheme of moral evaluation.

1 The condition of control

The condition on moral assessment is, roughly, that in order for it to be appropriate to morally assess an agent's action, that action must have been under the agent's control. Nagel puts the point like this:

“Prior to reflection it is intuitively plausible that people cannot be morally assessed for what is not their fault.”

To morally assess an agent is to say whether an agent's action was a good or bad one; this is often accompanied by either praising or blaming the agent for the action in question. Nagel's point is that if we find that the action in question is not under the agent's control, we are not inclined to praise or blame the agent. Examples: involuntary movements; cases where the agent could not have known the consequences of her actions.

If we were to consistently adhere to this standard, it seems clear that we should, in our moral judgements, adhere to something like the following principle:

If the differences in the actions of two agents are due only to factors outside their control, then the differences in their actions cannot be significant for the moral evaluation (including praise and blame) of those agents.

After all, this principle just seems to follow from the view that factors outside an agent's control are morally irrelevant.

The problem, as Nagel goes on to show, is that we consistently ignore this principle in our practices of moral evaluation.

2 Kinds of moral luck

Nagel shows this by distinguishing four kinds of cases in which we typically take factors outside an agent's control to be relevant to moral evaluation. These are four different kinds of 'moral luck.'

2.1 *Luck in how things turn out*

The first case Nagel discusses, and the most obvious, is luck in how things turn out. Cases of this kind are cases in which the effects of one's actions, even though dependent on factors outside of an agent's control, can affect one's moral status.

Nagel gives a number of examples of this; a striking one is the following:

“the truck driver who accidentally runs over a child . . . if he entirely without fault, will feel terrible about his role in the event, but will not have to reproach himself. . . . However, if the driver was guilty of even a minor degree of negligence — failing to have the brakes checked recently, for example — then if that negligence contributes to the death of the child, he will not merely feel terrible. He will blame himself for the death. And what makes this an example of moral luck is that he would have to blame himself only slightly for the negligence itself if no situation arose which required him to brake suddenly and violently to avoid hitting a child. Yet the *negligence* is the same in both cases, and the driver has no control over whether a child will run into his path.” (28-29)

How this example violates the principle above. Other examples; the drunk driver who swerves onto the sidewalk.

2.2 *Constitutive luck*

We often blame people not only for their actions, but for their character traits — if they are, e.g., greedy or envious or cold. But this practice too seems to violate the principle sketched above:

“An envious person hates the greater success of others. He can be morally condemned as envious even if he congratulates them cordially and does nothing to denigrate or spoil their success. . . . To some extent such a quality may be the product of earlier choices; to some extent it may be amenable to change by current actions. But it is largely a matter of constitutive bad fortune. Yet people are morally condemned for such qualities, and esteemed for others equally beyond the control of the will: they are assessed for what they are *like*.”

2.3 *Luck in one's circumstances*

Nagel describes his third category of moral luck as follows:

“The things we are called upon to do, the moral tests we face, are importantly determined by factors beyond our control. It may be true of someone that in a dangerous situation he would behave in a cowardly or heroic fashion, but if the situation never arises, he will never have the chance to distinguish or disgrace himself in this way, and his moral record will be different.”

The example of Nazi Germany.

2.4 *Luck in how one is determined by antecedent circumstances*

The problem that all of one's actions, including one's inner acts of will, seem to be the effects of events beyond one's control:

“If one cannot be responsible for consequences of one's acts due to factors beyond one's control, or for antecedents of one's acts that are properties of temperament not subject to one's will, or for the circumstances that pose one's moral choices, then how can one be responsible even for the stripped-down acts of the will itself, if *they* are the product of antecedent circumstances outside of the will's control?”

The problem of free will and the causation of one's acts by events outside of oneself.

3 Three responses to the problem of moral luck

1. *Skepticism*. Nagel states this position well: “In 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.”

2. *Acceptance of the existence of moral luck.* Why this seems to run counter to the very idea of moral assessment.

3. *Attempt to consistently adhere to the principle in §1 above.* Why this cannot be done by restricting the class of actions for which we praise and blame people, or retreating to praise and blame of the will.

This is why cases of moral luck are paradoxical; none of the three above responses to the problem is particularly attractive.

4 The relationship between free will, determinism, and moral luck

The view one takes of the relationship between free will and determinism might inform one’s view of Nagel’s examples.

Suppose, for example, that one is a compatibilist. Then how, for example, should one think of luck in how one is determined by antecedent circumstances? How should one think of the condition of control more generally?

Suppose that one is an incompatibilist. Then how should one think about luck in determination by antecedent circumstances? How about circumstantial luck, or constitutive luck?

Why luck in how things turn out seems to be the one category of moral luck upon which one’s theory of free will sheds no light.