

## The Kantian Picture of Moral Value

Much like the Nagel reading, Williams has a specific target for his arguments: that of Kant and his moral theory. Williams begins this chapter by listing some of the reasons that we may have for wanting morality to be immune to luck. You might be born healthy, while I was born with some malady, or you might be born rich, while I will remain poor no matter how hard I work. Despite this, however, it may be comforting to believe that my moral worth is independent of my medical or economic bad luck. A Kantian conception of moral worth offers, according to Williams, 'an inducement, solace to a sense of the world's unfairness.' (pg 21)<sup>1</sup>

Despite this, Williams claims that this solace will not amount to more than cold comfort if morality is also not of supreme value. If morality is just free from luck, but not of supreme value, then it is unclear as to why it would be important. So, for morality to be as important as Kant wants it to be, then it must both be 1) immune to luck and 2) have the right kind of value. In his words:

"The thought that there is a kind of value which is, unlike others, accessible to all rational agents, offers little encouragement if that kind of value is merely a last resort, the doss-house of the spirit. Rather, it must have a claim on one's most fundamental concerns as a rational agent, and in one's recognition of that one is supposed to grasp, not only morality's immunity to luck, but one's own partial immunity to luck through morality." (pg 21)

As the title of the chapter suggests, Williams is going to focus on the luck component.

## Rational Justification vs. Moral Justification

It may strike the reader as odd, but Williams begins his argument by discussing *rational*, rather than *moral*, justification. While Williams does eventually explain this, the main reason is that he is targeting a Kantian conception of morality. If we recall from our Kant readings, morality and rationality are linked, and so this is why Williams argues as he does. To this end, Williams asks if Gauguin's life (where Gauguin leaves his family to pursue a painting career) is rationally justified. Since Gauguin could not have known with any certainty that he would succeed, the only justification for his actions is whether or not he became a success.<sup>2</sup>

Given that Gauguin's success or failure is outside his control, and therefore a matter of luck, rational justification is (at least in part) a matter of luck. Moral justification, for the Kantian, is not supposed to be a matter of luck. Hence, morality and rationality are not as linked as Kant claimed, and so the moral and the rational clash.

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<sup>1</sup> Also, remember the passage that Nagel quoted from Kant where Kant states that 'A good will ... is good in itself' and that regardless of other factors, it is 'like a jewel ... that has full worth in itself'.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that rational justification, for Williams, is 'backwards looking' in the sense that justification for a particular decision can only be given after the fact. This is a controversial claim and one to which some ink has been spilled. See Andrew Latus' reply to Williams in Church, I.M., & Hartman, R.J. (Eds.). (2019). *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy and Psychology of Luck* (1st ed.). Routledge.

As a final twist of the knife, Williams notes that some of us may in fact be *grateful* when morality is tossed aside for certain rational considerations. (pg 37) The art appreciator, for example, might be grateful for Gauguin's choices. If this kind of trade off can be generalized, then it would appear that we are calling the entire point of morality into question.

We are left, however, with just two bad options given the Gauguin example. Either,

1. Accept that morality is not of *supreme* value, or
2. Accept that morality is subject to luck

To understand 2, we must note that if we wish to maintain that morality is of supreme value, then the reason that rational considerations can sometimes outweigh that value is because morality is subject to luck. Gauguin's family, for example, might have just had bad moral luck with regards to the kind of person that Gauguin was; or perhaps the bad luck was the circumstances that they found themselves in such that Gauguin could only find fame by abandoning them. Whatever kind(s) of luck are at play here, 2 certainly reduces the kind of solace that morality can provide.