

Though the initial focus of this chapter is directed at Kant, the problem that moral luck poses should be addressed by basically all moral theories. To motivate the problem, Nagel starts with a claim that you are supposed to find plausible.

“Prior to reflection it is intuitively plausible that people cannot be morally assessed for what is not their fault, or for what is due to factors beyond their control.” (pg 25)

We can clean this up a bit into the following moral principle:

Control Constraint: People cannot be morally assessed for what is outside of their control.¹

The plausibility of this constraint, according to Nagel, immediately causes a problem.

“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. Such luck can be good or bad. And the problem posed by this phenomenon, which led Kant to deny its possibility, is that the broad range of external influences here identified seems on close examination to undermine moral assessment as surely as does the narrower range of familiar excusing conditions.” (pg 26)

Again, we can clean this up a bit into the following:

Moral Luck: Most (if not all) of the time, what we do is (to a significant degree) determined by factors beyond our control.

When the control constraint and moral luck are combined, a paradox is generated.

Paradox: We morally assess one another even though what we do is to a significant degree determined by factors beyond our control.

Thought Experiment: Imagine two intoxicated drivers, X and Y. X gets home safely, but a pedestrian stumbles in front of Y and is killed. If the pedestrian stumbled in front of X, then X would have killed them too. So, X had moral good luck and Y had moral bad luck. This should result in X and Y being morally equal (via the control constraint) but many of you will think that Y is morally worse than X. That is the paradox.

¹ It also follows from the control constraint that when two people are in all aspects similar except for the presence / absence of some factors outside of their control that they cannot be assessed differently.

The presence of moral luck, according to Nagel, results in the “erosion of moral judgment ... not as the absurd consequence of an over-simple theory, but as a natural consequence of the ordinary idea of moral assessment, when it is applied in view of a more complete and precise account of the facts.” (pg 27)

A similar problem exists in another branch of philosophy: epistemology. Epistemology is concerned with knowledge and how we acquire it. A skeptic in this area is someone who denies that we have knowledge. The kind of skeptic that Nagel describes is one who notes that our beliefs and their truth depend on factors outside of our control. So, to the degree that there is something like a control constraint for knowledge², then the presence of epistemic luck will result in a skeptical conclusion.³ (pg 27)

Four Different Kinds of Moral Luck

1. Luck in the way one's actions / projects turn out (pg 28 - 30)
 - a. E.g. The truck driver who fails to have their brakes checked.
2. Constitutive Luck (luck regarding the kind of person that you are, pg 30 - 33 ish)
 - a. What virtues or vices you naturally have.
3. Circumstantial Luck (pg 33 - 34)
 - a. Being born in 1930s Germany versus Nebraska in the 2000s.
4. Luck in how we are determined (pg 34 - 37)
 - a. Moral responsibility seems to disappear if determinism is true.

Nagel closes his paper by noting that even if we accept that this is a genuine problem for morality, we will (in all likelihood) continue to make moral judgements. We cannot live solely in the 'external evaluative view'. (pg 37) By this, Nagel is relying on a different argument that he offered in chapter two of the book. There he claims that life is absurd because we have the intellectual ability to shift our perspective from the subjective / internal view of our lives, to the objective / external perspective (the so-called cosmic perspective). Such an ability reveals that our lives are absurd.⁴ In the moral arena, the objective / external perspective is our being able to see that much of what we do is determined by outside factors. His point, then, is that even though we recognize this, we cannot remain in that perspective. We will go back to the subjective and make moral judgements both about ourselves and others. Our intellectual abilities make our life absurd, and our moral judgments paradoxical. Fun stuff.

² Perhaps something like 'people cannot have knowledge when their beliefs are generated by factors significantly outside of their control.'

³ If this is of interest to you, then I would recommend taking Melanson's *Theory of Knowledge* class...if it's ever taught again!

⁴ If you would like to access the handout for that chapter, you can do so [here](#).