
Handout: Thomas Nagel – “Moral Luck”

Framing the Problem: The Control Condition

At the center of Nagel's essay is a foundational assumption in moral philosophy: the **control condition** (also called the *control constraint*), which holds that:

A person can only be morally judged for what is under their control.

This condition is widely accepted in both common sense morality and philosophical ethics. It connects with the principle that:

“Ought implies can” — i.e., we cannot be held morally responsible for what we cannot help.

It underlies our moral distinctions:

- We excuse people who act under **coercion**, **ignorance**, or **accident**,
- We distinguish between **intentional** and **unintentional** harms,
- And we often feel it's unjust to morally assess people for outcomes they didn't control.

This principle is clearest in **Kant's ethics**, where moral worth is located in the **good will**, not in consequences:

“Usefulness or fruitlessness can neither diminish nor augment this worth.”
(Kant, *Groundwork*, quoted by Nagel, p. 24)

- **Moral assessment should track only what is under our control.**
- A **good will** has moral worth *in itself*, regardless of outcomes (Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals).
- Therefore, luck—good or bad—**must be morally irrelevant**.

On this view:

“There cannot be moral risk.”

Kant's position reflects a powerful moral intuition: people should be judged only for what they *will*, not for what happens *to* them. But Nagel will argue that this ideal cannot be sustained. Our ordinary moral practices rely on and are shaped by **luck**—in ways that are both pervasive and paradoxical.

What Is Moral Luck?

Nagel's Core Claim

Moral luck occurs whenever someone is morally judged for something dependent on factors beyond their control.

Nagel observes that in ordinary life, moral judgments *do* reflect elements outside the agent's control. When we reflect on this, we find a paradox: if we strictly apply the requirement of control, almost **no moral judgment survives**. And yet we continue to make them.

This creates a deep philosophical tension: our moral practices seem to **presuppose** conditions that, when articulated clearly, **undermine** them.

Four Types of Luck

Nagel distinguishes four kinds of luck—four ways in which what we do or who we are is shaped by forces beyond our control, yet still **morally judged**.

1. Resultant Luck (Luck in Outcomes)

- Two agents may act with identical intentions and reasoning.
- But if one causes harm and the other doesn't, we **morally judge them differently**.

Examples:

- A reckless driver who kills a child vs. one who doesn't hit anyone
- An attempted murderer vs. a successful one
- A revolution that succeeds (American) vs. one that fails (Decembrists)

“The mens rea... does not exhaust the grounds of moral judgment.”

Even when outcomes are beyond the agent's control, they **change how we evaluate the act, and the person.**

2. Constitutive Luck

- This is luck in **who one is**: one's temperament, personality, psychological tendencies.

Examples:

- Someone may be generous, vain, cowardly, or envious.
- We morally judge people *for being* that way, even if those traits are not willed or chosen.

Nagel notes that on Kant's view, these features are **not proper objects of moral assessment**—only the will is. But this seems intuitively false:

“People are morally condemned for such qualities... They are assessed for what they are like.”

3. Circumstantial Luck

- This is luck in **what situations one faces**—which moral challenges arise in one's life.

Examples:

- Germans under Nazism vs. Argentinians who left Germany early
- Those who risked their lives to oppose injustice vs. those who never had the opportunity

Moral history often turns on whether one **had the chance** to do something heroic—or failed when tested. But we still morally judge people for *how they responded*, even if they didn't choose their circumstances.

4. Causal Luck

- This is the most fundamental kind: **luck in how one's actions are caused**.

The free will problem re-emerges:

If all our actions result from prior causes, and we didn't choose those causes, how can we be responsible?

Even our *choices* are shaped by factors we did not choose:

- Upbringing
- Culture
- Neural events

"Eventually nothing remains which can be ascribed to the responsible self."

Moral Judgment Under Pressure

If we fully accept the control condition, and subtract everything outside the agent's will, **very little is left to morally assess**. But if we keep our ordinary practices, we continue to rely on and accept **moral luck**.

Nagel illustrates this with **agent-regret**:

- A truck driver who accidentally kills a child (without fault) feels *agent-regret*—a sense of being **morally implicated** in a tragedy that was not his fault.
 - This reaction is *irrational* under strict Kantianism—but deeply human.
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The Deep Paradox

"The area of genuine agency... seems to shrink under this scrutiny to an extensionless point."

Nagel argues that this paradox is not due to a mistake or sloppy thinking. Rather, it reveals something **deeply unstable** in the very idea of moral responsibility:

- We want to judge people as **authors of their actions**.
- But when we examine all the forces that shape action, the **self dissolves into the world**.

This mirrors **epistemological skepticism**:

- Just as our beliefs rest on uncontrollable inputs, so do our actions.
- Yet we still claim to *know* things—and to *be responsible* for our actions.

Possible Responses

Nagel offers no resolution but lays out two conflicting perspectives:

A. The Internal View (Moral Intuition)

- We can't help but feel guilt, pride, admiration, resentment.
- These attitudes treat persons as **agents**, not as mere phenomena.
- We continue to judge *each other*—and ourselves—as *morally responsible selves*.

“Those acts remain ours, and we remain ourselves, despite the persuasiveness of the reasons that seem to argue us out of existence.”

B. The External View (Philosophical Skepticism)

- From a detached standpoint, we are part of the causal order.
- Our acts are just **events**, our character just **given facts**.
- Moral attitudes start to look *irrational* or *meaningless*.