

# Handout: Bernard Williams – "Moral Luck"

## Framing the Problem

A persistent theme in moral philosophy is the belief that **moral judgment should be immune to luck**. This belief, most famously associated with **Kant**, holds that:

- Moral worth is grounded in the **unconditioned will**,
- The **intentions** of agents matter, not the consequences,
- Therefore, moral assessment should be insulated from the contingencies of the world.

Kantianism promises a **kind of justice**: it offers something within our control—our will and our reasons—as the basis of moral worth. On this view, **moral luck** is incoherent. One cannot be more or less morally praiseworthy because of outcomes beyond one's control.

## Williams's Counter-Thesis

Williams's central claim is that this ideal **cannot be sustained**. In practice and in reflection, **luck deeply affects moral life**. The wish to detach morality from luck is **both understandable and doomed**. In recognizing this, we may also be forced to rethink the significance, scope, and even the **very concept of morality itself**.

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## 1. Four Types of Moral Luck

Although Williams doesn't offer an explicit taxonomy in this essay, his argument hinges on recognizing different forms of luck that affect moral assessment:

- **Resultant Luck**: Luck in how things turn out (e.g., the same intention leads to success or disaster).
- **Circumstantial Luck**: Luck in the situations we find ourselves in.
- **Constitutive Luck**: Luck in who we are—our temperament, inclinations, capabilities.
- **Causal Luck**: Luck in how we are determined by antecedent circumstances.

Williams focuses most on **resultant and intrinsic luck**—especially how *success* or *failure* shapes whether we are ultimately **justified**.

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## 2. The Case of Gauguin

To illustrate the role of luck in justification, Williams presents the (idealized) example of **Gauguin**, the painter:

- Gauguin leaves behind moral obligations (e.g., to family) in order to pursue his artistic calling.
- He makes this decision *knowing* that it involves serious costs for others.
- His **only justification** is if he *succeeds* as a painter: if his work turns out to be great.

### Retrospective Justification

If Gauguin succeeds, he can retrospectively claim his choice was justified.

If he fails, he was simply wrong—and has no such basis.

This is justification **dependent on outcome**, not on antecedent reasoning. In this way, **luck enters moral justification at the deepest level**.

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## 3. External vs. Intrinsic Failure

Williams distinguishes:

- **External failure**: e.g., Gauguin gets injured on the way to Tahiti and never paints again.
- **Intrinsic failure**: Gauguin paints but turns out to be a bad artist.

Only **intrinsic failure** undermines justification. External bad luck can frustrate the project, but it doesn't show that Gauguin's project was unjustified. In contrast, *failing as a painter* shows that he **was not the man he hoped to be**, and that **his decision was unjustified**.

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## 4. Agent-Regret

Williams introduces the important concept of **agent-regret**:

- This is a kind of regret **tied to one's own agency**.
- It is not just “too bad this happened,” but “too bad I did this—even if unintentionally.”
- A classic example: the truck driver who runs over a child through no fault of his own feels *agent-regret*, even though he is blameless.

Williams emphasizes that **agent-regret is intelligible, common, and necessary** for ethical life:

- It is not irrational.
  - It is not reducible to guilt or moral blame.
  - It shows how deeply we are tied to the *actual* consequences of our actions—even the unintended ones.
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## 5. Anna Karenina

Another example: **Anna's decision to leave her husband for Vronsky**.

- If her new life with Vronsky had been fulfilling, it might have retrospectively justified her abandonment of her child and social station.
- But when the relationship deteriorates, **her project collapses**.
- This failure is **intrinsic**: the thing she bet her life on proves empty.

Thus, **failure can erase justification**, not just make it tragic. Just as with Gauguin, Anna's agency is judged in light of how things turn out.

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## 6. Justification and Rational Deliberation

Williams contrasts these tragic decisions with ordinary, “normal science” forms of practical reasoning:

- In routine decision-making, we evaluate justification based on **deliberative rationality**.
- We ask: Was the decision reasonable, given what was known?

But Gauguin’s case is different:

- His justification doesn’t rest on rational deliberation *at the time* of the choice.
- It depends on *what he becomes*—on the **success of the life** he tries to create.
- **Justification is existential, not procedural.**

This undermines the Kantian idea that justification must be possible *in advance*.

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## 7. Gauguin’s Risk Is Moral

Williams pushes back against the idea that Gauguin’s risk is merely aesthetic or personal. It is also **moral**:

- He may wrong others (e.g., abandoning family),
- He cannot guarantee they won’t have just cause to blame him,
- Even if he succeeds, they may retain their grievance.

This shows that **moral justification is not universally public**. A moral cost may remain, even if something great is achieved.

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## 8. Against the Morality Immune to Luck

Williams concludes by casting doubt on the entire **project of insulating morality from luck**:

- Kantianism seeks a morality that transcends luck, in order to anchor fairness, dignity, and agency.
- But that very aspiration **distorts moral life**.

### Why This Matters

- Our lives are shot through with luck—not just in what happens to us, but in *who we are*, *what we choose*, and *whether we succeed*.
- The **moral importance of luck** cannot be denied without producing a **pathological form of moral thinking**: cold, rigid, disconnected from human experience.

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## 9. Implications for Morality Itself

If morality cannot escape luck, we may need to **revise our concept of morality**:

- Morality cannot be the *supreme* evaluative domain.
- It may be just one value among others (like creativity, love, or loyalty).
- We may need a **more tragic, human conception of ethics**, one that acknowledges failure and regret as central to agency.

As Williams puts it:

“Skepticism about the freedom of morality from luck cannot leave the concept of morality where it was...”