

## **Introduction**

In this paper, I argue that both Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel fail to convince us that luck damages morality. First, I will explicate Bernard Williams's assertion that rational justification is immune to moral luck, as well as spell out his broader goal of disposing morality altogether.<sup>1</sup> Thereafter, I will object to Williams' proposal by critiquing his "retrospective" mode of analysis, and by examining the fallacious assumptions behind his Paul Gauguin thought-experiment. Next, I will explore Thomas Nagel's problem of circumstantial moral luck and moral blame, which he drives home through historical examples.<sup>2</sup> Then I will respond to Nagel's position by offering my own historical examples, claiming that morality in politics is consequentialist by nature. Finally, I will conclude with my own theory of moral luck—although compromised by luck, morality is still a sufficient tool for the individual to live the good life and for society to preserve peace.

## **Williams and Moral Luck**

In the first few lines of his discourse on moral luck, Williams sets out to attack "a strain of philosophical thought" conceived by Immanuel Kant and his categorical imperative.<sup>3</sup> Fundamentally, Kant's categorical imperative, described in his *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, lays out a framework for moral introspection and assessment.<sup>4</sup> The categorical imperative takes as its premise a "good will," which all humans have according to Kant; this will "can be regarded as good without qualification," i.e. it is unconditionally good.<sup>5</sup> Essentially, the categorical imperative says that in order for an action to be considered moral, this "good will" of the subject must have been motivated to "act" from "duty."<sup>6</sup> Duty is a process where the will of an individual person could be made universal and therefore could serve as the will of all persons.<sup>7</sup> The importance behind a universalizable maxim is that an action could then be judged according to the person's intention, and not by consequence the act produces, which may not accurately represent the motive of the person.<sup>8</sup>

For Williams, Kant's categorical imperative is problematic for various reasons. First he thinks that the categorical imperative, because it is unconditioned, is removed from external contingencies, such as luck: "Both the disposition to correct moral judgment,

---

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (1981). Cambridge University Press, New York.

[https://bibliotecamathom.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/williams\\_-\\_moral\\_luck.pdf](https://bibliotecamathom.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/williams_-_moral_luck.pdf), Chapter 2, "Moral Luck," pg. 20-40.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck."

<https://web.archive.org/web/20141014002930/http://rintintin.colorado.edu/~vancecd/phil1100/Nagel1.pdf>, pg.1-9.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, pg. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by James W. Ellington (Hackett).

<sup>5</sup> *Grounding*, pg. 7 (393).

<sup>6</sup> *Grounding*, pg. 9 (397).

<sup>7</sup> "Duty is the necessity of an action done out of respect for the law," *Grounding*, pg. 13 (400). In order to act from duty, one must answer "yes" to this question: "I only ask myself whether I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law," *Grounding*, pg. 15 (403). This is also one formulation of the categorical imperative.

<sup>8</sup> An "action without any inclination at all, but solely from duty—then for the first time his action has genuine moral worth," *Grounding*, pg. 11 (398). By judging intentions, we can see if one acts out of self-interest or duty.

and the objects of such judgment, are on this view free from external contingency, for both are, in their related ways, the product of the unconditioned will."<sup>9</sup> As a result, morality is "immune" from luck because it is immune from conditionals, such as luck.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Williams is charging Kant for neglecting to consider luck in his system of morality. But Williams is not only indicting Kant, here. He finds the same fault also applicable to how humans consider morality in general: the "attempt [to escape luck] is so intimate to our notion of morality, in fact, that its failure may rather make us consider whether we should not give up that notion altogether."<sup>11</sup> Williams is delivering a blow not to any theorist or conception of morality—he is launching a wholesale attack on the term "morality" and advocating for its abandonment.

While a number of consequences are borne from this observation, the most significant concerns the relationship between "rational justification" and morality, which in its best form provides "solace to a sense of the world's unfairness."<sup>12</sup> However, Williams argues that morality "can offer that solace only if something more is granted," namely that "moral value has to possess some special, indeed supreme, kind of dignity or importance."<sup>13</sup> In fact, Williams embarks on a thought experiment to justify the claim that morality is somehow in conflict with "rational justification."<sup>14</sup> He takes an imaginary artist, inspired by and called Paul Gauguin, who flees from his family and takes refuge in Tahiti to become a better painter. Regarding this decision, "the only thing that will justify his choice will be success itself."<sup>15</sup> Williams believes that since success depends on some measure of luck, then rational justification relies on luck too, thus undermining moral decision-making.

### **Objection to Williams**

First, I will address Williams' broad claim that morality's resistance to luck is "intimate to our notion of morality." Williams thinks this is so because of the different social positions nature assigns us at birth. Person A might be born in a place of privilege where resources are abundant, whereas Person B could be born in a destitute environment ridden with poverty. Some of us get a head start over others before we can engage with the world, so luck is clearly in play at birth. While the luck-at-birth factor is entirely out of our control, this is not sufficient evidence to dismiss moral value. Suppose Person A is the Bavarian King Ludwig II, a "mad" monarch who built opulent castles all of his life. Person B is a twenty-three-year-old immigrant in 1907 New York who lives in an undermaintained tenement complex and makes a meager \$1.98 a day. We would not say that because of his wealth alone, Ludwig is more moral than a poor immigrant. It therefore does not seem plausible to assume one's moral worth from luck alone.

---

<sup>9</sup> Williams, pg. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Williams uses the word "immune" to refer to morality quite frequently in this passage; see pg. 20, 21, and 38.

<sup>11</sup> Williams, pg. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Williams, pg. 21.

<sup>13</sup> Williams, pg. 21. This will be a central focus in my "Objection to Williams."

<sup>14</sup> "...concentrating rather on ideas of rational justification. This is the right place to start, I believe, since almost everyone has some commitment to ideas of this kind about rationality and justification," Williams, pg. 22.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, pg. 23.



Furthermore, Aristotle addressed the problem of external wealth at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: "for one who is a human being, external prosperity will also be needed [for happiness]." <sup>16</sup> Thus, the possession of some basic external goods, which are given at birth by chance, are necessary ingredients to live a good life, one which is subject to moral examination. <sup>17</sup>

However, Williams would respond by resurfacing his earlier claim that morality only matters if it is the "supreme value." Otherwise, the so-called "solace" given off by morality is nonexistent. This argument is embedded in his Paul Gauguin example and his attempt to prove that if rational justification depends on luck, morality does too. We should pause to consider what exactly Williams means by "rational justification." He is not explicit, but Williams wonders whether Gauguin's move to leave his home will increase his chances of becoming a great painter, and if that decision has its roots in reason or luck. The problem is that we cannot judge Gauguin's decision in the moment he makes it, but only after. For Williams, rational justification can only be achieved in retrospect: "[t]he justification, if there is to be one, will be essentially retrospective." <sup>18</sup>

There are three faults with this argument. For one thing, Williams implies that luck and morality cannot mix. If they do, then morality is not the "supreme value" because it is corrupted by luck. Yet this is a draconian and unhuman perception of luck. We live in a world where luck is a precondition to our inhabitation: luck is as much a part of the human experience as air is to an individual's survival. To remove luck from our interaction with the world is nothing more than a thought-experiment; it is divorced from a real understanding of the world. To defend Kant's morality specifically, "if there remained only the good will, it would sparkle like a jewel in its own right, as something that had its full worth in itself." <sup>19</sup> In more basic terms, morality can and is affected by luck, but this does not dim the brightness of moral value—it can compete with other inclinations, but it is still clearly distinguishable and recognizable.

I also take issue with Williams's definition of success, which he claims with confidence is confined only to producing great paintings. <sup>20</sup> By assuming such a narrow definition of success, Williams is focusing only on the utility of an action, which can only be gleaned after the fact, or retrospectively, as indicated above. <sup>21</sup> Under this framework, there is no morality in the present moment; it is merely a method of analysis used by others and not accessible to the individual.

---

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins (Chicago), pg. 299, Book 10, Chapter 9.

<sup>17</sup> In my opinion, Williams neglects to consider this point inspired by Aristotle. Williams writes, "The successful moral life, removed from considerations of birth, lucky upbringing, or indeed of the incomprehensible Grace of God, is presented as a career open not merely to the talents, but to a talent which all rational beings necessarily possess in the same degree," pg. 21.

<sup>18</sup> Williams, pg. 24.

<sup>19</sup> *Grounding*, pg. 8 (394).

<sup>20</sup> "But it matters considerably to the thoughts we are considering, in what way the project fails to come off, if it fails. If Gauguin sustains some injury on the way to Tahiti which prevents his ever painting again, that certainly means that his decision was for nothing, and indeed there is nothing in the outcome to set against the other people's loss," Williams, pg. 25.

<sup>21</sup> This is what I meant by a "retrospective mode of analysis" in the "Introduction."

Kant addressed the "usefulness or fruitlessness" of an action, which "can neither diminish nor augment [the] worth [of the good will]."<sup>22</sup> But Williams is even more radical—success does not "diminish" or "augment" morality, it *is* morality. This is an absurd stance. Was Rosa Parks' Montgomery Boycott unjustified because she was arrested? Was Pat Tillman's death unjustified because he died defending his country? Would Paul Gauguin's decision to escape to Tahiti be unjustified even if he lived a simple life without ever picking up a brush again? The answers are clearly no, and their actions are or certainly can be morally favorable.<sup>23</sup> If anything, morality "offers solace" in the exact opposite situation that Williams lays out—it is a tool of foresight that enables an individual in the present to make decisions that will lead him or her to live the good life.

Here is an example that underlines Williams' extremity: suppose I will leave my house tomorrow only if it does not rain tomorrow. The meteorologist predicts that there is a 99% chance it will not rain tomorrow. I have good reason to believe it will not rain tomorrow, but I am unable to convince myself that I should exist my house because it would be only luck if it remains dry outside. Thus I do not leave my house. The major flaw of Williams' argument for moral luck, besides stripping morality of its present use, is that he does not differentiate between shades of luck. Consequently, Williams' narrowminded definition of morality can only be "supreme" in a luckless world. But luck cannot be viewed in black and white terms, and it is ultimately up to human judgement to consider luck regarding whether he or she should act. Moral virtues are still virtuous even if they are surrounded by luck. If we look at the list of moral virtues in Aristotle's *Ethics*, it is not rocket science to understand that some moral virtues do not even seem to be challenged by luck.<sup>24</sup> Morality allows humans to weigh their actions in the present moment and consider the future consequences of their actions—all while luck is in the air.

While self-reflection is a key part of the human mind, if you judge actions only after the fact, you are losing every time. You would not take any risks under Williams' worldview, for you would not know how to assess your chances using his definition of morality. In fact, were I to listen to Williams, I would be sitting on the couch as a desolate vegetable, unable to express my innate human creativity and perpetually trapped by luck. Life is about taking risks, and morality can help you take calculated risks.

### **Nagel: Moral Blame and History**

Thomas Nagel's thoughts on moral luck are expansive, but I will focus on only one argument, namely how to assign moral blame given circumstantial moral luck, which he supports by scrutinizing various historical examples. I will specifically respond to this claim: "It seems irrational to take or dispense credit or blame for matters over which a

---

<sup>22</sup> *Grounding*, pg. 8 (394).

<sup>23</sup> The idea here is that these are all "unjustified" cases under Williams definition of success, but can still be moral. I am therefore challenging his attempt of creating a conflict between "rational justification" and "morality."

<sup>24</sup> Of the eleven moral virtues discussed in the *Ethics* (3.6-5.11), "courage," "gentleness," "friendliness," and "wittiness" make compelling cases as "moral virtues" that are uninterrupted by the intervention of luck, for they appear to rely on the disposition or character of the person alone.



person has no control, or for their influence on results over which he has partial control.”<sup>25</sup> Nagel is troubled by the prospect of different circumstances producing different moral outcomes. He defines circumstance as the time and place—factors both out of one’s control and which depend on luck—in which the agent acts.<sup>26</sup> By way of example, Nagel imagines “someone who led a quiet and harmless life in Argentina [who] might have become an officer in a concentration camp if he had not left Germany for business reasons in 1930.”<sup>27</sup> Given the same disposition and character, the man might have become a high-ranking SS official three years later were it not for the time (1930) and place (Germany) of his departure. However, because of business, perhaps because of severe hyperinflation, he fled to Argentina. Nagel is still wondering: can this man be blamed as harshly in Argentina as he would have been in a Nazi uniform?

This is quite a disturbing question, for several reasons. First, if the man stayed behind in Europe and became a vigilant Nazi, carrying out the “Final Solution” in full force, it would seem that circumstantial moral luck has made an obvious difference—he was a secret monster waiting to be exposed at first chance. But even more complicated would be the scenario where the man remains in Germany, refuses to buy into Hitler’s creed, yet remains complacent about it. Should he be judged in the same light as if he was in Argentina? This is unclear, given that this indifferent German seemed to have no telling qualities of being an evil person, and, after all, it was only an extreme circumstance that brought out his slightly ignorant attitude.

### **Objection to Nagel**

The ground on which Nagel’s question stands on is flimsy. I respond to his alarming example of circumstantial moral luck by arguing that historical conditions presuppose moral judgement, especially with regards to political morality. Space, time, and place are social constructs that cannot be negotiated if Nagel wants his case to have any semblance of reality. Intellectual currents such as Karl Marx’s historical materialism and Quentin Skinner’s historical contextualism provide a strong basis for my claim, but I think I can counter Nagel’s example with my own, more compelling ones.

Let us take the opposite case—someone who was considering leaving Germany before 1933, but did not. Suppose this man is Joseph Goebbels. We would not say that Goebbels should be judged less harshly were he absent from Europe in the 1930s and therefore not the minister of propaganda under the Third Reich. Why? Because he did not do that—all we can assess is what he *did* do, not what he hypothetically could have done in an alternate universe. Lincoln’s observation confirms this point: if he had failed to end slavery and save the Union, “ten angels swearing I was right would have made no difference.”<sup>28</sup> In my opinion, political morality is consequentialist by nature. Circumstances are our only hope of extracting morality from politics, if we are operating

---

<sup>25</sup> Nagel, pg. 3.

<sup>26</sup> “Another category is luck in one’s circumstances - the kind of problems and situations one faces.” This definition of circumstantial moral luck is further qualified as “luck in how one is determined by antecedent circumstances.”

Nagel, pg. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Nagel, pg. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Abraham Lincoln, [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Abraham\\_Lincoln](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Abraham_Lincoln).

under the assumption that what is moral is what is better for the sake of protecting society and ensuring peace. What matters in the political world is one's actions, and only then can he or she be subject to moral critique. This is not to say that one's intentions are wholly irrelevant. I do not put into jeopardy Kant's categorical imperative when I say that personal motives should not be judged by our human, political lens; they should be, but by a different judge in a different court, perhaps in the divine realm.<sup>29</sup>

Nagel expected my response in his exposition: "We judge people for what they actually do or fail to do, not just for what they would have done if circumstances had been different."<sup>30</sup> In fact, in countering my objection, he would say that he merely raised the problem, of which there is "no solution," and that my examples add weight to his theory of circumstantial moral luck.<sup>31</sup>

Yet I would challenge his counterargument by accusing him of begging the question. Stepping out of the political arena, circumstantial luck still remains unconvincing. Would we say that we are all morally lucking for inhabiting the planet Earth given all the other inhospitable astronomical bodies in the universe? I do not think so, for an obvious reason: this is not a factor in our control, so we cannot be responsible for it. Likewise, employing the future to undermine the past is not fruitful either.<sup>32</sup> It is simply not fair to make an individual morally accountable for what happens tomorrow, today. If today is April 3<sup>rd</sup> and they commit an atrocious act on April 4<sup>th</sup>, they are in no way guilty of it on April 3<sup>rd</sup>. Such a statement would not only be illogical, but would also run down a slippery slope of causation. Would Kant still be in his "dogmatic slumber" if Hume did not exist? Perhaps, but then the history of philosophy would forever be changed—all those that came after Kant may or may not be remembered today, then. Speaking of Hume, it also the case that Nagel is suffering from the symptoms of the is-ought problem.<sup>33</sup> Nagel gives us no reason to believe that his hypothetical German in 1930 would become either a monster or an indifferent man in three years—we are using our imagination, and hence have no obligation to grant normative or "ought" descriptions of the future.

At best, Nagel successfully diagnosed the inherent tension between human agency and moral assessment. His theory of moral luck is much stronger than that of Bernard Williams, for he frames his argument as a "philosophical" problem, thereby recognizing

---

<sup>29</sup> It is clear from Kant's *Grounding* that humans themselves do not know their intentions, but that does not imply that intentions are unimportant. They are still a source of judgement, but, as Kant seems to suggest, by God. Man should be "grounded" in his moral behavior for he himself does not know if he is acting morally. "In fact there is absolutely no possibility by means of experience to make out with complete certainty a single case in which the maxim of an action has rested solely on moral grounds and on the representation of one's duty," *Grounding* pg. 19 (407).

<sup>30</sup> Nagel, pg. 6.

<sup>31</sup> "I believe that in a sense the problem [of moral luck] has no solution," Nagel, pg. 7.

<sup>32</sup> Here I am talking about analyzing the fleeing German in 1930 under a 1933 microscope (applying the present to the past, or, even more precisely, applying the past to the further past).

<sup>33</sup> Hume identifies the "is-ought" problem as the gap between descriptive, positive statements (what is) and prescriptive, normative statements (what ought to happen). "Hume's Moral Philosophy," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume-moral/#io>.

the limits and applications of his experimentation.<sup>34</sup> I think, however, that Nagel's worrying problem of moral blame is perhaps another way of framing the problem of free will; at its core, it is a challenge to human agency, not to morality, which stands untouched.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I evaluated two arguments for moral luck—one by Bernard Williams, and the other by Thomas Nagel—both of which, as outlined in my objections, failed at their primary goal of persuading us that morality is defeated by luck. In responding to their arguments, I made two powerful arguments of my own: (1) morality can coexist with luck, and for the individual, morality is a "tool of foresight" to live the good life; (2) political morality is consequentialist by nature, not circumstantial, and as such, it is likewise a helpful aid for society to preserve peace. In presenting my thoughts, I learned that the arguments for moral luck deserve attention in any ethical matter I encounter hereafter. I will leave my reader with a pair of questions: how can artificial intelligence and quantum-computing, two 21<sup>st</sup> century advents which I am particularly interested in, further complicate the problems and fears raised by moral luck? If the future can be predicted through technological innovation, then is luck really as big a problem as we make it out to be? Perhaps we are lucky to live in a time when technology is reducing the power of luck.

---

<sup>34</sup> "...we are dealing not with a theoretical conjecture but with a philosophical problem," Nagel, pg. 2.



## **Bibliography**

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins (Chicago, 2012).

"Hume's Moral Philosophy," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume-moral/#io>.

Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by James W. Ellington (Hackett).

Abraham Lincoln, [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Abraham\\_Lincoln](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Abraham_Lincoln).

"Moral Luck," Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (IEP),  
<https://www.iep.utm.edu/moralluc/#10>.

Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck."  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20141014002930/http://rintintin.colorado.edu/~vancecd/phil1100/Nagel1.pdf>, pg.1-9.

Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (1981). Cambridge University Press, New York.  
[https://bibliotecamathom.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/williams\\_-\\_moral\\_luck.pdf](https://bibliotecamathom.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/williams_-_moral_luck.pdf), Chapter 2,  
"Moral Luck," pg. 20-40.