

MORAL AND EPISTEMIC LUCK

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The subject of moral luck has received considerable attention in recent years, following the seminal papers of Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel.¹ In this paper I seek to apply some of the ideas developed in discussions on moral luck to the concept of epistemic luck. More particularly, I will try to show that a close analogy exists between these two sorts of luck, and, furthermore, that there is a substantial connection between them. Towards the end of the paper I will argue that in spite of this analogy, there is an important difference between the relation of luck to morality on the one hand, and to epistemology on the other. It must be emphasized from the outset that I do not intend to take a position on the question of whether indeed moral or epistemic luck are real. My aim in this paper is more modest, namely, to point out the similarity between these two sorts of luck, in the hope that this comparison may help us reach a better understanding of each of them.

I

Let us start by explaining what we usually mean by the term 'luck'. Good luck occurs when something good happens to an agent P, its occurrence being beyond P's control. Similarly, bad luck occurs when something bad happens to an agent P, its occurrence being beyond his control.² Thus, moral (good) luck is a case where one's moral status is positively determined, at least partially, by factors which are beyond one's control. If P is morally lucky, then his good personality and good actions are a result of factors which are beyond his control. To mention just one example, to which I shall return soon: one does not have control over the results of one's actions, especially long-term ones. So the fact that a certain act

¹ Both the papers were delivered originally at a symposium of the Aristotelian Society and appeared in its *Proceedings*, Vol. I (1976), Nagel's paper being a reply to that of Williams. Each was reprinted with revisions in Williams 1981, ch. 2, and Nagel 1979, ch. 3. All quotations are from these latter versions. For important responses to Williams and Nagel, see my anthology *Moral Luck*, State University of New York Press, Albany, New York (forthcoming).

² These two conditions, i.e., having an effect on one's life and being beyond one's control are only necessary conditions for the existence of luck, not sufficient. However this will be enough for the purpose of our paper.

turns out eventually to be morally good is really not under the agent's control. Yet we usually consider him morally praiseworthy for the act if it has good results, and morally blameworthy if it has bad ones.

The explanation of epistemic luck follows a parallel pattern. Epistemic luck means that one's epistemic status is determined, at least partially, by factors beyond one's control. In particular, that the fact one knows *p* is beyond one's control. What necessarily underlies the concept of epistemic luck is the assumption that knowledge is something good for its possessor. Though it is true in some cases that 'add knowledge, add pain', still getting to know the truth is generally considered to be a good thing. Had it not been so, the term 'luck' would not have been suitable. One cannot be lucky unless something good happens to one, and one cannot be unfortunate unless one's life is somehow damaged or hurt.

To return to moral luck. According to Nagel, luck affects morality in four ways.³ The first way is constitutive luck, that is, 'the kind of person you are, where this is not a question of what you deliberately do, but of your inclinations, capacities, and temperament'. Since one's capacities, inclinations etc., depend, at least partially, on factors beyond one's control, (e.g. heredity, environment), so, to that extent, the kind of person one is is a matter of luck. The second way is circumstantial luck, that is, 'the kind of problems and situations one faces'. The other two ways 'have to do with the causes and effects of actions'. One of them, which I shall call 'causal luck', is concerned with the way antecedent circumstances determine 'the stripped-down acts of the will itself' (Nagel, p. 35), and implies a denial of the freedom of the will. The other, which I shall call 'resultant luck',⁴ is luck 'in the way one's actions and projects turn out'.

Following Zimmerman, I would like to distinguish between this last sort of luck and all three others, to which Zimmerman offers the term 'situational luck'.⁵ The logic of this distinction is as follows: Causal, constitutive and circumstantial luck all point to different aspects of one's moral situation, which are influenced by luck. That is, ways by which one's personality or behaviour is determined by factors beyond one's control. In contrast, resultant luck concerns the moral worth of one's actions. Since the moral worth of an act depends, at least partially, on its results, and since

³ Nagel, p. 28.

⁴ Following M. Zimmerman, 'Luck and Moral Responsibility', *Ethics* 97 (1987), p. 376.

⁵ Zimmerman, *ibid.*

the results are a matter of luck, therefore, the moral worth of any act is a matter of luck, and consequently, so is its ascription to the credit of its doer. Thus, with regard to any act **a** of an agent **P**, **P** might be lucky in two fundamental ways, one concerning the agent, and the other concerning the act:

(1m) Luck in the causes or circumstances that bring **P** to do **a**, or to be such a person who wants to do **a**.

(2m) Luck in the destiny, so to speak, of the act; whether it turns out to be morally right or wrong.

Corresponding to situational and resultant luck in morality, we find the following two sorts of luck in epistemology:

(1e) Luck in the causes or circumstances that bring some subject **S** to believe **p**, or to be such a person who believes **p**.

(2e) Luck with regard to **p** being true or false.⁶

This needs some clarification. (1e) is based on the diversity of beliefs that exists among different individuals of one society, and, to a larger extent, among the members of different societies, either in the same historical period or in different periods. The standard and the most natural explanation of this fact is that the process of belief formation is highly influenced by cultural, psychological, and historical factors. Bob's belief that his neighbour Jim is schizophrenic and ought to be treated by a psychiatrist depends on some common beliefs in Bob's culture, such as a certain scientific explanation of human behaviour, a generally favorable approach towards what is considered 'science', and some kind of a tolerant view towards the exceptional. It is reasonable to suppose that the same Bob, had he lived a few hundred years earlier, would have had quite different beliefs about Jim; he would probably have believed that Jim's soul had been attacked by some demon, and would have applied to some priest or the like to exorcise the spirit. Bob might also have believed that Jim himself had become demonic, and thus ought to be killed, or at least expelled from society. Hence, the fact that one holds certain beliefs about reality and not others, is a matter of luck. If they happen to be true, one has good luck; if they happen to be false, one has bad luck.

⁶ I am not sure how cases of justified true belief that are not cases of knowledge (Gettier's cases) should fit into this scheme. These cases show that one can have (bad) epistemic luck, even when this luck has nothing to do with *p*'s being true, on the one hand, nor with *S*'s belief in *p*, on the other. I am inclined to say that this kind of luck fits more naturally into (2e), since it has a more objective character. That is, it doesn't refer to the inner state of the subject, but to some objective fact – namely, whether, indeed, the required relation exists between the proposition believed by *S* to justify his belief in *p*, and *p*.

There are numerous factors beyond one's control that cooperate in forming one's beliefs, that is, numerous ways by which one's epistemic status is influenced by luck. These ways can be classified into three groups, corresponding to the three sorts of situational moral luck, i.e., causal, constitutive and circumstantial. A theory of causal epistemic luck would point to different causes which determine one's act of believing in **p**. In its extreme version, such a theory might be reductionist, and argue that beliefs are reducible to some kind of bodily activity, which is wholly determined by physical and chemical laws.

Constitutive luck, to quote Nagel again, 'is luck in the kind of person one is, where this is not a question of what one deliberately does, but of one's inclinations, capacities, and temperament'. Now the kind of person one is, no doubt also influences one's acceptance or rejection of certain beliefs; If one is strong minded and has an independent kind of character, one will be less conformist in the shaping of one's beliefs. If one is weak, and tends to be easily influenced by changing fashions, one will tend to adopt commonly-held attitudes and opinions. Again, if these beliefs happen to be true, one is epistemically lucky to have such a personality. If they happen to be false, one is epistemically unfortunate.

Circumstantial moral luck is luck 'in the kind of problems or situations one faces', problems which rise out of the particular circumstances one finds oneself in. In the epistemic context, circumstantial luck could be interpreted in two ways. First, there is luck in the concepts and understandings into which one is born and which inevitably shape the way one basically looks at the world. Second, there is luck of a more particular nature, which refers to one's being in circumstances that are misleading, e.g. presenting optical illusions. Thus finding oneself in deluding circumstances is bad circumstantial epistemic luck.

This sort of luck seems quite clearly distinct from the previous one. Even if one is strong-minded and tries to form one's understanding of reality independently of what is commonly believed to be true, one is inevitably influenced by the concepts and ways of thinking of the society and period in which one happens to live. Thus the analogy between this sort of moral luck and epistemic luck runs as follows: in the case of morality, one is trapped into circumstances that bring one to a certain course of action which one would not have had the opportunity to take, had one lived in different circumstances. In the case of epistemology, one is born into a certain language and certain concepts (and one is

trapped into misleading or leading circumstances) with the effect that one inescapably views the world through them. Had one been born into a different culture (or, for instance, occupied a different standpoint in the deluding circumstances), one would have had quite different beliefs.

Note that the plausibility of this account on the various versions of (1e) does not depend on whether one is *justified* in holding one's beliefs. The point I am trying to make here is that one's very belief in **p** is a matter of luck, whether one's belief be justified or unjustified. As for the role played by luck in the justification itself, this would depend on one's understanding of the concept of justified belief, a concept which is highly debatable. If one's interpretation of this concept is subjective, assuming that justification is a matter of taking into consideration the information *available to the subject*, then justification seems not to be a matter of luck; it is under one's control to make an effort and to try to obtain the best available evidence for one's beliefs. If, however, one prefers a more objectivist account of epistemic justification, according to which a belief is justified iff it is supported by evidence which is really reliable (not only in the subject's eyes), then the notion of justification is vulnerable to luck too. After all, one can do no more than endeavor to obtain reliable evidence for one's beliefs; it is beyond one's control to ensure that one has gained it.

One notion of justification is of special interest here, that is, the notion of deontological justification. According to this notion, S is justified in his belief that **p**, iff in coming to believe that **p** S has not violated his epistemic obligation to try his best to believe that **p** iff **p** is true.⁷ One of the main reasons for adopting this concept of justification is its ability to account for the assumption that belief without real justification is occasion for reproach, in a better way than other theories do. Theories of objective justification make justification contingent upon features which are outside the subject's perspective with the result of it being unfair to reproach the subject for lack of justification.⁸ This difficulty disappears in deontological justification since it is assumed that one does have control over fulfilling one's (epistemic) obligations and hence, rightly deserves to be condemned for violating them. Epistemic justification's immunity to luck is gained by interpreting it as a deontological notion. However, this line of reasoning presupposes

⁷ See R. Chisolm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 2nd edition, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1977, p. 14.

⁸ See Charlotte Katzoff's unpublished article 'On Real Epistemic Justification', p. 14.

the very basic assumption that is the target of proponents of moral luck, namely, that the deontological domain is immune to luck. To put it in other words, the deontological notion of epistemic justification presupposes the denial of moral luck.

So far I have discussed (1e), trying to show that analogous factors to those which make man's moral situation vulnerable to luck make his epistemic situation vulnerable to luck too. Let us turn now to examine the epistemic analogue to resultant luck, luck of sort (2e). The idea behind resultant moral luck is that even if it is under one's control to do whatever one does, it is not under one's control to make it the case that what one does turns out to be morally right. Thus, whether it turns out to be right or wrong is a matter of luck. Likewise in the epistemic context; it is beyond one's control to make one's beliefs true. The maximum which is, or might be, under one's control, is the attainment of justified belief. And unless there is a Cartesian God, who somehow guarantees that justified belief is true, truth and falsity are a matter of luck.

To sum up this discussion, I have tried to show that the ways by which luck influences morality have close analogues in the epistemic domain, and they divide into two basic sorts: situational luck, that is, luck in what one does (or believes), and resultant luck, that is, luck in the moral value (or the truth-value) of what one does (or believes).

II

A common feature of both moral and epistemic luck is that both imply a sceptical approach; scepticism as to the possibility of obtaining knowledge, and scepticism as to the possibility of coherently ascribing moral responsibility, praise and blame, to agents. Let us see how this scepticism is implied by the two sorts of luck mentioned above, starting with the moral domain. The phenomenon of luck seems to lead to moral scepticism in two basic ways. First, if the fact that one carries out an act **a** is determined by factors over which one has no control, then one should really not be considered the originator of **a**, and thus, should not be counted responsible for it. So even if **a** was, in the final reckoning, the right thing to do, its doer is entitled to no credit for it. If at all, he played only a minor role in producing **a**, in comparison to the role played by the circumstances. Second, regarding resultant luck, it is doubtful whether an agent should be held responsible for the moral worth of his actions, since this worth is determined by accidental results, over which he has no control. So even if one is justly

considered the originator of **a**, one might not be entitled to credit for its moral worth.

The independence of the various ways by which luck influences morality strengthens the scepticism engendered by luck. This independence might be shown in the following way: Even if the acts of the will itself are not determined by antecedent causes, it is still possible that the kind of person one is is so determined. And even if it isn't, one might still be vulnerable to luck with regard to the circumstances in which one finds oneself. And, finally, even if this sort of luck is overcome, one's moral status might still be at the mercy of luck due to the fact that the actual results of one's actions are not entirely within one's control. Thus, any attempt to reject moral luck and the scepticism it raises must show that each and all of these kinds of luck don't have an effect on morality.

Turning to epistemic luck, here, too, we are led to scepticism. First, if my belief in **p** is determined by factors over which I have no control – biological, psychological and others – it seems that doubt as to the truth of **p** is unavoidable. There always exists the fear that these factors mislead us, that they are means in the hands of a Cartesian demon. And if what I believe to be true is forced upon me by such a demon, I can never claim to have knowledge. Second, since justified belief does not guarantee truth, there is always a possible gap between what one believes to be true, relying on the best evidence available to one, and what is really true. This gap is a source of scepticism. If one can never claim one has knowledge, only justified belief, maybe knowledge is unattainable, and man has to be content with *doxa*.

Nagel observes rightly that in both the moral and the epistemic case, scepticism does not depend on 'the imposition of arbitrarily stringent standards . . . , but appears to grow inevitably from the consistent application of ordinary standards' (*ibid*, p. 27). These ordinary standards require a more autonomous basis for knowledge, as well as for morality, a basis which is threatened by the irresistible penetration of luck in both these areas. Hence we face a dilemma: either to deny luck, which means to deny quite an obvious feature of our experience, or to admit luck and revise our conceptions of morality and of epistemology. As Williams noted, 'scepticism about the freedom of morality from luck cannot leave the concept of morality where it was' (p. 39), and this seems to hold for the concept of epistemology too.

One might object and argue that there is an important difference here between morality and epistemology. While one's status and

credit as a knower is not affected by luck, one's status as a moral agent is. Though one might come to believe **p** only due to luck, once one (justifiedly) in fact believes **p**, then one knows **p** (assuming **p** is true). While if one does something wrong due to luck, then, so the argument goes, one is not discredited by it. Hence, a more intimate connection exists between (immunity to) luck and morality than between (immunity to) luck and knowledge. However, this alleged difference is far from evident, especially after Williams's and Nagel's papers. One of the central points that Nagel tried to make was that moral judgement depends on what one *actually* does just as in epistemology we focus on one's actual belief. So, in that sense, moral worth is like knowledge. Moreover, it is not uncontroversial that luck has no effect on knowledge the minute one does, in fact, believe **p**, etc. Surely if this belief is a result of pure luck (e.g. a blind guess) we would not want to ascribe knowledge to its possessor.

The formal resemblance between moral and epistemic luck raises the question of whether there is a more substantive relation between these two concepts. I believe the answer to this question is positive, and the sort of luck which expresses such a relation is resultant luck.

Moral decisions do not take place in a vacuum. They are based on one's beliefs about reality, and about one's ability to influence it. These beliefs refer not only to the particular act one decides to do, but also to alternative acts which one decides *not* to do, assuming they are less valuable or less obligatory. For instance, suppose George believes that assassinating a certain dictator is the only way of ending his terroristic and barbaric behavior, behavior which endangers all civilized countries. George also believes that killing the dictator will be quite simple, and that it will not encourage any further bloodshed, or any harmful result in general. So, on the basis of these beliefs, George decides that assassination is the right thing to do. Let us further assume, that George is *justified* in holding these beliefs. Could we say he *knows* that killing the tyrant is the right thing to do? This depends, of course, on the truth of this belief, which cannot be known in advance. If George's beliefs turn out to be true, we shall say he knew in advance that assassination was the right thing to do. If not – we shall say that he merely believed so, and was wrong.⁹

⁹ Admittedly, even after the event it is very difficult to be sure that the decision was right, since it included not only the assumption that the assassination would be efficient, but also that other courses of action would not be, which is pretty hard to verify. However, one should

This is a case of epistemic luck. But isn't it a case of moral luck too? If, in view of his firm beliefs about the moral rightness of this course of action, George orders his special forces to kill the dictator, and then turns out to be mistaken, he will be judged morally blameworthy for the bloody results of this action. So there seems to be a close relation between moral and epistemic resultant luck (sentences (2m) and (2e) above). More precisely, (resultant) moral luck really depends on the existence of epistemic luck; had it been within the power of human beings to make sure their beliefs were true, it would have also been within their power to make right moral decisions. However, since, unfortunately, human beings have not got this power, they are at the mercy of luck, in both their epistemic and moral status. Thus, perfect knowledge is a necessary condition for immunity to moral luck.¹⁰

This analysis brings us back to the beginning of my paper, and suggests another possible justification for the use of the term 'luck' in the epistemic context. I argued that, in general, the concept of luck can be coherently applied only in cases where something good or bad occurs to somebody. In the epistemic context, I suggested that since knowledge itself is something good, the concept of epistemic luck makes sense. In the light of the relation between epistemic and moral luck, it can now be added that knowledge is good because of its importance to morality; one is lucky if one has true beliefs, because true beliefs enable one to choose right courses of action. And one is unfortunate if one has false beliefs, since this will lead one to commit acts which are morally wrong.¹¹

This last observation does not imply a reduction of epistemic

not conclude that there is no answer to the question of whether the decision was right or wrong. An answer lies somewhere, even if known only to God.

¹⁰ Needless to add, this would not be a sufficient condition either. As we saw, luck influences morality in many ways.

¹¹ Julia Driver apparently believes that sometimes it is a case of good moral luck to have bad epistemic luck. In her 'Virtues of Ignorance', *Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989), pp. 373–84, Driver argues that certain virtues are constituted by ignorance. Modesty, for example, involves ignorance as to one's real worth, and can be characterized as 'a dogmatic disposition to underestimation of self-worth' (378). As such, modesty, according to Driver, is necessarily involuntary (381). So since being ignorant about one's worth is a matter of epistemic luck, this is a case where bad epistemic luck is morally desirable, that is, might be considered as good moral luck. However, I believe Driver's account of modesty should be rejected, and indeed one of the reasons for this rejection is the above involuntariness of modesty which is entailed in it. For a different account of modesty which disagrees with Driver, see Owen Flanagan, 'Virtue and Ignorance', *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990), pp. 420–28 and Norvin Richards, 'Is Humility a Virtue?', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (1988), pp. 253–9.

luck to moral luck.¹² Though many beliefs have practical, and thus moral, relevance, many other beliefs have no such relevance. Since I believe that the use of the term 'luck' is appropriate in these last cases too, I believe that epistemic luck does not necessarily presuppose moral luck.

We have seen that luck leads to scepticism in both the moral and the epistemic domain, and threatens to undermine our basic notions in these areas. What could be the solution to this problem? In the moral area, the standard way to solve the problem is to reduce the legitimate domain of moral judgment to the inner life of the agents. That is, it is admitted that one cannot be responsible for the contingencies and fortunes of the world, and concluded that these elements have no weight in determining one's moral worth. What alone determines this worth is one's good will, 'sparkling like a jewel in its own right, as something that had its full worth in itself'.¹³ Immunity to luck is gained by a withdrawal to an area which is supposed to be secure.

This strategy might be applied to the epistemic area too. However, the result of such an application would not be a relocation, so to speak, of the focus of value, as in morality, but a giving up of the idea of knowledge altogether. Restricting our cognitions to beliefs and their possible justification leaves us eventually with no *episteme*, only *doxa*. So, in this respect, morality seems to be 'stronger' than epistemology, being more capable of facing the threat of luck.

But the restriction strategy might be helpful only (or mainly) with regard to resultant luck. Even if successful, it leaves untouched the different aspects of situational luck. As Nagel argues, following Feinberg, there is no reason to believe that one's inner world is more immune to luck than one's 'outer' world.¹⁴ The good will might be contingent just as its results are. If it is, then morality is in no better state than epistemology.

It is not my intention here to resolve the difficulties. The purpose of this paper was not to determine whether, indeed, one can escape being at the mercy of luck and can thus gain knowledge and moral worth, but only to highlight the close relations which obtain

¹² On the general question of whether epistemic concepts can be reduced to moral ones, see R. Firth, 'Are Epistemic Concepts Reducible to Ethical Ones?', in *Values and Morals*, A. Goldman and J. Kim, eds. (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1978), pp. 215–29.

¹³ I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. by H. Paton, New York: Harper & Row, 1964, 1st section, 3rd paragraph.

¹⁴ Nagel, *ibid.*, p. 32.

between moral and epistemic luck. The implications of the connection are far-reaching, for the scepticism generated by the phenomenon of luck threatens in a similar and a substantially related way our conceptions of both morality and epistemology.¹⁵

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