

## ON THE ISSUE OF IMPORTANCE OF LUCK IN THE WORK OF BERNARD WILLIAMS

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**Abstract:** In ancient moral philosophy, happiness was regarded as the ultimate goal of human life, the motivating force that determines the human effort to become a „better“ person. In contemporary ethics, it has returned to the very idea of luck, it has come about a revitalization of the philosophical reflections on the phenomenon of luck. The problem of moral luck – i.e. the problem that arises from the clash between our intuitions about the conditions of responsibility and common practice of moral assessment – is brought to the forefront of contemporary philosophical debates. Most people believe that one can be held responsible only for what is under one's control. However, common practice shows that factors beyond the agent's control make a difference in moral assessment. In the present study we analyse the above mentioned problem on the basis of Williams's philosophical reflections.

**Keywords:** morality, luck, retrospective justification, agent-regret.

### 1 Introduction

The problem of moral luck consists in conviction that the conditions for attribution of moral responsibility are – in cases involving the element of luck – in contradiction with the common practice of moral assessment. However, the notion that the moral status of individuals is subject to luck seems to be incomprehensible. The very term "moral luck" appears alike incomprehensible. It is rather contrasting combination of two quite different concepts. In addition, the very idea of moral luck involves the tension between morality, which implies control and luck which implies lack of control. There is no doubt that this is one of the reasons why the idea of moral luck has become – not only for the members of the narrow community of philosophers – so attractive. As Margaret Urban Walker puts it: „*The very idea of "moral luck" cannot fail to engage our interest, if only because some of us may be astonished at the very idea*“ (Walker, 1985, p. 319).

### 2 The concept of luck in Williams's theory of morals

The fact that one's motives, intentions and personality are influenced by luck (constitutive luck) is taken by Williams to be a bitter truth (Statman, 1993, p. 5). However, Williams does not elaborate on this kind of luck. The author pays attention the idea of the rationally justify, i.e. individual's ability to rationally justify its own decision and actions. In this context, it is necessary to emphasize that the fundamental distinction between Williams's and Nagel's debate on moral luck consists of the subject position in respect of the object of moral assessment. Thomas Nagel in contrast to Williams, is focused on an examination of moral responsibility assessment issue from an objective point of view, i.e. from the position of participant assessing the conduct of other persons.

Bernard Williams (1929 – 2003) was one of the most influential Anglo-American philosophers of the 20th century. From the beginning of his professional career as a thinker he paid attention to a wide range of topics. His contribution to philosophy was very wide-ranging from metaphysics and epistemology to moral, social, and political philosophy (Thomas, 2007, p. 1). Despite the fact that he was not a systematic philosopher, he noticed the consistency and mutual support among the distinct theories of contemporary ethics. As he noted: „*It is a reasonable demand that what one believes in one area of philosophy would make sense in terms of what one believes elsewhere*“ (Altham-Harrison, 1995, p. 186).

Williams wants to show that rational justification of his own action is often a matter of luck to some extent. He presents his claim based on the Gauguin's story. Paul Gauguin was young creative painter who had decided to leave his family in order to live life, which would allow him to increase his chances of becoming a great painter. He went to live in Tahiti, believing that by averting from the obligations towards his family or

requirements that had been imposed at that time of life he can carry out his project. However, at the time of the decision he could not know whether it will be successful. The only thing that will justify his choice will be success itself (Williams, 1981, p. 23). In fact, Gauguin does not have control over success. The will, no matter what is strong, is not sufficient to carry out his desire. In order to allow Gauguin to become a great painter, there should be much more: talent, motivation and many other factors beyond his control. In this context, the justification for Gauguin's decision is affected by factors which are resulted from luck. Central to Williams's argument is his contention that Gauguin's justification, if there is to be one, is not available to him at the time of the choice, i.e. in advance of knowing whether it would come out right. That is, his justification is essentially retrospective. The reason for this necessarily retrospective perspective is not only the trivial fact that Gauguin's choice, as with many other choices, is made under the conditions of uncertainty that result from limited human knowledge. It has a much deeper reason. Gauguin is, to some extent, a different person, a person who is the product of his earlier choices. That is, Gauguin's standpoint after his success differs from his standpoint at the time of the choice, i.e. he is now a different man (Statman, 1993, p. 7).

Not all kinds of luck are equally relevant to the justification of the decision (Statman, 1993, p. 5). In this context, Williams distinguishes between intrinsic luck and extrinsic luck. The intrinsic luck in Gauguin's case concentrates itself on virtually the one question of whether he is a genuinely gifted painter who can succeed in doing genuinely valuable work and thus carry out his project. Gauguin's project of realising his gifts as a painter affects talent as well as a sequence of accidental circumstances, which „... are subject to laws outside ourselves...“ (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 68) and thus lead us to the subject of extrinsic luck. For instance, if Gauguin suffers and injury on the way to Tahiti which causes his project is never really carried out it will be a matter of extrinsic luck. Despite the fact that both kinds of lucks are necessary for success, and hence for actual justification – only intrinsic luck relates to unjustification (Williams, 1981, p. 26).

In this context it should be pointed out that for Williams this marks no small point, for „*The discussion is not in the first place directed to what we or others might say or think of these agents, but on what they can coherently think about themselves*“ (Williams, 1981, p. 27). Describing the states of their mind, the author uses the concept of regret, i.e. desire to go back and change a past experience. Everyone can express regret. But there is a specific kind of regret (agent-regret) which a person can feel only towards his own past actions or actions in which he regards himself as a participant. (Williams, 1981, p. 27). „*It can extend far beyond what one intentionally did to almost anything for which one was causally responsible in virtue of something one intentionally did*“ (Williams, 1981, p. 28). As an example, he considers the regret of a lorry driver who – without being reckless or negligent - runs over and kills a child. Despite the fact that he could not to avoid the crash, he experienced painful feelings that are strange to somebody else with the exception of individuals who believed that they had been able to prevent that accident. Some people will try to console him by telling him this. They will try to free him from the state he fell into. This feeling of coexistence presupposes that its relation to the event is something specific, something that cannot be eliminated by thought that it was not his fault.

The fact that the agent regrets his own actions (agent-regret) is something that everybody should experience. To do otherwise it would be unwise. Williams is very strict on this point, arguing that: „... it would be a kind of insanity never to experience sentiments of this kind towards anyone, and it would be an insane concept of rationality which insisted that a rational person never would“ (Williams, 1981, p. 29). This madness is related to the false assumption that „... we might, if we conducted

*ourselves clear-headedly enough, entirely detach ourselves from the unintentional aspects of our actions...and yet still retain our identity and character as agents ...*" (Williams, 1981, p. 29).

However, unintended consequences of actions are also involved in shaping the one's identity. Taking into account this fact, detaching oneself from them one fails to retain one's identity and character as an agent. In this context *..... the idea of the voluntary is essentially superficial*" (Williams, 1995, p. 243).

An interesting and quite common case of involuntary action is the case of moral dilemmas. This is a specific situation when one must choose between two evils and, in this sense, one is not acting voluntarily. Nevertheless an agent faced with these choices should feel regret (agent-regret), and a desire to make up in some way for the wrong action he committed. This brings us back to the case of Gauguin. Gauguin's success as a painter lies beyond his control, hence, whether or not he was justified is a matter of luck. If he had had intrinsic luck and he failed he would be unjustified and sense feelings of agent-regret about his wrong decision. If he had had extrinsic luck, then though he would regret the failure of the project, the regret would not take the particular form of agent-regret and would not be much different from the regret experienced by a spectator (Statman, 1993, p. 7).

### 3 Conclusion

Although the picture of moral immunity to luck is attractive – such an understanding of morality as immune to luck is ultimately implausible. Two questions arise in this context: *„If the possibility of acting morally is available to everyone at any time in their lives, why doesn't everyone do so? If the possibility of "being moral" is open to everyone then why so many people become and remain evil is unclear*" (Haybron, 2002, p. 130)? The embarrassment we encounter in reply to the above questions agrees with the initial claim. In addition, a picture of the moral life as entirely immune from luck does not correspond to the way things are. The fact how we attribute praise and blame is closely connected with the idea that some people should not be held responsible for what they have done, that some circumstances furnish appropriate excuses and some influences are acceptable mitigating factors. The above-mentioned idea that morality is totally immune from the randomness of the outside world places a burden on a person, as it holds person responsible for all his acts and character traits irrespective of the nature of facts which directly affected them.

An understanding of morality as exclusively immune to luck is also implausible. If morality is subject to luck, then it attacks the idea that human lives have meaning. In that respect, all our efforts, our striving, our choices, are essentially meaningless. In view of that, this raises the question: If anything we do could turn out either way, regardless of our efforts and because of factors outside our control, then why should we try to do anything? In this context, D. M. Haybron also notes: *„With lack of control comes lack of meaning in what we choose and what we do, and ultimately lack of importance or significance in what we do and who we are...“* (Haybron, 2002, p. 129).

On the basis of the above facts, it is evident that neither of the two options outlined above, the luck view and moral immunity form luck, is satisfactory. Both are extreme and mutually exclusive views how to understand morality. Even though the lives of human beings are neither exclusively subject to the influence of this phenomenon, i.e. to luck, nor exclusively immune to it. In the words of Daniel M. Haybron: *„We are neither inert objects at the mercy of elements entirely outside our control, nor perfected gods entirely above the influences of luck“* (Haybron, 2002, p. 131).

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