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# RELIGIOUS LUCK

Linda Zagzebski

Recently the problem of moral luck identified by Joel Feinberg, Thomas Nagel, and Bernard Williams has captured a lot of attention in ethics. In this paper I argue that the problem exists for Christian moral theory and practice as well, and that the problem is magnified by certain aspects of Christian theology, including the doctrines of grace and of an eternal heaven and hell. I then consider five solutions to the problem, all of which involve modifying in one way or another either traditional Christian doctrines or common views on the grounds for moral evaluation.

## I. *Introduction*

Moral luck occurs when a person's degree of moral responsibility for an act or a personal trait goes beyond the degree to which she controls it. If it exists, people are the proper objects of moral evaluation, including praise and blame, reward and punishment, because of something that is partly due to luck. Thomas Nagel has argued that this is not a mistake in our moral practices, but is a consequence of the right way of looking at morality. We cannot eliminate luck without destroying moral evaluation altogether. Nonetheless, most of us find moral luck repulsive— even, perhaps, incoherent. Surely it must be the case that each of us has an equal chance at the one thing that matters most: our moral worth. While we must put up with elements of chance and fortune in the other aspects of our lives, how could this happen in morality? In fact, we could make a strong case for the view that a primary distinguishing feature of moral evaluation as opposed to other sorts of evaluation is that it is completely luck-free. And not only is it luck-free, it compensates for the prevalence of luck in the other areas of our lives. There is, then, a kind of ultimate cosmic justice. Nevertheless, Thomas Nagel, Bernard Williams, Joel Feinberg, and others have persuasively argued that morality is permeated with luck. If they are right, morality is threatened with inconsistency.

In this paper I will focus on the problems of moral luck identified by Nagel and Feinberg and will argue that they exist for Christian moral practice and Christian moral theories as well. In addition, the problem of luck for the Christian is worsened by several elements not found in secular morality, including the traditional doctrine of grace and the doctrine of an eternal



heaven and hell. Historical disputes over these doctrines within Christianity do not go to the heart of the luck problem. At one time the dispute took the form of the controversy over predestination vs. free will. Nowadays it is more usual for the focus to be on the question of whether an eternal hell is consistent with divine justice, mercy, goodness, or love. The problem I am raising, however, is not a problem about free will or the coherence of the divine attributes, but is a problem internal to the concepts of moral responsibility, reward, and punishment as understood by the Christian. I will argue that while secular morality has no resources to handle moral luck, Christianity can do so either by eliminating it or by rendering it innocuous. I will consider five ways this might be done, none of which are options outside of Christian theology, but each of which raises problems of its own.

## II. *The Case for Moral Luck*

In well-known papers by Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel the existence of moral luck has been identified and illustrated with numerous examples.<sup>1</sup> Nagel argues that there are three main sources of moral luck: luck in consequences, luck in circumstances, and luck in constitution, the last of which might more properly be called luck in traits of character. Together they make luck so pervasive that it contaminates virtually every type of moral theory as well as common moral practice.

Consider first luck in consequences. The idea here is that the outcome of a person's act affects his degree of fault even though the way things turn out is to some extent beyond his control. To take one of Nagel's examples:

If someone has had too much to drink and his car swerves on to the sidewalk, he can count himself morally lucky if there are no pedestrians in his path. If there were, he would be to blame for their deaths, and would probably be prosecuted for manslaughter. But if he hurts no one, although his recklessness is exactly the same, he is guilty of a far less serious legal offense and will certainly reproach himself and be reproached by others much less severely.<sup>2</sup>

Although the example is a legal one, it is clear in the subsequent discussion that Nagel thinks that the degree of *moral* responsibility differs in the two cases even though the degree of control by the agent is the same.

Luck in consequences is the category given the most attention by both Williams and Nagel, but it is also the most vulnerable to objection.<sup>3</sup> I will therefore not make any of my claims in this paper depend upon there being luck of this type. Let us then consider the Kantian move of focusing moral assessment exclusively on the internal sphere of intentions or acts of will. What accrues to our discredit is not literally *what* we do, on this approach, but only those mental acts by which we do it.

Will this move eliminate the problem of moral luck? Unfortunately, it will not. For one thing, a person forms intentions only when the occasion arises,

but the arising of the occasion is the result of circumstances largely beyond the agent's control. Again, to take one of Nagel's examples:

Ordinary citizens of Nazi Germany had an opportunity to behave heroically by opposing the regime. They also had an opportunity to behave badly, and most of them are culpable for having failed the test. But it is a test to which the citizens of other countries were not subjected, with the result that even if they, or some of them, would have behaved as badly as the Germans in like circumstances, they simply did not and therefore are not similarly culpable.<sup>4</sup>

In an earlier paper, Joel Feinberg made the same point that responsibility for one's inner states can in some circumstances be wholly a matter of luck.<sup>5</sup> He considers the case of Hotspur, the unfortunate slapper of Hemo, an equally unfortunate hemophiliac, who dies as the result of Hotspur's slap.

Imagine that we have photographed the whole episode and are now able to project the film in such very slow motion that we can observe every stage of Hotspur's action and (constructively) even the "inner" anticipatory stages. ...

At each of these cinematographic stages there is some state of affairs for which we might hold Hotspur responsible. We can also conceive of a third party, call him Witwood, who is in all relevant respects exactly like Hotspur but who, through luck, would have escaped responsibility at each stage, were he in Hotspur's shoes. We can imagine, for example, that had Witwood caused Hemo's mouth to hemorrhage, Hemo's life would have been saved by some new drug; or at an earlier stage, instead of becoming responsible for Hemo's cut mouth, Witwood lands only a glancing blow which does not cut; or again, instead of becoming responsible for the painful impact of hand on face, Witwood swings at a ducking Hemo and misses altogether. Though similar in his intentions and deeds to Hotspur, Witwood escapes responsibility through luck.

The same good fortune is possible at earlier "internal" stages. For example, at the stage when Hotspur would begin to burn with rage, a speck of dust throws Witwood into a sneezing fit, preventing any rage from arising. He can no more be responsible for a feeling he did not have than for a death that did not happen. Similarly, at the point when Hotspur would be right on the verge of forming his intention, Witwood is distracted at just that instant by a loud noise. By the time the noise subsides, Witwood's blood has cooled, and he forms no intention to slap Hemo. Hotspur, then, is responsible— I suppose some would say "morally" responsible— for his intention, whereas Witwood, who but for an accidental intrusion on his attention would have formed the same intention, luckily escapes responsibility.<sup>6</sup>

Since the introduction of Witwood to the analysis of Hotspur is just a colorful way of talking about what Hotspur himself might have done if he had not been unlucky, the objection might be raised that the claim of moral luck in circumstances rests on the questionable view that there are true counterfactuals of freedom of the form: In circumstances **C** Hotspur would have done **X**. But, in fact, the case rests on no such problematic counterfactuals.

It is not necessary that the circumstances in which Hotspur would not have struck Hemo are precisely specifiable, even in principle. All that is required is that there are *some* counterfactual circumstances (perhaps with the proviso that these circumstances not be too far removed from the actual ones) in which Hotspur does not strike Hemo, and that it is beyond Hotspur's control that these circumstances do not obtain; and surely that much is true.

The natural response at this point of the story of Hotspur and Witwood is to go back even further, before the situation arose. As Feinberg describes the case, Hotspur and Witwood have the same character traits relevant to the type of situation described. They are equally irascible or sensitive about personal remarks, and so if we make the primary focus of moral judgment character traits themselves, Hotspur and Witwood are equally at fault and so Hotspur neither benefits nor suffers from moral luck arising from actual intentions or feelings. Feinberg does not pursue this line, but Nagel considers it briefly with examples of the traits of envy and conceit and claims that they also are not impervious to luck. As Nagel describes these cases, they are most naturally understood as qualities of temperament rather than vices, but considerations on the nature of virtues and vices show them to be heavily affected by luck as well, at least they are on a classical Aristotelian theory. To Aristotle traits of character are not inborn, but are habits acquired through imitation of others. The character of the persons to which one is exposed while young is clearly outside a person's control, yet it is the major factor in the acquisition of moral virtues and vices. So even if the primary moral responsibility of persons is for enduring traits of character rather than for intentions, acts, or their consequences, moral luck still exists.

A thorough examination of the problem of moral luck would have to give careful attention to the development of our concepts of fault and responsibility and the purpose of rewards and punishments, but my conclusion at this stage is that moral luck does exist and is a flaw in the institution of morality as we know it. While I do not maintain that luck exists in all of Nagel's categories, there is surely luck in whatever it is people are morally evaluated *for* since every suggestion on what that is is covered by one of Nagel's or Feinberg's categories. The range of luck is wide enough to cover just about every object of moral evaluation in every known theory: consequences, acts, intentions, dispositions, character traits. Even worse, there is no reason to think that a new theory would help since the problem is pervasive in the practice of morality as we know it, not just in its theoretical formulations.

I maintain, then, that moral luck exists, but I also maintain that the Kantian intuition that morality ought to be free of luck is justified. So while we cannot escape moral luck, we ought to devise moral practices and ways of theorizing that minimize it. What Nagel and Feinberg do not say is that the degree of moral luck is less for some forms of moral evaluation than for others. If we

extend Feinberg's imaginary exercise and trace a line backwards from the consequences of an act, to the physical act itself, to the intention to perform the act, to the psychic states out of which the intention is formed, to the enduring character traits from which the act arises, we find that the farther back we go, the less luck there is. This is because each later point of assessment includes all the luck of the previous points as well as some others. There is a cumulative effect in moral luck. So in Feinberg's example of Hotspur, his degree of luck in killing Hemo includes the luck involved in the personal qualities that led him to become violent, aggravated by the degree of luck in the circumstances in which the intention to commit the act was formed, aggravated by the degree of luck in the circumstances in which death follows the act. The class of theories which focus moral evaluation on intentions are therefore preferable to those which focus on consequences in that they allow less room for luck. Even better than intention-based theories are virtue-based theories. At least with respect to the problem of luck, virtue theories have the advantage.

Nagel is rather sanguine about the existence of moral luck. It is something we will have to live with it, he says; we really do not have any choice. Morality may be defective, but we're stuck with it. Notice that this is a reasonable response only if we think of morality as having finite significance. While Nagel does not explicitly make such an assumption, it is clear that a major part of the reason he is willing to accept moral luck is that he assumes it is closely tied to human intuitions, purposes, and practices, the defects of which are so obvious that it really should not be any surprise that the defects extend to the ground of moral evaluation itself.

Feinberg's conclusion following his discussion of the case of Hotspur and Witwood is somewhat different from Nagel's, but equally interesting. Moral responsibility is a matter about which we are all confused, Feinberg concludes, and no particular philosopher or school is especially guilty of this confusion. The problem is not only that our degree of responsibility exceeds our degree of control, as Nagel maintains, but that our moral responsibility is indeterminate, even in principle.

### III. *The Luck of the Christian*

Christian ethics has some of the same problems of luck that face secular ethics. Perhaps Christian moral theorists are less inclined to hold a person responsible for consequences beyond those she can control, and to that extent Christian ethics does not face the most severe of the three types of moral luck identified by Nagel. Still, the range of objects of moral evaluation within Christian moral theories are all things that Nagel and Feinberg have demonstrated to my satisfaction to possess a degree of luck. To the extent that there is luck in one's moral responsibility for one's virtues and vices, the circum-

stances in which one forms one's intentions, and the resulting acts themselves, to that extent the Christian faces moral luck.<sup>7</sup> As the Christian understands morality, then, we are faced at least with luck in circumstances and in traits of character.

But Christian ethics differs from secular ethics in ways that make the matter of luck especially problematic. In the first place, Christian moral theory replaces the concept of moral wrongdoing by the concept of sin, an offense against God, and the concept of an abstract state of moral worth which may or may not be determinable is replaced by the concept of one's moral state as judged by God. And presumably that *should be* determinable. Furthermore, there is less room for the acceptance of luck in Christian ethics than in ethics as conceived by Nagel since to the Christian morality is not simply an institution dependent upon the finite concerns of limited and defective humans. What's more, Kantian intuitions are strong in the Christian tradition and it can be plausibly argued that Kant was heavily influenced by Christian sensibilities in devising his idea that moral worth is strictly under our control. In fact, the precursor to Kant's idea exists in St. Augustine's *De Libero Arbitrio*. There Augustine says that we are contented only if we possess the "good will" (*bona voluntas*), which is the only good fully within our power, and of which we cannot be deprived by worldly circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

To make matters worse, traditional Christianity includes two doctrines which, on the face of it, magnify the problem of luck to infinity. These are the doctrines of grace and of an eternal heaven and hell.

Consider first the doctrine of grace. On all accounts grace is necessary for salvation and is an unearned gift of God. While accounts of grace within Christianity differ with respect to the question of how much our efforts can affect the reception of grace, no one suggests that it is wholly under our control. There is, then, religious luck. What's more, religious luck magnifies moral luck, at least in the theology of Aquinas, since he says that not only are the greatest of the virtues, Faith, Hope, and Charity, infused by grace, but no merit accrues to our possession of the ordinary "natural" virtues such as kindness, justice, and courage without the action of grace. And Christian Charity is the supreme virtue without which no other trait we possess nor act we perform gives us any merit.

Most serious of all, the reward or punishment to which a life of grace or the lack of it leads is an eternal heaven or hell. This element of Christian teaching multiplies the effects of moral luck and the luck of grace to infinity. I will not speculate here on the nature of eternity; eternal reward or punishment may not be infinite in duration. Nonetheless, it must be the case that an eternal reward is infinitely greater than an earthly reward and an eternal punishment is infinitely greater than an earthly punishment. A person controls her individual choices and acts and the series of choices and acts which make

up her life only up to a point, yet her reward or punishment is infinite. This means that even in the best case, one in which we can assume that the cumulative luck in a person's life from natural qualities, circumstances, and consequences is fairly small, since an infinite reward or punishment is at stake, the effects of even a small degree of luck become infinite.

Religious luck is not strictly parallel to moral luck, however. Moral luck occurs when the rewards or punishments a person *deserves* are partially a function of matters beyond the person's control. In the case of religious luck, however, Christian doctrine maintains that everyone deserves the worst punishment, namely, eternal damnation. So religious luck is not luck in what one *deserves*, although it is luck in what one gets after the final judgment, and that at least appears to be reward and punishment. Two people may be in exactly the same position as far as their control is concerned, yet one is saved and the other is damned.<sup>9</sup> So the fact that moral luck is a matter of desert and religious luck is not hides a more fundamental similarity. Both moral and religious luck involve an inequality in the way persons are treated by the institution of morality itself.

A more important way that religious luck is disanalogous with moral luck is that most Christian theologians maintain that grace is offered in such abundance that everyone receives more than is sufficient for salvation. In fact, on some accounts everyone receives many times a sufficiency. This changes the analogy with the cases of moral luck in circumstances. A typical example of the latter is a situation in which two persons, David and Mark, appear at the scene of a burning house. David gets there first and saves a child from the fire. Mark would have done the same thing had he arrived on time, but as it is, David is the moral hero instead. Although Mark did not even have the opportunity to save the child, David both gets and deserves more praise than Mark.

To make this case analogous to the case of religious luck due to the circumstances of grace, its description must be amended. We would have to say that both David and Mark have numerous chances to save a child from a burning house or acts of a similar nature, and all either one of them has to do to receive the big reward is to perform one such act of heroism. David does have more chances than Mark, but as long as Mark has opportunities in abundance, the inequality between him and David loses some of its sting. This suggests that the greater the opportunities for even the least religiously lucky person, the less problematic the inequality between his luck and someone else's appears to us.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, the issue of the inequality remains, and that is the heart of the problem of luck as proposed by Nagel.

Historical disputes within Christian theology over predestination vs. free will and over the precise nature of Faith and the way grace works were partly disputes about luck, but not in the sense we are considering. All sides agreed



that no one earns or deserves grace, and so grace is obviously a matter of luck in the sense that it is gratuitous. Still, there were disputes over the relationship between human effort, will, or action and the reception of grace. There may have been less room for luck in the Catholic position than in the Calvinist position, but all the traditional positions included a substantial degree of luck in the sense we are addressing here, even the Pelagian heresy. It should be clear from Nagel's discussion that the issue is not one about incompatibilist free will. If there is no incompatibilist free will, then our moral acts, choices, and traits of character are wholly a matter of luck. If there *is* incompatibilist free will, then they are only partly a matter of luck. This is because the claim that there is incompatibilist free will is merely the claim that past circumstances do not completely determine the choice that a person makes; no one disputes that past circumstances, including many beyond a person's control, strongly influence a person's choice. So no matter which way we go on free will, there is luck. This luck contaminates any account of moral worth, including accounts of grace. If grace is both offered and received without any control by the recipient, then the luck of it is overwhelming and obvious. If the recipient controls either its offer or its acceptance to any extent through a free choice, the luck is still present in abundance, only less obviously so.

As with the doctrine of grace, traditional discussions of heaven and hell have tended to be about different problems from the one I am addressing. Even in contemporary philosophical theology discussions on the existence of hell usually approach it from the point of view of its consistency with other divine attributes: divine justice (Peter Geach, George Schlesinger), divine goodness (John Hick, Eleonore Stump, Richard Swinburne), and divine love (Thomas Talbott).<sup>11</sup> The question that concerns me here is not a problem for the divine attributes, but a problem for the Christian conception of morality itself. If there is moral luck and that is a flaw in morality, we cannot so blithely say as Nagel does that that is just something we will have to live with. The stakes are infinitely greater than those assumed by Nagel.

#### IV. *What Makes Luck a Problem?*

On the face of it the problem of luck in Christian moral theology is far greater, even infinitely greater than it is for secular moral practice and theory. But on the face of it Christian theology with its doctrines of an omniscient and provident God also has the resources to handle conceptual difficulties which would be impossible for a theory without such a deity. God can mend problems in moral evaluation that nothing can mend in ordinary moral practice. But before turning to the ways God can alleviate the problem of luck, let us look more closely at exactly what makes luck a problem for moral evaluation for ironically, the existence of an omniscient God worsens the problem of moral luck in one respect.

There are many kinds of luck. No one denies that we do not all begin life with the same advantages— in natural endowment, in material well-being, in the emotional support of the family, etc., and as life goes on those advantages and disadvantages can change— some due to human choices, some not. It is sometimes argued that a just society should attempt to minimize the effects of luck by such things as aid to persons with physical or mental handicaps or special academic programs for the disadvantaged, or programs aiming at redistributing income. One thing is certain, however; pure luck is much easier to accept morally than inequality that is the result of human choice or social or economic structures over which we have some control. Helmut Schoeck argues in his classic study on envy that the concept of luck is a socially positive concept which mitigates the envy resulting from material or social differences:

It is significant that concepts such as luck, chance, opportunity, 'hitting the jackpot'— what we generally regard as someone's being undeservingly favoured by circumstances beyond his or our control— are *not* found in all cultures. Indeed, in many languages there is no way of expressing such ideas.

Yet where one of these concepts exists in a society, it plays a crucial part in controlling the problem of envy. Man can come to terms with the evident inequality of the individual human lot, without succumbing to envy that is destructive of both himself and others, only if he can put the responsibility on some impersonal power—blind chance or fortune, which neither he himself nor the man favoured is able to monopolize. "Today it's the other man who is lucky—tomorrow it may be I." We derive the same consolation from the expression "to have bad luck." Thus what is involved is no providential God, whose favours can be won by special zeal in worship or a pure way of life, for this would most surely induce that bitter, consuming envy of the "holier-than-thou" fanatic, so amply corroborated by history— as in the witch trials, for instance.<sup>12</sup>

Once we get past Schoeck's concluding hyperbole, we see that he has suggested an additional problem of luck for the Christian. We have already seen that it is difficult to accept that even a portion of the grounds upon which we are morally evaluated are beyond our control, but what is worse, we are not even able to fall back on the idea of our moral luck as blind chance or the luck of the draw. If there is an omniscient God it is not accurate to describe that which we do not control as pure luck— something that is nobody's fault. The luck described by Nagel and Feinberg occurs due to impersonal forces that have nothing against you (or *for* you) personally. So if Sarah had been born with a more naturally cheerful disposition, she would have found it much easier to acquire the virtues of benevolence. If Mark had arrived at the burning building a few moments earlier, he would have been the one to save the child instead of David. If the young gang member had not been born in poverty to a drug-addicted mother and an absent father, he would not now be

in court faced with a string of charges from car theft to murder. In each case there is nobody to blame for the bad luck. It just happened that way. But if there is an omniscient God, and especially if omniscience includes a degree of knowledge of what a person would do or would be likely to do in counterfactual circumstances, it does look as if God is picking on some people.

So moral luck for the Christian is faced with a dual problem. Not only is there the problem identified by Nagel and magnified by the doctrines of grace and eternal reward and punishment, but the element of luck for the Christian is not independent of the knowledge and will of God. God permits it to go on in full awareness of who will be morally lucky and who will be unlucky. There is not even the consolation of luck as impersonal chance.

There is another way to look at luck, however, in which even conscious and calculated luck in some circumstances may seem benign. Brynmor Browne argues that luck in rewards is not nearly so bad as luck in punishments.<sup>13</sup> It is not as bad if some people are rewarded beyond what they control than for some people to be punished beyond what they control, and this is at least part of the reason that nobody complains about the existence of an eternal heaven, while many people argue that there is something wrong with an eternal hell. It is reasonable to say that no one has been treated unfairly in rewards as long as each person is rewarded at least as much as she deserves. So even if some people are rewarded more than they deserve and the reward is not based on the luck of the draw but is consciously calculated by the reward-giver, then there are no grounds for complaint on the part of those who receive less. Presumably this is the moral of the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard.

But parallel considerations can be given for the fairness of luck in punishments. Just as there is no unfairness as long as each person is rewarded at least as much as she deserves, we might say that there is no unfairness as long as each person is punished no more than she deserves. In each case it is gratuitous generosity that motivates the giver of rewards and punishments to increase the reward or to decrease the punishment for some. Just as only envy or spite could lead me to complain that others are the recipients of special generosity in receiving rewards, similarly, only envy or spite could lead me to complain that others are the recipients of special generosity in receiving punishments. In both cases, fairness for me is determined by my direct dealings with the laws of morality and their divine sanctions. The fact that someone else gets special consideration should be no concern of mine. On the model of the workers in the vineyard, we can think of my relationship with morality as being like a contract between me, God, and the laws of morality. What happens to other people is irrelevant to me.

This defense of the element of luck even in the case in which luck is not blind forces us to come to terms with the issue of inequality which we have

identified as the heart of the examples of moral and religious luck. There is little doubt that there is something repellent about inequality to the contemporary mind, although it might be argued that this is an obsession arising from modern political theory. But even if contemporary worries about inequality in wealth or opportunity are excessive, it hardly seems excessive to worry about inequality in moral assessment itself, especially when the consequences are as drastic as infinite reward or punishment. Inequality of treatment by morality and by God are not easily dismissed.

But there is an even more fundamental worry that the defense of religious luck just given overlooks. The problem of moral luck is not fundamentally a problem about the comparison of the moral worth of one person and another, but a comparison of the moral worth of a particular person and that same person under different counterfactual circumstances. The bothersome inequality, then, is between one person and himself in other possible circumstances. To return to Feinberg's example, the problem is not that Hotspur is the unlucky bearer of bad moral luck while Witwood has good moral luck, but that Hotspur *might have been* Witwood. As Witwood is described by Feinberg, he is just Hotspur's alternative self. The problem of envy which we find in the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard does not arise on this reading of the problem. Hotspur cannot be envious of his alternative self. He is simply distressed that he is not that self and that the fact that he is not is wholly beyond his control. The solution to the Christian problem of moral luck must address the problem that Hotspur and Witwood are the same person and it is only luck that determines that it is Hotspur that is actualized, not Witwood.

#### V. *Five Ways to Deal with Religious Luck*

Suppose that there are true counterfactuals of freedom and that God has Middle Knowledge. That is to say, for each person God knows what that person would freely choose to do in every possible situation. God would then be in a position to judge her, not just for her actual virtues and vices, the acts she in fact performs, and their actual consequences, but for the sum total of everything she would choose to do in every possible circumstance. Of course, some of those circumstances exhibit bad luck, but others exhibit good luck. It is reasonable to think, then, that luck is eliminated if her choices in the totality of possible circumstances are the basis for her moral assessment. Lovers of Middle Knowledge who are haters of moral luck may find this solution attractive. Such a procedure for moral assessment would no doubt have a levelling effect on the moral worth of human beings. After all, there is probably *some* possible circumstance in which almost anybody would do almost anything, whether it be good or bad. Whether this consequence is a good or a bad feature of this solution, I cannot say. A feature of it that many

would find seriously defective, though, is that it makes the actual world meaningless as far as moral evaluation is concerned. In fact, there is really no reason to have an actual world at all for such purposes; God might just as well have created the beings he wanted and have gone straight on to their final judgment, skipping the in-between step of letting a particular world unfold. It must be admitted, then, that this approach is very far removed from our ordinary notions of moral evaluation. But, of course, the defender of this approach can always say that that is because our ordinary notions of moral evaluation are permeated with elements of luck, as Williams and Nagel have shown, and the proper response to this is to say so much the worse for our ordinary notions of moral evaluation. So while I do not think this approach is absurd, it should be admitted that it is radical.

A second solution is to say that a person is morally evaluated for just that element of her character and her acts which she controls. Although Nagel does say that when we view ourselves from the outside that portion of the moral self that we control threatens to shrink into nothing, still, the argument that there is moral luck does not rest on such a position, and in this paper I have been leaving open the possibility that there is incompatibilist free will. If so, why couldn't our moral evaluation be determined by an omniscient God in proportion to our control?

The problem here is that it is not at all clear that there is any such thing as *the* proportion of our control. Recall Joel Feinberg's conclusion to the discussion of Hotspur and Witwood. There he claims that moral responsibility is indeterminate, not just relative to our epistemic situation, but in itself. The precise determinability of moral responsibility is an illusion, he says; moral responsibility is undecidable *in principle*. While Feinberg's argument may not be given with the care necessary to demonstrate such a dramatic conclusion, it does at least draw our attention to the range of questions that would have to have determinate answers if luck were to be eliminated by this move. Not only would there need to be a determinate degree of causal control a person has over a choice, but there would have to be a determinate degree of control that a person has over the fact that she is in certain actual circumstances rather than in any one of the infinite number of counterfactual circumstances. Further, there would have to be a determinate degree of her control over the fact that she has the virtues and vices that she has. It is highly doubtful that there is any such degree at all. And if not, even an omniscient judge could not base his evaluation on it.

A third solution is suggested by George Schlesinger in a discussion of divine justice.<sup>14</sup> The problem he addresses there is much more narrowly focused than the one I am raising here, but the solution might be applicable. Schlesinger is concerned about the fact that the religious beliefs requisite for salvation are much easier for some to acquire than others. As he puts it,

different individuals have different opportunities to avail themselves of arguments and evidence for the existence of God:

Suppose I am a non-believer who has remained unconvinced by the various proofs for God's existence I have read or heard. There is, however, a new argument which would appeal to me so much that it would most likely convert me to theism. It so happens that I never get the chance to gain knowledge of the argument and thus persist in my ungodly ways. Is it not grossly unfair that, owing to circumstances beyond my control, I should be deprived of the ultimate felicity I could have shared with the righteous?<sup>15</sup>

While Schlesinger puts the emphasis on the acceptance of theism based on argument, one need not be an evidentialist to agree that whatever it takes to believe in God is not something which everyone has an equal opportunity to obtain. Those who grow up in a happy religious home obviously have far greater opportunities for salvific Faith than those who grow up in deprived circumstances in which religion is either non-existent or, perhaps even worse, is associated in their experience with bigotry or hypocrisy. Schlesinger's answer is that "in accordance with the pain is the reward."<sup>16</sup> "The true amount of virtue embodied in a given individual is not determined by the absolute level of piety he has reached, but by the nature of the hostile circumstances he has had to contend with in order to raise himself to the level he has succeeded in attaining."<sup>17</sup> So the harder it is for a person to be saved, the greater his reward if he does his part in exhibiting a sincere good will; the easier it is for a person to be saved, the less the reward for making a lesser effort. So some people gamble for higher stakes with a lower chance of success, while others gamble for lower stakes with a higher chance of success.

I have two worries about this solution. In the first place it is not at all clear that the initial positions of the sincere person in a pagan society and the ordinary person in religiously ideal circumstances are really equal. After all, a real gambler has a choice between going for higher stakes with a lower chance of winning or going for lower stakes with a higher chance of winning. Much of what makes the game fair is that the choice is his. But in the religious case as Schlesinger sees it, it is not up to us to choose the game we play. We do not get to decide initially how much of a risk we want to take. Secondly, this solution faces the same problem that infects the previous solution. Is it even possible in principle to determine a person's chance for salvation? Is there any such thing as the proportion of his success or failure that is due to efforts completely under his control? What Schlesinger does not mention is that luck in circumstances is only part of the problem. There is also luck in those traits of character which lead some people to make the greater efforts some need for salvation. What Schlesinger calls "a sincere good will" is itself partly a matter of luck.

The fourth solution is to embrace a doctrine of grace according to which

grace not only does not aggravate luck, it eliminates it.<sup>18</sup> The idea here is that since God desires everyone to be saved, more grace is given to the morally unlucky. Everyone gets grace, but some get more of it to compensate for their bad moral luck. This does seem to be what a loving parent would do. A mother who loves all her children equally will not necessarily give each child equal attention and help. Those who need it more, get more. On this approach it would not be necessary for God to determine in advance a precise level of grace needed to neutralize the effects of moral luck since God can intervene at any time to provide more than enough grace when needed. The problem of the indeterminacy in moral responsibility or degree of control could therefore be circumvented on this approach.

This solution seems to me to be the best so far, but the problem is that it does not accord well with our experience. Of course it *might* be the case that truly corrupted criminals such as the principal character in the recent French film *L'Elegant Criminel* really did have more than enough chances to stay on the moral path and again later to reform themselves, but it certainly does not *seem* that way. What's more, an acceptance of this approach might lead to severe harshness in our moral assessment of others. That is, it suggests that the excuses people seem to have for their behavior are not really excuses after all since, unseen by us (and even themselves), they had even more opportunities for grace than most of us, but simply rejected it.

The fifth solution is that while God does not eliminate moral luck, he makes it innocuous through universal salvation. This solution involves severing the moral order from the order of salvation.

We have seen that Christian luck includes at least some of the kinds of luck discussed by Nagel and Feinberg, and that it is aggravated by several aspects of Christian doctrine. First, Christian luck is not blind, but is known in advance to an omniscient God. Second, there is some degree of inequality in the operation of grace. Third, and most serious of all, the doctrine of an eternal heaven and hell magnifies the extent of moral luck to infinity. What is most problematic in these doctrines is the way the concepts of grace, heaven, and hell are connected with the moral institution of rewards and punishments. Suppose, however, that there is no eternal hell. If so, we avoid the worst problem of an infinite degree of luck in punishment, and at the same time, an eternal heaven makes innocuous the effects of all the other sorts of moral and religious luck we have accumulated during our earthly existence, including inequality in the operation of grace. The fact that there is no blind luck and all of this is known to an omniscient God is an advantage rather than a disadvantage of this solution.

It might appear radical to sever the moral order from the order of salvation, but notice that the Christian is already committed to this in part since Christian theology dissociates what we get from what we deserve in the case of

heaven. When the generosity of a reward-giver is extreme enough, it is inappropriate to call his gift a reward. Heaven is not a reward, and so it is not part of the moral order. Hell, however, *is* a punishment since all who go there deserve it. Such a view requires an awkward partial break between morality and ultimate destiny. The fifth solution to the problem of moral luck would make a clean break between the two.

In distinguishing the moral order from the order of salvation, it is not necessary to radically alter our moral intuitions and practices in order to deal with moral luck, the major defect of the first solution. The solution of universal salvation does not take away luck in the moral order; moral luck simply has no bearing on one's ultimate destiny. This means that we can accept morality as a finite institution with finite significance, as Nagel does. If morality requires finite punishments after death, there is nothing in this solution to prevent them from occurring. The point is that whatever the defects of the institution of morality as we know it, that is something we can live with as long as all is made well in eternity. A consequence of this solution is that morality is ultimately not as important as many of us think. In any case, it ought to be cut down to size, the only size it can realistically manage.

This solution will be attractive to those who already maintain for independent reasons that there is no eternal hell. The arguments I know of for this conclusion almost always rest on a consideration of the divine attributes, and the argument is that an eternal hell is inconsistent with either divine justice, mercy, goodness, or love. My argument here is concerned only with the problem of moral luck and the fact that the problem can be handled rather well if there is no eternal hell. Independent arguments for the non-existence of hell might give this solution additional support. It should be admitted, though, that this approach does go against the dominant view in the Christian tradition. It is mostly dependent upon *a priori* philosophical reasoning, but, then, most of the other solutions are *a priori* as well. It is doubtful that the problem of moral luck as I have formulated it in this paper was even considered in the tradition, so it is no surprise that there is little in the tradition of direct relevance to the problem.<sup>19</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that moral luck really is a problem and its existence shows that common views on morality flirt with inconsistency. Some of the sources of moral luck identified by Thomas Nagel and Joel Feinberg are problems for Christian morality as well. Moreover, I have argued that there are several features of Christian doctrine that magnify the problem enormously. I have gone through five solutions to the problem. All of them in one degree or another modify traditional views about grace, heaven and hell, or the grounds for moral evaluation. The only way I know to maintain untouched



the traditional doctrines I have referred to in this paper requires the denial that moral luck is a problem even when infinite rewards and punishments are at stake. I believe this view to be deeply counter to modern moral sensibilities, although I have not attempted to defend those sensibilities in this paper, only to call attention to them. Furthermore, all of the solutions have problems of their own. But in spite of this, it seems to me that if the problem of moral luck has a solution at all, it will have to be within a theological structure which goes beyond morality as normally discussed in the secular philosophical literature. Non-religious ethics simply does not have the resources to handle the problem. For the purposes of this paper, I have considered only those approaches which arise within the Christian tradition. Non-Christian religious solutions, such as reincarnation, would also be worth considering.<sup>20</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck," in Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck," in Williams, *Moral Luck*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Earlier versions of both papers were published in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplemental Vol. 50 (1976), pp. 115-35.

2. Nagel, p. 29.

3. Judith Jarvis Thomson, in "Morality and Bad Luck," *Meta-philosophy*, vol. 20, no. 3-4 (1989), pp. 203-21, claims that the argument that there is luck in consequences plays upon an ambiguity in the notion of blame. In the sense of blame which reflects discredit on a person, there is no luck in consequences. The two negligent drunk drivers are equally at fault. But there is also a sense of blame in which we say a person is to blame for an undesirable state of affairs, such as a person's death. In this sense, the driver who actually kills someone is clearly to blame, while the one who does not is not.

4. Nagel, p. 34.

5. Joel Feinberg, "Problematic Responsibility in Law and Morals," in Feinberg, *Doing and Deserving*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 25-37. Other papers in the collection are also relevant.

6. Feinberg, pp. 34-35.

7. Philip L. Quinn argues in "Tragic Dilemmas, Suffering Love, and the Christian Life," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1989), pp. 151-83, that a different sort of moral luck exists for the Christian, and that is the moral dilemma. A person faces a moral dilemma when no matter what she chooses, she does the wrong thing. It is therefore a type of moral trap. Quinn argues that Shusaku Endo's novel *Silence* depicts a person faced with a situation in which the two great commandments—the command to love God with our whole heart and the command to love our neighbor as ourselves—command conflicting acts. If Quinn is right that the Jesuit missionary Sebastian Rodrigues faces a moral

dilemma in Endo's novel, then that is another way in which moral luck arises for the Christian, but in this paper I will limit my discussion to the categories of moral luck identified by Nagel and Feinberg.

8. *De Libero Arbitrio*, Bk. I, chap. 12.

9. One way this could happen is if they sin together and one is killed right after he repents, but the other is killed immediately after the sin but before repenting. If one's eternal destiny is determined by one's state at death, the former would receive eternal reward and the other eternal punishment. I thank an anonymous referee for this suggestion.

10. This disanalogy between grace and moral luck in rewards was pointed out to me by Thomas D. Sullivan.

11. Peter Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); George Schlesinger, *New Perspectives on Old-Time Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), chap. 7; John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966); Eleonore Stump, "Dante's Hell, Aquinas' Moral Theory, and the Love of God," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1986), pp. 181-98; Richard Swinburne, "A Theodicy of Heaven and Hell," in Alfred J. Freddoso, *The Existence of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Thomas Talbott, "The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment," *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 7, no.1 (1990), pp. 19-42.

12. Helmut Schoeck, *Envy* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1966), pp. 237-38.

13. Brynmor Browne, "A Solution to the Problem of Moral Luck," *Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 42 (1992), pp. 345-56.

14. Schlesinger, *op. cit.*

15. Schlesinger, p. 184.

16. Schlesinger, p. 186.

17. Schlesinger, p. 188.

18. This solution was suggested to me by my colleague, Kenneth Rudnick, S. J.

19. A sixth solution was suggested to me by Stephen Davis. Suppose that God gives us the opportunity to make a luck-free choice in eternity and eternally rewards or punishes us on the basis of such a choice. Notice the similarity between Davis's suggestion and the Myth of Ur at the end of Plato's *Republic*.

20. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the meeting of the Midwest region of the Society of Christian Philosophers at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota, October 1992, and at the meeting of the Pacific region of the SCP January, 1993. I thank the participants at both conferences for their helpful comments, especially Thomas D. Sullivan.