



MORAL LUCK

Thomas Nagel

INTENTIONS AND CONSEQUENCES



Good intention,
bad consequences

- Am I responsible for the bad results?
- Should I be blamed for them?



Bad intention,
good consequences

- Am I responsible for the good results?
- Should I be praised for them?

**INTENTIONS
MATTER,
NOT CONSEQUENCES**

“A course of action that would be condemned if it had a bad outcome cannot be vindicated if by luck it turns out well.” (Nagel)

In other words, *there cannot be moral risk.*

Luck should not make a moral difference.

KANT'S GOOD WILL

“The good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes or because of its adequacy to achieve some proposed end; it is good only because of its willing, i.e., it is good of itself.”

“Even if it should happen that, by a particularly unfortunate fate, this will should be wholly lacking in power to accomplish its purpose, and if even the greatest effort should not avail it to achieve anything of its end, and if there remained only the good will (not as a mere wish but as the summoning of all the means in our power)...it would sparkle like a jewel in its own right, as something that had its full worth in itself. Usefulness or fruitlessness can neither diminish nor augment this worth.”



THE CONTROL PRINCIPLE

People should be **morally assessed** only for what is due to factors **under their control**.

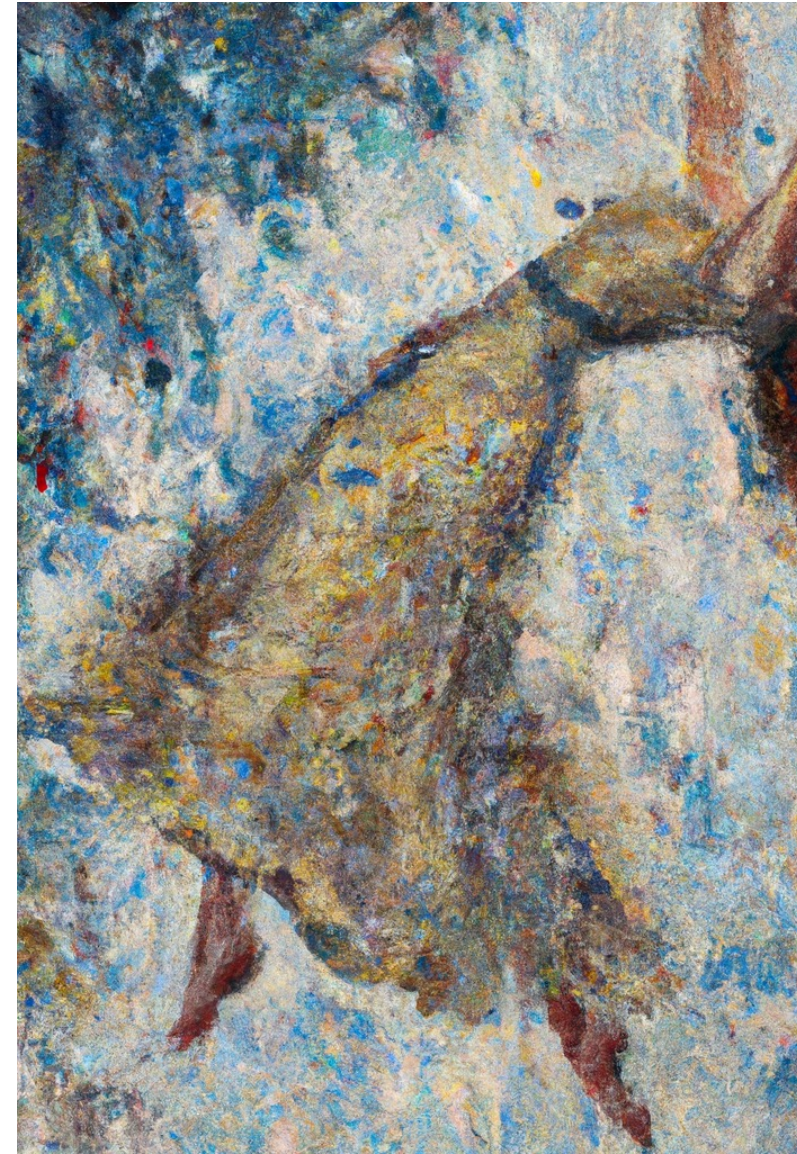
COROLLARY PRINCIPLE

Two people should **not be morally assessed differently** if the only other differences between them are **due to factors beyond their control**.

EXCUSES

A lack of control (usually) excuses one from responsibility.

(Further evidence for the connection between control and responsibility.)



‘OUGHT’ IMPLIES ‘CAN’

We cannot be required to do things that are impossible (or beyond our abilities).

Kant says,

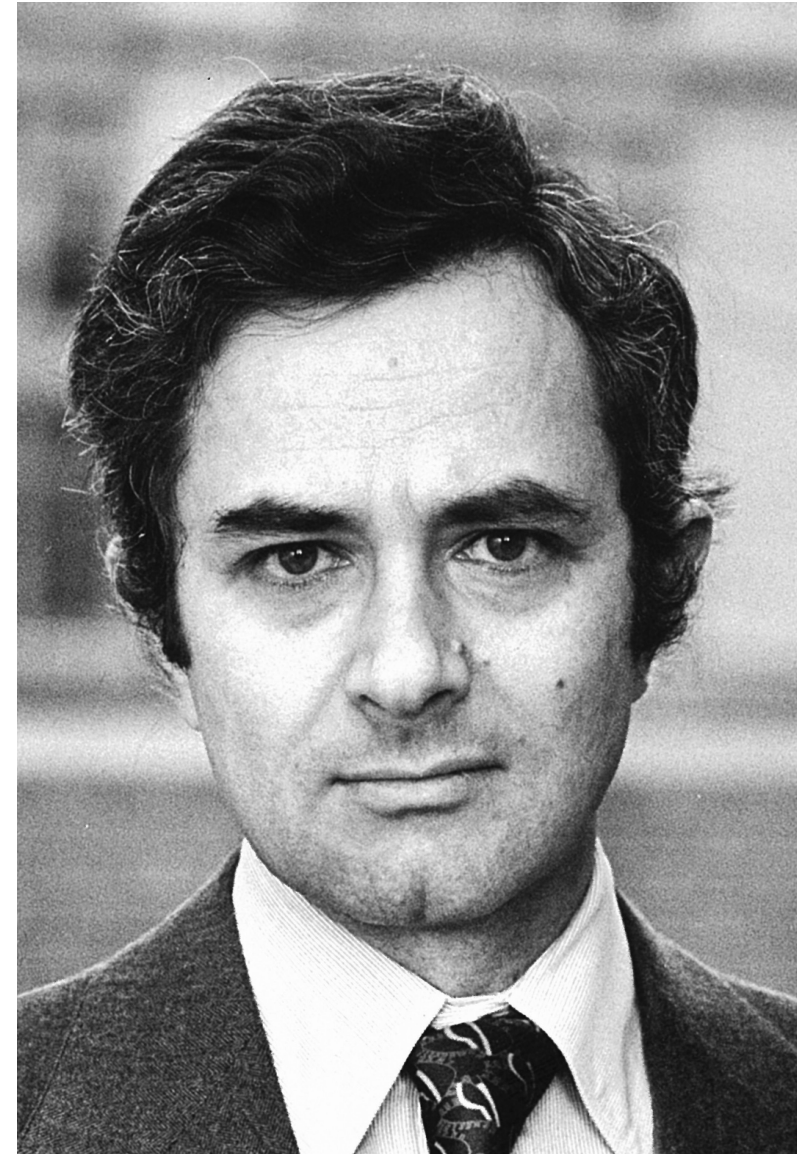
“For if the moral law commands that we **ought** to be better human beings now, it inescapably follows that **we must be capable** of being better human beings.”

“The action to which the "ought" applies must indeed be **possible under natural conditions.**”

NAGEL'S WORRY

There is “a fundamental problem about moral responsibility to which we possess no satisfactory solution.”

This is the problem of moral luck.



MORAL LUCK

Moral luck occurs when:

- (a) an agent is treated as an object of moral judgment
- (b) a significant aspect of what they are assessed for depends on factors beyond their control.

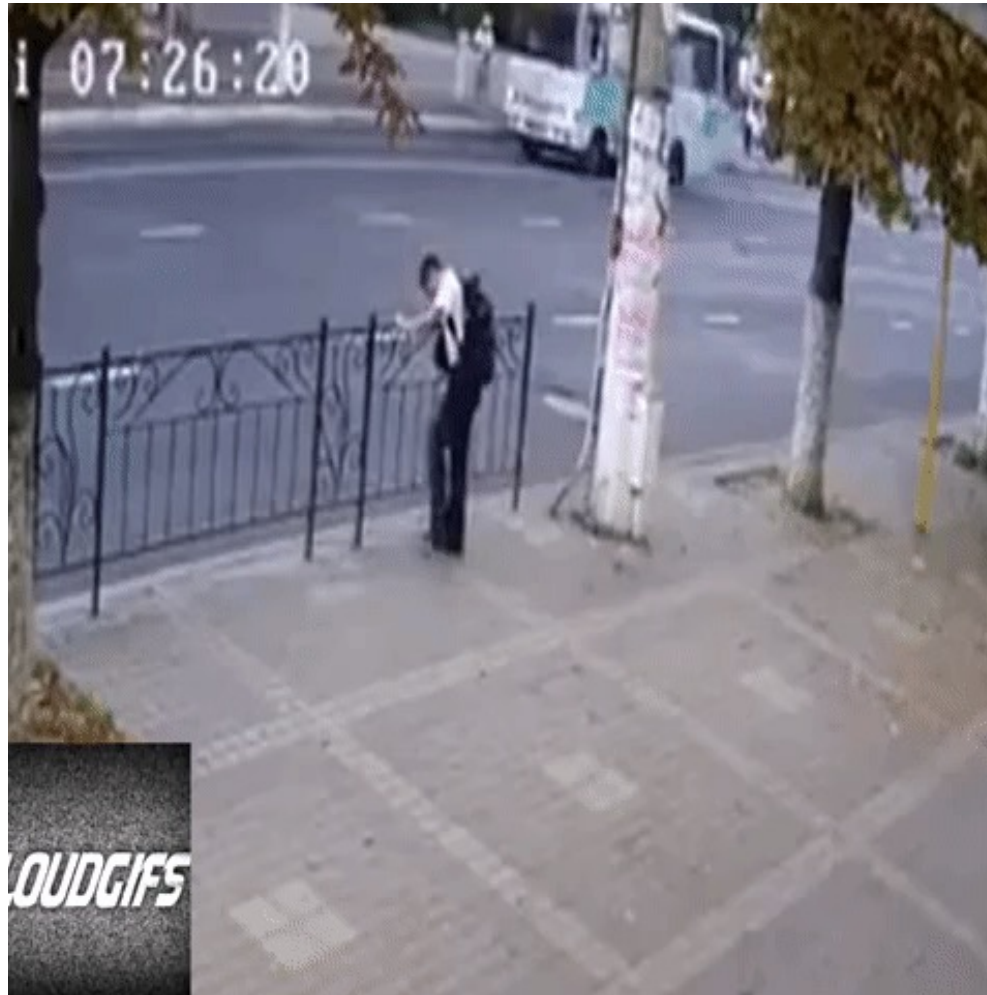


THE DRUNK DRIVER

There is a morally significant difference between reckless driving and manslaughter.

But whether a reckless driver hits a pedestrian depends on the presence of the pedestrian at the point where he recklessly passes the red light.





MORAL LUCK

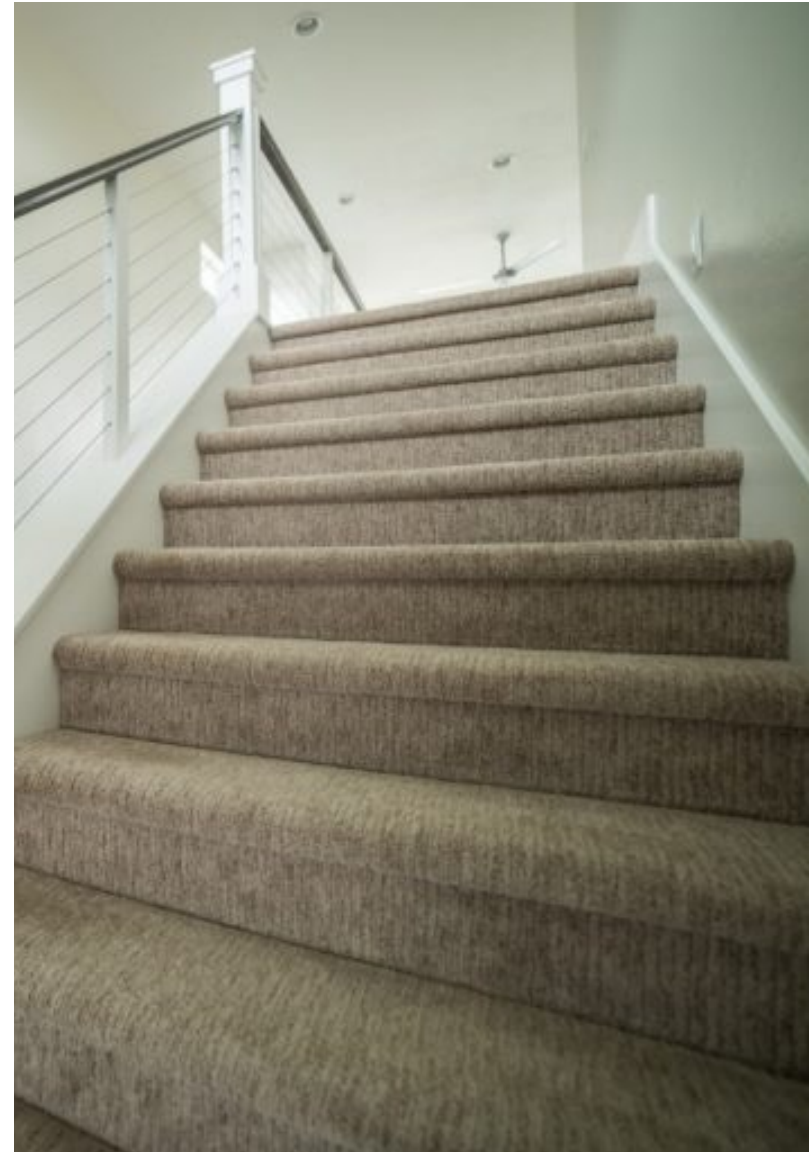
THE BURNING BUILDING

There is a morally significant difference between rescuing someone from a burning building and dropping him from a twelfth-story window while trying to rescue him.



THE NEGLIGENT CAREGIVER

If one negligently leaves the bath running with the baby in it, one will realize, as one bounds up the stairs toward the bathroom, that if the baby has drowned one has done something awful, whereas if it has not one has merely been careless.



MURDER VS. ATTEMPTED MURDER

Attacker A intends to kill B.

He fires his gun, hitting and killing B.

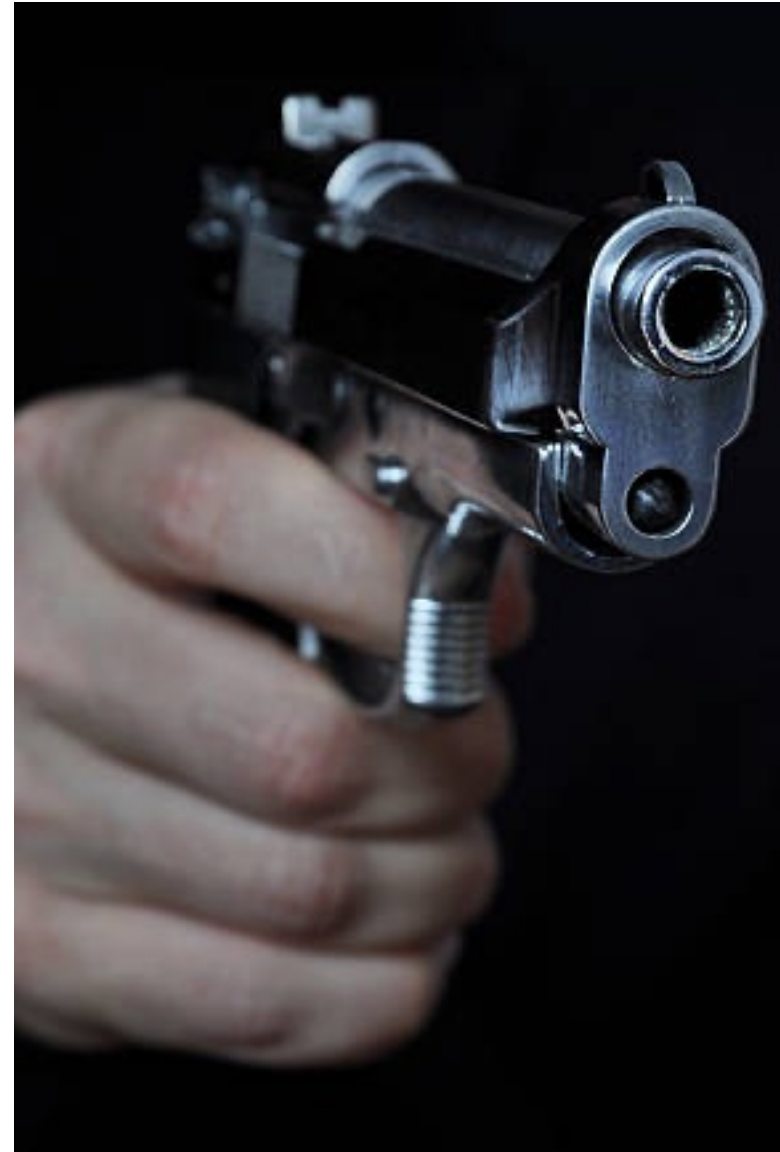
He is tried for murder and sent to prison for a long time.

Attacker A2 intends to kill B2.

He fires his gun at B2, but a bird happens to fly by, and the bird takes the bullet.

A2 is tried for attempted murder.

A2 is sent to prison for less time than A.



THE NAZI / FARMER

Someone who was an officer in a concentration camp might have led a quiet and harmless life if the Nazis had never come to power in Germany.

Someone who led a quiet and harmless life in Argentina might have become an officer in a concentration camp if he had not left Germany for business in 1930.



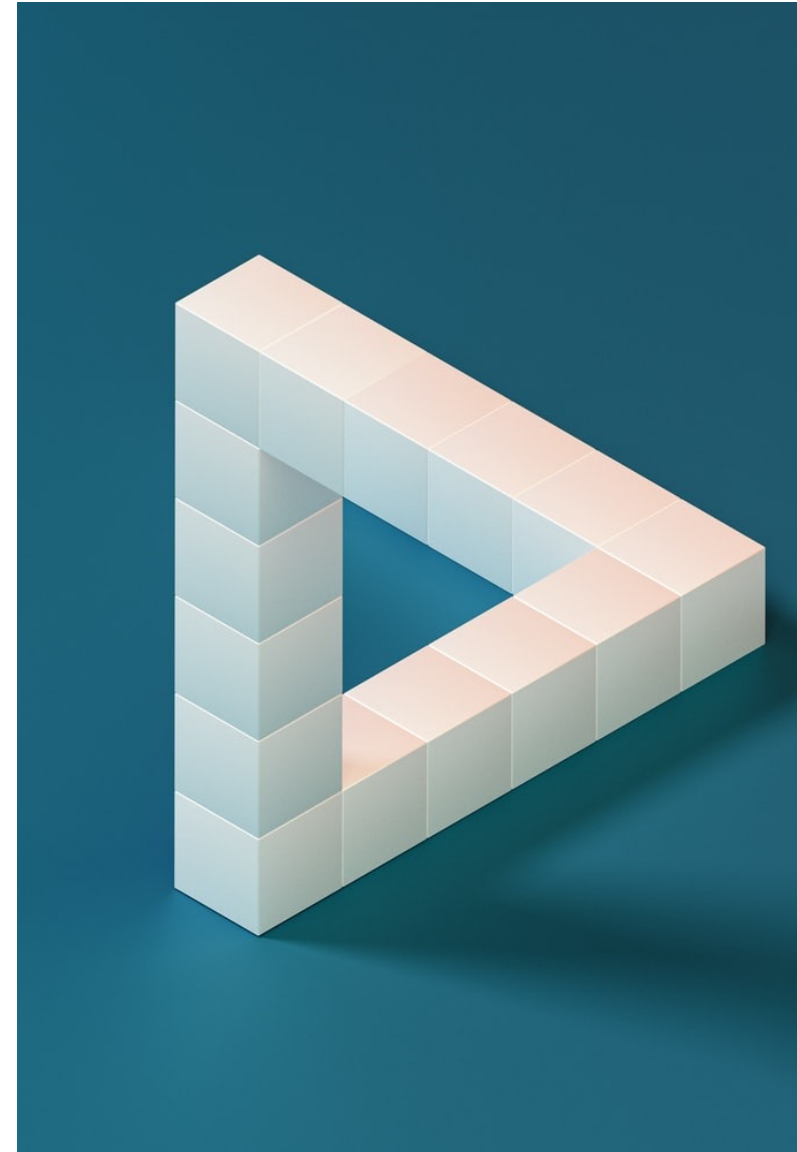
THE PUZZLE

There is a conflict between

(a) Our beliefs about the conditions for moral responsibility.

and

(b) Our actual practices of moral assessment.



THE PROBLEM

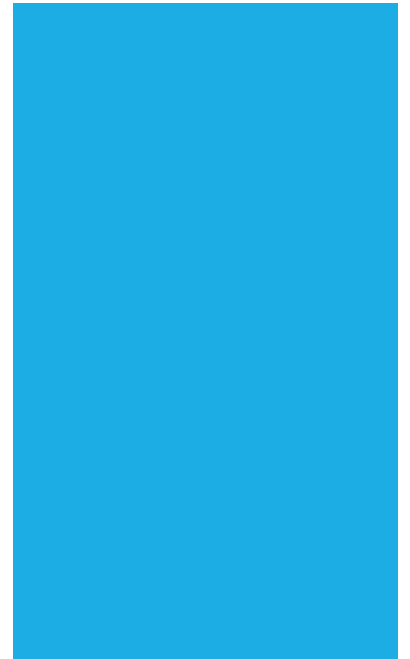
If the condition of control is consistently applied, it threatens to erode most of the moral assessments we find natural to make.

Why?

We are determined in more ways than we first realize by what is beyond our control.

Thus,

Ultimately, we would be responsible for nothing (or almost nothing).



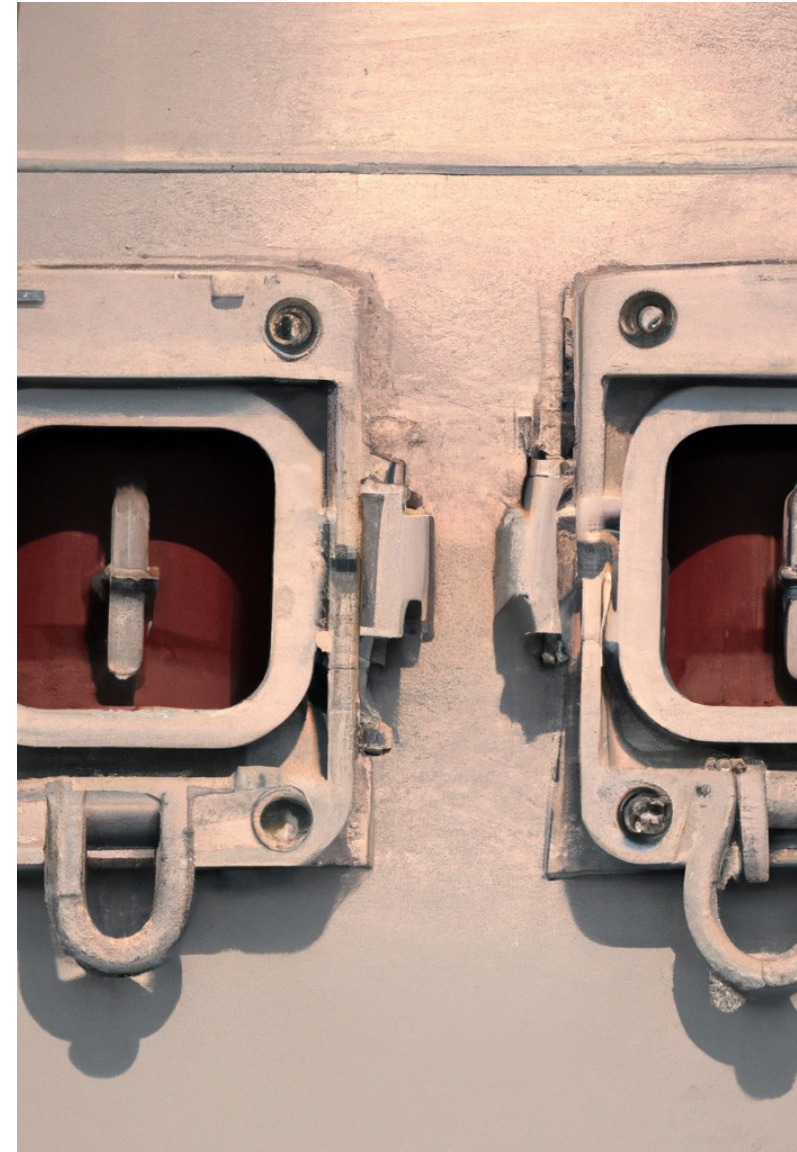
TWO WAYS OUT

1. Reject the condition of control.

We should praise/blame people for things beyond their control.

2. Reject our everyday moral judgments.

We are wrong to praise/blame people depending on the results.
People should be judged *solely* for their intentions.



KINDS OF LUCK

- Resultant luck
- Circumstantial luck
- Constitutive luck
- Causal luck



RESULTANT LUCK

Luck in the way things turn out.

Each member of the pair has exactly the same intentions, has made the same plans, and so on, but things turn out very differently.



CIRCUMSTANTIAL LUCK

Luck in the circumstances in which one finds oneself.



CONSTITUTIVE LUCK

Luck in who one is, or in the traits and dispositions that one has.

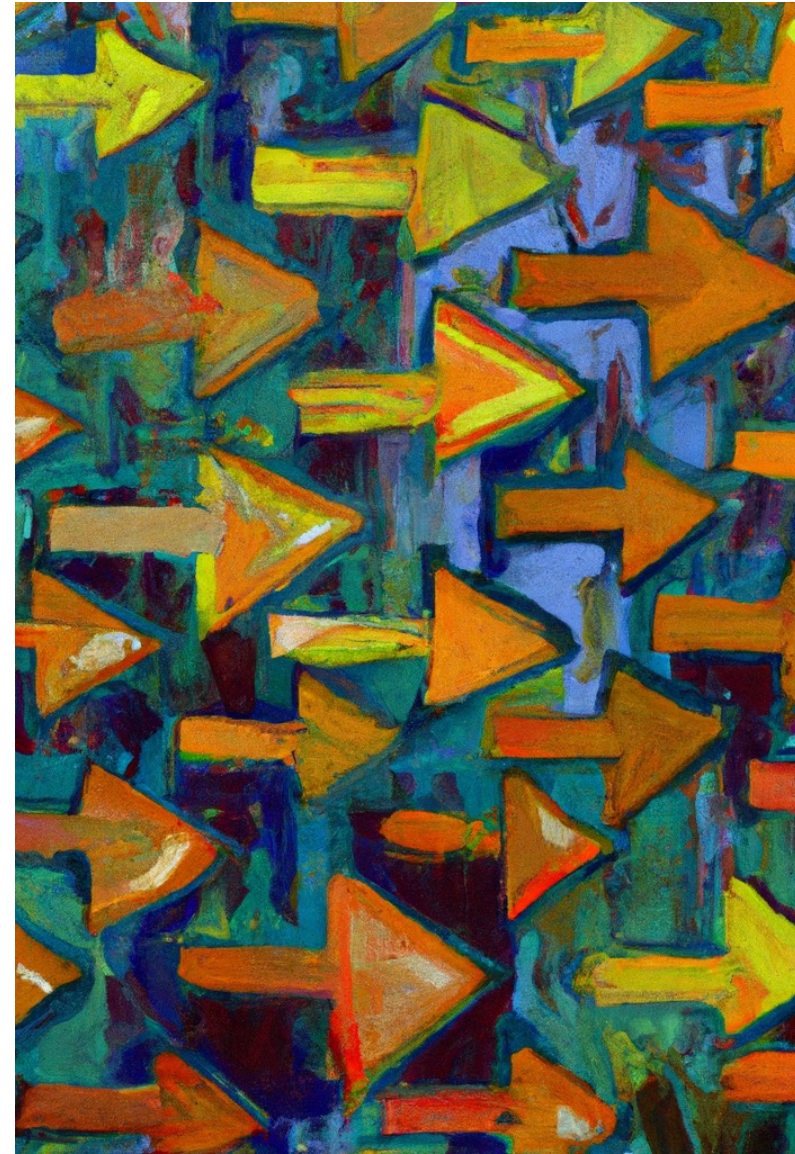
- Our genes, parents, friends, and other environmental influences all contribute to making us who we are. And how we act is partly a function of who we are.



CAUSAL LUCK

Luck in how one is determined by antecedent circumstances.

Essentially the classic problem of free will.

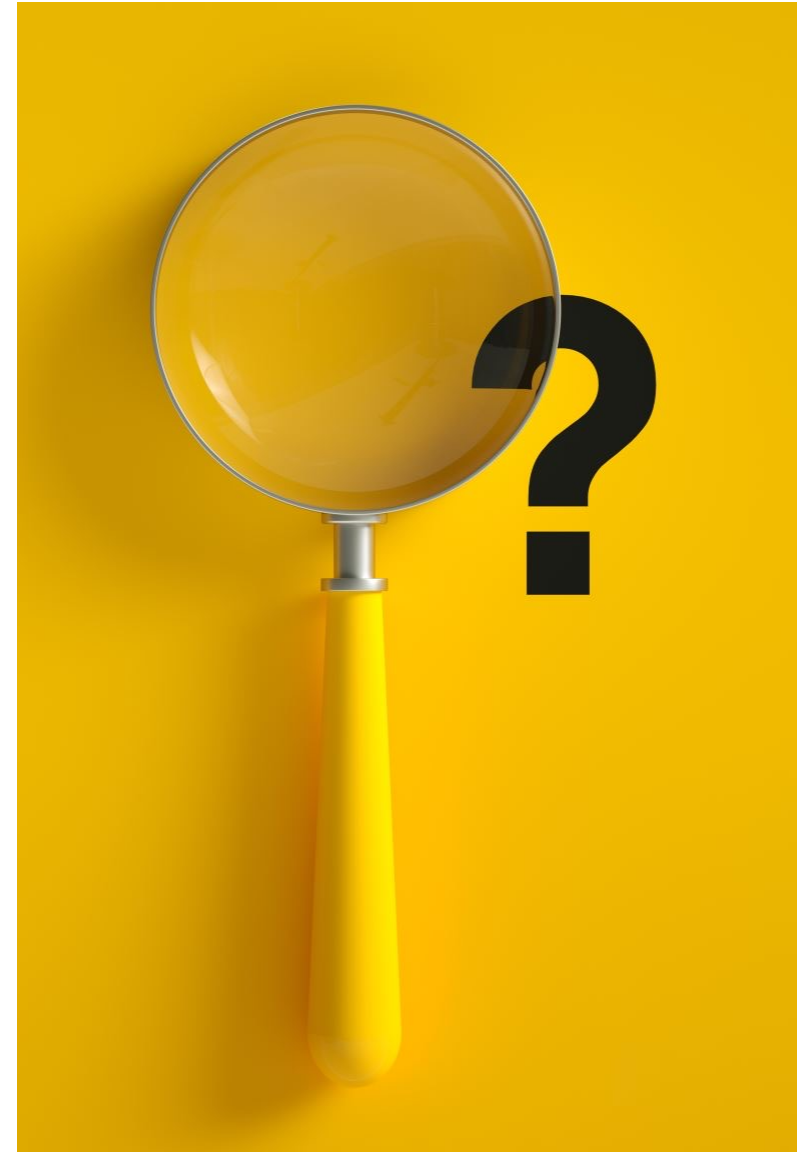


HOW BAD IS THE PROBLEM?

As Nagel puts it,

“[t]he area of genuine agency, and therefore of legitimate moral judgment, seems to shrink under this scrutiny to an extensionless point. Everything seems to result from the combined influence of factors, antecedent and posterior to action, that are not within the agent’s control.”

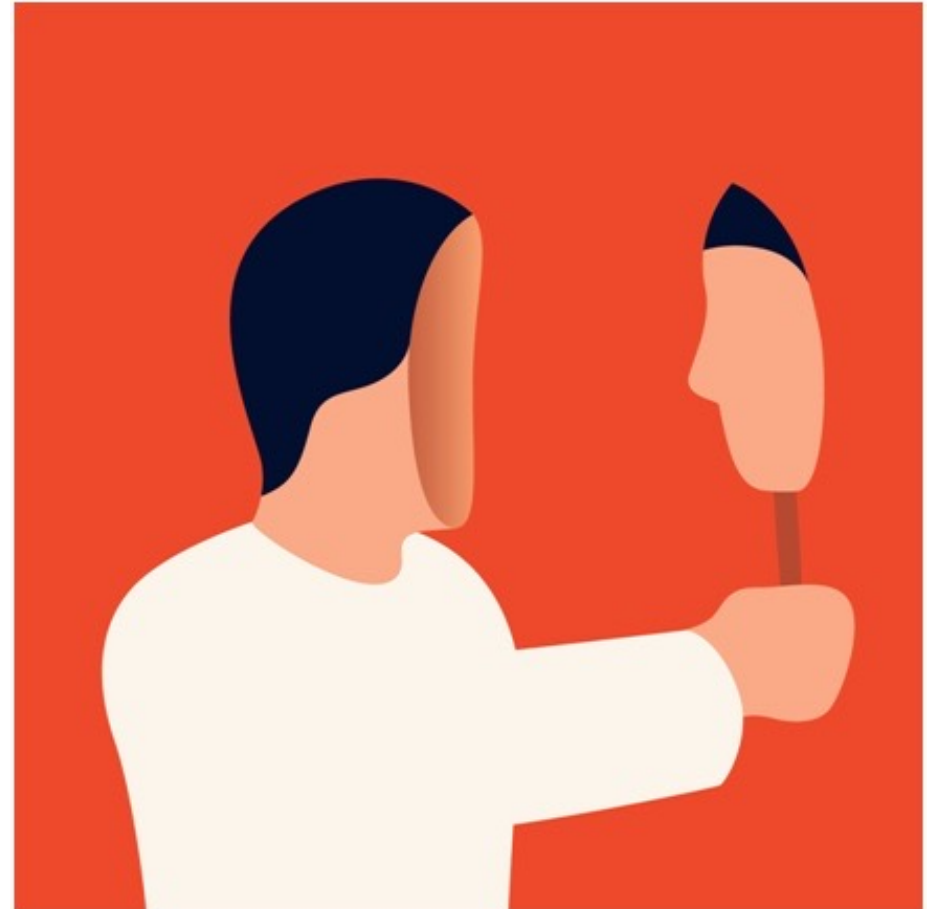
Eventually nothing remains that can be ascribed to a responsible self.



OUR INTERNAL CONCEPTION OF THE SELF

When we view ourselves “from the inside”, we cannot deny the feeling of control, free will, and responsibility.

We do not view ourselves as merely events in the world.



THE EPISTEMIC ARGUMENT

We treat cases of bad luck and good luck differently **because we can't know** that the lucky driver would have hit the pedestrian.

There really is **no moral difference** between the two agents.

- Thus, there is no problem of moral luck.

The main difference between the two cases is:

- With the unfortunate driver, we have a *clear indication* of his deficient moral standing.
- The outcomes of our actions are a key source about what goes on in our heads.



LUCKY NOT TO BE FOUND OUT

- A different type of luck.
- Some are lucky b/c they do not get the fate they deserve.
- Sometimes our true moral colors are not revealed.
- It is a matter of not being found out.



AN OBJECTION TO THE EPISTEMIC ARGUMENT

- If our conflicting judgments are simply the result of our imperfect epistemic situation, then *an improvement in our epistemic situation should reduce the conflict.*
- **If we completely fill in the details of moral luck cases, do we still experience conflicting intuitions?**

Does it depend on the type of luck?

- Resultant luck (e.g., burning building, drunk driver, attempted murder)
- Circumstantial luck (e.g., the Nazi/farmer)
- Constitutive luck (e.g., Good Will Hunting)

MCDONALDS

A COUNTEREXAMPLE?

I promised my girlfriend that I would stop eating at McDonald's.

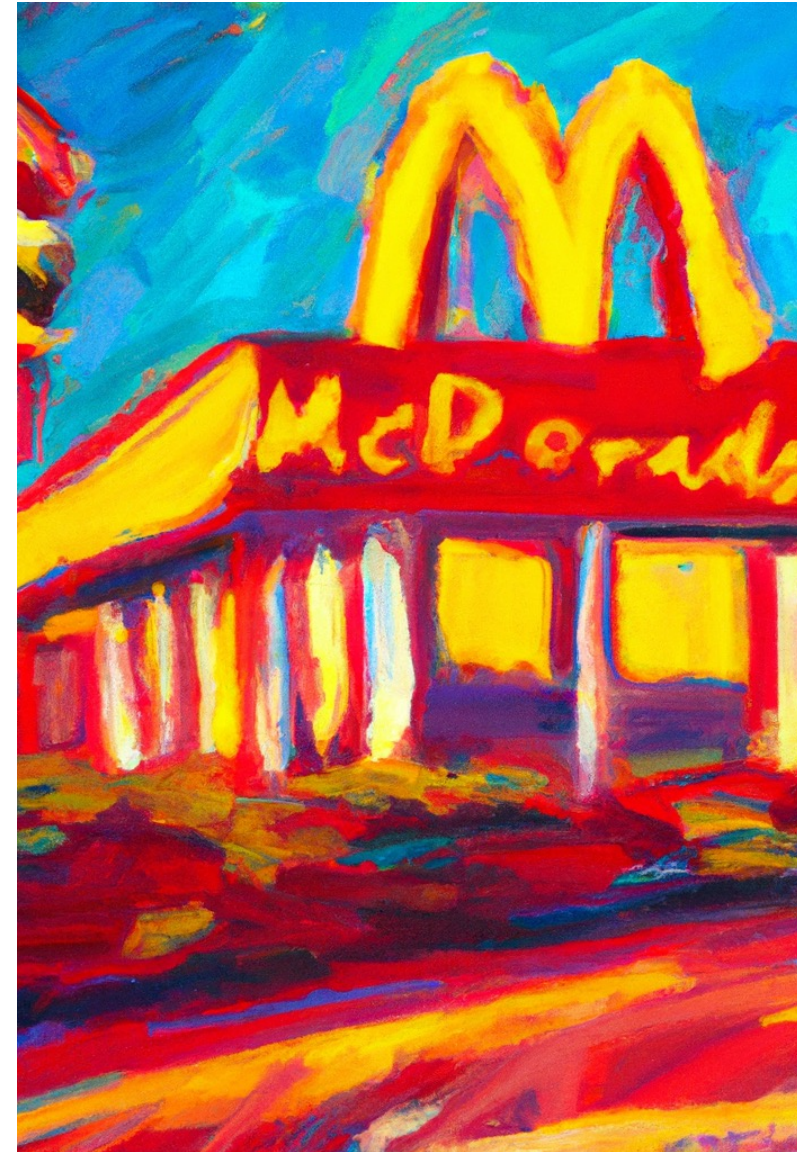
But I know the following is true:

If I were driving by the local McDonald's while it is open, I would succumb to temptation and break my promise.

However, I am intent on not breaking my promise.

So, I regularly avoid driving by the McDonald's while it's open.

Am I culpable to some/the same degree (e.g., as the promise-breaker)?



TWO QUESTIONS

1. Can luck make a difference in a person's moral worth?
2. Can luck make a difference in what a person is morally responsible for?

SUMMARY

- People should be morally assessed only for what is **under their control**.
- We often morally assess people even when significant aspect of what they are assessed for depends on factors **beyond their control**.
- So, there is as **a contradiction** in our commonsense ideas about moral responsibility.
- This contradiction may reveal that **no one is morally responsible** for anything, if we hold on to the principle of control.