



Theoretical Ethics

Happiness and Luckiness

Paul Schollmeier
The University of Nevada, Las Vegas

ABSTRACT: Moral philosophers, beginning with Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel, have recently broached the topic of moral luck in the philosophical literature. They limit their discussion however to considerations of how luck affects our ability to carry out actions or how it affects the consequences of our actions. I wish to suggest that luck is also an important factor in determining our actions as ends in themselves. What actions we may choose to perform for their own sake in a given situation depends much more than we might care to think on causes beyond our control. Our happiness rests ultimately on our luckiness.

I

Moral philosophers frequently remark how a philosophical position can reflect the practical circumstances of its origin. But we philosophers note with less frequency how a moral position can also be obscured by these circumstances. I believe that such is the case with the philosophical perspective that I wish to present. The very fact that this point of view has not been elaborated attests to the pervasiveness of certain practical attitudes in contemporary society. These attitudes, I suggest, might also be mistaken.

That we have recently begun to examine morality and its relationship to luck, is surely a sign of change. (1) But unfortunately the change does not go deep enough. Though we wish to consider its role in our lives, we have yet to examine what role luck might have in determining the ends of our actions. Our attention has been focused almost entirely on how luck affects our ability to carry out actions and how it affects the consequences of our actions. (2) We somehow manage to keep our goals aloof though our feet now touch the ground.

I wish to consider the possibility that luck is a crucial factor in determining the ends of our actions. Or at least in determining what our ends ought to be. In our pursuit of happiness we far too often charge ahead without stopping to ask what sort of happiness we should seek. And we have become far too adept at facilitating our charge with machinations both moral and technical. I suggest that we pause for a moment, shut down our eudaemonic engines, and ask ourselves if we might be seeking felicity in a manner somewhat inept. We shall see, I believe, that fortune has a role to play in setting our goals. But in so doing our luck does not impoverish our happiness. Paradoxically we may find it enhanced.

II

The proposition that some actions of ours are voluntary in part and in part involuntary, would give few people pause. But that all our actions are both voluntary and involuntary, is a proposition that most people would have to ponder. I intend to show that for us the proposition can only be a universal one. Let us begin by reminding ourselves why an action may be both voluntary and involuntary. We shall then be able to see why all actions must be of this sort.

What makes an action either voluntary or involuntary? A voluntary action is one which we perform from an internal cause with full knowledge of our situation. An involuntary action is the opposite. We do not act from an internal cause or we do not act with complete knowledge. We may indeed hardly be said to act. I take these conceptions to be the usual ones developed in classical times by Aristotle and encountered today in our legal systems as well as in our daily lives. (3) Examples abound. Those illustrating the involuntary make both concepts clear. If someone is blown off a ship by the wind, the disembarkation is surely involuntary. The person did not choose to leave. Or if someone stabs another with a foil thought to be blunted, the homicide is also involuntary. The death is the result of ignorance. (4)

What then makes an action both voluntary and involuntary? For the present I shall not consider how knowledge and ignorance could yield an action with both qualities. I want to examine only how causes, internal and external, can make up an action of this mixed sort. Let us take a classic example. Consider the pilot of a ship in a storm. If the storm is severe enough and the ship is laden, the pilot may throw his cargo overboard. He does so in order to save himself and his crew. This action is voluntary because the pilot acts from an internal cause. He chooses to jettison the cargo. But the action is also involuntary. The external circumstances force the pilot to make the choice that he does. His action is thus the result of a combination of an internal cause and of external causes. (5)

What I wish to suggest is that all our actions are the result of an internal cause, our choice, and of external causes, our circumstances. To put the matter aphoristically, we are all sailors at sea in a storm. The premises on which my argument rests are nothing new. Moral philosophers already acknowledge them. But because they are uneasy about them, philosophers neglect, I think, to explore fully the implications of these propositions.

One premise is that luck is an external cause that affects us for better or worse. What luck brings about are things that we ourselves could have brought about through our choice though we did not. Consider another classic example. A man is collecting donations for a for a banquet. While downtown, he happens upon someone whom he wishes to dun, and he in fact obtains a donation. This man might have chosen to go downtown with the purpose of seeking a donation. If he had, he would not have received the donation by luck. But he did not. He received the donation by luck because external causes brought the donor to him. (6)

Luck in this classic sense is different than chance. Chance is an external cause that affects an outcome not of human action but of processes of other sorts. For example, a horse might not stand in its usual corner of its stall and escape being hurt by a falling beam. But the horse by hypothesis could not have chosen to avoid the beam. It thus escaped harm by chance. (7)

Only a brief reflection is sufficient for us to realize that our very selves are subject to luck in the classic sense. Who we are has an effect on what we do, but who we are is in part an effect of external causes. The mental and moral powers that we possess are from birth a given. Our mental faculties and their scope as well as our moral feelings and their breadth and depth are things that we must merely accept. If we choose to develop our character, we have to take into account our talents and temperaments as we do other causes external to our will. (8) And of course that we have a will, is also a matter of luck. We might have been born an animal of another sort, such as *Homo habilis* or *Homo erectus*. (9)

The circumstances of our birth are obviously a matter of luck too. Our family, our culture, and our natural environment are all facts that influence our actions, and yet these facts remain beyond our control. As we lead our lives, we must willy-nilly take these circumstances into account. True, we may move from one situation to another more to our liking. But we still cannot mold our circumstances entirely to suit ourselves. Fortuitous facts are bound to have some affect on our every endeavor. (10)

What is more obvious, and what we more often acknowledge, is that our characters and our surroundings are subject not only to change from external sources but at times to capricious change. For example, who has not found himself unexpectedly betrayed by a friend or a fellow citizen? We surely have all known a friend or a relative who suddenly suffered a fatal stroke. And we have to take notice of severe changes in the weather and especially of natural catastrophes.

One might even argue that our human nature and the natures of other things are fortuitous. Darwin argues that we are the product of evolutionary processes that might have turned out otherwise. (11) But Hume goes even further. He points out that every natural process might still turn out otherwise. All natural process are matters of fact, and these matters may turn out other than they usually do. The sun need not rise tomorrow. (12)

Of course the natures of things do not for the most part change much. Certainly not during a lifetime. Consequently we do not usually regard going to town or having a banquet as matters of luck though an unexpected encounter with a donor is. (13) And in practice Hume himself finds his skepticism overcome though he is all too right in principle. (14)

But I especially wish to emphasize that what particular actions we are able to choose depends entirely on fortune. We often think that some choice is foisted on us because we must choose from a very limited range of options on a given occasion. But all choice is foisted on us because we must choose from a limited set of opportunities in every situation. Who we are and what we do depends on where and when we are. The abilities which we possess as well as the opportunities which we have depend in large part on causes other than ourselves. The fact that a sailor is a pilot, for example, that he makes this voyage, that he takes this cargo, all these facts result from choices conditioned by luck as much as does any choice to jettison a cargo. (15)

I conclude then that what choices we face depends entirely on our luck. The choices open to us are determined ultimately by causes are external to our will. These causes lurk in our very selves and in our surroundings.

III

What are the consequences of my argument about luck for our happiness? In answer to this

question I shall assume only that happiness must contain an element of activity. Indeed, my assumption is that happiness is an activity that we choose primarily for its own sake. Admittedly this assumption concerns only one element necessary for a complete definition of happiness, albeit the most important one. For a full definition we would want to examine other conditions surrounding human action. We would want to consider the practical intellect and its role in choosing an action and in carrying it out. And also our habits and emotions and their affects on our choices and actions. (16)

Now my argument implies that when we engage in an activity, we must be circumspect and consider what our lot is. We ought not to forget that we are subject to causes external to our will, both those in our selves and those in our surroundings. Remember that our actions are only in part voluntary, and that they are involuntary in part. We ought to recognize not only that we ourselves change with age and experience, and that our circumstance vary in accordance with the natural course of events. We must also take into account the fact that these processes themselves and many changes within them result from the chance interference of other causes.

But if we acknowledge fortune and its effects, we can see at once that we ourselves are of the very fabric of our environments, cultural as well as natural. We may thus view ourselves as being part and parcel of our environments and as participating in their multifaceted processes. By accepting our fortune we are accordingly able to engage consciously in many activities that we might otherwise neglect. And what variety of thought, emotions, and situations do we not experience within a lifetime! How varied we find them within a single day! (17)

Human happiness on this account thus entails consequences similar to those that follow from what contemporary philosophers call the Aristotelian principle. (18) That we enjoy greater breadth in exercising our capacities, and that we enjoy greater depth in their exercise, appear to be facts of human nature. But we can better enjoy this greater depth and breadth by engaging in more activities with broader and deeper causal connections with our environments. Consider sailing. An enthusiast will be quick to take good advantage of every opportunity to sail boats of different sorts and to sail on different water ways. He may also wish to try his hand at windsurfing, iceboating, and sandboating. He will of course enjoy more any jaunt that makes demands on his skills to adjust for shifts in the winds or currents. (19)

One might say then that whatever life we lead, our life can only be, if we acknowledge luck, multifarious. What activities we perform rests not merely with our choice but also with our circumstances. Indeed we are a nexus of activities, and these activities depend on a complex of causes, of which our will is only one. What we do and who we are depends in large part on where and when we are. (20)

But I do of course acknowledge two ways in which luck may curtail our happiness. An extreme of ill fortune may limit the facets of our life, and so it may, paradoxically, an extreme of good fortune. Bad luck can obviously so maim or crush us that we may find our happiness greatly reduced with little or no prospect of regaining it to the extent that we might wish. But good luck can so insulate us from our circumstances that life may yield for us a tedium or an ennui in more than its usual modicum.

We can also see that happiness viewed in this light is at odds with most contemporary conceptions. Contemporary philosophers tend to identify happiness with what they call a

rational plan of life. They argue that a person is happy when he is successfully executing a plan of such sort and is confident that his plan will be successful. (21)

Notice that this conception of happiness entails an unpleasant paradox. When he engages in an activity, someone who pursues happiness in this way has not yet attained an end. He is only successfully working towards his goal. And yet when he attains his end, someone who views happiness in this way is no longer actively engaged. He no longer has a rational plan to fulfill. Consequently, when he is happy, he has not attained an end, and when he attains an end, he is no longer happy. (22)

The reason for this paradox is that carrying out a plan of life is not itself end. We do find some value for its own sake in making a plan and carrying it out. Some people especially take pleasure in logistics of this sort. But we primarily value a rational plan for the sake of other things. Who would make a plan merely for the sake of making a plan? And those philosophers who advance this conception of happiness do in fact argue that we primarily value a life plan for the sake of something else. Usually for the sake of satisfying desire. (23)

But my argument about luck reminds us more importantly that any action valued for its own sake is after all terribly finite. Any action of ours is finite because what we can do constantly changes with our luck. Not that our luck determines whether or not our actions are successful. It does that too. But rather that our luck determines what actions we can value for themselves. For our actions are products of choice and of chance.

The argument thus rules out happiness of the sort achieved through a plan of life. We may make plans, and indeed we ought to do so. But we cannot make plans for an entire life. Not only is a plan not valued for its own sake, but what actions we value for their own sake changes with changes in a matrix of external causality. We would be imprudent to undertake a course of action for life, and we would inexorably make ourselves unhappy if we did. In order to follow such a course, we would tend to minimize our luck, both good as well as bad. We would thus lose many opportunities. And do we not commonly experience increased anxiety when we try to force ourselves and our circumstances toward some one goal? Not to mention the damage and destruction loosed upon environments, both social and natural, when we ignore them.

Consider an example. When we take a vacation, we face a particular choice similar to the more general choices that we face in life itself. We may take a prepackaged cruise of the Caribbean, say. But if we do, we will find ourselves sharing the fate of the typical tourist who says, If today is Tuesday, this must be Cartagena. But we may also get together with our friends and charter a boat of our own. We can then go where we list. And we can take advantage of new facts discovered on our trip about the places that we visit.

Now one might object that there does not seem to be all that much difference between a practical activity and a life plan. All practical activity is really valued not for its sake but for its effects. We take a cruise for example in order to meet new people and to see new places or in order to refresh ourselves from the tedium of daily life.

I have to concede that we are not always able to value practical actions for their own sake. But we can nonetheless very often value such actions for themselves as well as for their effects. We usually value travelling for itself though we may value its effects too. A boat trip is clearly something valued for its own sake. Though once important for war and trade, we now almost exclusively go out on sail boats, for example, merely as a sport. Indeed

sailing is today an Olympic sport. (24)

We might also ask when we should be active and when passive. One cannot easily say. But we can surely eliminate two extremes. We can see already that we do not want to be too active. When we are overactive, we fail to respond to our very selves and our circumstances. We especially lack this responsiveness when we attempt to follow a single plan for our entire life.

But we do not want to be too passive either. Sometimes we have a tendency to identify happiness with luckiness. In our own language the very word "happiness," derived from "hap," suggests a close connection with luck. Other modern languages present similar etymologies. But to identify being happy with being lucky would ultimately be to eliminate any role for choice. We would abdicate our human freedom and its responsibilities. We would consequently deny our rationality and our very humanity. (25)

We see then that our happiness depends not only on our choice but on the choices available to us. And that the choices available depend on our luck.

IV

If we wish to be happy, we have to perform an action for its own sake from choice. But what actions we can so perform depends entirely on a confluence of causes beyond our control. The choices available to us rest at bottom on luck. We are lucky to be creatures who can be happy. But our own particular happiness also depends on our luckiness. (26)

Notes

(1) Williams and Nagel begin the contemporary discussion of this topic with an exchange of papers presented before the Aristotelian Society. They have since published their papers in revised versions (Barnard Williams, *Moral Luck* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981], ch. 2; Thomas Nagel, *Moral Questions* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979], ch. 3).

(2) Both Williams and Nagel develop their positions in opposition to Kantian ethics. They view Kant as having attempted to divorce morality from luck (Williams, pp. 20-22; Nagel, pp. 24-25). They contend that our actions and their moral status depend on our success, and that our success rests on our luck. Williams argues that our justification for a practical project in its relationship to morality depends on its outcome, and that its outcome is subject to luck. Its justification especially depends on unknown conditions internal to it. On what Williams calls intrinsic luck (pp. 22-27 and 36-39). Nagel argues that our moral judgement of a practical action depends on our control over its outcome, and that our control over its outcome is subject to luck in several ways. He even suggests that our control might ultimately be an illusion (pp. 25-26, and 36-38).

(3) See Aristotle, *Ethics* 3. 1.

(4) See *Ethics* 3. 1. 1109b35-1110a4 and 1110b18-1111a21.

(5) Compare *Ethics* 3. 1. 1110a4-1110b18.

(6) See Aristotle, *Physics* 2. 5. 196b10-197a8 and 2. 6. 197a36-197b18.

(7) See *Physics* 2. 6. 197a36-197b18. Games of chance present a curious case. If I win a lottery, for example, I surely have a stroke of good fortune because I might also earn my way in the world through my own purpose and effort. Many people in fact object to gambling because they feel that wagering on these games corrupts our moral purpose. But the game itself, if honestly run, can only have an outcome which is a chance event. The bouncing ping-pong balls in the hopper, say, can form no intention.

(8) Nagel calls luck of this sort constitutive luck. But he discusses these traits merely as determinants of moral judgement (pp. 28 and 32-33). He thus does not see them not as factors to be taken into account when acting. Our uneasiness about luck of this kind is especially evidenced by Rawls (John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), secs. 12 and 17).

(9) Williams recognizes that our freedom is a matter of constitutive luck. Even the Kantian conception of it (pp. 21-22).

(10) Luck of this kind Nagel calls circumstantial luck. He acknowledges that these factors call upon us to perform different actions. But he sees them merely as undermining our moral judgement (pp. 28 and 33-34). Factors such as these are rather the mainstays of our judgements and of our actions too. Rawls is also uneasy about luck of this sort (secs. 12 and 17 again).

(11) Darwin suggests how even our mental as well as our emotional traits are products of evolution (Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, esp. chs. 3-5). Wilson presents a more contemporary account (W. O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978], esp. ch. 4).

(12) Hume argues that relations of ideas depend on the principle of contradiction, but matters of fact rest only on the principle of mental custom (David Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, secs. 4-5) He does distinguish between necessary, probable, and chance events. But he clearly argues that even necessary and probable events are contingent. Their necessity and probability is due again to our mental habits (secs. 6-7).

(13) Aristotle too thinks that necessary and probable events are not due to chance (again *Physics* 2. 5. 196b10-31). But he does nonetheless recognize that these events are contingent. For they can turn out other than they usually do. He favorably mentions the "man-headed ox progeny" of Empedocles, and he suggests an "olive-headed vine progeny" as well (*Physics* 2. 8. esp. 199a33-199b13).

(14) Even the Pyrrhonian will laugh when "the first and most trivial event in life" puts his skeptical dream to flight (Hume, sec. 12, pt. 2).

(15) Bacon appears to agree though he puts the matter paradoxically. He asserts that each man makes his own fortune. But he means that each person must take advantage of what fortune has to offer. For he argues that secret and hidden virtues in us bring fortune forth, and he asserts of fortune that "though shee be Blinde, yet shee is not Invisible" (Francis Bacon, *Essays*, no. 40).

(16) Aristotle certainly argues that this element is the crucial one for his definition (*Ethics* 1. 7. 1097b22-1098a18).

(17) Joyce ably shows how varied the lives of individuals may be during a single day (see James Joyce, *Ulysses*).

(18) See Rawls, sec. 65.

(19) Rawls considers these facts not with regard to accepting a complex of different activities but only with respect to choosing between different complex activities (sec. 65, pp. 426-427).

(20) I thus agree with Williams's conception of a project. A project apparently satisfies a categorical desire, and a categorical desire is one that gives meaning to our life (ch. 1, pp. 10-12). Williams even argues that we are a nexus of projects (p. 13). But I would view our projects as placed in different metaphysical circumstances. What projects we are able to pursue depends not on what we categorically desire but on what is categorically desirable.

(21) Rawls in particular made this conception of happiness popular (secs. 63 and 83). But Rawls tell us that he borrowed the conception from Kenny (see Anthony Kenny, "Happiness," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 66 [1965-1966], pp. 93-102). Williams's conception of a project appears to be similar to that of a plan though it is not for a whole life. For Williams argues that an agent identifies with his project, and that its outcome defines his life (ch. 2, pp. 33-36). Williams does recognize that our preferences are not fixed, and that even what we do may change them (pp. 34-35). But I would argue that what is preferable is not fixed either. We would best identify both with our projects and with our circumstances.

(22) Kenny recognizes the second horn of this dilemma, but he does not see its full implications (pp. 101-102).

(23) Rawls attempts to argue that we value a plan of life for its own sake (sec. 83, pp. 549-550). But he also argues that the human good is the rational satisfaction of desire (sec.15, pp. 92-93). And he clearly indicates that a plan of life aims at satisfying wants and desires (sec. 63, pp. 415-416). Kenny identifies happiness with the satisfaction of major desires and the belief that their satisfaction will continue (again pp. 101-102).

(24) Compare *Ethics* 2. 4. 1105a28-1105b5.

(25) Nagel appears to accept these conclusions. He suggests that we are ultimately mere things and our actions mere events (pp. 36-38). Aristotle noted a similar attitude in ancient Greece (for example *Ethics* 1. 8. 1099b 6-8).

(26) Nagel thinks it a paradox that we are not responsible for what we are and are not responsible for (p. 34). I think it a platitude.

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