

## Oedipus's Responsibility: The Problem of Moral Luck According to Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel

By Rui Rego\*

*In mythology, Oedipus is impelled, by destiny or fate, to perform a set of actions. Given that he is not responsible for his fate or luck, is he responsible for his crimes? Can moral judgments be independent of luck, chance or fortune? Nagel suggests an example: two agents (with the same intentions, desires, beliefs, etc.) shoot someone. The first agent hits the target, the second agent does not hit it because, luckily, a bird crossed the path of the bullet fired. Both agents wanted to hit their targets, but by the interference of chance or luck only one of them hits it: do we judge both agents in the same way, morally speaking? It seems that the moral responsibility of an agent for his actions is inseparable from a principle of control of the agent over his actions. However, when we analyse the object of moral judgment (agents, actions), our assessment varies according to elements of luck (constitutive, circumstantial, resulting, causal). Does luck introduce a paradox into the core of moral judgments (Nagel's thesis), limiting the very concept of morality (as Williams argues)? In this paper, I argue for the need to evaluate agents and actions morally regardless of whether they are subjected to luck.*

### Introduction

Can moral judgments be independent of luck? It seems that the moral responsibility of an agent for his actions is inseparable from a *principle of control* of the agent over those actions. However, when we analyse the object of moral judgment (agents, actions), our assessment varies according to elements of luck.

Let us clarify the problem of moral luck with an example suggested by Thomas Nagel. Two agents<sup>1</sup> aim to shoot another person with the intention to kill. In the case of the first agent, the bullet hits a bird, failing the target and preventing him to kill the person. The second agent has the same intention, the same motivation, and performs an action similar to that of the first agent. However, unlike the previous agent, when he shoots, nothing stands between the bullet and his victim, and he manages to hit his target and kill him.

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1. For *agent*, cf. Sofia Miguens and Susana Cadilha, *Ação e Ética: Conversas sobre a Racionalidade Prática* (Lisbon: Edições Colibri, 2011), 83-84; Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 12-24.

Our *moral judgment* of these two agents is distinct: we do not consider attempted murder and homicide to be morally wrong at the same level. But, if this is so, we are admitting that moral judgments differ according to *luck*, i.e., to something that is not controlled by the agent. The *intentions* and *actions* of the first and the second agents do not vary (both have the intention to kill and act accordingly). What does vary from one case to the other is a *circumstance* and, because of that, the *consequences*. But, if we make a different appraisal of both actions, it appears that we don't judge only what is under the control of the agent. For nothing that is directly dependent on both agents' control is different: both have the same intentions, beliefs, and motivations to kill a person. The fact that one of them is effective and the other isn't does not depend on something that was under any of the two agents' control, but on the fact that in one of the cases, the trajectory of the bullet was intercepted, by chance or luck, by a bird passing through.<sup>2</sup>

Consider a second example. Two people want to help feeding the poor and they can do a bank transfer to that effect by pressing a button. The first person pushes the button and the money is indeed sent. The second person presses the button, but the money isn't transferred, perhaps due to technical reasons, and therefore no poor person is fed. Should both be praised for their generosity?<sup>3</sup> This is the fundamental point of the discussion: if the consequences of an action are important for the moral evaluation of that action, then, when the consequences depend on luck and not on what the agent can control, moral evaluation must be dependent on luck.

What can *luck* have to do with *moral* thought? Bernard Williams felt that, in associating these two terms — *moral* and *luck* —, he was creating an oxymoron,<sup>4</sup> because their combination expresses a dilemma or a confrontation. On the one hand, based on the principle of control, an agent has moral responsibility only for what he can control in his actions. But luck is something that escapes human control. Thus, *prima facie*, morality has nothing to do with luck: morality has to do with judgments about responsibility, about whether an agent is or isn't justified in acting as he did, and therefore whether he is worthy of praise or blame; luck, on

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2. Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 29.

3. I owe this example to the anonymous reviewers of this paper.

4. "When I introduced the expression *moral luck*, I expected it to suggest an oxymoron. There is something in our conception of morality, as Thomas Nagel agreed, that arouses opposition to the idea that moral responsibility, or moral merit, or moral blame, should be subject to luck. This is so, I still think, because the point of this conception of morality is, in part, to provide a shelter against luck, one realm of value (indeed, of supreme value) that is defended against contingency. However, there are some misunderstandings that I now think my formulations in *Moral Luck* may have encouraged." Bernard Williams, *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers 1982-1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 241.

the other hand, consists of elements that are beyond the realm of human freedom. However, we don't usually eliminate from our moral judgments elements that escape the agent's will. So, can agents and their actions be subjected to moral judgments when they are substantively subjected to fate or luck? It should be noted that fate can be distinguished from luck. Fate is usually associated with a predetermination concerning the whole of life, a predetermination that can be blind or produced by someone, whereas luck (or bad luck) is usually referred to an isolated, chance event. As I will eventually conclude, in the case of fate, the person (Oedipus) cannot resort to it to clear himself of an action he was led to commit, while in the case of luck (the bird), our judgment of the agent's moral fault is nuanced by the fact that he was prevented from completing his action. That is, in the case of Oedipus, the fate that impels him to action does not diminish his responsibility, whereas in the case of the killer, the luck that prevented him from completing the action diminishes his blame.

Let's consider the myth of Oedipus. Oedipus is impelled by fate to perform a set of actions; not being responsible for his fate, is he responsible for his crimes? I shall argue that, although fate or luck interferes with our moral judgments, it is necessary to evaluate agents and actions morally regardless of whether they were impelled to action by fate or luck. I shall begin by defining moral luck and categorizing it in different types (*resultant, circumstantial, constitutive, and causal*); I then proceed analyse the interference of luck on the judgments we make about others (considering Nagel's proposal) and the interference of luck on the agent's self-evaluation of his own actions (in Williams' philosophy). I shall conclude by arguing that, even if we accept the interference of chance in life projects, we cannot admit that bad luck alters our moral judgments (at the risk of bad luck completely eliminating the object of moral judgment): Oedipus cannot escape moral judgment by claiming that his actions were due to the force of circumstances that transcended him — his fate or his bad luck.

### Field of Analysis

*Luck, fate or fortune* — the things that escape the control of the human agent as contingencies, good or bad, advantageous or harmful — is a recurrent theme of moral consideration both in ancient philosophy and in tragic poetry. Hellenistic culture uses the *fate* in 25 different ways (has 25 different words for *destiny*). In recent times, the echoes of the problem of luck circumscribed to morals are essentially due to Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel. "Moral Luck" by Thomas Nagel is a response to Bernard Williams' paper of the same title. In 1975, both

philosophers entered a Symposium on Aristotelian thought with a meditation on moral luck. These articles are the mainspring of contemporary discussion.<sup>5</sup>

Martha Nussbaum analyses the influence of luck or fortune on ethical life (particularly in *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, 1986), evoking not only the philosophers (mainly Plato and Aristotle), but also the (tragic) poets, given how compelling the theme is for both poets and philosophers. Recalling how tragic poets were considered “important sources of ethical insight”<sup>6</sup> with whom philosophers directly competed, Nussbaum follows Bernard Williams’ philosophical exercise of returning to Greek thought and tragedy.

In this reengagement with Greek philosophy and tragedy, we can find, among other references, the important case of Oedipus.<sup>7</sup> The myth of Oedipus has multiple facets in contemporary culture.<sup>8</sup> In this paper, I want to focus on the fact that Oedipus internalizes the guilt of parricide although he was destined by fate to perform it, thus becoming a central example of the paradox I’d like to analyse: the paradox introduced by moral fate.<sup>9</sup>

### Methods and Categories

In the present section, I will focus on both the definition and the characterization of the types of moral luck proposed by Thomas Nagel, trying to systematize them. At the end of this section, I will make a brief commentary on the cases of luck analysed by Bernard Williams. Let’s start by considering Nagel’s definition of moral luck:

Where a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control, yet we continue to treat him in that respect as an object of moral judgment, it can be called moral luck.<sup>10</sup>

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5. Sergi Rosell, *La Suerte Moral* (Oviedo: KRK Ediciones, 2013), 23-26; Judith Andre, “Nagel, Williams, and Moral Luck,” *Analysis* 43 (1983): 202-207.

6. Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), XV.

7. *Ibid.*, XXXII; 25; 129; 282-283; 334; 380; 383; 385; 387; 489*n*; 510*n*; Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 30.

8. Carlos João Correia, *Mitos e Narrativas: Ensaio sobre a Experiência do Mal* (Lisboa: Centro de Filosofia da Universidade de Lisboa, 2003), 147-160.

9. For a broader literature review about *moral luck*, see Dana K. Nelkin, “Moral Luck,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ed.) Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2021 Edition).

10. Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 1979, 26.

According to this definition of moral luck, the object of moral judgment integrates factors external to the will of the agent. That is, character and action are evaluated also according to good or bad luck.

The elements of luck which interfere with moral judgment can be distinguished and typified into different categories: *resultant luck*, *circumstantial luck*, *constitutive luck*, and *causal luck* (note that although Thomas Nagel has listed these forms of moral luck, the designations are not explicitly of his making). These different types of moral luck help clarify what is at issue.

**Resultant luck.**<sup>11</sup> The case of murder *versus* attempted murder presented above is an example of *resultant moral luck*. Both members of the pair (the murderer and the murderer in the attempted form) had the same intentions, plans, motives and actions. Yet, the outcomes differed. The different outcomes (murder and attempted murder) trigger different moral judgments.

Another example formulated by Nagel is the case of the Russian revolutionaries known as the Decembrists. The Decembrists were a revolutionary group in Russia that contested Tsar Nicholas I. Like all revolutionaries, they took a risk when they launched their uprising: if their actions were successful, they would be justified; if not, they faced a grim future. The outcome was tragic: the coup failed, and the consequences were severe for the soldiers who had been persuaded to follow them.

As we will see later, it should be noted that *retroactive justification* based on future success does not eliminate present evils. Thus, for example, Serguei Volkonski, one of the few Decembrists who survived the Siberian punishment, was Tolstoy's distant cousin and the inspiration for the character of Prince Andrei Bolkonski in *War and Peace*; but his alleged literary and artistic success does not supersede the evil of having been imprisoned. We will return to this topic when discussing *Gauguin's problem* as presented by Bernard Williams.<sup>12</sup>

**Circumstantial luck.** It refers to the environment in which one acts, or the time and place in which one finds oneself, and how this fact determines how one is appraised. Consider the case of two German men, one of whom travels to Argentina before the rise of the Nazi party in Germany, while the other remains in Germany. Both identify with the ideology of the rising Nazi party, but the agent who remains in Germany will eventually become an officer in a concentration camp, while the other does not affect his support for the Nazi party because he is not, at that time, on German territory. According to Nagel, it is not possible to pass the same judgement on both agents' ideological stance.

In Oedipus' case, the circumstances in which he found himself were relevant. We can assume that Oedipus would not kill his father if he knew he was

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11. Sergi Rosell, "Nagel y Williams Acerca de la Suerte Moral," *Revista de Filosofía* 31, no. 1 (2006): 158. Cf. Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck*, 1981, 28.

12. Orlando Figes, *Uma História Cultural da Rússia* (Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2017), 150.

his father (he would not commit parricide), because Oedipus ran away from home so as not to risk killing his father (or the man he thought was his father).

**Constitutive luck.** One considers "one's luck to be who one is [...] one's inclinations, talents, and temperament."<sup>13</sup> An agent's response to the requirements of morality is not indifferent to the kind of agent that he is. Thomas Nagel points to character's traits (sympathy, cowardice, coldness, envy, etc.) that are the background from which one responds morally (although one can counteract those same character traits). As to Williams, he begins "Moral Luck" by presenting the sage in classical antiquity as someone immune to luck, independent from whatever might disturb his tranquillity and happiness (think of the Stoic sage); however, he adds that this would already be an example of *constitutive luck*, since not all agents are willing to be wise in this way, able to accept the corresponding demands, inclined to take this path, that is not accessible to all.

**Causal luck.** "The luck in how one is determined by antecedent circumstances."<sup>14</sup> The debate about determinism *versus* free will falls under this category of moral luck. On the one hand, if our actions are a consequence of things that we do not control, they are not free actions, and since freedom is, as we would admit, a requirement for moral action, they are not proper moral actions. On the other hand, if we admit that agents are free, it is as if they inserted into the causal world, which they can't control, a certain spontaneity non determined by biological, physical, psychological luck, etc.<sup>15</sup>

For the purposes of the categorization of cases of luck, Thomas Nagel's work seems more adequate, since it is more detailed. Nagel uses Bernard Williams' *constitutive luck*, but Williams makes a broader category of it, encompassing not only *constitutive luck* in the sense given above, but also *circumstantial luck* and *causal luck*. Williams distinguishes *constitutive luck* from *incident luck*, understanding the latter as the *resultant luck* of the types here presented.<sup>16</sup>

### Results: Limits, Justifications, and Regret

*First.* The boundaries of moral luck are dependent on the concept of morality that one has. If you think Kantian, then moral responsibility excludes the idea of luck. If you agree with Kant, then *good will* (*guter Wille*), the will whose goodness is intrinsic (since it expresses duty or has the moral law as its motive), must dominate over talents and temperament (referred to earlier as *constitutive luck*) and over luck in general (*circumstantial*, etc.) as a condition for being moral.

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13. Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 1979, 28.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Thomas Nagel will return to this problem in *The View from Nowhere*, cf.: Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 110-137.

16. Sergi Rosell, "Nagel y Williams Acerca de la Suerte Moral," 2006, 158.

According to Kant, luck does not interfere with morality and moral judgments nor should it.<sup>17</sup> Kantism is the paradigm theory for the denial of moral luck, since moral duty — to act according to one's good will — excludes from its horizon elements such as luck, fate or fortune, which bypass the determination of the will by duty. Contrary to the sage referred to by Williams (mentioned earlier), who is inclined to his sagacity by his *constitutive luck*, Kant believes that the possibility of an agent morally determining his will is universal, regardless of inclinations.<sup>18</sup> Bernard Williams recognizes in this thesis — of morality conceived as independent of luck — an enticing aspect: it is, in a certain sense, a consolation for the injustices of the world;<sup>19</sup> in Kant's view, morality restores equality among people, because morally relevant actions can't have anything to do with luck (*constitutive, circumstantial, or other*).<sup>20</sup>

*Second.* Luck imposes limitations on morality. According to Bernard Williams, morality (contemporary and otherwise) aims at “delivering good news,”<sup>21</sup> by advancing harmonious conclusions to practical dilemmas. The circumstantial contingencies of human life betray, at every step, the ambition to find harmony for practical dilemmas. Williams is interested in Greek tragedy because it presents man (even the hero) as irreconcilable with the world. There is, in fact, a distance and confrontation between individual desires and the force of reality, regardless of whether we call it fate, the gods, or social reality.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, the agent could act well and still feel regret. Rationality and morality do not guarantee harmony of judgement, nor a safe conduct inhibiting luck and circumstantial (or other) chance. Williams is sceptical as to the ability of morality to solve practical dilemmas.

*Third.* Let us consider, in the context of luck, *retrospective justifications* for action, starting with a case presented by Bernard Williams, the so-called *Gauguin problem*:<sup>23</sup> imagine that Gauguin has to decide whether to live according to certain social expectations (and thus continuing to live with his family) or travel to the

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17. Immanuel Kant. *Fundamentação da Metafísica dos Costumes* (Lisboa: Porto Editora, 2003), 32.

18. *Ibid*, 31.

19. Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck*, 1981, 21.

20. John Rawls, writing in the Kantian tradition, proposes a choice of *principles of justice* whose aim it is to blindfold the contingencies of chance. John Rawls, *Uma Teoria da Justiça* (Lisboa: Editorial Presença, 2013), 76; Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 62-63.

21. Eduardo Pohlmann, *O Problema da Sorte Moral* (Porto Alegre: Universidade de Rio Grande do Sul, 2012), 74

22. Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 164-165.

23. Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): “Gauguin problem”.

South Pacific, where he can evolve as an artist and become a great painter.<sup>24</sup> If he chose the latter (as he has), the justification for his actions based on his success would be retrospective, that is *a posteriori*; but retrospective justifications depend on the consequences, and therefore, on luck in the process.<sup>25</sup> Williams goes even further, claiming that Gauguin's decision reveals that morality does not prevail in all cases: to take a risk as an artist in progress would be more structuring for Gauguin's identity than certain moral obligations. And that is Williams' dilemma – either moral value is not supreme or it incorporates elements of luck.<sup>26</sup> Thomas Nagel rejects Gauguin's case as a moral case.

Furthermore, we don't always act according to our own moral standards, but in order to have a justification when we don't, we need to present a different standard for our actions. We have to present a justification for our choice of standards, and this can ultimately also be moral: it means deciding how we should live.

*Fourth.* One might think that if the agent has no control over a particular action, then he is not truly an agent, but a spectator of an event. However, this does not seem to be the case. For example, if a careful truck driver runs over a child who jumped into the road, the driver, although careful, had no control over the outcome, and yet he is not a mere spectator of an event.<sup>27</sup> The driver can be expected to *regret* the event, even if he is exempt from moral responsibility.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the agent's participation in a misfortune is not indifferent, even when he is not responsible for the result.<sup>29</sup>

Williams proposes a concept that helps clarify what is at issue: *agent-regret*. That is, to the general idea of regret, according to which "it would have been better if things had been otherwise," if we had deliberated differently, there is added the agent's participation in an action (not restricted to deliberative agency) and the evaluation that the agent makes about himself.<sup>30</sup> This regret presupposes that the agent participates in the act, even if he is exempt from moral responsibility for it: if the truck driver was not sorry for what happened, even

24. Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck*, 1981, 22.

25. Sergi Rosell, "Nagel y Williams Acerca de la Suerte Moral," 2006, 152.

26. *Ibid*, 153.

27. Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck*, 1981, 28.

28. It should be noted that *regret* has both a subjective and an objective meaning. It is one thing to say, "It would have been better if I had done things differently" and another thing to say, "It would have been better if things had happened otherwise"; the former is repentance for what one has done/not done and the driver does not feel, the latter grief for what happened.

29. For the debate around the egalitarianism of luck, as to whether, in the name of justice, a more egalitarian distribution of goods should correct certain inequalities arising from *constitutive luck* (natural talents), on the grounds that it is unjust for people to have advantages for which they are not responsible, cf. Dana K. Nelkin, "Moral Luck," 2021.

30. Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck*, 1981, 27.



though he had no responsibility in it, that would be, we would admit, morally wrong. Although the running over was not intentional and the driver was not negligent, the example reveals it is not only consequences that matter for moral judgment; reactions to misfortune also play a relevant role in morality.

Thus, even if one tries to focus moral evaluation on the agent's motives and intentions, first, there is no escape from moral fate, and second, these are not the only elements to consider in morality: it is important to consider (moral) reactions in the wake of unintentional acts.

### **Discussion: The Paradox of Moral Luck or a Hybrid Position**

Thomas Nagel objects to Gauguin's case by arguing that it does not constitute a moral situation. For Nagel, the problem of moral luck is a paradox arising at the core of morality or our moral judgments. Let us analyse two corollaries of Nagelian philosophy applied to this problem.

*First*, Thomas Nagel will not give up on the principle of control as a structuring element of morality. However, he views various philosophical problems from a perspective that applies also to moral luck, namely that individuals are capable of a double viewpoint:<sup>31</sup> on one hand, the internal (or first-person) viewpoint, from which they conceive themselves as agents acting in the world; and, on the other hand, the external (or third-person) viewpoint, from which they conceive themselves as events in a given causal nexus, from which they are absent.<sup>32</sup> Nagel argues that we would be unable to always look at

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31. Cf.: Thomas Nagel "Subjective and Objective," In *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 196-213. "The power of the impulse to transcend oneself and one's species is so great, and its rewards so substantial, that it is not likely to be seriously baffled by the admission that objectivity has its limits. While I am arguing for a form of romanticism, I am not an extremist. The task of accepting the polarity without allowing either of its terms to swallow the other should be a creative one. It is the aim of eventual unification that I think is misplaced, both in our thoughts about how to live and in our conception of what there is. The coexistence of conflicting points of view, varying in detachment from the contingent self, is not just a practically necessary illusion but an irreducible fact of life." Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 213.

32. "The problem arises, I believe, because the self which acts and is the object of moral judgment is threatened with dissolution by the absorption of its acts and impulses into the class of events. Moral judgment of a person is judgment not of what happens to him, but of him. It does not say merely that a certain event or state of affairs is fortunate or unfortunate or even terrible. It is not an evaluation of a state of the world, or of an individual as part of the world. We are not thinking just that it would be better if he were different, or did not exist, or had not done some of the things he has done. We are judging *him*, rather than his existence or characteristics. The effect of concentrating on the influence

ourselves from an external point of view, as mere events in a causal nexus. A permanently external point of view would eliminate the possibility of seeing ourselves as agents.

*Second.* Luck threatens intuitive and habitual moral judgements: when everything is blamed on luck, the attribution of responsibility is reduced to a point without extension. However, at the same time, the paradox clarifies relevant aspects of the agent's conception of himself:

I believe that in a sense the problem has no solution, because something in the idea of agency is incompatible with actions being events, or people being things. But as the external determinants of what someone has done are gradually exposed, in their effect on consequences, character, and choice itself, it becomes gradually clear that actions are events and people things. Eventually nothing remains which can be ascribed to the responsible self, and we are left with nothing but a portion of the larger sequence of events, which can be deplored or celebrated, but not blamed or praised.<sup>33</sup>

The analysis of the agent from an external, scientific-natural point of view, eliminates entirely the free and responsible subject, submerging him or her in a causal chain, which can be happy or unhappy, but with no room for moral praise or blame of the agent. For, in a blind causal nexus, who is the subject that responds or is responsible? In a flow of events, which actions may be subjected to moral judgment? Unlike Bernard Williams – who is *sceptic* regarding the capacity of moral values and practical rationality to definitively influence autonomous practical decisions vis-à-vis other inputs and other values –, Thomas Nagel does not believe that morality has such limitations.

Nagel's and Williams' analysis have different focuses: (a) Nagel is interested in the interference of luck in the judgments we make about others, while Williams wants to understand the interference of luck in the agent's evaluation of his own actions (*agent-regret*; *Gauguin's problem*), i.e., the problem of *retrospective justification* for oneself and others. (b) Nagel discusses moral responsibility from an external or third-person point of view (the agent is judged from an objective point of view), while Williams reflects on the agent from an internal or first-person point of view (he is interested in the agent's self-evaluation). (c) Nagel is primarily concerned with non-circumstantial justification, while Williams highlights the agent in his surrounding circumstances, with irresolvable or morally undecidable practical conflicts. (d) For Nagel, the problem of moral luck connects to our conception of action, on the one hand, or the internal moral (actions) point of view, and, on the other hand, to the external factual viewpoint (events); while for Williams, it is not just a problem of the nature of action, but of the limits of the

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of what is not under his control is to make this responsible self-seem to disappear, swallowed up by the order of mere events." Thomas Nagel, *Mortal*, 1979, 36.

33. Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 1979, 37.

voluntary, the field of what can be blameworthy or praiseworthy: one can censure the driver who runs someone over without regret, even if he has no responsibility for the running over. That is, Williams believes that the agent is not limited to the strictures of morality in a legalistic sense: moral reactions and feelings also play a relevant role.

### Conclusions: Oedipus' Responsibility

*First.* Where does the debate leave us? We have two extreme positions: either we deny the principle of control, admitting the contamination by luck of every subject of moral judgment, namely agents and actions, or we deny luck, believing in the immunity that morality would allow (following Kant). One of the determining aspects introduced by the philosophical problem of moral luck is the requirement to define more clearly the field of actions and agents, accounting for the possible interference of luck and chance. Does thinking that I act count as acting? And does thinking that I act mean that I'm acting? Or can one imagine an evil genius, like Descartes', or an evil neuroscientist who makes me believe that it is I who act, when in fact everything I do is controlled by him?<sup>34</sup>

*Second.* Returning to the notion of human life originating in classical tragedy, which inspires Bernard Williams' reasoning as we have argued, what part of Oedipus' actions is entirely his responsibility, in view of the fact that his actions are conditioned by his fate or luck?<sup>35</sup> Or, in another example from tragedy, could Ajax (the one that entered the Trojan War), after being defeated and killing false enemies, return to his home? Or does his integrity leave him no other way out but suicide? It is as if something in the way the agent sees himself overcomes moral or other values. The case of Ajax reveals the (tragic) connection between a life project (of the warrior hero), luck, and the identity of the agent (self-respect), which is not exclusively moral.

*Third.* The definition of moral luck and the discussion of different moral judgments of actions that differ only due to luck, presupposes certain apparently intuitive moral feelings and reactions (repudiation of the assassination attempt, etc.). If these reactions are not presupposed, it is difficult or unfeasible to recognise moral luck. Furthermore, if we admit that the agent who missed the target (murder in the attempted form) and the agent who hit it deserve equal moral judgement (treatment), then we are not in fact validating the interference of luck in moral judgements; in that case, both (the murderers in the attempted and

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34. Sofia Miguens and Susana Cadilha, *Ação e Ética: Conversas sobre a Racionalidade Prática*, 2011, 70.

35. Cf.: Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 30.

actual forms) are guilty, regardless of the result, and therefore of the interference of luck.

However, even if we are not strictly consequentialist, the resulting luck seems to have to be weighed in, otherwise we would be forced into other absurd conclusions, or inferences that are hardly defensible *prime facie*, namely: if we don't need the results to evaluate a driver, but judge equally one that runs someone over and one that does not, we will have to condemn (or absolve) both drivers in the same way, regardless of the outcome of their driving. I admit that this conclusion is counterfactual, since, in fact, they are not both subjected to the same moral judgment. Or imagine a man full of good intentions who, by luck, never manages to put his good intentions to practice: would we, nevertheless, attribute merit to him? Would we consider someone a virtuous agent even if he has no actions to show for himself, but only morally correct intentions and motivations? Symmetrically, would a vicious agent who, by luck, never acts morally wrongly (an agent hypothetically continually thwarted in his murderous intentions) be morally judged only by his malicious intentions or motivations? If we admit to not negatively evaluating (censuring) the murderer regardless of whether he was successful or not (murder in the attempted form *versus* murder in fact), it does not seem symmetrically permissible to positively evaluate (praise) both a well-meaning agent who carries out his virtuous intentions and a well-meaning agent who does not (or, *in extremis*, a malicious agent whose actions have benign consequences).

*Fourth.* Going back to the Greek context, even Zeus, despite being sympathetic to Hector, had to accept the death of the Trojan prince after weighing down both his and Achilles' fate.<sup>36</sup> It may be that even the gods are subjected to fate. Yet, as far as morality is concerned, we should not resign ourselves to benevolently accept Oedipus' statement – "I did not err"<sup>37</sup> – after the prophesied crimes have been committed. In conclusion: we cannot accept, *prima facie*, that luck should alter decisively our moral judgment.

There is here present a paradoxical dynamic to which I have pointed before: in the case of the gunman whose shot was intercepted by a bird, the luck that prevented him from committing the crime affects our moral judgement of his action: we don't say that he is a murderer. But in the case of Oedipus, the fate (the misfortune) that forced him to commit the crime does not affect our moral judgement of this actions: we say that he is a parricide.

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36. *Iliada* 22, 209-213, cf.: Manuel Antunes, "Sebenta de História da Cultura Clássica (1970)," in *Obra Completa do Padre Manuel Antunes, Sj.* (t. I, vol. II) (Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2008), 262.

37. "Meus sofrimentos são inesquecíveis; / sofri-os sem saber o que fazia. / Os deuses são as minhas testemunhas / e tudo aconteceu malgrado meu." Sófocles, *A Trilogia Tebana: Édipo Rei, Édipo em Colono, Antígona* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2012), 575. "Não! Eu não pequei!" *Ibid*, 594.

Finally, the rereading of the Oedipus tragedy marks Western culture since Freud and psychoanalysis; or, if Oedipus is the scapegoat who, by being sacrificed, allows for the re-establishment of justice in Thebes and the end of the plague of which he was, after all, the only culprit (René Girard), as argued by Carlos João Correia, the myth accounts for the hiatus between life and thought,<sup>38</sup> namely the gap between the chaos of chance, fate and the circumstances of life, that escape the will of the agent, and moral thought and judgement. If, on the one hand, we call destiny the vital circumstances that introduce uncontrollable elements, on the other hand, moral thought cannot abandon its critical, evaluative and guiding purpose for right action. It is this responsibility for moral errors mixed with his fate that Oedipus bears, although his knowledge of the determinants of his action is limited.

Synthesizing the central argument: (1) There is a tension between luck and morality at various levels or of different kinds. (2) Kant's position is a paradigm of the exclusion of luck in moral judgment. (3) Oedipus is determined by the gods to commit parricide; is he free and therefore responsible for his actions? If so, how? (4) The objective viewpoint of action (scientific-natural) eliminates or threatens the deliberative character of action. (5) There is a tensional dialectic between how we look at our actions and how actions can be observed in a causal nexus — as events. This tensional dialectic is irresolvable.

In summary: luck interferes with judgments and we continue to judge morally (this is the definition of moral luck). There are decisive factors beyond the agent's control. Oedipus is subjected to luck (he does not control what happens to him). Oedipus can still be subjected to moral judgment.

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38. Carlos João Correia, *Mitos e Narrativas: Ensaios sobre a Experiência do Mal*, 2003, 156.

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