

# Moral Luck

There but for the grace of God. . .



# One Plausible Constraint

\* A reasonable constraint regarding freedom and responsibility:

1. We are right to praise/blame  $S$  with respect to  $a$  only if  $S$  is responsible for  $a$ .
2.  **$S$  is responsible for  $a$  only if  $S$  could have done otherwise with respect to  $a$ .**
3.  $S$  could have done otherwise with respect to  $a$  only if  $S$  is free with respect to  $a$ .
4. We are sometimes right to praise/blame  $S$ .
5. So, for at least some actions  $a$ ,  $S$  is free with respect to  $a$ .



# One Plausible Suggestion

- \* (2) suggests that we are responsible for actions only when the circumstances pertaining to those actions are in our control.
- \* So, in general, we are not responsible—and hence not subject to praise/blame—when matters are beyond our control.



# The Control Principle

- \* The Control Principle (CP): We are rightly praised/blamed for an action *a* only if—and only to the extent that—*a* is subject to our control.
- \* A Corollary of the Control Principle (CCP):  $S^1$  and  $S^2$  should be praised/blamed differently for their actions only if the relevant differences in their actions are within their control.



# Some Corroborating Examples

- \* CP:

- \* If you are waiting in a queue and are pushed from behind into the person in front of you, then you are not rightly blamed if your bumping into them harms them.
- \* If you are waiting in a queue and you grow so angry and impatient that you decide to throw all the people in front of you to the ground and stomp on them as you storm to the front, then you are rightly blamed for harming them.

- \* CCP:

- \* You are driving home safely and alertly when a neighbour's dog runs suddenly in front of your car. You hit it. This is lamentable, of course, but you are no more blameworthy for your actions than another person, also driving safely and alertly, who suffers no such bad fate.



# What is in our control?

- \* Well, it may seem—even assuming genuine free will—that precious little is actually in our control.
- \* We make decisions and act, but then the world intervenes.



# One Extreme View

- \* A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes, because of its fitness to attain some proposed end, but only because of its volition, that is, it is good in itself... Even if, by a special disfavour of fortune or by the miserly provision of a step motherly nature, this will should wholly lack the capacity to carry out its purpose—if with its greatest efforts it should yet achieve nothing and only the good will were left (not, of course, as a mere wish but as the summoning of all means insofar as they are in our control)—then, like a jewel, it would still shine by itself, as something that has its full worth in itself. Usefulness or fruitlessness can neither add anything to this worth nor take anything away from it (Kant 1784/1998, 4:394/RR, 475-6)



# A Problem

- \* We tend to endorse CP and CCP.
- \* Yet we *do* make discriminations in moral assessments based upon factors beyond one's control.
- \* What is more, it seems as if we are right to do so.
- \* To some degree, at least, our subjective hopes, wishes, desires, and preferences must bump up against objectively given forces utterly beyond our control.



# Some Examples

- \* Two reckless drivers, speeding through an urban neighbourhood.
  - \*  $D_1$  drives home safely, laughs it off, and goes to sleep.  $D_2$  drives, though driving no more or less dangerously than  $D_1$ , but manages to kill her neighbour's dog due to her recklessness.
    - \* In law and morality, we appraise them differently.
- \* Two drunk drivers, driving home from the pub.
  - \*  $D_1$  drives home, intoxicated. Impaired, he turns a corner and drives over his neighbour's lawn. He damages the lawn and is culpable for the property damage.  $D_2$ , in the same scenario, kills his neighbour's child, who happened to be playing on the lawn.
    - \* In law and morality, we appraise them differently.



# Why should luck matter?

- \* Moral luck: some features beyond the control of a moral agent play a role in our appraisals of: (i) the goodness/badness of their actions; (ii) the goodness/badness of the agents themselves.
- \* Yet, CCP suggests this is a mistake.
  - \* —yet CCP seems somehow correct.



# A More General Example

- \*  $S^1$  and  $S^2$  are similarly obsequious: both are rule-followers; neither wants to make waves; both feel that it's right to love their countries; both are patriotic; neither is in any sense a moral hero; both more or less try to get along and not to draw attention to themselves.
- \*  $S^1$ , born in 1935, lives and works in Detroit in 1965, making cars and earning a respectable middle-class salary;  $S^2$ , born in Dresden in 1921, first works in a factory making kitchen stoves, but is then given a choice to be drafted into the Nazi army or to continue working in the same factory for the war effort. Choosing the latter option,  $S^2$  now works in the same, retrofitted factory making parts for trains used to deliver Jews, communists, and homosexuals to a concentration camp.



# Three Kinds of Moral Luck

- \* Resultant Luck

- \* how things happen to turn out, given vagaries of chance (e.g. parallel drunk drivers, one of whom notes 'Bad luck about that dog.' and the other of whom intones 'There but for the grace of God go I.')

- \* Circumstantial Luck

- \* where we happen to land in the world (e.g. parallel soldiers, the rich and the poor)

- \* Constitutive Luck

- \* how we happen to be formed (e.g. a vicious racist reared by vicious racists)



# Objective Frameworks

- \* In large measure the frameworks of our life are unchosen, unbidden, objectively given.
- \* It is hard to understand, then, how moral appraisal of the subject can proceed apace.