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# INADVERTENCE AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

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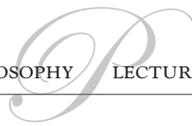
ABSTRACT

Against the view of certain philosophers, such as Thomas Nagel, I defend the common sense belief that people are not morally responsible for what they do or bring about inadvertently. I consider what response we might reasonably expect from a person who inadvertently does or brings about some event or condition that is manifestly undesirable or bad; and I suggest that we might reasonably expect such a person not to feel guilty but, rather, to feel embarrassed by his or her inability to prevent or avoid that condition or event.

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# Inadvertence and Moral Responsibility

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I. MANY PEOPLE CONSIDER IT to be a precept just of ordinary common sense that we cannot be held morally responsible for behavior in which we have engaged only inadvertently. In other words, we are not properly subject either to a positive or to a negative moral assessment for behavior in which we have somehow come to be engaged, but in which we have engaged without deliberately intending to do so. Moreover, this way of limiting the scope of appropriate moral judgment is generally understood to apply not only to behavior in which we have *directly* engaged, but also to the *subsequent outcomes* and *consequences* of our direct behavior.

It is taken to be simply a matter of common sense, then, that we are not morally responsible for behavior in which we have been directly but only unintentionally engaged; and that we are also not morally responsible for any outcomes or consequences of our direct behavior that were not intended. Bernard Williams conveys the essential point as follows: “Anything which is the product of happy or unhappy *contingency* is no proper object of moral assessment.... Just as, in the realm of character, it is motive that counts, not style, or powers, or endowment, so in action it is not *changes actually effected in the world*, but *intention*.... It cannot be a matter of luck whether [a person] was [morally] justified in doing what he did.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Williams, “Moral Luck,” in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 20–2, emphasis added.

2. IT IS EASY ENOUGH to appreciate the elementary moral intuition that lies behind this rather familiar precept. Behavior that we *do not deliberately intend* is behavior that is *not altogether voluntary*; we do not fully *will* to engage in it. It is natural to think that it would be *unfair* to hold us *morally accountable* or *morally responsible* – that is, to consider us as legitimate objects of *moral esteem* and *moral opprobrium*, or of *moral praise* and *moral blame* – for behavior in which we have happened to be engaged, but which we ourselves did not *willingly undertake*. After all, we may have been no more personally involved in producing the behavior, and no more truly accountable for it – at least, from a *moral* point of view – than if the behavior had consisted entirely of the spasmodic thrashings about of our limbs during an uncontrollable epileptic seizure.

3. YET DESPITE its seemingly decisive endorsement by common sense, this precept concerning the limits of moral responsibility has recently been challenged. Certain philosophers have argued that the precept is really not acceptable, because it overlooks the fact that there can be such a thing as *moral luck*. They suggest that it is quite possible for circumstances to arise in which it *would* be proper to consider us subject to moral assessment not only for the *direct* behavior in which we have been *deliberately* and *voluntarily* engaged, and for the *deliberately intended outcomes* and *consequences* of that behavior. In their challenge to the common sense precept, they maintain that it may sometimes be legitimate for people also to be morally assessed for outcomes or consequences of their behavior – for *changes actually effected by them in the world* – that they did not *deliberately intend to bring about at all*, but that came about *merely inadvertently*, or *as a matter of luck*. Thus, their view is that we may indeed be morally responsible for happy or unhappy contingencies – i.e., for outcomes or consequences of our behavior that we did not intend, that were not under our control, and that it is not reasonable even to expect us to have foreseen.

Here is how Thomas Nagel explains this view, to which he himself adheres:

*Prior to reflection* it is intuitively plausible that people cannot be morally assessed for what is not their fault, or for what is due to factors beyond their control.... A clear absence of control, produced by involuntary movement, physical force, or ignorance of the circumstances, [generally] excuses what is done from moral judgment. But *what we do* depends in many more ways than these on what is not *under our control* – what is not *produced by a*

*good or a bad will*... And external influences in this broader range are not usually thought to *excuse what is done from moral judgment*, positive or negative... What has been done, and what is morally judged, is partly determined by external factors. However jewel-like the good will may be in its own right, there is a morally significant difference between rescuing someone from a burning building and dropping him from a twelfth-storey window while trying to rescue him.<sup>2</sup>

*What we have done* evidently includes, on Nagel's account, not just our direct personal behavior but also the outcomes and consequences of what we have done directly. Suppose that we pull the trigger of a gun; and suppose that a bullet is thereby fired, and that this kills someone. Our *direct* personal behavior here consists just in *making the hand and finger movements* by which we point the gun and pull the trigger. Doing this may be, in fact, the *only* events that we *deliberately will to bring about*. We may not intend to fire a bullet, or intend anyone to be hit and fatally wounded by the shot. Nonetheless, our direct personal behavior of pointing the gun and pulling its trigger constitutes only *part of what we actually did*. We also fired the gun; we shot someone; and we killed that person. These doings also belong, in addition to what we did directly, in a comprehensive inventory of what we personally did.

The gun being fired when we pulled the trigger, a person being hit by the shot, and that person's wound being fatal, were events brought about by what Nagel thinks of as "external influences" or "external factors." They depended upon conditions quite distinct from the movements of our hand and finger, which entirely constituted our direct personal behavior – conditions such as the operation of the gun's mechanism, the location of the person who was hit, and the particular way in which the bullet impacted the victim's bodily system. According to Nagel, however, we are nonetheless subject to moral assessment for these outcomes and consequences of our direct behavior, even if they were not products of our own will – that is, even if we did not deliberately intend them.

Nagel's view, then, is that our moral responsibility *does* extend to what Williams calls "happy or unhappy contingencies" which we did not bring about voluntarily. On his account, we may legitimately be subject to moral assessment even for what we were not able to

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck," in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 25, emphasis added.

control or to foresee. He believes that people may quite justifiably be praised or blamed, in the *moral* sense, for what they did altogether inadvertently. They may be morally assessed for what they just *happened* to do, not by their own will but on account of forces they themselves did not knowingly or deliberately call into play.

4. IN CONSIDERING THIS VIEW, let us begin with the judgment Nagel offers at the conclusion of the passage I have quoted: “there is a morally significant difference,” he asserts there, “between rescuing someone from a burning building and dropping him from a twelfth-storey window while trying to rescue him.”

Is this judgment correct? The difference between the two cases Nagel cites is certainly *significant*. But is it really – as he professes confidently, but without any argument – *morally significant*? Does the way in which the two cases differ warrant making different moral evaluations of the rescuer who succeeds and of the rescuer whose failed attempt leads to the death of the person he was trying to rescue? Suppose we assume that the person who dropped the man to his death did so quite *unintentionally*. Would he nevertheless somehow be *morally culpable* on account of what happened?

Let us imagine that a certain fireman is *praiseworthy* – not just for his skill or for his reliability in carrying out the tasks that firemen are expected to perform – but praiseworthy *morally*, for having *heroically* rescued someone from a burning building. It seems to me that, from the same moral point of view, another fireman might also be morally praiseworthy, and *in exactly the same degree*, for having *tried* – also heroically – to rescue someone from the burning building, even though *his* effort was *not* successful. I believe that this might be the case *even if* the second fireman not only failed in his rescue attempt but if, *on top of that*, he unintentionally dropped from a twelfth-storey window the very person he was trying to save.

To make my point clear, I will stipulate (arbitrarily but, I think, quite legitimately) that the unsuccessful fireman displayed *just as much heroism and devotion to his duty* as the fireman who succeeded. I am presuming, in other words, that the former was *no less courageous* than the latter in exposing himself to harm, and that he was *just as selflessly and conscientiously dedicated to protecting the safety of others*. I will make the further stipulation that his failed attempt had its dreadful outcome only on account of circumstances that he could not reasonably have been expected to control. Perhaps his attempt failed only because he had been critically

weakened, both physically and mentally, by having earlier made strenuously demanding efforts to rescue others; or, perhaps, his attempt failed in the way that it did only because his hands had become so sweaty and slippery from prior heroic exertions that he could not help losing his grip and so dropping the person whom he was currently attempting to save.

It is surely *possible* that the unsuccessful fireman was moved throughout what he did by *the same courage*, and by *the same conscientious devotion to duty*, for which the successful rescuer is rightly judged to be morally praiseworthy. In that case, it seems clear that his failure was, from a moral point of view, *entirely innocent*. The fact that he failed catastrophically in what he attempted to do implies absolutely no moral transgression or moral lapse on his part; nor does his failure reveal in him any moral defect or deficiency. *On the contrary*: his heroic albeit *failed* attempt entitles *him* to the *very same* positive moral assessment as that to which the other rescuer is entitled on the basis of *his* effort, which was indisputably *more successful* but which was, we are presuming, *no more heroic* and *no more selfless*.

5. THERE IS UNQUESTIONABLY an important difference between a man *being saved by a fireman from a burning building* and a man *being dropped to his death by a fireman from a twelfth-storey window*. One of these outcomes is, of course, *far preferable* to the other. However, there may be – at least, in my view – *no difference at all* in the appropriate moral evaluations of the two men who bring about those outcomes. If the one man is morally praiseworthy for what he *succeeded in doing*, the other may be entitled to *equal* moral praise for *having tried to do it*.

6. IT SHOULD BE NOTED that, strictly speaking, the successful fireman is not, in the first place, actually to be praised *for having saved someone*. It would be more precise to say that he is to be praised, as the *unsuccessful* fireman is *equally* to be praised, just *for his selfless heroism*. What entitles him to his moral reward is, to be rigorously exact, simply the morally admirable conduct that, as it happened, enabled him to succeed in rescuing the endangered person.

This way of construing the situation will doubtless seem discordant with our customary manner of speaking about circumstances of this kind. It is certainly more natural for us to say that we praise the successful fireman *for having actually saved someone*. We would not ordinarily say that he is morally commendable just for having heroically *tried* to save someone.



But imagine that the heroic efforts of the successful fireman had led to his success *only by chance*. Let us imagine, perhaps, that *after* the fireman had actually dropped the man, a safety net had *altogether fortuitously* been moved by those below to a position where it was situated to break the man's fall; and imagine further that the fireman himself had dropped the man *in the mistaken belief* that the net was *already* in such a position that the man he dropped would be saved. In that case, I think, we would be much less inclined to praise the successful fireman *for having succeeded* in saving someone. It would be clear to us that he was entitled to whatever moral praise he had earned not by his *success*, which we are imagining to have come about quite *fortuitously* and even (in virtue of his false belief concerning the position of the net at the time when he actually dropped the man) *contrary* to what he had reason to expect.

We would understand that he was entitled to moral praise just *for his heroic and selfless conduct*. That conduct was by no means fortuitous or adventitious, or a matter of chance. It consisted of actions that are attributable wholly and unequivocally to him personally, as his own doing.

The successful and the unsuccessful rescuers are entitled to exactly the same moral praise because both behaved in exactly the same morally commendable manner. The outcomes of their attempts differed very considerably in value, but the ways in which they conducted themselves did not differ in moral value at all. It would seem *irrational* to praise the *successful* rescuer *for his virtues of courage and of selfless concern for others* while refusing to award exactly similar praise to the *unsuccessful* rescuer, who displayed in his conduct the *very same* morally admirable characteristics.

The horrible outcome of the unsuccessful attempt does not *undermine* or *diminish* the moral worthiness of that attempt, because that outcome was not due to any *moral fault* or *deficiency* on the part of the person who made the attempt. It was not on account of any moral failing that he dropped the person he was trying to rescue. By the same token, the moral worthiness of the *successful* attempt is not *supported* or *enhanced* by its success, since that success was not achieved because some act or intention of the successful rescuer was morally creditable. Rather, its success depended upon various "external factors," such as the safety net being at a certain location at a certain time, for which the rescuer was in no way

responsible. So far as he was concerned, the presence of those external factors, and hence the success to which they contributed, was simply a matter of luck.

7. NAGEL INTRODUCES a second example of what he considers to be moral luck, which has to do with two reckless drivers. The drivers in the example are equally reckless, but only one of them does significant harm: he commits manslaughter, by running down a pedestrian. With respect to this example, Nagel observes that “there is a morally significant difference between reckless driving and manslaughter.”<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, as he points out, “whether a reckless driver hits a pedestrian depends on the presence of the pedestrian at the point where he recklessly passes a red light.”<sup>4</sup>

Now, so far as the drivers are concerned, it is clearly *just a matter of luck* whether a pedestrian happens to be present at that location. Therefore, Nagel concludes, it is just a matter of luck whether a driver turns out to commit manslaughter or whether he turns out to be guilty of nothing worse than reckless driving. The “morally significant difference” between a case of manslaughter and an instance of nothing worse than reckless driving is determined simply by luck.

To be sure, a legal system such as ours may have compelling reasons of its own for imposing far more severe penalties on a reckless driver who kills a pedestrian than on a reckless driver who causes no substantial harm. There is unquestionably a *legally* significant difference between reckless driving and manslaughter. But our law, while it seeks generally to be consistent with our moral understandings, is not exclusively concerned with morality. It is often more interested in determining who may appropriately be considered liable for *compensating victims*, or whom it may be appropriate to subject to *judicial punishment*, than it is interested in assigning *moral responsibility*, or in deciding whom it may be appropriate to regard as subject to praise or to blame. Thus, legal distinctions and provisions cannot reliably be presumed to settle what judgments of *moral* significance are correct.

My own moral judgment concerning this example is similar to my moral judgment concerning the previous example involving the two firemen. I do not believe that the difference

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3 Nagel, “Moral Luck,” 25.

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between the two drivers is *morally* significant. The fact that one committed manslaughter, while the other failed to do any harm, does not *in itself* imply any *moral* difference in them or in their conduct.

It is surely possible, and we may suppose that it was actually the case, that the recklessness of the two drivers was similarly intentional or similarly negligent, and that both drivers understood with equal clarity and conviction that driving recklessly might well result in someone's being killed. We may also suppose that the one driver, who had the *good luck* not to encounter a pedestrian, had *the same* or *as much* reason to expect that there might be a pedestrian at the *fateful location* as did the other driver, whose recklessness ended *unluckily* in manslaughter.

These suppositions entail that the morally relevant considerations that guided the two drivers were the same: the drivers were reckless in the same manner, and they had the same expectations concerning the outcome to which their recklessness might lead. It seems to me, then, that the moral guilt or moral innocence of the drivers must also be the same. Even though the one driver had the bad luck to kill someone, while the other driver had better luck and so did no harm, I can find no basis – given the suppositions I have made – for judging that there is a difference in the *moral liability* of the two drivers. If one of them is morally blameless or morally blameworthy in some degree, the same must be true of the other.

It seems to me that, in fact, the only offense for which either is morally culpable is the offense of *recklessly endangering the lives of others*. And for this offense, given my suppositions, the moral blameworthiness of each is exactly the same as that of the other. Just as in the case of the two firemen, the difference in the *outcomes* of their behavior reveals *nothing* either about the moral *character* of the two drivers or about their morally significant *impulses* and *inclinations* at the pertinent time.

The difference in the outcomes of their behavior was due entirely to an *external factor* – namely, the presence or absence of a pedestrian at a particular location – which was just a matter of luck. They were not in any way responsible for it. It was not their doing. What happened at that location has no implications at all, then, for moral judgments concerning them or concerning how they behaved.

Perhaps all this may be made even clearer by considering a variant of the example. So suppose again that the two drivers are equally reckless, and that one of them hits a pedes

trian. But now suppose that the pedestrian is not killed, but is merely knocked to the ground. And finally, imagine that the impact resulting from his fall alters the positions of certain of his vertebrae *beneficially* and thereby relieves him of a painful and disabling spinal deformity. Being knocked down does him no serious harm. On the contrary, it does him considerable *good*.

In that case, surely, the law would not consider the driver entitled to any reward. Nor would the fact that he had actually provided the pedestrian with a valuable benefit by hitting him be regarded as mitigating his legal or his moral liability for reckless driving. His bizarre good luck in the outcome of his behavior has no significant bearing upon what is appropriate either in the legal or in the moral assessment of his conduct. The fact that moral assessment is indifferent to the outcome of a person's behavior must surely be no less salient, and no less incontrovertible, when the outcome is harmful than when it is beneficial.

8. ALTHOUGH IT MAY BE entirely reasonable for our moral assessments of the two firemen – or of the two drivers – to be identical, the firemen and the drivers themselves will surely not *feel* the same, or *think* the same, about what they have done; nor would it be *reasonable* or *proper* for them to do so. Both the unsuccessful rescuer and the driver who committed manslaughter did clearly do something *bad*: namely, each caused a human death. It is equally obvious that the successful rescuer and the lucky driver did something *good*: each of them saved, or at least avoided destroying, a human life. In the case of the successful fireman, a mortal threat to an endangered person was overcome; and thus, *the world was made better*. In the case of the unsuccessful fireman, an endangered person, instead of being rescued, suffered a grotesque death; and by that event, *the world was made worse*. The driver who killed a pedestrian also made the world worse. On the other hand, the lucky driver did not make the world worse. He drove without causing any harm.

It is only to be expected that these manifest and radical differences between the cases will somehow be reflected in how each of the men responds to what he has done. We would expect the successful fireman to be quite proud of himself. He not only conducted himself with exemplary virtue. He also accomplished something unquestionably worthwhile: he saved a human life. The unsuccessful fireman, we are supposing, behaved just as virtuously – his courageous readiness to sacrifice himself for others was equally exemplary. He might per-

haps be moved by this, then, to award himself a bit of rather mordant satisfaction. However, his rescue efforts *failed*; and he actually *brought about a human death*. Recognizing that his conduct had this fateful outcome will certainly mitigate, and most likely it will *overwhelm*, whatever moments of self-congratulation he might otherwise be able to enjoy as he considers what he did. More or less similar considerations pertain to the two drivers.

This is certainly not to say that either the unsuccessful fireman or the unlucky driver *will*, or that he *should*, feel *guilty* or acknowledge any guilt for what he did. After all, neither was *morally* responsible for the death he caused. What they did in causing those deaths provides no basis whatever for unfavorable judgments of their *moral character*; nor does it provide any basis for condemnation of their morally significant transient impulses and inclinations.

9. ALTHOUGH THERE MAY BE NO good reason for either man to *think himself guilty* or to *feel guilty*, neither would it be reasonable for either to absolve himself completely of having behaved badly. It would be entirely reasonable, indeed, for each of them to acknowledge that he had done something for which he ought reasonably to *reproach himself*. But what sort of criticism, what sort of reproach, would this be? If not moral blame, or an acknowledgement of guilt – then what?

I think that what these men might especially be expected to feel is something like *embarrassment*. They will naturally have other feelings as well, of course; but if they understand their circumstances correctly, they will most particularly be embarrassed. Perhaps it may seem that embarrassment is not a sufficiently penetrating or portentous emotion to be suitable as a response to having killed someone or to having caused someone to die. It may strike us as too shallow to reflect at all adequately a person's recognition that he has brought about an immeasurable and irreparable harm. In fact, however, a feeling of embarrassment may be both deep and shattering. It need not be shallow or inconsequential. After all, embarrassment is closely related to *shame*; and feelings of shame may be quite devastating.

It is surely clear that a person may be embarrassed by, or may feel ashamed of, something that he did altogether inadvertently. To take a trivial example, these may be the very feelings that would be expected of someone who, in the midst of a formal dinner party, emits a loud and grossly offensive belch. Perhaps he really could not help himself. Let us assume, at any rate, that the belch was not voluntary, and that it was truly uncontrollable. Perhaps it



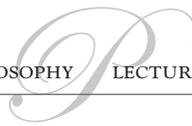
exploded from the person before he even noticed that it was coming; he may quite possibly have had no opportunity for taking effective measures to suppress it. Nevertheless, he will quite naturally – and, indeed, quite appropriately – chastise himself; and he will chastise himself *precisely* for *having failed* to notice that it was coming, and for *having failed* to suppress it.

People *should not* belch at formal dinners. Therefore, a person *should* be able to notice when belches are coming, and should be able to take effective measures to suppress them before they get away. A person who is not able to accomplish these things is *deficient*. To display this deficiency on a formal occasion may certainly be embarrassing, and it may well evoke even a feeling of shame in someone whose inability to behave properly has thus been publicly revealed.

No doubt both the unsuccessful rescuer and the driver who commits manslaughter will be *horrified* when they recognize what they have done. In this, however, their responses will be quite similar to the natural responses of *bystanders*, who did not participate in the events but who will also have been *horrified* by what they witnessed. Unlike the bystanders, however, the consciousness of each of the two men will include not only horror but also the thought that it was *he* who brought about the horror. Neither man can deny that it was *he* who made the fatality occur. The calamitous outcome of his behavior was brought about by what *he* did.

Despite the fact that he did not intend the outcome, and did not cause it deliberately, he cannot rationally adopt the attitude of a mere spectator towards what he did. He was *not* a passive and unengaged *bystander* to what happened, with no active or direct participation in its occurrence. The fact is that he was personally involved in bringing about what happened, even though what happened did not come about through any voluntary action on his part.

With respect to a person's internal bodily processes, such as metabolism or circulation of blood, the person is entirely passive. If the person happens to be aware of these processes at all, his or her awareness of them is very much that of a bystander who may know what is going on but who does not actively participate in bringing it about. The person is not engaged as an agent in what is going on. He or she is entirely detached from it, and performs no action that directly makes it occur. The circulation of the person's blood, and the processes of his or

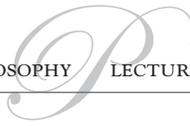


her metabolism, tell us nothing, therefore, about the person's particular character as an agent or about the person's individual identity as an active creature.

On the other hand, the inadvertent outcomes of what the unsuccessful fireman and the unlucky driver do reveal important features of their identities as agents. Those outcomes, precisely on account of their inadvertence, demonstrate how the driver and the fireman are *limited* in their abilities to function effectively as agents. They reveal points at which each, despite his best efforts, is incapable of avoiding or of overcoming the interference of external forces and thus of engaging competently in the management of events. Each is instead reduced, at these points, to watching helplessly as events *go along without him*. These points and limits are significant indicators of a person's identity as an agent, which would be masked if the person sought to detach himself entirely from the inadvertent outcomes of his behavior and to deny that his identity as an agent are truly implicated in them.

The limits or boundaries of a person's active capacities are essential to defining his or her shape as an agent. To an important extent, it is by discovering what a person *cannot* do that the person's identity as an agent is revealed. This discovery reaches a truth about the person that is, in fact, even deeper and more stubbornly real than any truths concerning what the person deliberately and voluntarily *wills*. This truth is a fixed and irreducible aspect of the person's nature, which cannot be altered by any mere voluntary exercise. Therefore, it is more decisively and inherently a feature of his reality than any occasional and transient configurations of his will.

Insofar as such a feature of his reality as an agent is implicated in disastrous behavior on his part, it is something of which he may understandably feel embarrassed. If it is implicated repeatedly in disastrous outcomes, or if it may reasonably be expected to be repeatedly so implicated, he may quite understandably feel not only *embarrassed* by its eruption into a current situation; he may feel even *ashamed* to be marked and tainted by it as someone who is generally unreliable in situations of a certain kind. He will recognize himself as a person who cannot be counted upon to emerge from situations of that kind without doing harm. He cannot be indifferent to this characteristic of himself, which is plainly a deficiency or an inadequacy on his part whether or not we regard it particularly as a *moral* deficiency or inadequacy. It means that he is liable to make the world worse when he encounters situations of the pertinent variety, and that the world is therefore worse for his being in it than it would



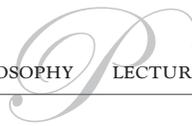
be if – other things being equal – there were no one in it with the dangerous inadequacy or deficiency that characterizes him.

Perhaps “embarrassment,” and even “shame,” are terms too weak to convey the natural response to themselves of people who are unable to avoid disastrous outcomes when they encounter a certain kind of bad luck. Perhaps a sharper focus here may be attained by considering an extreme case of a type of bad luck somewhat different than those already considered. Let us suppose, then, that a person is the carrier of a highly contagious and dreadful disease. Mere proximity to this person, even without any more intimate contact, is sufficient to lead to infection with a severely debilitating and often fatal illness. Let us say, moreover, that this person came to be a carrier of the disease through no fault of his or her own. It was entirely inadvertent that the person became a terrible threat to everyone around. It was just a matter of bad luck that the world became worse because of this particular person’s misfortune in acquiring the uncontrollable tendency to spread illness and death.

It would be almost a joke to suggest that this person would most appropriately, upon recognizing his or her toxicity, just feel embarrassed or just feel ashamed for being someone who could not help bringing such harm to others. I suppose that the person would naturally be *horrified*, would feel *helplessly discouraged* by the evident impossibility of keeping from doing wholesale harm, and might well *conclude* – even while acknowledging no *moral* responsibility at all for being so toxic – *that the world would be better off without him*. The toxicity is by no means his fault; but he certainly cannot pretend that it has nothing to do with him. However he may wish that this were not the case, he is a *poisonous creature*, who cannot avoid doing dreadful harm.

It would be grotesque to *punish* someone for being the carrier of an awful disease and thus a source of illness and death, assuming that it was no more than a matter of bad luck that led the person into this condition. On the other hand, it would surely be justifiable to recognize that the person is a threat to our well-being, and to protect ourselves from him even at some considerable cost to himself.

The situation is similar, I believe, to others with respect to which we ordinarily do not agree that evaluations of people, by others or by themselves, are warranted. There are certain individuals who are exceptionally good-looking, or exceptionally intelligent, or who possesses some notable artistic or athletic skill. In virtue of these characteristics, they make the



world better: it is a pleasure to look at them, or to watch them as they excel in sports, or to enjoy the benefits that they provide by making use of their brains and their talents. So it is natural for us to value them and to praise them for their endowments, even though it is just a matter of good luck that they possess them.

It makes just as much sense for them to be proud of themselves in virtue of possessing those endowments, even though they did nothing to create or to earn them. It seems to me that they are as much entitled to be pleased with and proud of themselves on account of the benefits that good luck has enabled them to provide, as it is proper for the disease carrier to be horrified at himself and to feel ashamed on account of being someone who inadvertently – as a result just of bad luck – causes widespread harm.

It would be a kind of lunacy for the disease carrier to deny any responsibility for the harm he causes. He plays an active role – though not one for which he is morally responsible – in making the world worse. It would be comparably insane for individuals with better luck to deny their roles – albeit roles they are not morally responsible for playing or for being able to play – in making the world better. In either case, there would be a refusal to acknowledge the palpable reality that certain effects in the world are *due to us*. We are responsible for them as their cause, even though we do not intend them. They accrue to our credit or to our blame, though not to our moral credit or moral blame. There may be something about ourselves of which we may appropriately feel proud, or something about which we may appropriately be ashamed; and this may not be due to anything we have deliberately brought about. It may be the result of nothing more than our having been cursed by bad luck or blessed by luck that was good.

## References

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