



Gerald Lang: Strokes of Luck: A Study in Moral and Political Philosophy

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In the first half of *Strokes of Luck* (Chaps. 1–5), Gerald Lang argues that moral luck plays an intelligible and indispensable role in our moral responsibility practices. In the second half (Chaps. 6–8), he critically discusses the role of luck in contemporary political philosophy. I here mainly focus on the first half.

Lang’s starting point is that worldly outcomes matter morally (pp. 21, 47). Indeed, malicious intentions, recklessness or negligence make an agent blameworthy because of their potential worldly consequences (p. 57). Maliciously intending to assassinate someone is bad because it typically leads to harmful consequences, such as the target being killed. But why should it make a difference to blameworthiness whether, on a particular occasion, the malicious intent causes harm rather than not, given that this is beyond the agent’s control? In other words: Why accept resultant moral luck?

Lang’s answer has two prongs. In Chap. 3, he argues that by merely having and deciding to act on a malicious intention, the agent makes herself “*consequentially* liable” to be blamed in proportion to the badness of the consequences (p. 100). In light of this, is not unfair to blame the successful assassin more than the unsuccessful one. While the agent lacks control of whether her assassination attempt is successful, she does control whether she at all attempts to do what she is morally obliged to avoid doing. In acting against morality, she thereby makes the worldly outcomes that she brings about relevant to her degree of blameworthiness.

As Lang points out, this reasoning is only applicable to cases where bad outcomes make a difference to agents’ *blameworthiness*. It does not deliver the result that a sniper who successfully shoots a bullet through a hangman’s rope, thereby intentionally saving the person that is about to be hung, is more praiseworthy than a sniper who misses due to no fault of her own, resulting in the person’s death. In such contrast cases, both did what they were morally obliged to do and for the right reasons. Hence, unlike in the blameworthiness cases, it would

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violate “Ought Implies Can” if we treated the unlucky unsuccessful sniper differently than the lucky successful sniper (pp. 93–95). The unsuccessful sniper could complain that she is no less deserving of praise than the successful one.

The idea of consequential liability answers to an anti-luckist intuition that it is *unfair* to treat the successful and the unsuccessful assassins differently, but it does not respond to the anti-luckist intuition that consequences outside the agent’s control are *irrelevant* to the moral evaluation of the agent. This brings us to the second prong of Lang’s answer. This is an externalist theory of the moral badness of “culpable” mental states (presented in Chap. 2). While the anti-luckist claims that the successful and the unsuccessful assassins are equally blameworthy because the mental states and the extent of their control are identical, Lang argues that the disvalue of these mental states are not identical. It is not only the general tendency of a type of culpable mental state to cause harm which determines the moral badness of a particular token of that type, but the actual harm caused by the token mental state partly determines how bad that state is. Its disvalue does not only depend on internal bodily going-ons but also on its actual consequences, external to the agent’s skull and skin. Hence, the successful assassin’s malicious intent will be morally worse than the unsuccessful assassin’s malicious intent. Lang’s externalism thereby bridges the gap between our practice of *blaming* being sensitive to resultant luck and the status of *the agent’s blameworthiness* itself being sensitive to luck.

For Lang, this externalism is restricted to culpable mental states; it does not apply to morally admirable mental states. This is because Lang thinks that there is no “normative mechanism” that can play the role analogous to consequential liability in cases where agents are praiseworthy (p. 102). It is thus consequential liability that is doing the heavy lifting in Lang’s argument.

The asymmetry between blameworthiness and praiseworthiness may strike some as problematically counterintuitive, but others may accept it as an intriguing discovery. I suspect, however, that Lang’s externalism is an idle wheel. Without it, Lang thinks he has to fall back on the view that while the successful and the unsuccessful assassin are equally bad agents, their *acts* nevertheless differ in degree of blameworthiness. I agree that this strategy is problematic since judgements of blameworthiness “attach fundamentally to *agents*.” (p. 60) But pro-luckists can arguably avoid it by emphasising that a blameworthiness judgement is a complex judgement that assesses an agent in terms of how her quality of will relates to or explains a bad action or outcome. This leaves room for the judgement to be influenced appropriately by both internal and external factors. It is therefore unclear whether Lang’s externalism is needed. If one thinks that blameworthiness *solely* tracks an agent’s manifested “quality of will”, then Lang’s externalism is perhaps necessary, but it is not clear why pro-luckists should be committed to such a *pure* quality of will view (nor is it clear whether Lang is committed to such a view).

What about Lang’s arguments against anti-luckists? In Chap. 3, he applies insights from Susan Hurley’s work on luck egalitarianism to argue that when anti-luckists equalize the blameworthiness of agents in two contrasting cases—such as that involving the reckless driver who kills and the one who drives home without harm—they eliminate resultant moral luck only by tacitly relying on another kind of moral luck. They make the blameworthiness of one agent depend on the blameworthiness of the other, which is clearly outside her individual control. It must therefore be a matter of moral luck, namely “*fate-sharing* luck” (p. 89). As Lang points out, the appropriate level of blameworthiness for drunk driving will

presumably depend on “the general track record of drunken car journeys and the fatalities which ensue from them.” (p. 90).

This argument is effective against those who base their anti-luckism on the idea that the degree to which an agent is blameworthy can only be affected by what is in her control, and who think that our blameworthiness judgements can, at least in principle, be cleansed of the illegitimate influences of luck. However, it does not seem effective against a more limited anti-luckism restricted to denying resultant moral luck. Such limited anti-luckism can be grounded in the idea “that our moral appraisals are ultimately concerned with the quality of will displayed by agents” (p. 36). On such a view, there will be some standard that determines whether the drunk driver’s manifested quality of will is bad—that is, whether his risk-taking is acceptable or counts as an instance of recklessness. This standard will be determined by general track record and will be outside the control of the driver. But on the quality of will view, control is only indirectly significant insofar as it establishes a connection between an agent’s quality of will and her behaviour or its outcome. The view is thus compatible with fate-sharing moral luck. Similarly, in Chap. 4, Lang convincingly shows how Michael Zimmerman’s control principle-based anti-luckism is likely to lead to a thoroughgoing scepticism about moral responsibility. But this argument is not effective against the quality of will-based denial of resultant moral luck, which is compatible with both circumstantial and constitutive moral luck.

This is not a major oversight though. I recommend the first four chapters (along with two appendices) to anyone interested in the moral luck-debate. Lang’s discussion is rich and stimulating, and his argumentation is compelling overall. The positive two-pronged account constitutes a sophisticated and innovative defence of resultant moral luck. In Chap. 4, Lang also makes interesting points in favour of accepting circumstantial moral luck. The fifth chapter focuses on exegetical issues regarding Bernard Williams’s work on moral luck. While this is interesting in its own right, it is, as Lang acknowledges, largely disconnected from the rest of the book.

The book’s second half is shorter and less cohesive than the tightly interwoven treatment of moral luck in the book’s first part. In Chap. 6, Lang convincingly argues that a purely luck-neutralizing egalitarianism will either fail to make distributions sensitive to individuals’ choices, or fail to favour an egalitarian rather than an inegalitarian distribution of resources. In Chap. 7, Lang offers a revised and (as far as I am aware) novel interpretation of John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*, according to which the distribution of morally arbitrary natural or social endowments should not be neutralized, but are rather simply irrelevant when principles of justice are chosen behind the veil of ignorance. In Chap. 8, Lang then uses this account to, among other things, reject an argument against non-cosmopolitanism about justice. This half of the book will be of great interest to those working on luck egalitarianism or Rawls’s theory of justice.

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