

Beyond the Limits of Control: On Education, Moral Luck, and Responsibility

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In her essay, Ann Chinnery rightly argues that educational philosophers should start thinking more seriously and systematically about the role of luck in education in general, and in moral education in particular. By eloquently discussing the different ways in which morality is affected by luck, and by connecting these to real-world examples, she sets us in the right direction. What Chinnery suggests is that education must find ways to reduce the influence of luck, and especially constitutive luck (the luck that affects the sort of person one is), on life. This seems to me a valuable suggestion that is well in line with how we commonly perceive the role of education and worthy, therefore, of being pursued. We must not forget, however — and Chinnery is aware of this — that there is a limit to our ability to control luck's influence, and that we could never utterly eliminate it.¹ The question, then, remains as to how educators should deal with the influence of constitutive luck on moral behavior.

Suppose, for example, that there is a school bully who suffered from bad constitutive luck, namely, his bullying seems to be a direct result of his upbringing or some other cause such as ADHD. As Chinnery argues, it is our duty to try to mitigate the effects of his bad constitutive luck, but what if we fail? Should we treat him, then, differently from a bully who did not share the same constitutive bad luck? Should we even hold him accountable for his behavior? After all, it seems unfair to blame him for what is apparently beyond his control.

I can think of at least two good reasons why educators should hold such a bully accountable in their educational response. The first is that education, like law, is guided by a set of normative considerations of which culpability is just one.² We may, for example, decide that although the bully is not to be morally blamed for his behavior, in order to achieve desired educational goals, he should be held accountable for it. For example, he could be punished in order to protect his classmates, to prevent the behavior from recurring, or to set him on a path of moral improvement by making him realize that his acts are unacceptable.

The second reason why the bully should be held accountable is that we do not possess perfect knowledge and can never know for sure to what extent the bully is truly to blame for his bullying. This is especially true when dealing with constitutive luck, since it involves innumerable factors. While, on the one hand, this means that we should be extremely cautious when attributing blame, it also means that we should be careful when clearing persons of blame. Unless we hold that a person's character is not at all of his own making, a position that seems untenable from an educational perspective, we can attribute at least some degree of blame to the bully for his actions.³ This, I realize, is controversial and potentially opens a door to unjust ascription of blame. Yet, it seems wrong to completely disregard the bully's actions,

which are an important indication of who he is, simply because we are unable to determine to what extent they are of his own making.⁴ The proper solution, in my estimation, would be to embrace, out of a recognition of the limits of our knowledge, a lenient position rather than a strict one when ascribing blame.

The fact, I have claimed, that a person's character or behavior is influenced by luck must not prevent us from holding him accountable for it in our educational response, but should he be held *morally* accountable for it? If we were somehow able to establish that the bully's actions directly resulted from his constitutive luck, should we treat him as morally blameworthy? On the one hand, as noted by Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel in their classic essays on moral luck, in practice we often morally blame or praise people for things beyond their control.⁵ We do not assign equal blame to a drunk driver who has killed a person and another who has not, even if the only thing standing between the two is sheer luck. On the other hand, it appears unreasonable, especially for educators who have been entrusted with furthering the good of the child, to blame a pupil for what is beyond her control. Should we embrace, then, the notion of moral luck and, following common practice, hold pupils morally responsible under certain circumstances for that which is beyond their control, or should we reject this practice for being educationally unjustifiable?

In the philosophical literature there is wide-ranging debate regarding the existence of moral luck.⁶ The question facing those concerned with education, however, is slightly different. As educators, we must ask ourselves not whether there is moral luck, but whether we should act *as if* there is moral luck and sometimes hold pupils morally responsible for what seems to be beyond their control. The case against such a position is fairly clear. As Chinnery, following Ronald Glass, notes, blaming students for what is beyond their control is not only unjust but also helps to perpetuate social injustices.⁷ But do educators have reasons, which go beyond social conventions, to act as if there is moral luck? If I understand Chinnery correctly, she thinks we do. She writes that we should not reject "the notion of constitutive luck as a morally relevant factor in a human life." She does not, however, substantiate this claim, and, in the short space I have left, I would like to propose one argument in defense of this position.

By acting as if there is moral luck and holding pupils morally responsible for what seems to be beyond their control, a powerful moral message is conveyed. As Margaret Urban Walker argues, the acceptance of moral luck "expresses a substantive view about the conditions under which we should see ourselves and others responsible for actions and their outcomes."⁸ When acting as if there is moral luck, educators demand that pupils should take moral responsibility for their actions and their consequences even when these are beyond their direct control. As Walker notes, the embracement of moral luck commits us to the view that "responsibilities outrun control."⁹ Returning to the bully, in acting as if there is moral luck, the educator clarifies that even if the bully's behavior is not within his own control, he must see himself as morally responsible for it and, therefore, not only feel regret for his actions, but also work to make amends and try to change his ways. Since we live in a nonideal world in

which luck has a deep influence on our actions and their repercussions, conveying to students the message that their moral responsibility extends beyond those areas in which they have direct control seems to me a worthy educational ideal.

In conclusion, the existence of constitutive luck should not prevent educators from holding their pupils accountable for their actions. I have also suggested that since the notion of moral luck can help to support what seems to be a worthy educational ideal, we sometimes ought to hold pupils morally responsible for what their constitutive luck has led them to do. Let me be clear, however. I am not arguing that educators must always act as if there is moral luck. The disadvantages of acting in such way may very well outweigh its benefits. In deciding whether to act as if there is moral luck, we must consider the specific educational situation in which we find ourselves. Furthermore, we must remain vigilant about the role of luck in shaping our pupils' characters and actions. What may be true for a class of marginalized or oppressed pupils may not be equally true for a class of privileged youth. What I suggest is that we not categorically reject the idea that educators should sometimes act as if moral luck existed.

1. Nicholas Rescher, "Moral Luck," in *Moral Luck*, ed. Daniel Statman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 141–166.

2. David Enoch, "Moral Luck and the Law," *Philosophy Compass* 5, no. 1 (2010): 42–54.

3. See Norvin Richards, "Luck and Desert," *Mind* 95, no. 378 (1986): 198–209.

4. Brian Rosebury, "Moral Responsibility and 'Moral Luck,'" *The Philosophical Review* 104, no. 4 (1995): 499–524.

5. Bernard A. O. Williams, "Moral Luck," *Proceeding of the Aristotelian Society* 50 (1976): 115–135; Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck," *Proceeding of the Aristotelian Society* 50 (1976): 137–151.

6. For a good summary of the arguments for and against moral luck, see David Enoch, "Moral Luck," in *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, ed. Hugh LaFollette (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

7. See also: Ronald D. Glass, "Left Behind Once Again: What's Luck Got to Do with Current Education Policies and Practices?" in *Philosophy of Education 2006*, ed. Daniel Vokey (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2007), 354–363.

8. Margaret Urban Walker, "Moral Luck and the Virtues of Impure Agency," *Metaphilosophy* 22, no. 1/2 (1991): 17.

9. *Ibid.*, 19.