

Standard Bearers

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Sadly, sadly, the sun rose; it rose upon no sadder sight than the man of good abilities and good emotions, incapable of their directed exercise, incapable of his own help and his own happiness, sensible of the blight on him, and resigning himself to let it eat him away.
Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

The worst cynicism: a belief in luck.
Joyce Carol Oates, *Do What You Will*

1. 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 [is] moral luck” (Nagel, 26).
2. Kant: “[E]ven if it should happen that, by a particularly unfortunate fate or by the stinting provision of a remorseless Nature, th[e] will should be wholly lacking in power to accomplish its purpose...it would sparkle like a jewel in its own right, as something that had its full worth in itself.”
3. Nagel: “[I]t is intuitively plausible that people cannot be morally assessed...for what is due to factors beyond their control...when we blame someone for his actions we are not merely saying it is bad that they happened, or bad that he exists: we are judging him, saying he is bad, which is different from his being a bad thing.”
4. But, also: A father is running up the stairs, realizing that he negligently left the bath running with the baby in it— “[I]f the baby has drowned one has done something awful, whereas if it has not one has merely been careless.” [I think it’s relevant that this case apparently involves *omission*: but we won’t investigate that here.]
5. Williams: whether Gauguin was wrong depended on whether he would succeed, and while this latter condition excludes what is external to “the project,” it is nevertheless not entirely in the agent’s own control.
6. J.J. Thomson extracts Nagel’s “Weak Result: Whatever we do, our doing of it is no more to our discredit than are those purely mental acts by which we do it.” The ultimate result is to “pare down each act to its morally essential core, an inner act of pure will assessed by motive and intention” (Nagel, 32). But Adam Smith long ago observed that “when we come to particular cases, the actual consequences which happen to proceed from any action have a very great effect upon our sentiments concerning its merit or demerit.”
7. Nagel sums up: “The problem arises, I believe, because the self [that] 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. . . . 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.”
8. “Once we see an aspect of what we or someone else does as something that happens, we lose our grip on the idea that it has been done and that *we can judge the doer and not just the happening*.”
9. Sometimes, but not always, we have a true belief that has a certain important further epistemic status, and thus it constitutes a bit of knowledge on our part. Must duplicates’ beliefs be alike in respect of this status?
10. Hume said, “[f]rom this circumstance alone, that a controversy has been long kept on foot, and remains still undecided, we may presume that there is some ambiguity in the expression, and that the disputants affix

different ideas to the terms employed in the controversy” (*Enquiry*). A first sign that the concept in dispute here may not be univocal appears when we ask what the *bearers* of a normative *standard* might be.

11. What sorts of thing can be justified? In ethics we are concerned with what it is for S to be justified in doing A intentionally; and in epistemology, we are concerned with the justification of S’s belief. The agent is justified *in* intending or believing as they do. Normative status is instantiated, apparently, by a complex containing an agent and their intention or belief. The distinction we’re tracking is in this way minimized: whether it is bad that they so acted intentionally is a function of what they are like and what they are like is, in systematic ways, revealed in the intentions from which they act. (Correspondingly for epistemic evaluations.)

12. Orcutt as a spy is sneaky. And Orcutt as a pillar of the community is forthright. How’s Orcutt himself? Maybe it’s hard to say. But maybe not. Maybe Orcutt’s forthrightness is a put on, a political maneuver. That’s not what he’s really like. Or maybe it’s rather his sneakiness that’s affected—a prerequisite of his spooking.

13. A natural further thought is that even otherwise good people who do bad things are bad “in that” (or insofar as, or inasmuch as) they did those bad things. And otherwise bad epistemic subjects who come by some knowledge are at least, it seems, epistemically good in that they have that belief. Doesn’t this eliminate any residual significance for the distinction between possible objects of evaluation, possible bearers of standards—the agent on one hand and the agent’s intention or belief on the other? Isn’t the goodness of the agent after all crucially interdependent with the goodness of her intentional actions?

14. Forrest Gump famously said, “Stupid is as stupid does,” effectively encapsulating the popular view I aim to challenge here. A large part of the appeal of the Gump phenomenon—as well as that of Mr. Magoo, the notoriously myopic cartoon character from the 1960’s and 70’s—is the *systematic* breakdown between what they are really like and what they achieve through intentional action.

15. Suppose the evil demon were “modally robust”: even had the possible world in which the demon operates differed in ever so many ways, the demon would still have operated.

16. When we focus on the agent as an independent locus of ethical or epistemic status, it becomes hard to conceive what is not in the relevant sense in her as threatening that status. But correspondingly, a belief that were the agent to have it would be true has an important positive evaluative status; *it’s* good in a way, no matter what might be said of its subject.

17. *The New Evil Demon problem is the problem of moral luck reframed for epistemology.* And Norman and Mr. Truetemp (Gump and Magoo for the epistemic set) raise effectively the same issues, if in the opposite direction. The approach developed here proceeds from scepticism about the univocity of the normative concepts in play. There is the status that *agents* can sometimes have that we describe in saying that the agent is good or justified. But there is also, quite differently, the status that *intentions* or *beliefs* can sometimes have that we describe in saying that the intentional action was a good thing to have done, or that the belief is a good one to have—that it will constitute knowledge.

18. Intentional action, and belief, *can* be evaluated with respect to agent-centered normative status. And agents *can* be (and often are) evaluated with respect to state-centered normative status. That’s partly because our world does not contain systematically ethically- or epistemically-deceptive demons: fortune does not in fact disfavor us so especially, nature provides rather richly. In our world, whether you are good and whether what you do is

good are, as a matter of fact, well correlated; correspondingly for the epistemic case. But your goodness and that of your intentional action, or belief, are metaphysically independent, as the thought experiments reveal.

19. Internalist foundationalism and coherentism need not conflict with externalist reliabilism. Epistemically good agents, agents with their mind in good epistemic order, have a kind of excellence that they hold in isolation from any possible external contingency. That sort of excellence is to be distinguished from the feature on which reliabilism focuses: some beliefs track the truth. My epistemic status in fake barn country is problematic in that my belief and its truth are insufficiently intimate. The relevant intimacy, when it obtains, is a modal articulation of the belief's actual truth; and while everyone is an externalist about truth, the reliabilist, extending this externalism into modal space, finds epistemic excellence in a more stable connection to the truth.

20. The structure of the problem of Moral Luck and of the New Evil Demon exposes an internalist/externalist tension in our normative thought. A solution is to distinguish the *bearers* of normative *standards*. Duplicates are necessarily good or bad alike—that's a categorical quality. But their intentions and beliefs can differ in status—that status is relational. *Anyone can get lucky; but there's no such thing as being lucky.*

21. An issue arises in connection with the concept of *skill* that figures in virtue theories epistemic and ethical: a skilled performance requires a kind of *co-operation*, of the skilled and the skill. Aristotle thinks of good living a bit like that. But is the virtue-theoretic combination of the internal element and the external in any important sense normatively more than the sum of its parts? Those parts, however compatible, are too different for their conceptual combination to be anything but incoherent.

22. Virtuous agency expresses a kind of normative excellence. To have the sort of mind virtuous agents have is a way for agents to be good. And the sorts of intentional action or belief the virtuous agent intends or affirms may instantiate various values. But the epistemic goodness of good subjects is a far, far different sort from the goodness of a good belief. And production of the latter by the former cannot create a new circumstance on the normative scene.

23. The goodness of the good agent is internal in the following sense: nothing can be a duplicate of that agent without sharing her excellence. And the goodness of the good belief is not internal: the very same belief, even should it be true, held by a duplicate subject, might "lack the capacity to carry out its purpose" (another Kantianism) so that its *truth* might be an accident. Remember the barns—and, worse, the demon. Sometimes, Dickens appreciated, the man of "good abilities" may be unable to avoid to "the blight on him."

24. To lump together into the notion of a *skilled performance* both varieties of goodness is to produce a causally-mediated conjunction with pretensions to coherence that cannot be satisfied.

25. We began with moral luck. That perennial philosophical issue dramatizes a contrast between varieties of normativity. One attractive way to accommodate the apparent bifurcation in our normative thought is to align it with a metaphysical difference between bearers of normative status. Conscious subjects are apt for a distinctive sort of normative evaluation—to which nothing other than a subject can aspire. Other phenomena (such as beliefs and intentions) are nevertheless still evaluable along another sort of dimension (a dimension that can then be exploited to construct *another*, derivative, evaluation of subjects too). We thus gain understanding. Much of the clash between competing theories of normativity, in both epistemology and in ethics, can accordingly be quieted.