COMMON-SENSE VIRTUE ETHICS AND MORAL LUCK

Accepted: 27 April 2005

ABSTRACT. Moral luck poses a problem for our conception of responsibility because it highlights a tension between morality and lack of control. Michael Slote’s common-sense virtue ethics claims to avoid this problem. However, there are a number of objections to this claim. Firstly, it is not clear that Slote fully appreciates the problem posed by moral luck. Secondly, Slote’s move from the moral to the ethical is problematic. Thirdly, it is not clear why we should want to abandon judgements of moral blame in favour of judgements of ethical deplorability. Finally, this paper defends an alternative solution to the problem of moral luck, which focuses on judgements of probability, but which has been rejected by Slote.

KEY WORDS: common-sense virtue ethics, ethical luck, Michael Slote, moral luck, responsibility, virtue ethics

The possibility of moral luck poses a problem for our judgements of responsibility, as it highlights the tension between on the one hand morality, which is about control, choice, responsibility and the appropriateness of praise and blame and on the other hand luck, which is about lack of control, unpredictability and the inappropriateness of praise and blame. Cases of moral luck are cases where a crucial element of the act was outside the agent’s control and at the same time we still want to hold the agent responsible for it. If luck affects morality then it also poses problems for our notions of equality and justice. A moral theory that avoids or resolves the problem of moral luck avoids the tension between morality and luck, and can also lay claim to a strong and pure notion of responsibility. Michael Slote claims that his account of common-sense virtue ethics can avoid the problem of moral luck, specifically that:

...a non-moral virtue ethics can avoid the paradox and contradiction that arises in common-sense morality with respect to moral luck, and we have attempted to do this by showing how a virtue ethics that avoids both specifically moral concepts and common-sense or other moral judgements can safely accommodate itself to luck or accident, that is, to their partial role in determining what virtue-ethical attributions apply or fail to apply. (Slote, 1992, p. 124)

The term ‘moral luck’ and the problems it creates for our understanding of responsibility was introduced to modern moral philosophy by Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel.
This paper argues that Slote’s attempt to make his moral theory immune to luck is, at best, only partly successful. To show why this is so I will make a distinction between different kinds of moral luck and will then examine two features of Slote’s theory with respect to moral luck.

**DIFFERENT KINDS OF MORAL LUCK**

For the purposes of this discussion there are three different kinds of moral luck: constitutive luck, developmental luck and resultant luck. A similar distinction occurs in Nagel (1979), who distinguishes between constitutive, situational, resultant and antecedent luck. For the purposes of this paper, situational luck has been subsumed under the wider concept of developmental luck. This is because, as I have argued elsewhere (Athanassoulis, 2000), situational luck can be seen as a particular instance of developmental luck, i.e. the kinds of moral tests we face go towards shaping our moral character. Developmental luck then is a wider category including all influences which go towards shaping who we become. The possibility of antecedent luck is not discussed in this paper.

Constitutive luck affects who we are, the raw-material we are born with. Our talents, abilities, pre-dispositions, etc. are all affected by luck in that they are part of our nature and not under our control. Thus, some people are born with natural tendencies to be kind, charitable, affectionate, etc. whereas others are naturally irascible, cowardly, mean, etc.

Who we are when we are born may only be one factor, whereas many factors go towards making us who we become as we grow up. Developmental luck affects the factors which go towards the development of our moral characters. Teachers, role-models, opportunities for exercise, habits, the situations one comes across etc. all go towards shaping our moral characters and although the influence of such factors is crucial, their availability and quality are not under our control.

Resultant luck relates to the results of our actions. Luck affects the results of our actions, so that the consequences of our acts can be other than those intended solely because of factors outside our control. For example, two men intend to kill their respective victims, pick up their guns, point them at their victims and pull the trigger. One man is ‘successful’ in what he set out to do, i.e. he kills his victim, but the other man’s gun jams and he is prevented from killing his intended victim. One man is a murderer whereas the other is an attempted murderer due to luck.

**SLOTE ON MORAL LUCK**

Slote’s common-sense virtue ethics develops around two ideas which are relevant to this discussion: the first is the idea of an ‘agent based theory’