

Reading Guide Philosophical Puzzles

Readings for 3 March 2011

READINGS (REQUIRED)

[A] “Moral Luck” by Thomas Nagel (1976/1979), as reprinted in Gendler, Siegel and Cahn, eds. *The Elements of Philosophy: Readings from Past and Present*, pp. 208-216.

[B] “Ducking Harm” by Christopher Boorse and Roy A. Sorensen. *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 85, No. 3 (Mar., 1988), pp. 115-134.

[A] “Moral Luck” by Thomas Nagel.

Background

Thomas Nagel (1937 -) is a highly-respected American philosopher who teaches philosophy and law at New York University. His philosophical interests include philosophy of mind, ethics, political philosophy, as well as general questions about what renders a human life fulfilling. He is renowned for the clarity of his thought and the accessibility of his writing.

The paper we are reading is self-standing essay published in a 1979 collection of Nagel’s papers entitled *Mortal Questions*; it a slightly modified version of his 1976 essay of the same name, which he published in response to a paper on by Bernard Williams (from whose work we read a selection last week.) In it, Nagel explores our perplexing tendency to assign moral praise or blame to subjects on the basis of outcomes that lie beyond their control, despite our explicit insistence that these outcomes are morally irrelevant.

Terms, Concepts and Examples

Be sure that you understand and are able to distinguish among the following:

Terms and Concepts: Constitutive luck, circumstantial luck, resultant luck, and causal luck

Examples: reckless driver, attempted murder, historical examples, baby in the bathtub, citizens of Nazi Germany

Reading Questions

As you read through the selection, keep in mind the following questions:

- (1) What does Nagel say is the fundamental problem of moral responsibility? How does the phenomenon of moral luck demonstrate a conflict between particular moral judgments and a general principle of responsibility?

- (2) Why does Nagel think that we cannot resolve the problem by declaring that either our particular judgments or our principle of responsibility is mistaken?

[B] “Ducking Harm” by Christopher Boorse and Roy A. Sorensen.

Background

Roy Sorensen is a contemporary philosopher who teaches at Washington University in St. Louis. His interests are philosophy of language, epistemology, and metaphysics. Christopher Boorse is a contemporary philosopher of language and science who teaches at the University of Delaware.

“Ducking Harm” explores a series of cases that demonstrate a potentially puzzling distinction in our moral judgments about the permissibility of acts with identical consequences. In each pair of cases, an agent avoids being harmed while a bystander suffers harm. The cases differ only in the manner in which the agent manages to avoid the harm.

Passages to focus on/passages to skim

- Please read sections I and II in full.
- You may skim or skip section III (unless you are planning to go to Law School.)
- Please read sections IV and V in full.

Terms, Concepts and Examples

Be sure that you understand and are able to distinguish among the following:

Terms and Concepts: ducking vs. shielding (sacrificing), act vs. omission

Examples: Alex, Bruce and the bear; Angela, Brenda and the gunman; Arthur, Brian and the runaway truck; Alison, Beatrice, Babette and the terrorists; Arnold, Ben and the sinking boats; A, his car, the child and the rock

Reading Questions:

As you read through the selection, keep in mind the following questions:

- (1) What is the problem that Sorensen and Boorse see in our judgments about the relative morality of ducking and shielding? That is, what assumption underlies the claim that the difference in our judgments is puzzling or problematic?
- (2) What are the factors that have been shown to influence our judgments of the relative morality of ducking/shielding cases? Are any of these morally defensible distinctions?
- (3) What are the six solutions that Sorensen and Boorse consider and reject? What is their conclusion?
- (4) Why do you think this article is being assigned in conjunction with Nagel’s “Moral Luck?”

[posted 2/26/11]