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Religious luck and religious virtue

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Abstract: **Following Linda Zagzebski's discussion of the paradoxical implications of moral luck for Christian morality, I explore the role of religious luck in two accounts of divine election – that of Paul the Apostle and that of the sixteenth-century Jewish thinker, Rabbi Judah Loeb of Prague. On both accounts, special religious status is conferred unrelated to the deserts of the beneficiary. What sense does it make to ascribe religious worth to someone if it simply came his way? Both accounts appeal to the notion of religious virtue to answer this question. On Rabbi Judah's account, like ethical virtues, religious virtues inhere within the essence of their bearer and thus belong to him necessarily; on Paul's they are accidental, a matter of luck. Thus Paul's account, more than Rabbi Judah's, suffers from the paradox troubling Zagzebski.**

We talk of luck when we take ourselves to be affected, be it for good or for ill, by factors which lie substantially outside our control. What happens to us by luck is not what we do or make through our own agency – it is what just *happens*.[1] To speak of luck in this way makes no claim as to the nature or source of the factors which usurp, as it were, our control – whether they are, for example, genetically or metaphysically determined, the actions of a fellow human being, or simply a product of blind chance. Luck, so construed, is not an epistemic phenomenon. Even if we were to know precisely by what forces and how we are affected, insofar as this knowledge would not afford us control over those forces, our condition would remain a matter of luck.

This is the notion of luck that lies at the root of the controversy over moral luck initiated by Thomas Nagel and Bernard Williams.[2] Nagel points to different ways in which luck intrudes itself into our lives and calls attention to the pervasiveness of its effects on ourselves, our actions, and their consequences. The problem of moral luck arises because it seems to make no sense to praise or blame someone for performing an action if a significant aspect of what happens, in the performance, or as a result of it, does not happen because of him. We feel that one's moral responsibility should not extend beyond the limits of one's control.

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In the wake of the debate set off by Nagel and Williams, Linda Zagzebski explores the implications of moral luck for Christian morality.[3] According to Zagzebski, Christian ethics is troubled by problems of moral luck in much the same way as is secular ethics, and in certain respects more acutely, because it must accommodate the doctrines of grace and eternal heaven and hell. Noting that Christian teaching is divided as to the extent to which the gift of grace is unrelated to the efforts made by the recipient, Zagzebski underscores what is common to the different Christian views – that the offer of grace is never wholly under the control of the beneficiary, that it is in every case, in some sense, an unearned gift from God. Yet, although it is at least in part a matter of luck, grace affects people's moral worth, on some views, and according to many, determines their everlasting reward and punishment.

Under the rubric of religious luck, Zagzebski restricts herself to the implications of one's lack of control specifically over one's moral status. The Christian notion of grace figures in her study as a factor which further erodes the agent's control over his moral worth and desert. Within religious thought, however, the idea that God freely bestows His favour, without reference to the recipient's deeds or efforts, also pertains to status that is not specifically moral. God, in the Bible, singles out Abraham, prefers Jacob over Esau, and designates Israel as the chosen nation. Not only in Christian, but also in Jewish thought, there is a tradition which regards these and others of God's choices as independent of anything the chosen did or tried to do. Nevertheless, being singled out by God confers special religious standing upon the beneficiary; Abraham is regarded as the fitting father of a great nation, Jacob worthy of carrying on his line, and the people of Israel are acknowledged as God's chosen people.

More commonly, leaders, prophets, and teachers are venerated as religious or spiritual heroes, often on the assumption that their achievements are due to circumstances beyond their control. Their qualities, such as faith, compassion, generosity, and patience are held up as religious virtues even though these virtues may be regarded as outright gifts from God. While morality, as many understand it, entails the logical impossibility of God's bestowing moral excellence as an outright gift, on some ways of thinking, God grants religious distinction gratuitously.

Although the issue of control is not the same for religious thought as it is for morality, objects of religious appraisal, like those of moral assessment, include human beings, whose identity and worthiness are bound up with their autonomy. Thus, as is the case with moral status, the notion of God conferring religious status without reference to deeds or efforts is perplexing. We may distinguish two aspects of the problem:

(1) *Attribution*: On the assumption that being chosen or favoured by God is not in the hands of the recipient, is unconnected to what the recipient does or tries to do, then his being chosen or favoured seems

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more like something that is accidental to him, rather than a fact about his true self or nature. How then does it serve as a basis for attributing special religious status to *him*?[4]

(2) *Valuation*: Assuming that we regard a particular trait as genuinely belonging to the recipient even though he did nothing to acquire it, in what way is the recipient religiously worthy because of it? What value attaches to religious status that one simply comes by rather than earns?

This paper is an attempt to shed light on these puzzles. It begins with an analysis of the workings of different kinds of luck in various non-moral contexts, with an eye towards the contrast between the latter and moral contexts. This leads to distinguishing different forms of evaluative discourse and different criteria by which we judge people and their actions. I enlist these distinctions to analyse the implications of luck for religious valuation in two accounts of divine election.

The notion of grace with which Zagzebski grapples, of freely given divine favour, can be traced back to the teachings of the apostle Paul. I examine the operation of luck in Paul's thought, and compare it with an account of divine election put forth by the sixteenth-century Jewish thinker, Rabbi Judah Loeb of Prague, commonly referred to by the acronym, 'the Maharal'. Both Paul's and the Maharal's account take off from the assumption that there is nothing the elected does in virtue of which he gains special religious status, that acquiring it is not at all up to him. Both alike regard this lack of control, not as an unfortunate given, a bitter truth, but as an essential principle in which their theologies are grounded.

The accounts, taken together, highlight an important aspect of a distinctively religious view of value, which distinguishes it, I shall argue, from a moral view, particularly as Nagel sees the latter. The accounts differ, however, in the way in which they resolve the issue of attribution. I shall suggest that Paul's account is threatened by the paradox of religious luck for reasons similar to those for which it is, as Zagzebski points out, vulnerable to the problem of moral luck. On the Maharal's account, on the other hand, the recipient's lack of control does not translate into religious luck and the notion of unearned religious status is less vexing.

Lucky shots

A stroke of luck befalls us by chance – just happening to be in the right place at the right time. However, a benefit gained by chance may count to one's credit. Consider, for example, epistemic status. A lucky guess does not count as knowledge. It may fail on two counts. From a subjective point of view, a person

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may not be sufficiently committed to a guess he has made for it to count as his belief. A guess also fails to fulfil more objective conditions of knowledge, such as justification or reliability.

Imagine, however, that Rita opens the window to let in some fresh air and happens to catch sight of a man across the street strangling his wife. We do not hesitate to attribute to Rita the belief that her neighbour is strangling his wife. Moreover, the belief is both true and justified. We credit her with knowledge of the crime, and the fact that she gained it by sheer chance and not as a result of any attempt on her part to gain this or any other knowledge, makes her no less knowledgeable.

In his analysis of moral luck, Nagel distinguishes different ways in which objects of moral appraisal may be subject to luck.[5] One way is luck in one's circumstances – 'luck in the kind of problems and situations one faces'. Rita's is a story of epistemic circumstantial luck.[6] The presence of such luck may undercut an agent's status in the moral sphere. Here, however, it does not count against Rita's knowing about the crime, because knowledge, on most accounts, does not presuppose control.[7] On the contrary, thanks to her circumstantial luck, Rita's epistemic status is enhanced.

Consider next Sam who fires off his arrow and hits the bull's eye. We may wonder if Sam really knows how to handle a bow. What we want to know is whether the arrow just happened to hit the mark – a lucky shot – or whether Sam's success is due to his skilfulness, to his control over his bow and arrow. In the latter case, and only then, we credit him with the achievement.

One of the other ways luck may affect us, according to Nagel, is in the kind of people we are – in our inclinations, capacities, or temperament. Perhaps Sam perfected his skill through painstaking effort. If, however, his knowing how to shoot is the result of his having been born with special talents – a matter of constitutive luck, in Nagel's terms – this does not detract from Sam's status as a marksman, which derives from his control over his bow and arrow, not over his expertise.

Someone who wins a fortune in a lottery is considered lucky, but so is Alice who inherits a fortune from her parents. Given that Alice is the child of her parents, it is not by chance that she is their heir. Nor is it by chance that she is the child of her parents. Many aspects of our lives might be other than what they are, but it seems to be a metaphysical truth that a person is who he is necessarily. This necessity extends to whatever qualities are essential to his being who he is, and the identity of his parents appears to be such a quality.[8] Necessity, no less than chance, however, takes matters out of our hands. So, in the end, it does seem that Alice's having been born to her parents is something that happened to Alice, a matter of luck.

Perhaps not. Given that the identity of Alice's parents determines Alice's identity, it would follow from the above that Alice's identity is a matter of luck as

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well. Can Alice's identity be regarded as something that *happens* to Alice? According to Nicholas Rescher, who you are cannot be something that happens to you. Person theory does not countenance the notion of a bare particular. It makes no sense to talk of a featureless individual who starts out with a blank 'prospect' identity which will then be filled out by the properties which come his way, who will be lucky or unlucky in the particular set of character traits which attach to him. 'Identity must precede luck.'[9] David Heyd elaborates this point: 'For a person to have been someone else is like not having been born or not having existed at all. To exist (as a person) is to exist as a particular person, characterized by certain features that make one that person rather than someone else.'[10] Thus, Alice is not lucky for having been born to her parents.

We can imagine, however, that someone might be different in *some* respects from the way he is and still be himself. Sam, for example, would still be himself, we would think, even if he were not a great marksman. So he is constitutively lucky to be such a great shot. Likewise, who Alice's parents are is not affected by their wealth. Their being rich, then, is at least partly due to their circumstantial luck. For that reason Alice is lucky to inherit a fortune. Even in a deterministic world, where it is not at all a matter of chance that her parents are wealthy, Alice would be lucky.

How much about a person can we change and still be changing *him*? John Greco includes among a person's changeable features his location, education and physical make-up, but speculates that changing one's culture or gender might mean ending up with a different person.[11] The distinction between properties which are essential to a person's identity and those which are accidental is not clear-cut. While Alice is circumstantially lucky in having inherited her parents' fortune and would be constitutively lucky if she had inherited her father's good eyesight, we may hesitate to call her lucky for inheriting her mother's cheery disposition. In any event, the distinction has to do with what makes Alice who she is – not with what about Alice is up to her.

Note, then, that by excluding chance we do not always ward off the kinds of paradoxes associated with luck. In moral contexts we encounter them whenever the agent lacks control, whatever the reason – human interference, metaphysical necessity, divine intervention, or the like. We saw, however, that in non-moral contexts, luck does not always undermine status. We distinguish between Sam's bull's-eye that is due to his having been born a marksman and George's that is due to sheer chance. We saw also, as in the case of Alice's being born to her parents, that lack of control is not tantamount to luck.

I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau

A classic account of divine election which affirms the reality of religious luck is Paul's rendition, in his Letter to the Romans (9.10ff), of the choosing of

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Jacob over Esau. Paul cites the narrative in Genesis 25, which recounts God's revelation to the pregnant Rebecca of the destinies of her two yet unborn sons. Arguing for the dependence of salvation solely upon God's call, and against the efficacy of works, Paul writes:

> Even before they had been born or had done anything good or bad (so that God's purpose of election might continue not by works but by his call) she was told, 'The elder shall serve the younger.' As it is written, 'I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau.'

Driving home his message that God's plans are paramount and are indifferent to human will or exertion, Paul cites the fate of Pharaoh.

> For the scripture says to Pharaoh, 'I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.' So then he has mercy on whomever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses. (Romans, 9.17–18)

Paul invokes the analogy of a potter who fashions 'out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use' (Romans, 9.21). The potter endows the vessels with different qualities to suit them for the different purposes he has in mind. So is Pharaoh fitted out with a hard heart in order to play his part in the divine design. Having chosen Jacob, God will grant him qualities which will secure his ascendancy over his brother and fit him for his assigned role. Like the epistemic norms which govern the status of the knower and the skill specifications which define the status of the archer, the part the elect plays in God's designs determines his religious status.

Paul lists some of the gifts people enjoy as a result of receiving God's grace: prophecy, ministry, teaching, and exhortation. God's grace is conferred, not only on whole nations and on outstanding individuals, but also on ordinary human beings, who are endowed with generosity, diligence, and cheerfulness. Among the 'fruit of the Spirit', Paul includes patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.[12] One natural way to describe these qualities is as religious virtues, analogous to epistemic or moral virtues. As epistemic virtues are conducive to forming true beliefs, and moral virtues to leading a good life, religious virtues qualify or incline their possessor to carry out God's designs.[13] In this respect, their value is teleological – the recipient of grace is imbued with spiritual powers, inspired to live a life in accord with the divine will.

This view of divine election may be likened to a divine-command theory of morality, according to which what is morally right or wrong is determined by Gods will. In creating moral categories God is subject to no constraints, guided by no independent moral criteria. On one version of the divine-command theory, what *makes* an action right or wrong is God's commanding or forbidding it and nothing else.[14] On another version, God does not decree what is morally right or wrong, but rather gives rise to morality in that He endows human beings with natural properties such that moral laws, independent of God's will, apply to

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them.[15] It is the latter version which Paul's teaching more closely resembles, with the important difference, however, that, on his view of religious virtues their value is not independent of God's will, but derives from the purpose they serve in the divine plan.

Zagzebski, in her article, calls attention to the fact that the greatest of the virtues, faith, hope, and charity, are infused by grace. Faith is a prime example of a religious virtue which, by its very nature, is not under the control of its possessor. Arguably, the adoption of any belief is not given to the voluntary control of the subject.[16] All the more so is it not up to a person intentionally to embrace a particular religiously mandated belief in the absence of epistemically good reasons. If, however, such a belief were to take hold of him, whereas in epistemic terms harbouring it would be indefensible, in religious terms it would be commendable.[17] Thus, for God to grant one the religious virtue of faith, to change one's doxastic state for the better religiously, is a stroke of religious luck.

As envisioned by Paul, God's grace transforms the direction of people's lives, changing what they are like, turning them around.[18] Pharaoh becomes infused with inordinate obstinacy, and suffers the tragic consequences thereof, unconnected with his past record, according to Paul, simply for the purpose of implementing God's designs. The opposite image, of God's gift of grace changing for the better the course of a life that has shown little promise, redeeming the sinner and the non-believer, is central to Paul's teaching and is embraced by many subsequent thinkers who are strongly influenced by Paul – foremost among them, Augustine and Aquinas – and it serves as the background to Zagzebski's deliberations.[19]

To be sure, being favoured by God does not, on Paul's account, relieve the recipient of responsibility for his ensuing conduct. Paul enjoins those who have received God's call to lead a life worthy of their calling.[20] Although they are infused by the divine spirit, which attunes them to God's will and equips or empowers them to fulfil it, it is still up to them whether they do so or not. 'Work out your own salvation', he urges them, 'with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure' (Philippians, 1.12–13). The worth of the elected, be it moral or religious, is, then, determined by a complex of factors – the luck of being favoured by God, and their own efforts and exertions. The precise mechanism by which this equation works itself out – the precise role of luck vs effort and their relative weight – is not specified by Paul.[21] What the balance is between the two is, as Zagzebski observes, an issue for much of subsequent Christian theology.

As great as the part played by the recipient's own efforts may be, however, there is no mistaking that, according to Paul, receiving the gift of grace is a critical factor in enhancing the recipient's worth and destiny. It assures him of the initial qualities which serve as the foundation of whatever excellence he ultimately attains. Had God not seen fit to bestow it upon him, he would be less worthy, of

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inferior religious status. The connection between *him* and the virtues in which his religious value resides is indeed, at least in part, secured by divine fiat. However, since the latter is unrelated to his merit or desert, his religious worth is, to the extent that it is contingent upon God's favour, to that extent, tenuous and insubstantial. The role he is assigned in God's plan is, to that extent, a matter of luck, accidental to his self.

A blueprint of creation

The view of divine election put forth by Rabbi Judah Loeb of Prague, like Paul's, places election outside the moral realm. Rejecting midrashic attempts to construct a suitable past for the patriarch, Abraham, which could account for God's finding him worthy of his calling, the Maharal reads the biblical narrative as telling us nothing about Abraham to explain why God favoured him (*Sefer D'rashot*, Drashot L'shabbat Hagadol, 59).[22] Based on this, the Maharal denies any connection between God's love for Abraham and his deeds – past, present, or future. Actions, the Maharal explains, are fleeting and changeable. Were God's love for Israel contingent upon its conduct, Israel would stand in danger of forfeiting it. Israel cannot fall from favour, however, according to the Maharal; God's love for Israel is unconditional and unwavering.

Although it was not for his deeds, neither, however, on this view, was it for no reason that God loved Abraham. His love was grounded in Abraham's 'substance', his essence, which was fixed and immutable. The Maharal draws a categorical distinction between what is essential and what is accidental to Abraham and his progeny. Israel's constancy and devotion to God are persistent features which flow from its substance. A particular action of Israel's that might signal a waning or lapse of these qualities is only accidental.[23] Implicit in this distinction is the Maharal's vision of an over-arching divine plan for the world. Insofar as someone plays a role in this plan, it is *qua* substance, the invariability and permanence of which assures the ultimate realization of the plan. The plan cannot be thwarted because of the participants' accidental qualities; the latter have no effect on the divine scheme of things, and thus no bearing on the religious standing of their bearers.

The divine plan, according to the Maharal, is rooted in the structure of the world. 'If one examines the world', he writes, 'one finds it to be artfully arranged and perfectly ordered. This could not have come about by accident' (*Tiferet Yisrael*, ch. 25, 238).[24] God created the world according to a comprehensive design which is contained implicitly in the Torah, the Hebrew Bible (*Netivot Olam*, Part 1, 3).[25] The Maharal conceives of this as a unified system of interlocking parts, each of which coheres with the whole. Together they form a network of necessary relationships, a perfectly rational design (*Derech Chayim*, 356; *Netivot Ha-Torah*, ch. 5).[26]

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The divine blueprint calls for building blocks of various kinds, each with a unique essence defined by the place the block occupies in the system. The qualities of the block which flow from its essence, which are entailed by the location of the block and by its necessary relationships with the other elements of the system, determine how and where the block fits into God's plan and make it a fitting instrument for the role assigned it by that plan. As with Paul, these qualities may be viewed as religious virtues, the value of which is teleological.

The plan requires, according to the Maharal, that mankind receive the Torah.[27] Among the blocks specified by the blueprint is one whose properties entail that it is suited to bring this about, to receive God's Torah and to propagate it. Abraham and his progeny, the nation of Israel, are that block. They are constituted to fulfil this mission; inherent within them are the special qualities which equip them for it. Abraham was not *chosen* to be the father of a great nation – he was *brought into being* as such. While on the Pauline account, it is as a result of being singled out by God that the chosen acquires his special qualities, on the Maharal's view, his favoured religious status is a function of his essence and his special qualities.

Israel's substance is uniquely defined by its place within the cosmic order. It is the logic of the system that fixes its identity; it is individuated by the special set of qualities which derive from its essence and which are embedded within the design of the world. Thus, Israel is not simply suited for its role – it is *uniquely* suited.

> Should you speculate that perhaps the Torah could have been given to a different nation … such a possibility is unthinkable, because each thing that exists has its own special order which is unique to itself and that order does not belong to any other existent. Thus, the order of the Torah and its commandments can be given only to Israel … for no one is suited to this Torah other than Israel alone … . This makes it clear that the election of Israel is determined necessarily by the order of existence – for the sake of the Torah. For the world is impossible without the Torah and the Torah is impossible without Israel. (*Netzach Yisrael*, ch. 11, 70)[28]

Implicit in the metaphysical picture drawn by the Maharal, then, is a notion of individual essence or *haecceity* – the idea that each of God's creatures necessarily has a unique nature, dictated by the structure of creation, from which each of its essential qualities follows necessarily, distinguishing it from everything else in the world. Thus, it is a priori impossible that Israel should have lacked the essential virtues which define its unique religious role and give rise to its special religious status. Nor is it possible that any other creature could have possessed Israel's essence, borne the identical set of essential virtues, or performed the same exalted function.[29]

I have distinguished, then, between Paul's view of election, according to which the religious virtues one receives through grace are a matter of luck, and the Maharal's, according to which these virtues are a part of the essence of the elected. Abraham is no more responsible for his election on the latter, however,

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than is Jacob, on the former. His religious virtues are no more up to him according to the Maharal than according to Paul. If on both views religious status is, to a significant degree, not under the control of the chosen, what is the point of the difference I have underscored? With respect to the teleological value which attaches to the virtues, there is none. As to the problem of attributing these virtues to the subject, however, the different views do not provide equally well for a solution. This will become clear from a closer look at the way different kinds of virtues attach to their possessors.

Virtue theory

Virtue theorists of all stripes have in common their locating the grounds of a person's status or worth in the person's qualities or characteristics. Thus, virtues are not simply praiseworthy in themselves, but constitute reasons for thinking well of their possessors. In the case of epistemic virtues – curiosity, open-mindedness, diligence, or discernment – this seems unproblematic. Even those proponents of virtue theory who regard epistemic excellence, not as simply the possession of virtue, but also as its exercise, over which they regard the subject as having considerable control, recognize the extent to which this control is limited when it comes to their acquisition.[30] Epistemic virtues belong in part to our genetic heritage, in part they become ours via upbringing and education and only in part do we acquire them purposefully and by dint of effort. Thus, we count a person epistemically virtuous without assuming that he is responsible for his having epistemic virtues.

While admiring someone for his skill with a bow or for his powers of concentration is consistent with regarding it as a genetic windfall, to Nagel it seems clear that praising him for his kindness is not. Not all ethicists agree. As part of our common-sense, intuitive, ethical thinking, some argue, we may admire or condemn someone without implying that he could or should be different. Virtue theorists propose a distinction between moral discourse in a narrow or deontic sense, which relates mainly to questions of reward and punishment, blameworthiness and praiseworthiness, and ethical discourse more generally, which subscribes to ideals of human excellence and employs notions such as admirable and deplorable, desirable and regrettable. While the former gives expression to Kantian intuitions, linking moral worth with autonomous agency, and incorporates notions of responsibility, the latter, it is claimed, is free of such commitments.

Michael Slote proposes a virtue ethic which makes use only of 'morally neutral concepts'.[31] Eschewing notions of blame or moral responsibility, he sees his approach as nevertheless providing for deeply important and consequential judgments about the way people are, their character and motivation, and the way they treat themselves and others. Judith Andre argues for the priority of virtue ethics over Kantian morality: 'In its central sense … morality refers to excellence of

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character. Whenever we praise people as moral we mean they are worthy of praise and emulation; but only sometimes do we mean that they are worthy of reward'.[32] Virtue theorists claim that a person's having bad features is excellent reason to think him a bad person. 'Surely it would be crazy', writes Judith Jarvis Thomson, 'to say, ''I can quite see that David is arrogant, a bully, a coward, and all the rest, but I wonder whether there's any reason at all to think him a bad person''.[33] If a sadist is not a bad person, then who is? And if we were to learn that he is a sadist because of the way he was raised, we would not withdraw our moral censure. Indeed, we might not blame him, but to count that against virtue theory would be to beg the question.

The cardinal insight of virtue theory – what is common to all who subscribe to it in one version or another – is that viciousness, generosity, avarice, or courage, the kinds of qualities for which a person is ethically judged, are facts about the person because they are part of what makes him the individual he is. Abstracted from them he is not a subject for ethical theory. They are things 'to which the idea of choice does not apply; changing them would mean coming up with a different person'.[34]

How different, then, are ethical from epistemic virtues? As with the exercise of the latter, the exercise of the former may be up to us, and whether it is or not may be a crucial issue for morality, perhaps less so for epistemology. When it comes to the manner of acquisition, however, the issue of control is irrelevant to epistemic status, and, on this view, irrelevant to moral worth as well. Similarly, attribution is a problem for neither, but note that for different reasons. To admire a person for his keen intelligence is to attribute to him the ability to acquire true beliefs, to gain knowledge, and to apply it appropriately. It is consistent with taking *him* to be lucky for being blessed with this gift. To deem him trustworthy, on the other hand, is to pass judgement on *him*, not by attributing to him the virtue of trustworthiness, which he is lucky to possess, but rather, by acknowledging him for the kind of person that he is – reliable, steadfast, faithful, someone we can depend on.

I have interpreted both Paul and the Maharal to be subscribing to virtue theory as an account of religious value. In light of the above, however, I am suggesting that, as an account of the attribution of religious value, virtue theory does not serve the two equally well. For the Maharal, virtue theory works as it does in the ethical sphere – attribution is not an issue. Since the religious virtues the elect receives from God constitute, at least in part, his very identity, we do not credit his having them to luck. They are what he is and he is therefore intrinsically valuable. By contrast, Paul's view of virtues as, insofar as they are divine gifts, fortuitous, accidental, as it were, impedes the attribution of value to the individual on the basis of those virtues.

Consider again the view of Pharaoh that emerges from Paul's account of God's hardening his heart. The vice that Pharaoh exhibits is something that is *inflicted*

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upon him, part of a chain of events which God sets in motion, on this view, without reference to Pharaoh the individual. One can imagine God devising some other tactic for showing His power, one which would not require tampering with Pharaoh. Pharaoh might then have lived out his life in a morally or religiously unremarkable way. As Paul pictures Pharaoh's recalcitrance, we are disinclined to take it as a basis for fixing his intrinsic worth. Deplore as we may Pharaoh's hard-heartedness, it is difficult to think the less of *him* for it.[35]

Note that common to both Paul and the Maharal is the assumption that a person's will is free, that he is capable of exerting himself in ways that may entitle him to either reward or punishment, but that God does not single him out on the basis of his merit. The Maharal specifies that, not only is Israel's election unconnected to its past record, but Israel's being elected does not mean that it does not now sin, nor that it will not continue to do so.[36] The lack of agreement between what a person deserves and the way he is treated by God is fundamental to both accounts.

This incongruence is more poignant, however, in Paul's picture, than it is in the Maharal's. If, as I have argued, religious virtues are, on Paul's account, not part of the individual's essence, we can, in our mind's eye, separate the individual from them and speculate as to what *his* worth is, apart from them. The problem of religious luck here mirrors that of moral luck – voices of protest emerge most naturally from this more robust view of the self, which constitutes a locus of value to which God, in his dispensing of grace, is indifferent. By contrast, deriving Abraham's identity from a comprehensive, divinely ordained system which endows him with a set of essential properties in which his religious worth is grounded, has the effect of subordinating his entire 'substance' to that system, precluding our prizing *him* apart from the virtuous qualities he 'comes by'. Thus, the tension between intrinsic desert and religious worth is muted.[37]

Concluding remarks

Champions of a Kantian view of morality observe that, as compared with other types of assessment, moral assessment, within the Kantian tradition, enjoys a 'special, indeed supreme, kind of dignity or importance'.[38] Virtue theory, they point out, in allowing for commendation or criticism in the absence of responsibility, diminishes the seriousness of ethical distinctions. Kindness and honesty, meanness and hypocrisy, are placed on a par with spontaneity and charm, dullness and bad skin. We do not and should not attach the same weight to poor marksmanship as we do to dishonesty.[39]

Does construing religious value in terms of virtue threaten to reduce the stature of the former? I make no pretensions here to adjudicating between the Kantian and virtue approaches to ethics. Rather, I want to argue that, even if we endorse the above criticism of virtue ethics, a virtue theory of religious worth is not open

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to the same objection. One reason that moral worth is regarded as an ultimate form of value is that acquiring it is completely up to the individual. Morality aspires, 'to escape as far as possible from contingency', writes Williams.[40] Similarly, on the religious accounts we have examined, religious value is not vulnerable to the vagaries of chance. According to the latter, however, this immunity is compatible with human lack of control because it is achieved through divine control. While the assumption of human autonomy is central to the overriding importance of moral merit, what endows religious worth with its transcendent status is, at least in part, its grounding in a divine plan. Thus, the lack of control associated with religious virtue fails to subvert it as does lack of control in the case of moral virtue.

It seems to me, however, that the above accounts only in part for the absence in both Paul's and the Maharal's teaching, of Kantian sympathies. Central to the religious sensibility which these accounts share is the belief that divine control not only subdues chance, but also circumscribes human action. Dominating the world view of both theologians is a belief in the ever present and ubiquitous involvement of the divine in human affairs. We are God's creatures and we are placed in a world of God's making.[41] Thus, morality's search for the unconditioned will, for the autonomous, self-determined core of one's being, is misconceived. Given the limitations imposed by this world view on the sovereignty of the self, the attempt to assess its merit may seem relatively trivial and perhaps futile. As compared with the dubiousness of such an undertaking, to value those who are privileged to engage in special service to God is to acknowledge the most authentic and profound of human attainments.[42]

Notes

1. This notion of luck is articulated in Nicholas Rescher 'Moral luck', 141–166, a revised version of 'Luck', *APA Proceedings*, **64** (1990), and Martha Nussbaum 'Luck and ethics', 72–108, extract from *idem The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) in Daniel Statman (ed.) *Moral Luck* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1993).
2. Thomas Nagel 'Moral luck', in *idem Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Bernard Williams, 'Moral luck', in *idem Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Both are reprinted in Statman *Moral Luck*, 57–71 and 35–55.
3. Linda Zagzebski 'Religious luck', *Faith and Philosophy*, **11** (1994), 397–413.
4. See Geoffrey Cupit 'Desert and responsibility', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, **26** (1996), 83–99. Cupit discusses the 'attribute requirement account' of desert, according to which regarding someone as deserving credit for some quality assumes that having that quality is a fact about that person.
5. Nagel 'Moral luck', in Statman *Moral Luck*, 60.
6. For Nagel, however, luck is opposed to knowledge. Daniel Statman develops analogies between the various kinds of moral luck identified by Nagel and different kinds of epistemic luck in his 'Moral and epistemic luck', *Ratio*, **4** (1991), 146–156. See also Peter Unger 'An analysis of factual knowledge', *The Journal of Philosophy*, **65** (1968), 157–170; Mylan Engel, Jr 'Is epistemic luck compatible with knowledge?', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, **30** (1992), 59–75; Charlotte Katzoff 'When is knowledge a matter of luck?', *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, **51** (1996), 105–120.
7. This is especially true on externalist theories of knowledge.

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8. This is Saul Kripke's position. Anyone coming from different parents would be a different person, according to Kripke. See his *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), especially 110–115.
9. Rescher 'Moral luck', in Statman *Moral Luck*, 155.
10. David Heyd '"Wrongful Life" Claims', *Israel Law Review*, **21** (1986), 580.
11. John Greco 'A second paradox concerning responsibility and luck', *Metaphilosophy*, **26** (1995), 81–96.
12. See Romans, 12.4–8, and Galatians, 5.22–23.
13. Alternatively, one might characterize virtues as constituent of rational activity or of the morally or spiritually good life, rather than as conducive to them. However, regarding religious virtues as gifts conferred by God for the purpose of advancing his own goals conforms to the teleological view of virtues that I propose.
14. William K. Frankena *Ethics*, 2nd edn (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973), 28.
15. Basil Mitchell *Morality: Religious and Secular* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 107. For a discussion of these two versions of divine command morality, see Avi Sagi and Daniel Statman *Religion and Morality* (Amsterdam and Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1995), 21–23.
16. See Bernard Williams 'Deciding to believe', in *idem Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 136–151.
17. See Robert Merrihew Adams 'The virtue of faith', *Faith and Philosophy*, **1** (1984), 3–15.
18. Although Paul underscores God's election of Jacob before he has any deeds to his credit or otherwise, the election of Jacob is in this respect exceptional.
19. Zagzebski writes that the problem of moral luck is not so much about a comparison between one person and another, but 'between one person and himself in other possible circumstances' (407).
20. See for example, Ephesians, 4.
21. For a discussion of Paul's views on this matter, see E. P. Sanders *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1977), ch. 5, section 6.
22. *Sefer D'rashot Maharal mi-Prague*, D'rashot L'shabbat Hagadol (Jerusalem: Machon Torah Shlemah, 1958). Paul likewise denies that Abraham was justified by works. He maintains, however, that he was justified by faith, citing Genesis, 15.6, as well as instances in the narrative which he takes to illustrate Abraham's faith. See Romans, 4.
23. The Maharal also invokes the distinction between the general and the particular to distinguish between the nation Israel's unchanging devotion to God and the lapses of its particular members. See *Netzach Yisrael*, ch. 11, 68.
24. R. Chayim Pardes (ed.) *Tiferet Yisrael* (Tel Aviv: Machon Yad Mordechai, 1985).
25. The Maharal cites a *midrash* on the first verse of Genesis in this connection, in which the Torah tells of God's consulting her in the course of his designing the world. See Moshe Aryeh Mirkin (ed.) *Midrash Rabah, B'reshit Rabah* (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1977), 3. The notion that the physical world corresponds to a higher divine realm is found in Jewish mysticism. On Cabbalistic elements in the thought of the Maharal see Ben Zion Bokser *From the World of the Cabbalah: The Philosophy of Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954).
26. R. Chaim Pardes (ed.) *Derech ha-Chayim* (Jerusalem, 1975). The *midrash* cited by the Maharal may be interpreted so as to suggest that God is not the author of the blueprint but rather is consulting an independent document. This reading is supported by the affinity the *midrash* bears to the image in the Platonic dialogue, *Timaeus*, St. 28. The Maharal ascribes this plan to the divine intellect, however.
27. The Maharal accounts for this requirement by positing a correspondence between the normative system explicit in the Torah which is meant to regulate mankind's conduct and the design of the cosmos, which is implicit in the Torah. See *Netivot Olam, Netiv ha-Torah* (London: L. Honig & Sons, 1960).
28. The Maharal also derives Israel's uniqueness directly from the uniqueness of God. See *Nezach Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Machon Jerusalem, 1997), ch. 10. On the Maharal's account of Israel's uniqueness, see Benjamin Gross *Nezach Yisrael: The Messianic Views of the Maharal of Prague about the Exile and the Redemption* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1974), ch. 4.
29. For a contemporary presentation of this notion, see Alvin Plantinga 'World and essence', *Philosophical Review*, **79** (1970), 474–490, and *idem The Nature of Necessity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), chs 2–5.
30. See John Greco 'Virtues and vices of virtue epistemology', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, **23** (1993), 413–432; Linda Zagzebski *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Charlotte Katzoff 'Epistemic virtue and epistemic responsibility', *Dialectica*, **55** (2001), 105–118.

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31. Michael A. Slote 'Virtue-ethical luck', in *idem From Morality to Virtue* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 117. Slote suggests an analogy with aesthetic evaluation.
32. Judith Andre 'Nagel, Williams, and moral luck', in Statman *Moral Luck*, 127.
33. Judith Jarvis Thomson 'Morality and bad luck', in Statman *Moral Luck*, 208.
34. Rescher 'Moral luck', 156.
35. This is so whether or not, given his hardness of heart, Pharaoh is morally responsible for his subsequent conduct.
36. See *Sefer ha-Nezach*, ch. 11; *Derech ha-Chayim*, ch. 9, 16.
37. In explaining why Paul's account rather than the Maharal's evokes protest, it surely bears noting that on the former the incongruence is associated with God's seeming arbitrariness and injustice (see Romans 9.19ff), while on the latter it is associated with the irrevocability of Israel's election. This does not mitigate the connection between the conceptual features of each of these accounts and the notions of religious value to which they give rise.
38. Williams 'Moral luck', in Statman *Moral Luck*, 36.
39. See Julia Driver's critique of Slote in 'A critical study of Slote', *Nous*, **28** (1994), 71–89.
40. Williams 'Moral luck', in Statman *Moral Luck*, 257.
41. See William P. Alston 'Religious belief and values', *Faith and Philosophy*, **18** (2001), 36–49.
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