Moral Competence and Bernard Williams

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More than twenty years ago the late Bernard Williams published a paper under the oxymoronic title of 'Moral Luck',[1] which claimed that chance shapes moral standing, and that moral standing, like social or professional standing, has its winners and losers, successes and failures. Williams' final book, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*,[2] offered as a 'fiction' a sociobiological genealogy of moral standing, and worked to free some of the virtues associated with it—such as integrity, Accuracy, and Sincerity[3]—from the taint of these presumed primitive origins. Whatever the proceeds of this exercise in saving reductionism from itself, it seemed that 'moral luck'—the earlier category—had come through it essentially undamaged.[4]

The category deserves revisiting, if only to find out why Williams and others have found it so persuasive. The reasons will turn out so compelling that a powerful counter-example will be

[1] Bernard Williams (1976), 'Moral Luck', in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 20–39. First published in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary volume **I** (1976), 115–35.

[2] Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton University Press, 2002).

[3] Unlike 'Accuracy'and 'Sincerity,'the term 'integrity' is not one of the 'terms of art' in *Truth and Truthfulness*. However, Williams does call on 'integrity' in a key chapter, 'What Was Wrong With Minos?' where he describes Thucydides as replacing the myth world with a new and unprecedented summons to Accuracy about the past. From Thucydidean historical objectivity, Williams derives the complex structures of 'intellectual integrity' (150). His tying *Accuracy about what has happened* to integrity is in line with the sense I give to integrity in this essay, although—on that virtue's genealogy and scope—Williams' view is not mine. However, any differences that are of interest in the present context will be sketched out below.

[4] See Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 205. The argument as a whole focuses on other facets of the moral situation, but its continuity with the 'moral luck' discussion is evident in 191–98, as well as elsewhere.

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needed, if refutations are to have any force. One that Williams—who doesn't miss much—may have overlooked.

We will claim that he has overlooked *evil*, as an objective reality, not a construct among the constructs. What sort of reality will not be a thing to be stipulated, but a thing to be encountered. If the encounter is to be described, evil cannot be allowed to swallow up the one who meets it. The observer must be kept distinct and evil must be kept distinct. Hence, resisted by its observer. We add nothing new when we note that *such* resistance requires integrity. It follows that evil and integrity are linked concepts. It will be shown that neither is linked to luck.

The risks of the moral luck thesis are not merely academic. There are two practical risks: (1) confusion in resisting evil, and (2) confusion in saving one's integrity. From the first two risks, another will be seen to follow: (3) confusion in the face of failure. If such are the risks, what should we ask of the correctives? That they do the opposite, opening the way to moral competence: in resisting evil, saving integrity, and keeping hope alive. We seek to clear away Williams' conceptual obstacles to that competence.

What was irresistible in 'moral luck'? It is Williams' most discussed coinage. In the moral arena, perhaps more dramatically than elsewhere, a way to talk is a way to be. The way of being that belongs to moral luck *talk* wraps itself around one's form in the world like a fishnet. Just to remind ourselves about the talk: when a purpose fails because something external—like a letter—doesn't get there, that gets the name of bad *extrinsic* luck. When one sets oneself up to be a certain kind of person, collecting all one's forces to do what that person does—yet fails to get it done and fails to be the person one thought one was—that gets the name of bad *intrinsic* luck. One shows oneself a loser from within, and that is the worst sort of bad luck. Thanks to this loser-from-within kind of bad luck, Tolstoy's Anna Karenina became—not the great lover she'd risked everything to be—but one more fallen woman or object lesson in why the conventions should be respected. In the contrast Williams drew from real life, Paul Gauguin lucked out. He became just what he had intended to be, although *he* had defied the conventions in equal measure.

Cavillers might object that luck had had nothing to do with it, for either one. Gauguin must have moved with intuitive authority about himself and his painting—he knew he was great—while Karenina lacked authenticity *vis à vis* her *grande passion*. Unmoved by the objection, Williams would respond: it's still a gift of fortune when some have genius, prudential skills, or the talent for objective

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self-assessment, while others lack those very qualities. Gauguin's and Karenina's were still cases of good intrinsic luck and tough intrinsic luck. And so, viewed from inside this panopticon, is every life story, no matter how crass or subtle the ends for which one strives.

Here was where the philosophical critics weighed in with their educated distinctions. Morality is *not* prudence, they noted. Integrity is *not* respectability. Agent evaluation is *not* act evaluation—quite as if Williams never knew how moral talk was supposed to sound.[5] But Williams' point was just that *morality itself is not autonomous*. The criteria for outward respectability and core integrity are both lodged inside local schema or (as we may say) habitats of justification. Any act not assigned to the 'moral' sector in a given habitat of justification can line up for a prudential and/or realm-of-manners assignment. No matter. It is within the habitat

[5] Among these critics, there is Nicholas Rescher, for whom the corrective insight would have been furnished long ago by the Greeks when they saw that agent evaluation involves judgment of character over time; or similarly Judith Jarvis Thompson, for whom the flaw in Williams' analysis is mendable when we note that agent evaluation is ordinarily separated from act evaluation, though she does note that our evaluative practice often hooks them together again; or again Michael J. Zimmerman, with his focus on 'internal judgments of praise and blame' that point to agent responsibility, even where such responsibility can be hard for the onlooker to fix. See Rescher, 'Moral Luck', in *Moral Luck*, ed. Daniel Statman (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1993), Thompson, 'Morality and Bad Luck', in *Moral Luck*, first published in *Metaphilosophy*, vol. **20** (1989), and Zimmerman, 'Luck and Moral Responsibility', in *Moral Luck*, first published in *Ethics*, vol. **97** (1987). From Williams' perspective, these moralizing critics may be simply highlighting cases of what Williams, Thomas Nagel, and others have called 'constitutive luck', the latter being the sort of good fortune that is in play when a person has been gifted with a good character, with its ingredients of good upbringing, relatively protected circumstances at life's formative stages, sufficient will power, an educated judgment, sound principles, and so forth. Judith Andre notes that this Aristotelian model may be considered *worthy of emulation* without touching the question of how much of good fortune goes into the shaping of the model, and with this point Williams is not in disagreement. Cf. Judith Andre, 'Nagel, Williams, and Moral Luck', in *Moral Luck*, 123–29, first published in *Analysis* **43** (1983): 202–207, and Williams' reply to his critics in 'Postscript', *Moral Luck*, 251–58.

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that the agent is justified.[6] These habitats are not sealed compartments. Rather, all agent justifications—'moral' or other—are fragmentary, situational, conventional, and contestable. All involve strategic calculation within the politics of experience. Just as no one stratagem suffices in military combat, so also in social life no one justification can satisfy all its critics. Since justifications are essentially moves on the chessboard of social life, alleged differences between the moral and the prudential cannot be true differences in kind. Therefore, every proto-Kantian effort to cut out disinterested from interested relations, the autonomy of the will from its heteronomy, must ultimately break down.[7]

In his 'Postscript' to the 1993 collection we are referencing, where Williams replied to his critics, this breakdown was in fact the

[6] Similarly, in *Truth and Truthfulness*, Williams carefully distinguishes rules, such as the one debarring a minister from lying in the House of Commons, from ordinary expectations between people, such as that they can be relied on in what they say. To the former no exceptions can be allowed, but the latter normally admits of many circumstantial qualifications. Williams conducts a subtle and shrewd tour of these socially justifiable exceptions. See Chapter Five, 'Sincerity, Lying, and Other Styles of Deceit', especially 109.

[7] In *Truth and Truthfulness*, however, Williams supposes that interested acts can pass by degrees into disinterested acts. 'We can imagine already in the State of Nature a certain degree of specialization; it is not merely that two people go in different directions, but they recognize that one is better at looking for fish while another excels with game ... There is a long but *entirely intelligible route* from this to the discovery of the structure of the DNA ... [italics mine].' It is 'this process'—Williams holds—which 'has generated refinements in the virtues of truth themselves, in the form of a dedication to science and to standards of scientific truthfulness, which involve not just Accuracy but Sincerity, both with others and with oneself. Under this transformation, the notion of an investigative investment becomes more abstract, and the motivations associated with wanting truth for its own sake (about a significant or interesting question) become more important. The search for truth becomes in these respects an intrinsic good'(141). Williams' assurances that the route between interested and disinterested inquiry is by now 'entirely intelligible' must be deemed premature. Although, in *Truth and Truthfulness*, the avowed intention is to give a separate—*genetically reducible but conceptually irreducible*—status to disinterested action, it will become harder to keep that distinction (between the reducible and irreducible) inviolate when we come across the same instabilities and social dependencies in the psyche according to *Truth and Truthfulness* that abounded in 'Moral Luck', Cf. note #10 below.

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author's bleak valediction, shaken over the volume's last pages in a rhythm more rambling than that gifted stylist typically shows, rather as if a man who had blown away some of the moral landmarks of his city were now stumbling about the rubble, no longer quite sure where his remarks ought to begin and end. Nietzsche was invoked, as if from wilds beyond the city walls. We were at the end of the cleared road, on notice that the author had tacitly assumed as a psychodynamic premise what we thought his argument had set out to prove *without* the help of any particular psychology.[8]

However Williams had got there, it seemed that nothing much was left, after the breakdown of moral strivings, save the discomfiting realities of social power. That is a view with implications for social power. If one represents as objective a view of moral standing that is merely conventional, one sets oneself up to blunder—at least rhetorically. Ungrounded high-mindedness is less *persuasive* than well-dug-in low-mindedness. People sense that a blusterer cannot stay the course. Among the more debilitating blunders of social life, we should make room for a Fallacy of Misplaced Moralising. Of course we want to strike—be on target, morally—while the iron is hot. But perhaps there's no iron there. How can we know?

What Williams called 'moral luck' might also be called justificatory luck, or apologetic luck, where *apologia* is taken in its etymologically Greek sense of defence. Membership in what used to be called a 'moral order' would then reduce to *fellowship in justifiability*.

But is this adequate? When the best case for moral luck has been made, it still looks as if Williams' argument has been about the reputation of integrity, not the being of it. It has not yet touched the ontological question: whether integrity—pure and undiluted

[8] In *Truth and Truthfulness*, by contrast, psychology does not make a merely *ad hoc* appearance. Rather, Williams lays it down that 'there must be a general human psychology in terms of which we can understand these [cultural and historical] variations' (191). Unsurprisingly, that 'general psychology' turns out broadly Nietzschean. Witness 195, on the incohesiveness and multiplicity of the self; 45, 75, and 189, on Sincerity as uninhibited spontaneity; also 183f, on Sincerity as either opaque to itself or amoral. Hume and Diderot are also cited in support of this psychology, though Williams is no doubt intellectually prudent to stay out of the Freud labyrinth.

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but undetected and undefended—can *be*. (Well, actually it has touched the question, but there will be no rush to concede that it has quite decided it.)

The question about integrity's being has been with us as long as philosophy has. Plato raised the question. To frame the question (actually the question of what it's like to be just, absent ulterior motives), Plato let a Just Man be imagined who '[t]hough he does no injustice ... must have the greatest reputation for it, so that his justice may be tested full strength ...'[9] By Platonic thought experiment at least, the world has 'seen' at least one Just Man who 'was not seen' to be just. Can this tree that falls in the forest unheard, still make a sound? Can a just man, though everywhere vilified, still be just? What would that be like? *Is* the being of integrity separable from the reputation of it?

Plato's man was at least allowed to remain clear about *his own* integrity, as he hung there, 'stretched on a rack, blinded with fire ...' Plato trusted that a philosophically acculturated man or woman would be able to sustain this activity of self-vindication, transparently and steadily, no matter what. But it would be safer to suppose the contrary. Not quite always, after all, Plato.

Unreachable contingencies can change the look of a life project, so that it comes to *seem* a sham, even to oneself. An otherwise blameless person can lose face—and not just before others. One can lose track of one's original aim, and feel unable to go on making the case for it.[10] When that happens, one can lose the case, in the first instance before the tribunal of one's own mind. So, even if we allow Plato to be right—that integrity and social defensibility are not the same thing conceptually, any more than the inquiry into what is

[9] Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, revised by C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), 37, para. 361.

[10] On our need for ongoing social reinforcement, if our sense of self is not to disintegrate, here is Williams in *Truth and Truthfulness*: 'At a more basic level, we are all together in the social activity of mutually stabilizing our declarations and moods and impulses into becoming such things as beliefs and relatively steady attitudes' (193). What give us 'assurance that for the most part sincerity in the form of spontaneous declaration will have some validity over time ... [is]... the practice that socializes people into having such beliefs. If what I uninhibitedly declare at a given moment can be taken by myself or anyone else as a declaration of something which I believe, that is because there is a practice that firms up the expression of the immediate state into something that has a future. It is what enables us, most of the time, coherently to make such declarations as declarations of belief, and to read them in what other people say' (192).

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(ontology) and the inquiry into what we can know (epistemology) are quite the same thing—in actual practice the two must be pretty closely intertwined.

To be sure, integrity is not respectability. But in real situations they do come close. To tarnish someone's honour is not instantly to destroy the real merit within. To mar someone's image is not to disintegrate the personal essence or identity. But how many will care to put that conceptual difference to the first-person test, by doing a stint as the one with the marred image? The question is self-answering, for such are the facts of social power. Those facts are what give to Williams' argument its real force, which no armchair moralising can disarm.

From my personal experience and reading, I get the sense that intellectuals are apt to be less good than other people at preserving the sense of themselves as justified, in what French philosophers have called a *situation-limite*.[11] If indeed this is so, it may be because intellectuals think they have to be able to 'make the case' for themselves in all circumstances and against all critics and—precisely in the *situation-limites*—find that they can't.[12] Non-intellectuals, by contrast, can grasp the point that they won't

[11] The term was introduced into French philosophy by Gabriel Marcel, in an article, 'Situation fondamentale et situations limites chez Karl Jaspers', in *Recherches Philosophiques* **II**, 1932–33, 317–48. In Jaspers' usage, any experiential given, considered under the aspect of the subject's freedom, can become a *situation-limite*. Merleau-Ponty also employs the expression, but for him only exceptional historical crises, which bring to light the hidden contingency of freedom, deserve this name. Here I mean the expression in Merleau-Ponty's more ordinary sense of a testing situation.

[12] See Robert Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of 'Brainwashing' of American Civilian Prisoners by the Chinese Communists* (New York: Norton, 1961). Few were able to resist the process of mind control that Lifton describes, and those few did not happen to be intellectuals. And here is how a different *situation-limite* looked to a renowned Austrian-Jewish man of letters as the civic ground gave way under him. 'When those of us who had once conversed about Baudelaire's poetry and spiritedly discussed intellectual problems met together, we would catch ourselves talking about affidavits and permits and whether one should apply for an immigration visa or a tourist visa; acquaintance with a stenographer in a consulate, who could cut down one's waiting-time was more significant to one's existence than friendship with a Toscanini or a Rolland.' Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 411, reproduced from the 1943 edition, Viking Press. Zweig committed suicide in Bolivia in 1942.

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be able to make an uncontrovertible case for themselves when they are surrounded and outnumbered by their enemies. At that point, they may well decide not to try.

Deciding not to try to make the case for one's moral standing is a losing strategy on the stage of history, however. Contrast the moral standing of the victims of the Jewish and the Armenian holocausts. In the Armenian case, the documents and the witnesses have never been assigned to a single body with force and concern enough to bring about a Nuremberg-style prosecution. The consequence? The present Turkish government continues blandly to deny that *any* Turkish government deliberately engineered the Armenian holocaust (which the present German government certainly does not do in the case of the *Shoah*). The Turkish denials are easy because the Armenians could not *make the case*. It's ineluctably frustrating if one *is* Armenian. One knows that either the admission or the denial will take the field. If the deniers win, one's own position in the world and grip on the truth will be shakier.

What is ultimately at stake in all the disputes over the legitimacy of the Nuremberg and Eichmann trials is whether the *Shoah happened*. If, as some have argued, those trials were not legitimate, then the evidence presented at them can be deemed suspect.[13] That is just what Holocaust revisionists and deniers have done. Wherever their arguments persuade, the very *evils* of Nazism come to seem less clear. In this world-historical context, the fight for reputation cannot be dodged. One is either reputed the victim of a monstrous crime against humanity, or the purveyer of a doctored claim to victim status—thus a false accuser. So our question is still unsettled: how to separate the being of integrity from the reputation of it, and whether *au fond* one can.

If we are to settle it, something—an encounter that we can experience—will have to shock us into contact with *the moral*

[13] One reason that, in *A Good Look at Evil* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), I deemed it critical to contest Hannah Arendt's challenges to the legitimacy of the Nuremberg and Eichmann trials is that any delegitimation, even partial and qualified, of those trials leads directly to the delegitimation of the evidence presented in them. If this is once allowed, the clearest case of evil on record blurs hopelessly. In moral philosophy, concepts without percepts (definitions without exemplary instances), are particularly empty. These consequences have to be faced, though they were not the basis for my disputing the Arendt claims. See Abigail L. Rosenthal, *A Good Look at Evil* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), Chapter Six, 'Banality and Originality: Arendt and the Trials', 163–80.

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dimension as such. Otherwise, it seems, we can never break out of the charmed (more likely the charmless) circle of academic dispute, where every point scored harbours the germ of its own refutation. Despite Plato's Just Man thought experiment, encounters with integrity in its pure state cannot provide the shock we need, since we never meet it in its pure state. Or if we do, the ambivalence in the eyes of the beholders will suffice to conceal it for the purposes of an argument such as this one. Evil unadulterated *is* met with from time to time, however.[14] And those are the meetings that will prove instructive for our question.

We can start in classical times, with Plato's second visit to the court of Dionysius II, the tyrant of Syracuse. During that time, there was a young man named Heracleides whom Dionysius suspected of plots. Plato happened to be present when Theodotes, the young man's uncle, tried to persuade the tyrant to exile Heracleides rather than have him killed. We have Plato's recollection of the encounter in his *Seventh Letter*.

" 'Do you agree to that [to exile for the nephew]?' " asked Theodotes.

" 'Yes, I agree,' replied Dionysius; 'even if he is found in your house nothing shall happen to him beyond what you have said.' "

By the next night, however, it was clear that the tyrant's troops were still hunting down the nephew. The distraught uncle prevailed on Plato to go back with him to Dionysius. Here is Plato's report:

"Theodotes fell at his feet and, grasping his hand, begged him with tears not to do such a thing, while I by way of comforting him said: 'Take heart, Theodotes; Dionysius will never dare to violate the agreement we made yesterday.'

" 'I made no agreement of any kind whatever with *you*,' said Dionysius, giving me a very despotic look.

" 'God knows you did,' said I; 'you promised to refrain from the very course which Theodotes is begging you not to take.' "[15]

Note the *timeliness* of Plato's answer.

To see it clear, imagine an answer less prompt and punctilious about the relations between before and after. For example: "Ah you

[14] This observation, about the greater likelihood of encountering evil in its pure state, than good, I owe to the late Léo Bronstein. Our conversation is in my *Conversions: A Philosophic Memoir* (Temple University Press, 1994), xiii.

[15] Plato, *The Seventh Letter*, in *Phaedrus & Letters VII and VIII*, translated with introductions by Walter Hamilton (New York: Penguin Books, 1973),146f.

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have brought to light a host of ambiguities, Dionysius! Wasn't it my colleague, the sibylline Heraclitus, who said, 'You can't step into the same river twice'? I don't know whose utterance yields more fascinating conundrums. The fallibility of event memory! The undecidability of conflicting interpretations! We must dive and delve into these themes in our next get-together. Whenever you can resume those. So stimulating! I shall look forward!"

What exactly would have been lost? Only Plato's integrity. Only the Plato whose opinion of Socrates, 'the best man then living,' carried weight. And lost in an *instant*. Instead, in an instant, we have 'God knows you did!' And Plato is still Plato.[16]

[16] This is not to say that integrity *equals* the absence of diplomacy. If it did, civil life would hardly survive. Cicero's comment is apposite here: 'I believe in moving with the times. Unchanging consistency of standpoint has never been considered a virtue in great statesmen. At sea it is good sailing to run before the gale, even if the ship cannot make the harbor; but if she *can* make harbor by changing tack, only a fool would risk shipwreck by holding to the original course rather than change it and still reach his destination. Similarly, while all of us as statesmen should set before our eyes the goal of peace with honor to which I have so often pointed, it is our aim, not our language, which must always be the same', Cicero, *Letters to Atticus and His Friends* (*Ad familiares*), ed. and trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey (Penguin Classics, 1958), quoted in Anthony Everitt, *Cicero: The Life and Times of Rome's Greatest Politician* (New York: Random House, 2001), 163f. But the example of *The Seventh Letter* serves to remind us that integrity may sometimes require absence of diplomacy.

Is there a rule that can tell us when to follow Plato with Dionysius II and when Cicero with his aristocratic correspondent? The casuistry that is applicable runs on and on. A spy (we suppose) can have integrity within his calling, yet deceive. A diplomat can reply disingenuously to a cruel despot, yet serve his country with integrity. A *resistant* may forge identity papers for a hunted refugee, and yet (or all the more) act with integrity. Or, as even Plato implies, anyone may, with integrity, lie to a madman who returns for the weapon he borrowed when he was sane. (*Republic*, para. 331.)

When, then, may one *not* do these things—not and preserve one's integrity? How can one tell the difference between running before the gale and giving up the harbour altogether? It seems to me that honourable conduct cannot escape the risks of these storm-ridden calculations, risks not run by those chroniclers who divvy up the accounts while standing safe on shore. In the instant, one has only one's training and intuition to trust. In the course of these navigational struggles, calculations, miscalculations and course corrections, one becomes something of a veteran. Generally speaking, the character of a veteran is detectable *in* those who have it, *by* those who have it. (But even that is not something

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How did Plato do it? Where did he get a retort so timely and so apt? The conversation had been going along, not well, but as well as one could expect from a man of unchecked powers and appetites, when *evil* suddenly loomed, with its double threat: one may suffer injury, *or one may succumb*.

If I see evil looming—it always seems sudden—and I haven't been able to steer round it, then what is called for from me is, obviously, resistance. Nor can my resistance be a mere tactic, in the sense of something not identified with myself. The norms are not going to help me here. (What is the norm for dealing with tyrants?) Even if there are relevant norms, if I can't make them my own, they will be powerless to move my littlest finger.

In less desperate circumstances (where one isn't dealing with a tyrant), relevant norms might be called in. Experts might point out the tactics and precedents that could guide me in making my appeal to the legal, professional or social norms. If I do it right, I might even find allies. But all this happens later. At the start, my resistance has to come from the place where I keep my 'integrity', wherever that place is. My integrity is my personal grip on the truths of the particular case. Whereas, even if they are applicable, the norms are more generic than that.

What were the truths of the particular case that we have consulted? For Plato, Dionysius was his student, since that was the light in which Plato had first been prevailed upon to see him—as apprentice-philosopher-king—when he embarked for Syracuse. And the student had fallen out of his role. He was changing the past, scrambling the facts of the matter, upending the relevant

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one can count on.)

All this is not very satisfactory, in providing a standard metric for integrity in a moveable world. If one is directly challenged to lie—*or else*—by an adversary who knows who and what one is and what truth one knows, one should treat that as a direct challenge to one's integrity, and respond with the undiplomatic truth. But again, the *or else* might impinge on one's pain-tolerance threshold, or threaten a wider circle than oneself alone, and in such cases one has to return to one's computations-before-the-gale, or educated intuitions. So we are not much further along, on the theoretical side. Williams is correct that 'there is no exceptionless and simple rule'. If, as Williams concludes from this, 'there is no Moral Law', (*Truth and Truthfulness*, 122), there is still a *moral dimension* to stand in, for given situations. One can learn to stand in the moral dimension, but there is nothing rote-like about it. Being skilled behavior, it takes, as Aristotle reminds us, practice, practice, and more practice.

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human relations. Plato is merely reminding him of the past, the facts, and the relevant relations. It is the right thing to do. It is Plato's resistance. It looks simple. But its analysis is no simple matter.

Teachers have practice in noticing when a particular student has fallen out of the role. For a more recent example, I can call to mind a brawny student in the back row of an introductory philosophy class that I was teaching some years back. I can still see his bulky shoulders rocking with silent laughter, although (to judge by the stolid expressions of those seated nearby) nothing funny had happened or been said, and his *eyes*, large, dark, flat as coins, and opaque with gleaming malevolence. It was a look that gave me a start and triggered the silent, reflexive response: *Uh oh*. *Never mind* [Campus] *Security; Get the exorcist*.

What sort of event is this? And how can one find out? What is the right method? If one can take oneself as an adequate gauge (not, let us hope, excessively paranoid or hyper-imaginative), one might start by scanning one's own reactions, instantly and minutely. Notice that the scanner will pick up a small tremor or vibrato. Is it a tremor of *rushing to deny* something? But what? The answer might be found by scanning one layer down, to a lower psychic sediment. That lower-down sediment seems to contain *fright*. And now there is a third step for the scanner: the outward-looking or intentional step, which can be taken once the scanner stops veering around nervously. For the outward-looking scanner, what will loom dead ahead is the *face of pure malice*.

Let us suppose one has seen that face and been really scared by it. That face is horrifying as such, quite apart from what it can do. The malignant intentions themselves are what are frightening. If denial does not get the upper hand, and one remembers to repeat silently to oneself, 'pure malice: that is what this person has a case of', and if that sense is sustained without flinching or wavering, then sometimes (at least in the classroom where the contending powers are unequal) nothing further will be needed along the resistance line. The person with the face of pure malice has been understood. He or she might even subside, at least for so long as one sticks by one's perception.

Dim the insight just a shade, add the faintest tinge of 'forgiveness' to it, admit just a speck of remorse over having had it in the first place, psychologize it away with well-intentioned, therapeutic chatter-in-the-head, allow oneself to be distracted in any way from one's silent seeing and, interestingly, the hydra springs back, many-headed as before. Note what has happened

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here. The situation was truly hopeless. That's not the trouble. The trouble is that one has given up on its hopelessness and opted for hope, too soon. One has been a 'liberal' at the wrong time. The situation reverts and is, once again, uncured. It may be proportionately harder to cure the next time round.

This phenomenon is a very democratic one. Any venue is eligible for the exhibiting of it. I have cited the student-teacher setting because I know it best, readers who have served in classrooms might recall some similar moment, and this is normally a more contained and structured setting than some others one could cite. But wherever it happens to surface, pure malice cannot be effectively *treated* as the shakeout from antecedent contingencies. The constraint is a practical one. Our motive need not be 'moral', in any conventional senses of the term. We could go most of the distance with Williams, if he were to deem this a contest for social power. The point is that we cannot *handle the situation* as it needs to be handled unless we take in its defining feature: malice freely chosen for its own sake. Despite Spinoza's psychologistic dictum that man is not a kingdom within the kingdom of nature,[17] in this particular instance we do find something free: a kingdom within the kingdom. That is just what is frightening. It is what I will tend, almost reflexively, to push beneath the surface of my awareness, ferreting it out only with difficulty and reluctance later.

Let us be clear about this. Even to exercise *effective* social force, one must recognize the element in the situation that goes beyond the play and counter-play of social forces. Nor can this recognition be faked. Plato is not bluffing. One has to recognize what's there because such is the truth of the matter, *not because it would be useful to treat the matter as if such were the truth of it*. Just as you cannot fool a wild animal by pretending that you're not afraid of it when you are, so you cannot fool a person of creative malice by pretending that you recognise his free malevolence *as such*, when in fact you are merely responding to the social force he exudes.

Right away one can hear oneself asking (rather desperately perhaps), can't one *cure* evil intentions? At the moment, the question is irrelevant. 'Cure' is another story, and a much more problematic one, since what we are dealing with falls within the chiaroscuro precincts of human freedom. Potential victims and survivors can often be found rushing to 'cure' whatever it is that has mysteriously afflicted their attackers. No cure is likely if one does not know the malady. The person who has been made a target

[17] Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, in the prefatory remarks to Part III.

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has to recognise what is going on, and be prepared to get a grip on the truth of the encounter. The oddity is that the bearer of ill will often *does* know, at least sufficiently to hit the target. In fact, ill will leaves its own kind of trail, permitting one to track its intended quarry: the good that must be protected.

Encounters with evil are uniquely fitted to reveal the good that was under attack. They may end well or badly for the one threatened. But, if the encounter goes right—because the struggling victim keeps a grip on the facts of the matter—such a struggle becomes its own evidence that the roll of the dice was not decisive. If the encounter goes wrong, and the victim's grip on the particulars is relaxed untimely, *the evidence that this was no chance happening is erased as the happening goes along,* and indeed this is part of what it means to go wrong.

No how-to manual can provide evil's would-be resisters with algorithms. The encounters do not work like that. A resistance procedure that helped detect or thrust back a previous attack will likely not do for the next time. In moral combat, as in military, one should not fight the last war. What happens next time will always come as a surprise. It is meant to. The agent of freely chosen malevolence will not strike ineffectually, if he or she can help it. That agent always seems to look over the target's defensive system in advance. He or she will find the weak place, the untried or undermanned side of the fort, and climb up just where the defender is not looking. Why else climb up at all? Nor is there any height one can scale that will leave one safe from future assault. Quite the contrary. The higher one is (the heights need not be spatial, social, or professional—just high by any measure one can name), the higher one's freely-malevolent assailant can climb. No single adversary is meant here. Formerly ill-intentioned agents can change and become well-intentioned. Reverse transformations also occur. The adversarial phenomenon here described can come from multiform quarters. The point is that its defeats are never decisive. What else would such an assailant do? This is *evil* we are talking about, not rolls of the dice.

Concerning malevolence, something should be said about its freedom. In one sense, the malevolent person seems free—not driven or powered from behind. She is not a robot. Her self-guided intelligence sets out to discover and thwart her victim's aims in life, and this bespeaks autonomous agency—even creativity. In another sense, however, the malevolent one seems to be 'not herself'. Often—especially if she was nicer once—she *looks* different. Not necessarily worse, but altered. She may be enjoying new freshets of

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charisma. She may glow, but it will look a bit phosphorescent. Her pacing seems odd, as if the fuel making it go isn't blood, but some substance with preservative in it. There may have been a time when those who loved her began no longer to recognise her—though that time be long past and, by most, forgotten. All of which raises the question, is this free malevolence really *hers*? Or has 'something' got into her?

It begins to look as if the second answer might be the right one, but there's a problem here for the resister. If we treat the malevolent one as if she can't help it, because she's been overpowered by an impersonal force, then we can't handle the kind of malevolence that confronts us. That at least appears both free and intentional.

Without presuming to say, either psychologically or metaphysically, what the *that* is, all I can say from experience is that the encounter with evil is a meeting with something that has both freedom and malevolence. I do not know whether the free malevolence inhabits its bearer as a stranger, or comes to coincide with her without remainder. What I can say is that the value-neutral supposition that one's assailant *can't help it* will be likely to blur one's focus when the time comes to take aim. One meets this assailant either with conscious resistance to his or her free malevolence, or else with degrees of surrender. But nobody in this encounter is beyond good and evil. That posture is delusive. There are no neutrals here.

What then is its real target, the thing evil aims at so as to take it down?

We can't pretend to an exhaustive account, but in the cases here cited, what the evil agent aimed at was one's integrity, which was one's grip on the truths of the particular case and, collaterally, one's ability to call up that hold on the particulars. Of course being right is not a birthright. *Because one can be wrong*, one needs what is sometimes called a dialectical method. As we know, the method of Socratic or Hegelian dialectic tests a *belief* in terms of its adequacy to the relevant evidence and its freedom from internal or external contradiction. It tests an *aim* in terms of its ability not to be undercut by its instruments, and not to have equivalently defining or related aims undercut by those instruments or else by inconsistency.

There is a difference between people that bears on integrity. It is not the one between extroverts and introverts, the tough-minded and the tender-minded, or the bearers of unequal quanta of sex energy. Nor—*pace* multiculturalists—is it the difference between

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the cultures they came from. It lies rather in their degrees of willingness to uncover the truth of their questions by pursuing them to the end.

In sum: the recipe for achieving and retaining integrity, or grip on the truths of the particular case, would be compounded of dialectical method, persistence in its use over time, and hopefulness. Absent the hope that the seeker can uncover the truth sought, the needed persistence won't be summoned. Evil must therefore attack one or another of the instruments wherewith one seeks the truth relative to one's standpoint in life. There are many such instruments: logical, empirical, intuitive, social, material and vital.

The foregoing is a general inventory. In real life, the truth-finding instruments cited are particular and have a personal bearing on one's course in life. With such instruments as are at one's disposal, one pursues the aims of one's life, in the context of one's world as one understands it. The instruments are what enable one to adjust one's aims and to correct the understandings on which they are based. Since intelligent hope doesn't fly blind, attacks on any of one's instruments will also undermine the mainstays of hope in one's life. Which instrument will the evil agent attack? That depends on her opportunities and the scope of her aggression.

Any such formulations as these will have the defect of their abstract and schematic nature. Consulting some of the objections, however, might help us to put flesh on the bones. One objection might be that people without higher education must be able to have integrity too, and yet this account seems to reserve integrity for people in possession of a dialectical method.

Actually, however, 'dialectic', in the broadest sense—the sense here intended—can be found as readily in people who live the most practical and unassuming lives, since *their* judgments must also take the measure of things and, as good craftsmen, make the necessary corrections. A conscientious gardener, housepainter, fire fighter—the list goes on—often shows more integrity than does the man or woman whose left hand doesn't need to know what the right hand is doing. This closeness to the corrective force of real things is the reason.

At the other extreme of objection, one might argue that the most practiced dialecticians have found ways to rationalize the most deplorable defaults and transgressions. If 'dialectic', so called, is such a support to integrity, why didn't it keep these people decent?

The reason is that dialectic is not an autonomous power. For the purposes of securing one's integrity, it's not a machine that goes of itself. It is I—who stand at a certain juncture of my life, collecting

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the memories of my efforts to sustain my purposes and get them to cohere, verifying that I can still trace my purposes in the broken places of my life—I who must, once again, find the resources and the heart for going on. It has never been obvious, how and why to go on. It will still be a business of trial and error, and keeping tabs on my results, as compared to my purposes, in the time-honored 'dialectical' style. But if I don't try, then I give it up. It doesn't go of itself.

It should go without saying (but perhaps it needs saying) that evil is not always presented in the shape of an *external* enemy. It can present itself—when all is going well and one is surrounded by applause and well-wishing—in the shape of the mysterious inner impulse to, so to speak, take a dive. The *modus operandi* is the same. It's quite an odd thing but, when one is at the top of one's game, and has no enemies to speak of, evil still *knows* how to take down one's integrity. I offer no theology, indeed I have none worth offering: but it's almost *personal*, how evil knows.

So, with regard to the objection that practiced dialecticians can rationalize the worst misdeeds: this is true. That is, armed with mere intellectual training, not using the wide spectrum of one's instruments for gauging one's course in the world, one will be left amateurish with respect to one's grip on who and what one is. Without that grip, integrity easily slips away.

A third objection goes like this. Integrity or, as Aristotle would name it, truthfulness, is a virtue. Aren't the virtues obtainable and sustainable without dialectic? Aren't they just qualities one *has*—like brown hair—self-sustaining or even sustained in inverse proportion to the degree of one's conscious grip on who and what one is? Some years ago, the actor Jimmy Stewart starred in a film called 'Harvey', about a man whose gentle guilelessness was shored up by his delusion that he had a Giant Invisible Rabbit to watch over him. Isn't this (the objection runs) a fair instance of what it's like to have a virtue like integrity?

The film had a nice conceit (or, as they say in Hollywood, sceptical 'concept'), but it was probably a by-product of our morally skeptical age. The intelligence—almost cunning—with which Dickens' Little Dorritt tenaciously maintains her filial piety in the face of her drunken father's utter worthlessness, is surely closer to the mark with regard to any given virtue and what it takes to keep it. It takes tenacity and an intelligent assessment of the real situation. If one does not care about the effect of one's virtue, it's doubtful that one has it in more than the ornamental sense. It has to be matched to its occasion. Tolerance is not the right virtue when

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evil looms. Aristotle gave us virtue ethics and the practical syllogism. He could not have meant that his list of virtues—those steady tendencies to feel and act appropriately—could be hard-wired into us in childhood, thereafter to work in us as if we were *their* automata. Adult virtue is hard bought and never secured without remainder. If we want to apply a virtue to the concrete situation that needs it, we must assess and reassess the situation, take aim repeatedly, and be prepared to modify our course again and again.

One can call this the requirement of dialectic, or call it by any other name that conveys what it is to be reasonable in real life. Whatever its name, it belongs to integrity's daily life. Now what is there about integrity that draws the *attentions* of free malevolence? There is enough, apparently. The local and personal life that has assembled its reasons for being where it is, and seeks to be guided by those reasons (or by better ones) in future, already presents a target worth *dis*assembling, since it has some of its 'own business' to mind. That business is its constant effort to pull its life together, and to correct course as it goes along.

Free malevolence hates that and will target that. It will seize the cohesive point of such a life—sometimes before its owner does—and set to work to scatter the point, to throw the one whose point it was off the track of it, switching around its identifying terms. There is a scriptural prohibition against moving a neighbor's boundary stone. Evil is always found moving the boundary stone. The relevant facts are always what evil misrepresents, generating fictive versions of what happened, or attacking the targeted one's competence and honesty. Other instruments of the life of integrity (the material, social, and vital) may of course be attacked as well. As we noted, the target will vary with the opportunity. Evil too must assemble its instruments.

The encounter with evil has allowed us to see on what the life of integrity is based: a truthful, persistent, and hopeful effort at self-integration. We have seen a correspondingly persistent but *un*truthful and hope-*destroying* effort involved in evil, as the deliberate targeting of such a life. Luck, whether as experience or as concept, is not among the phenomena we have met in this encounter.

But Williams is not refuted yet. Unmoved, he might reply: "Suppose everything you have said about integrity is right. My points would still hold, since the gifts that belong to 'integrity' in your sense must be the products of a fortunate temperament or upbringing, or else come from the happy chance of meeting the

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right models in adult life. And all these factors are only the shake-out of luck." To that objection, there is only one possible answer: *believe that and you'll buckle*. The tests of moral competence may prove easy or hard, clear-cut or subtle, but they are not the tests of counter-*argument*. They are the first-person tests, at those junctions in life when I stand alone, and nobody can help me. I cannot out-argue Williams. All I can say to the reader is, 'put it to the tests'.

Another way of describing the moments in life when 'I stand alone and nobody can help me,' is to say that they are moments when I threaten to come unglued and have to work strenuously to put the pieces of myself together again. This raises the question, how does *Williams* think we are put together? He gives us collage selves, put together with the glue of other people's perceived reactions. The collage self may come unglued or, with luck, it may cohere. Overall, in 'Moral Luck' as in *Truth and Truthfulness*, our self-assessments are discrete and situational. Whatever steadiness there is in our collage lives must incessantly be reinforced by other people's expectations. What collage lives cannot be seen to do is *pull themselves together*, as integrity—or for that matter evil—requires. If we have been right about the self-originating way integrity works, and also about the kinds of creative initiative evil shows, then integrity and evil, taken together, disclose an inadequacy in the moral luck thesis. They tell us that something *important and undeniable* has been left out of the account of moral standing: the philosopher's help in the task we all have of saving our integrity when evil threatens it.

We can complete our refutation. If, as Williams contends, Anna can be conscious of her *failure* to accomplish the aims that pull her life together, it would follow that she can *take the measure* of her entire life, as having succeeded or failed.[18] Here we are talking

[18] In *Truth and Truthfulness*, Williams writes: 'a project of living a life that is authentic either in social or in purely personal terms may come to grief for extrinsic reasons, which will not falsify the idea that it would have been an authentic life. But there are circumstances in which that idea may be falsified, and then the agent's hopes for a meaningful and satisfying life will be not just negated but refuted by what happens' (205). In a twist, Williams concludes that 'the pursuit of authenticity' may also fail because it needs—*but may have to conceal from itself*—'the virtues of truth'. The implication, which is clear from the context, is that the need for concealment of the truth about oneself from oneself follows if at bottom the human being is profoundly amoral—both fragmented and opportunistic—in the Nietzschean sense. But the disintegrated

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about a double-sided activity of self-integration and self-assessment. Human agency is at work on a big scale. Just in order to take herself to be a failure, she needs considerable inherent power, rather than passive submission to the throw of the dice. It takes a lot of power to deem oneself powerless globally.

The inconsistency just noted allows us to point out the third kind of help not given by this philosopher: help in the face of failure. The failures Williams talks about seem entire and inoperable. He has to be wrong. On his very account, the hopelessness of failure can never be entire—not in a self that is *integrated enough to fail* in its life. (We note that being a failure in life is not that hard. Anybody can do it, on any social level. This is not the arcanum of the psyche.)

Picture a self with this not-uncommon ability integrally to round up its purposes. A failure of them *all*—linked as they are one to the next—could be taken as rather promising. My goodness, the sufferer might exclaim, what a vast failure I am! It's tragic! It gives me pity and terror for myself! It prompts me to look for the tragic flaw that led me to it, in order to self-correct and—in that very dialectical nub of experience—find the heart for going on. I don't have to read the *Poetics* to look for the tragic flaw. Entrepreneurs

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Nietzschean stratum of the psyche—supposing it to be real as described and not just a nineteenth-century, German Romantic philosopher's brainchild—would not be the stratum that can sustain realizable intentions over time. It could neither succeed nor fail, nor know that it had succeeded or failed.

The style is sketchy and allusive here, but Williams' abrupt withdrawing of the self-corrective power he had just conceded to the self brings him closer to the position he took in 'Persons, Character, and Morality', (*Moral Luck*,1–19). There he had the notion of a 'ground project' that would be the agent's *raison d'être*, 'providing the motive force which propels him into the future, and gives him a reason for living'. This motive force he variously termed 'character', 'self', and 'substance'. Conviction, morale, and personal force inhabited this motive force and came into our lives from there. In that earlier essay, Williams had not specifically endowed his 'selves' with self-corrective powers. They had motive force, but they couldn't seem to correct course as they jetted along. One wonders how a force of this incorrigible kind could *notice* that it had failed at something. Might it not rather just fall down and get up, again and again, like the Russian doll, or like Rasputin during his interminable assassination?

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who fail do this. Lovers who fail do this. Finding the heart for going on is hard work, but it's not that rare. It's called 'pulling oneself together'.

Is it 'unphilosophical' to weigh in on the side of a hopeful attitude? Or is it just the philosophical equivalent of bad form? *Must* philosophy be fashionably hopeless at mixing *phronesis* with fellow-feeling? If so, it must also be hopeless at giving the recipe for integrity. For holistic 'failures' are, from the standpoint of integrity, at least as interesting and fruitful as the acknowledged successes of a person's life. Nobody is failure-proof. Failure is not the enemy of one's integrity. Hopelessness is.

About success and failure, there is just a bit more to be said here. Suppose, like Gauguin, one risks one's reputation on a forbidden venture—and wins. In that case, one has tested what we earlier called one's 'habitat of justification' and pushed back its boundaries. Now suppose one only tries to do that, and fails, as Anna failed. What then? The boundaries of one's habitat have at least been more thoroughly mapped. For good or ill, the boundaries may be enlarged by some later explorer, or by oneself on a future occasion.

The standpoint of the future is particularly instructive in looking at the very risks singled out by Williams. Fast forward to a Gauguin who would be *our* contemporary. Like the first Gauguin, he cannot live significantly without painting, and he too must paint the Tahitian people. Nowadays, however, *le nouvel Gauguin* can arrange a commuting marriage, supposing his wife unable to get leave from her Parisian law firm, and Tahiti providing no suitable day care for their children. Alternatively, the couple can credit deposits to a joint account and at least keep in regular touch by email. And if, by the by, it turned out that 'Tahiti' had been a mere placeholder for bohemian irresponsibility, well it is not so easy to escape to the South Seas as it used to be. Today one gets followed. By lawyers, creditors, the lot. If character is still at risk, it is *not for the sake of art* that the risk is run. Nor, conversely, is it for the sake of his character that his art is still at risk. It is only that, with humans generally, both talent and character are at risk.

Even more obviously have the risks changed for Anna. Contemporary Kareninas don't walk under trains. If perchance they feel emotionally starved, they *get divorces*, normally with shared custody of the children. Also, for women nowadays, the longing to be real (guessing that to have been her unspoken object) can be expressed in other media. In sum, certain adventures that looked tragically defiant of the norms of an earlier era have shown a

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recent capacity to be resorbed within the social contract. One era's social tragedy becomes another's social comedy. If *we* can see this (the comedy behind the tragedy), scanning backward from the twenty-first century to the nineteenth, we may reasonably anticipate that today's loss of face may be tomorrow's double vision—today's social tragedy, tomorrow's social comedy. Here the standpoint of the long future shows that Karenina's failure as a lover was not in principle hopeless, and that the debits of Gauguin's personal life were not in principle the price of his art. The lesson here? It is hopeful, but also realistic, to understand the private future of each one of us as part of humanity's long future, and—also for that reason—to regard the private future as reparable.

No doubt some things in life are harder to repair, lost integrity among them. But apart from that sort of success or failure, the story of our lives is not *primarily* about success or failure. It is about learning the costs of what we are, and paying as we go.

If not everything in the moral domain is at the mercy of luck, some things admittedly are. Behind-the-wheel decisions do matter in split seconds, and not all of us are gifted with the right reflexes or neighbors on the road. (In fact, the whole concept of 'moral luck' seems peculiarly geared to the experience of *drivers*. It is all too clear that the driver who inadvertently kills a child has a different moral situation to face than any luckier driver, and here the partisans of moral luck have managed to create a stir by underscoring the obvious.)[19]

There *is* a gap between what we intend and what we manage to perpetrate. This gap is a permanent feature of the moral life, and it cannot be closed by any enhanced elasticity in the social conventions. When one has, accidentally or unwittingly, done harm, one had better face it and take the consequences. The law recognizes this point when it brings weightier charges against the hit-and-run driver than against the one who has stayed and telephoned for an ambulance. Though gossips may not recognize the fact, and one's own overworked conscience may obscure it, the moral element here is *not* a matter of chance, and the luck element is *not* moral.

[19] For elucidation of the obvious, we can safely turn to Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (110b15–25). If we act without a clear picture of our act's instruments and what it will lead to, our act is ruled involuntary. But if the result of the involuntary act proves damaging, and we fail to admit and repair the damage as best we can, it becomes retroactively more like voluntary.

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Taken all in all, whether in the realm of frightening encounters with objective evil, or life aims frustrated, or painful responsibility for roadside accidents, we have not found that collapsing integrity into social force, or the effects of conscience into those of chance, is warranted. That said, none of the recognitions that have moved us off the terrain of Williams' argument for moral luck have been comfortable ones. All are of the dangers that may beset our every step, from start to finish. We still walk a fine line—a wire, even.[20]

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