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Grading with a Self-Evaluation Rubric: Acknowledging the Effect of Moral Luck on a Student's Learning Process in Higher Education

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Introduction

Education reform is a constantly evolving and controversial topic in the United States. Miguel Cardona is the United States' current Secretary of Education, confirmed on March 1, 2021 by the Senate. While Cardona's primary plans have been primarily COVID-19 related, he has spoken to the overuse of assessments and grades in our current education system. Cardona says "We need sensible assessments, always asking, why are we doing this? Does it improve instruction? Does it help serve students?"[1] In other words, it seems he understands there is a need for more thoughtful and comprehensive evaluation systems, ones that are more effective and focus on actual learning for the students. While grades and examinations have their own purposes, education reform should work to strengthen the learning process and take away the emphasis on standardized testing and grades. Learning for the sake of learning is the most important thing. In what follows, I will be presenting evidence for and considering various philosophical, ethical, and pedagogical implications of teaching practices and grading systems that do not give a holistic picture of how students are learning because they do not take into account moral luck. If moral luck were considered throughout the learning process, students would be able to have an improved learning environment and subsequently grades would go up because grading itself would not be so important that it adversely shaped the way students view themselves.

I personally attended a preparatory academy for high school and felt the pressure firsthand to receive a certain GPA in order to even be considered eligible to apply to higher education institutions. I experienced an inappropriate hyper-focus on grades as the most important thing necessary for 'success.' This focus, I will argue, takes away from the learning as,

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[1] Long, Cindy. 2021. "Meet Miguel Cardona, the New U.S. Secretary of Education." https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/meet-miguel-cardona-new-us-secretary-education

again, it does not account for all the extenuating circumstances that make each person's learning

needs and experiences quite different. It is unfair and inequitable for there to be a standardized

grading and education system when so much of student's lives are out of their control. The

difficulty of achieving a fair learning environment is not a reason for children or adults to avoid

learning. We must acknowledge the flaws and not run away from them, but lean into the

challenges because I believe we can create reform. This thesis is partially inspired by Martha

Nussbaum, a philosopher, who writes about the controversial idea that it is ethical, under certain

circumstances, to impose education on people.[2] Without being educated, no one can truly know if

they want to be educated or not, or achieve the basic capabilities that Nussbaum thinks are

essential to living a good life. So, while the initial push to learn may be unwanted, the person

could not know if they truly would have wanted it or not without the experience. While my

preparatory school offered me a form of education that I did not necessarily agree with, the

actual content that I learned from it is very valuable. I am not arguing for the possibility that all

the ethical issues can be removed from the educational context, nor that grading, and evaluation

is per se unacceptable as I think this would be an unreasonable task. Instead, I agree with

Nussbaum that despite the ethical issues related to teaching and learning, education is necessary

for everyone and can be done in more ethical ways.

The guiding question for my thesis as a whole is as follows: despite external

circumstances and moral luck, is there a way to more fairly educate and evaluate students? I

believe there is. When moral luck is taken into account in the learning process, it allows for

students to learn in more ideal circumstances and subsequently get higher, and deserved, grades.

This thesis will be split into five main chapters excluding the introduction and conclusion, with

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[2] Nussbaum, Martha. 2000. "Women and Cultural Universals." *Pluralism: The Philosophy and Politics of Diversity*, Maria Baghramian & Attracta Ingram eds.

the goal of answering the above question. Chapter 1 begins with a brief overview of the history of education reform. This will include Thomas Jefferson's "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge," Horace Mann's Common School Movement, progressive education as advertised by John Dewey, and lastly the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The purpose of outlining the history is to show how the goals of education have stayed primarily the same from the late 1700s to early 2000s, with different tactics to accomplish the tasks. Next, I transition to an exploration of the purpose of grades by commenting on a conversation I had with current professors at Connecticut College. Lastly, I discuss how grades inaccurately reflect the most important aspects of education, like learning and growth.

In Chapter 2, I explore two grading systems, one traditional grading system, and one described by Robert Wolff, as well as multiple arguments and counter arguments that come with them. I argue that there are ethical and moral issues that grading raises because grading a student's work is also functionally a way of grading the student themself. Due to the fact that grades are so important in determining a student's life outcome, it is necessary for an educator to acknowledge life circumstances. Clearly, someone could point out how unreasonable it might seem to expect a professor to have the time to learn details about each of their students' lives. This leads into a discussion of the moral responsibility of teachers and the essentializing nature of grades on students.

In Chapter 3, I introduce the problem of moral luck as written about by Thomas Nagel, and show how the puzzles that Nagel raises pose distinct challenges in the educational context in general, and for grading in particular. There are four main types of moral luck: constitutive, circumstantial, consequential, and antecedent. I will outline some of the problems that each type of luck raises in the context of education or learning. I explore how each type of moral luck can

impact an individual's education either positively or negatively, and how this makes evaluation of that learning problematic. Then, I acknowledge that Nagel does not believe the problem of moral luck can be solved, but I believe it is possible to mitigate the problems of moral luck by simply acknowledging moral luck, but also through interventions like self-evaluation, something I will explore in greater depth in Chapter 5. The conclusion is that moral luck needs to be taken into account during the learning process in order to give students a better chance at receiving higher and fairer grades.

In Chapter 4, with an understanding of Wolff's three models of grading presented in Chapter 2, I summarize a thought experiment presented by Wolff which encapsulates the issues I offer a solution to in chapter 5. In the example, Wolff writes about two students who attend the same university but have different interests and educational circumstances. John is fascinated by American History, but uninterested in every other subject. William, on the other hand, is mediocre at all the subjects and does not have a particular passion in anything, but manages to get his degree while John does not. The purpose of this chapter is to critique Wolff's thought experiment and argue that Wolff is wrong in believing the structural issues in education that did not allow for John to succeed while William did, are unfixable.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I propose and evaluate one response to the problems of unfair evaluation for students. This involves acknowledging moral luck by giving students the opportunity[3] to complete a self-evaluation questionnaire. The questions will tackle specific problems from each type of moral luck that I summarized in Chapter 3. The goal of self-evaluation is twofold: First, allowing students to reflect on their learning and working process, as well as any life circumstances that were helpful or harmful towards their work.

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[3] I acknowledge the possible ethical concerns that could be raised with the self-evaluation questionnaire given as a **required** assignment. I will address these concerns in Chapter 5.

Second, it allows for educators to see how students are learning and what they could do better to accommodate for any of the problems of moral luck. With multiple self-evaluation questionnaires filled out throughout the school year or semester, learning can be a constantly evolving process and one that enhances both the way students learn and teachers teach. With this in mind, one can imagine that a successful self-evaluation questionnaire could lead to better grades overall as learning becomes more successful.

I then conclude with an overview of what I have argued, acknowledgment of limitations to my suggested reform, and an outline of further questions.

Chapter 1: A History of the Purposes of Education in the United States

In this chapter, I will be exploring the historical correlation between education and grading in the United States in order to lay the foundation for my eventual critique of grading practices that emerge from this discussion of educational history. The purpose of this chapter is to set out some explanations of the power and entrenchment of the current popular grading systems, which I will be arguing are morally problematic in a number of ways. First, I will briefly discuss the changing purposes of education from the 1800's until the present, focusing mainly on the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Second, as related to the central idea of standardized education from the NCLB, I will transition to talk about grades and their purposes, namely that grades allow for students to have an idea of how they are doing in class, as well as allowing them to see if they are progressing. Then, with those two parts in mind, I will think about the correlation between education and grades.

History of Education Reform

While the goals of education are seemingly always changing, it is beneficial to look at some history of education reform. In 1779, Thomas Jefferson proposed his new system of education in "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge." This bill proposed the start of "public education" where free children, male and female, had three years of tax-funded education. The purpose of these public schools was to "diffuse" knowledge more equally through the population. [4] However, it is possible and quite likely that there was also a less-talked about economic and political purpose behind the popularization of public schools. Education reform continued to progress when Horace Mann spearheaded the Common School Movement. When

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[4] Committee of the Virginia Assembly. 1779. *A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge, 18 June 1779.* National Historical Publications & Records Commission. https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0079

elected to act as Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education in 1837, he worked towards a more harmonious school system, which subsequently would lead to better democratic participation and social well-being. In other words, like Jefferson, Mann believed that the purpose of education was to benefit society just as much as the individual which made schooling more appealing to local communities. The Common School Movement consisted of schools that were "commonly supported, commonly attended and commonly controlled." [5] So, the education was paid for by the community, and accessible to everyone in the community (a disclaimer that "accessible to everyone" does not include those who were discriminated against due to race). Again, similar to Jefferson's proposal, the goal of Mann's school system was to make education more accessible to as many children as possible. However, both of these aforementioned governmental changes were primarily for lower schools, or early education.

In 1919, there was a push to make education more progressive. Famously developed by John Dewey, progressive education focuses more on student experience, experiments, purposeful learning, and freedom.[6] The goal of a progressive education system is to give students practical knowledge and problem-solving skills, as well as an overarching purpose to promote social change and reform society.[7] It involved much more "hands-on learning," and there was an emphasis on the building of social skills.[8] This type of education moved away from the typical rote memorization that was found in Jefferson's schools. This system of education could be placed in public schools everywhere, and so, as education reform progresses the goal changes from not just making sure education is widespread, but focusing on making sure that "good quality" education is spread.

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[5] Mann, Horace. 1848. "Report No. 12 of the Massachusetts School Board." Basic Readings in U.S. Democracy. https://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/democrac/16.htm
[6] Joseph, Pamela Bolotin. 2007. "Conceptualizing Curriculum." *Cultures of Curriculum*. 2nd ed., Routledge.
[7] Ibid
[8] Dewey, John. 1963. *Experience and Education*. New York; Macmillan.

Because of wealth disparities, sexism, racism, and more, education is a complex system to keep fair. Just giving children access to public education does not account for some schools offering better education, or for any students' physical or mental health challenges that could change the way they learn. The effects of these life circumstances on education will be addressed further in Chapter 3 through Thomas Nagel's idea of moral luck. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) authorized different programming to close achievement gaps and lessen the disparities in education. The United States Congress aimed to achieve this by increasing funding and adding qualifications for teachers, but more interestingly, they also placed more emphasis on testing and having systems such as report cards and grades, to measure academic progress.[9] This increased emphasis on testing and assessment was essential to establishing and sustaining the problematic idea (which is the focus of this thesis) that education can be measured accurately through grades.

From 1779 to 2001, it can be noted that the government has, in various ways, continued to promote the goal of making education accessible to as many people as possible. If educators are aware of this purpose, which it is likely that they are, the consequence is that education will no longer be individualized at all. This conclusion has been made because, with widespread education, comes bigger classroom sizes, larger schools, and less opportunities for educators to focus on one student at a time. So, students will have one way to learn, and if that strategy does not work well for a student's mind, then they could be left behind (or, even promoted despite appropriate learning goals not having been met). While the implementation of easier access to education seems to be for the purpose of equality, it does not address the educational inequities in our society. In particular, the concept of moral luck as something that affects people in

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[9] Walker, Tim. 2015. "Five Issues That Will Decide If the Era of No Child Left Behind is Really Over." https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/five-issues-will-decide-if-era-no-child-left-behind-really-over

different ways. While accessible education is a step in the right direction, an equity based system

would be a more beneficial goal. The problems of moral luck will be addressed more in depth in

Chapter 3.

A Conversation With Current Educators

Under NCLB, states had a new requirement to bring all students up to a "proficient

level." The standard was completely defined by grades and standardized test scores[10]. The

thought process behind this was that it would be an objective standard for all children to be

evaluated equally. State tests each year were used as a benchmark to see where students were,

and to determine gaps in their knowledge. This was put in place in particular for students who

were minority groups, English second language (ESL), or special education students.[11] The focus

on tests ended up taking away from learning as teachers started "teaching to the test,"[12] and not

focusing on more beneficial content. The NCLB's philosophy of learning offered one reason for

education: to pass state given exams proficiently. Plenty of educators believe the mission of

education and learning is much broader: promoting education for each student in the most

beneficial way possible.

Many professors or educators have different ideas on the purpose of grades (I will

explore these purposes later in this chapter and throughout the thesis as a whole), but it can be

widely agreed that grades are a good way to evaluate student work and provide feedback. One

issue to keep in mind while thinking about current professors' opinions on the purposes of

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[10] In this thesis I will be focusing on the purpose of grades and grading, rather than standardized testing
[11] Klein, Alyson. 2015. "No Child Left Behind: An Overview."
https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/no-child-left-behind-an-overview/2015/04
[12] Ibid.

grading is that these educators are people who have already been acculturated into higher education, and received plenty of good grades throughout their own education.

As I wrote this thesis, I felt it was important to have a conversation with current educators in order to determine what their notion of the purpose of grading is. There is a trend in higher education where faculty are no longer able to be on the tenure track due to schools trying to save money, and more and more professors are coming to teach as adjuncts. There could be problems with grading on both of these tracks: tenured and adjunct (and other untenured faculty). It is possible that after many years of teaching, or with the protections of tenure, there is less of a motivation to care about the student behind the grades; on the other end of the spectrum, an adjunct professor may not know the impact of their grade on a student, (and faculty without tenure may, in general, have other motives to grade students in ways that support their continued employment). I decided that I would speak to tenured professors at a higher level institution to try and gauge their opinions on what the purpose of grading is, as well as to get feedback on my idea for a solution to these possible problems that come with grading. I will be using their answers throughout the rest of this thesis, and as a way to develop my idea of self-evaluation further based on their critiques.

I spoke with professors about two topics: first to discuss what they believed was the purpose of giving out grades, and second to give an explanation about their thoughts on self-evaluation (which I report on in Chapter 5). I will refer to the ideas of one of the professors as Professor A. Professor A described their grading student work as a process similar to reading published philosophical work; in other words, there is no reason why a professor should "hold anything back" when reading student work. Students should have their work taken seriously because it is a way to motivate them to put more care into what they do. Professor A says, "when

reading published work, it makes sense to look at what is working in the paper and what is not, and for student work it should be the same."

Professor A and I then transitioned into a discussion on the purpose of grading and whether or not they believed that grading generally reflected what was important in student learning. Here, Professor A explained what they believed to be the two most important purposes of grading. First, grades serve as a motivation for students; students want to achieve good grades and so subsequently will put in the work to do so. Second, grades allow students to see where they stand in the class. Exams let students know how much they have learned, and if they need to work more on absorbing the material.

There are obvious drawbacks to these purposes and it was discussed how grades do not function as motivation for every student. Sometimes, receiving a "bad" grade, or one below average, can make a student feel as though they are lesser than average and that they should stop trying all together. The problem of students taking a grade to define their self-worth is one I write more about in Chapter 2. Relatedly, receiving a bad grade could push a student to compare themselves to the students around them who might have received better grades. If someone is working hard in a class, but still receiving less than ideal grades, a student might start to believe that they are incapable of doing any better. This could hurt their self-esteem and end up hurting their motivation. In terms of the other purpose, using an exam as a way to tell the student where they are in the class may work, but there are other ways which a professor could achieve the same goal.

Lastly, I brought in my own idea about self-evaluation. The discussion I had with Professor A and B about self-evaluation has been integrated into Chapter 5, where I write a detailed explanation about what self-evaluation looks like and what the purposes of it are.

Conclusion

With an understanding that the ultimate goal of public education is widespread knowledge and standardized testing is a way to evaluate said knowledge, the relationship between the two is clear. Most education reform plans throughout history advocate for a standardized type of education; one that looks the same no matter the state or the student. The issue with this is that it does not take into account the cultural, political, religious, and wealth differences that change the way children grow up all over the country. Further, there are smaller differences that need to be accounted for. Even if two children grow up with the same circumstances, then there could be internal differences between the children such as learning disabilities or physical disabilities which will impact the way a child can learn. Typical grading does not account for learning differences as it does not acknowledge how hard a student has been working on learning something, motivation, etc. This was further reflected in the section where I speak with current professors. The reception of grades differs for every student, and changes the way student's view themselves and their peers. Throughout this thesis, I will address these issues.

In the next chapter of this thesis, I will write an outline of two different grading systems, and then critiques of both systems. I argue that the grading systems cannot be objective (the word objective is being used to mean not influenced by biases) because grades essentialize students to the point where students themselves are being graded, not just the work as its own entity.

Chapter 2: **Grading Systems and the Essentializing Nature of Grades**

In this chapter, I am going to lay out two versions of what grading could look like in a standard education system. The first is a grading model that attempts to relay an ethically neutral way to grade. If this view were successful, the goal of measuring a students' output relative to a standard would be valid. The second model is one described by Robert Paul Wolff, from his book *The Ideal of The University.* The book, about his concerns about the purposes of higher education, highlights the issues I have raised, or will raise, in this thesis and presents them in a hypothetical educational context. After providing a clear idea of what the grading systems would look like, I will introduce my initial argument: While some educators might believe the purpose of grading can be isolated to just evaluating a student's work and giving them an objective measure of where they are in the class, this is not possible because grading a student's work is also grading a student; there is no way to separate the two. This will lead into a discussion arguing why grading is an ethical issue, and not simply a matter of recording the outcome of an objective measure. When something is done *to* someone else, it is, in principle, an ethical issue, in other words, when an action is completed by one person which then affects another (in positive or negative ways, and in ways that can be deserved or undeserved, fair or unfair), it creates an ethical issue. So, this then calls for educators to take into account various circumstances when they grade in order to increase fairness, and dilute the possible ethical issues that could arise. This argument then raises the potential objections that even if grading is an ethical issue, an educator cannot reasonably take everyone's circumstances, or feelings, into consideration. Furthermore, this raises the question of whether taking everyone's circumstances into account is really their job at all.

A Detailed Examination of Two Grading Systems

      With grading rubrics for essays and answer keys for multiple choice exams, it is possible to say that grading can be (or can meaningfully strive to be) completely objective. I will be arguing that even with objective components, grading cannot be purely objective. But before deciding if it is possible to grade objectively and hence fair, or if grading is inherently at least in part a problematic reflection on the student themself, we must define the traditional grading system. A traditional grading system is usually either grading a student with a percentage, from 0 to 100 percent, or letter grading from an A to an F. These methods can easily be translated into one another as an A or A- can easily be understood as anywhere between a 90-100%, a B+, B or B- can be somewhere between a 80-89%, and so on. These grading systems are standardized in order to complete their main goal of providing a "fair" way to evaluate the same assignments completed by different students. With specifications given by professors to students about what is expected of them when completing an assignment the student can theoretically be assured that they know what they need to do to get an A, or what they did not do right to receive a less than desired grade.

      While a multiple choice examination has objectively right and wrong answers, written answers or essay responses are not as easily graded. Despite this, both are typically given the same type of grades, and in both cases an "A" is good and an "F" is bad. Given the subjective element in assessing some kinds of work, different work formats should ideally come with different rubrics. In other words, in order to strive toward objectivity in contexts where subjective judgment still seems relevant or unavoidable, the professor has to be transparent about the criteria of evaluation and the guidelines of what they are looking for. The criteria written out could involve objective criteria, like font size, margin size, multiple choice or mathematical

questions, and more, as well as subjective criteria like clarity of writing, short/long answer

question answers, or something that can be argued by the student. Even the subjective criteria are

something that have an objective dimension because of how the educator will aim to have the

same standards (e.g. related to clarity) for each student that presents them with work.

Most students are familiar with this system, and this indicates how influential it is. The

positives are clear, and easily discernible. The system aims to maximize objectivity (objectivity

meaning there is no obvious place for bias on the part of the evaluator). Students are given a

clear standard of what the work should look like and so each student has the same awareness of

what is desired by the professor. This concrete system also makes transparency much easier, and

if a grade needs to be argued for then a conclusion between professor and student can be easily

made on the basis of appeal to the given rubric and specific criteria of evaluation. Evidence of

progress, or lack thereof, is easily available to students because they can just compare the grade

from their last assignment to the grade on their most recent one and students can get an objective

sense of the quality of their work relative to the transparent standard.

The three models of evaluation written about by Wolff are as follows: "Criticism" is the

act of a teacher or professor analyzing the work of a student, identifying the faults or the

strengths and providing feedback that enables the student to improve their work. Wolff specifies

that in higher level education, criticism can be subjective and students and professors should be

aware of their own biases. That said, Wolff's view is that criticism is the appropriate and

valuable pedagogical tool that offers a way for students to learn what they did wrong and do

"better" next time. Wolff writes favorably about criticism: "criticism lies at the very heart of

education….Painful as criticism is, even from those one loves best or respects most, there is no

other way to learn" (63). In other words, although it may be hard to hear criticism, it is necessary

for learning as there is only so far you can push yourself to make work better independent of someone else reading or looking at the work you have created.

Next, for Wolff, is "evaluation," or the objective way to assign a measurement of the quality of students' work. This mimics the traditional grading system written about in Chapter 2. Evaluation is completed by measuring student performance against some type of "linear scale." Usually on a grading scale of A, B, C, etc, the work is given a set grade. Evaluating work based on an already objective scale is something used frequently in the professional world, as well as in an educational context. No matter if someone continues to graduate school after undergraduate, or goes on to work at a company or organization, they will deal with someone evaluating their work. Wolff thinks that evaluation, in itself, does not have a clear pedagogical or educational function but that it is in fact used essentially as a professionalizing tool and as a criterion by which students can ultimately be ranked.

Lastly, ranking is the third grading model which Wolff specifies is also the most stressful for students: "ranking is the grading activity which produces the greatest anxiety and provokes the most opposition" (61). While criticism and evaluation are practices that reflect a teacher's chosen standards of assessment, ranking forces students to view themselves in comparison to their peers. Wolff's view is that ranking is basically serving an economic purpose: it is a tool that educational institutions use to enable graduate schools and employers to sift through applicant pools that are larger than the number of positions available. Unlike criticism and evaluation, ranking seems to make the least amount of sense in everything but a select few professional programs like medical school. In the profession where saving or helping lives is the goal, knowing who are the most competent students (assuming, for the moment, that ranking in fact

does measure this) can help hospitals know which residents to admit to their program to hopefully curate the best medical program they can.

Grading a Student's Work Means Grading the Student

With the traditional grading system and all of its nominal perks in mind, one has to then look at it through a critical lens. This system in itself might have the goal of being objective by having standard measures for what work deserves an A, a B, or so on. My conversation with the professors in my previous chapter indicates that the primary purpose of grading is for students to have an understanding of their learning process and how they can continue to improve. This may be true, but in the modern-day trend of colleges and universities decreasing their acceptance rates, and opting to have more restrictive admissions, another purpose of grades in high school is to serve as a gate-keeping function, to give (or potentially deny) students an opportunity to be accepted into higher education programs. This trend continues in higher education where grades in undergraduate programs are used to determine whether or not students are capable of succeeding in graduate school programs or jobs. With a critical lens, I will detail multiple ways in which grading is a high-stakes practice that is consequently an ethical issue and must be treated as such. Firstly, students with high grade point averages have better opportunities to get into universities, and subsequently, students with high grade point averages in colleges and universities have an easier time being accepted into graduate school. It is possible for one grade to even be the turning point for a student making the required GPA for Latin honors. This means that students with lower grade averages will not have as many opportunities and it will change the outcome of their lives: so not only do grades affect your transcript, but they also change your sense of self. While one grade can seem like a small component of the years spent in

undergraduate education, each grade averages out to become something that subsequently affects the rest of a student's life. Because the person who is receiving the grade generally feels some sort of emotion in response to the grade, either positive or negative, we can say that the grade itself is not *only* given to the work, but the student who created the work. An action done to one person by another, that significantly affects a person's wellbeing and life outcomes, makes it an ethical issue. If grades were not such an important part of our society, and did not have the power to change the course of someone's life (fairly or unfairly), then ethics would not play a part in the grading system. Knowing that grades are so capable of changing someone's life trajectory, it is perfectly reasonable that there are strong emotional reactions that surround the experience of being graded. And so, it is only right that educators should be taking the life circumstances of their students into consideration so that the conditions of learning become more equitable.

The Purpose of An Educator is Not to Worry About a Student's Feelings

Immediately, one counter argument made to this is that it would be impossible for an educator to have to worry about the emotional effect that each grade has on a student, and subsequently take each student's feelings into account when grading work. The job of an educator is to teach given material and communicate to the students how well their work demonstrates mastery of said material, relative to a transparent standard. Most professors teach multiple classes, with a range of students in them, but even at a small university, lecture courses can have up to 30 to 40 students in them. With students turning in assignments at the same time, it adds an immense amount of pressure on educators to grade quickly and all with the same measure.[13] Hence, the purpose of this objection is to point out that grades are not given to

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[13] These limitations in particular will be addressed further in the conclusion.

students in order to make them feel bad, they are given for practical purposes, and if students take their bad grades to heart, this is not a proper ethical concern for an educator. This would mean that we should not take grading to be a serious ethical issue because the professor is not actively trying to make a student feel "good" or "bad" when receiving a grade, they are just awarding the student whatever grade they deserve based on the work completed. It is unreasonable, in this view, to ask an educator to pay close attention to the complex array of implications that grades have on a student's life, or what factors may have led the student to produce the work that was awarded whatever specific grade it received.

Moral Responsibility of an Educator

I reply to this counter argument by saying that because the grade is given to the student, and is affecting the student, this makes grading an action with moral weight to it. Moral responsibility can be understood as the reason someone deserves praise or blame for a "right" or "wrong" act as it affects others. Awarding a student an "A" grade on an essay will subsequently make the student feel good, while awarding a "C" to a student may make the student feel bad. It is the educator who then has a moral responsibility for making a student feel one way or another and changing the course of the students life.[14] Importantly, this means that the question of whether students *ought* to feel good or bad or *deserve* to feel good or bad, and the implications of these resulting feelings on student learning, should be taken into account from a moral perspective. The conclusion that I have reached in my initial argument is that grading a student's work cannot be separated from the student, and so when an educator is giving out a grade to a student, they are directly affecting the student, and these effects can be good or harmful. For

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[14] I want to clarify that I am not arguing that it is wrong to give bad grades if they might make someone feel bad. The main takeaway from this argument should be that an educator should be aware of the effect of moral luck on a student's learning process, so that when giving out a final grade, it most accurately reflects what a student deserves and is not swayed more positively or more negatively by moral luck.

these reasons, there must be a way to take a student's life circumstances into consideration during the learning process, so that bad feelings can be mitigated when grades are received. For example, a student who receives a bad grade on an exam because they had a migraine during the test, does not deserve to feel bad about themselves on this account. The educator thus has a degree of moral responsibility to take responsibility for how the grade is affecting the student's life and ability to learn and thrive. It can even make the educator unsuccessful if the students' lives and feelings are not taken into consideration, as knowing these things can help to better facilitate learning. If students are not learning because an educator is not making their teaching style malleable, then the purpose of their job is taken away anyway.

A Second Counter-Argument: Grades are Given Because They are Deserved

Another counter argument that then could be brought up is that if a student is receiving a certain grade on their work, no matter if they could have done better with different circumstances, the grade is still what the work deserves, and consequently the implications for the student's feelings should not be of significant concern. No matter why a student's work warrants a B, the work deserves that B. This goes for any grade that is given, for example, if a student puts in minimal work to an assignment but fulfills all the requirements with ease, they can still deserve an A. Grades are only meaningful when they solely reflect the quality of the student work. When it becomes necessary for moral luck to be acknowledged consistently throughout the learning and grading process, this makes the grade not only about the work that is submitted. In other words, when the grade becomes about more, it takes away the objectivity of grading and adds a component of bias.

The Essentializing of Students and A Start to the Argument of Moral Luck

Lastly, I reply to this by writing that grades essentialize students; when a student thinks they are an "A student" they might begin to believe that they no longer need to try as hard because they are at peak performance, or vice versa if they are a student who consistently receives C's, they might begin to believe that they cannot do any better. Carol Dweck, an American psychologist, gave a TED talk about her growth mindset vs fixed mindset theory which reflects the essentializing nature of grades. A fixed mindset is one where students believe their intelligence and talent is something that is unchangeable, and so they do not spend time trying to develop skills. Dweck argues that a growth mindset is more important for students to have because it allows for one set-back to not devalue all of a student's work or their sense of self, but instead to notify them that they can continue progressing.[15] "The power of yet" is something that Dweck speaks about in her talk. She refers to an example that she believes successfully demonstrates an understanding of a learning curve; "I heard about a high school in Chicago where students had to pass a certain number of courses to graduate, and if they didn't pass a course, they got the grade "Not Yet." And I thought that was fantastic, because if you get a failing grade, you think, I'm nothing, I'm nowhere. But if you get the grade "Not Yet", you understand that you're on a learning curve. It gives you a path into the future."[16] This is an important example because a failing grade could make a student think that that is who they are: a failed student. And when being a student is one's primary identity, this can verge into thinking that one is, simply, a failure. In reality, skills have to be worked toward, and a fixed mindset is an unrealistic way of understanding the process of learning or one's own life possibilities.

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[15] Dweck, Carol. "The Power of Believing You Can Improve" *TED,* Nov. 2014, https://www.ted.com/talks/carol_dweck_the_power_of_believing_that_you_can_improve/transcript?language=en
[16] Ibid

The emphasis on the importance of grades reveals something problematic about our grading culture. Grades should not be so meaningful that they make students feel like the grade is who they are. The grade a student receives should be an external motivator, not intrinsically part of them. If a student was only receiving B level grades, and then talked with their professor and worked extremely hard and received an A, they could be motivated to keep working hard. I believe that this point in particular is an important issue because of how it relates to the problem of moral luck, a concept that will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

Continuing with my previous argument that grading the work of students is the same as awarding a grade to the student themselves, I believe that the issue of essentializing students is strengthened further with the addition of moral luck in the argument. Moral luck, as I will argue, is in itself a problem because of how it affects people positively and negatively, and similarly, grading is an ethical issue because of how it affects people positively and negatively. It is the active component in both situations which causes the problems to arise, and this is what requires the problems to be addressed, as well as what helps us understand what the purpose of an educator is.

There are general principles that can be assumed for what the role of an educator should be. Clearly, an educator should not harm a student, either emotionally or physically. Nor should they completely dictate what and how a student should think. I do believe that it is important for an educator to acknowledge the weight of giving a grade, and what sort of implications a grade can have to a student. In other words, I will be arguing that when moral luck is taken into consideration when a student is learning, the grade that is given will impact the student in a fair and expected way.

Conclusion

In sum, it is because of how entrenched grading is in students' essences that educators must be aware of the effects of giving a student one grade over another. Most students are enrolled in school for a large portion of their young life, and so it is the moral responsibility of an educator to understand how their relationship to a student will affect the student's life. Grading in particular is such a specific action that has an increasing amount of importance in people's lives. In Chapter 3, I further this argument by exploring the problems of moral luck in detail.

Chapter 3: The Problems of Moral Luck

Having established in my last chapter that grading is an ethically-laden teaching practice, in this chapter I continue exploring the effects of extenuating circumstances on the lives of students. Whether positive or negative, there are factors out of one's control that change the direction of their lives. Our success and failures depend on factors beyond our control, and so students deserve acknowledgement of their life circumstances. Thomas Nagel writes an essay outlining his idea of moral luck, the term describing the lack of control one has over their life affairs. Nagel writes that "people cannot be morally assessed for what is not their fault, or for what is due to factors beyond their control."[17] Blaming someone entirely for something bad that they have done, or even praising something good, does not acknowledge the constant unpredictability of external factors that affect our characters, our actions and their outcomes. For example, Nagel uses a situation in which a pedestrian is hit by a car while crossing the street. While we can still say that the reckless driver is at fault, the pedestrian's place in that moment also has to be taken into account. If the person operating the motor vehicle was driving just as recklessly, but the pedestrian was not in the middle of the road at the time, that person would have much less blame on them despite completing the same action as the person who committed manslaughter. This is problematic because it means that blame is dependent on the outcomes of the bad action (which was the product of moral luck), not the bad action itself. I argue that a person's actions should not be assessed completely separately from their moral luck. I begin this chapter with an overview of the four different types of moral luck, then a philosophical investigation of them. The goal is to determine how each one could affect a student being educated. Within each overview of the types of moral luck, I add an example of how it would

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[17] Nagel, Thomas. 1979. "Moral Luck." *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge (England): Cambridge University Press. Print.

affect someone in an educational context. The question then, is why is this a problem? In order to first understand my argument, and the answer to my proposed question, I argue that evaluation in itself should be understood as comparable to moral assessment. This is the case because grading is something that is bound by norms relating to what is deserved, is done to the student who created the work, and is not merely a measure of the work itself. With this in mind, I consider Nagel's objection that the problem of moral luck cannot be solved, with the implication that people should not be morally assessed. I reply to this by arguing that moral luck should be acknowledged and taken into account when a student is being evaluated because even if the problems of moral luck are not completely resolvable, they are able to be mitigated.

Nagel's Four Types of Moral Luck

Nagel outlines four ways that people are "subject to luck" (3), in other words, the four types of moral luck. First is the phenomenon of constitutive luck, which is your personality or inclinations that come from factors such as biology and genetics. The disadvantages and advantages that stem from constitutive luck in education are very apparent through learning disabilities, genetic predispositions to mental illness, attention-deficit disorders, or quick processing speeds. Someone who has the neuro-biological luck to be able to focus easily and understand the information taught by a professor may then learn more quickly and understand concepts more deeply without outside help, while someone with ADHD or dyslexia may struggle with reading quickly out loud in class or deciphering new words without assistance. This could cause someone to need extra time with tests, and maybe would work better under conditions where they had time to practice reading out loud alone before doing so in a classroom setting. Evaluating a student without giving them the opportunity to have more time to learn or find an

environment that allows them to concentrate best is an unfair advantage to those who are neurotypical. That being said, both giving a neurodivergent student an opportunity to have extra time on an exam, or just being neurotypical is a form of good moral luck, and giving extra time is a way to fairly cancel out bad luck. The moral luck in question makes it unfair for those with unaddressed disadvantages to get bad grades without first attempting to mitigate the consequences of whatever it is that moral luck changes in someone's life.

Second is circumstantial luck, or the unavoidable type of issues that one person tends to face throughout their life, for example having to attend one school instead of another due to districting laws. This could change the outcome of one's education – and one's life – for better or worse depending on the school and its rigor. If someone needed more academic support than someone else, but was attending a school that did not offer help, and did not have the opportunity to seek out external help they might not do as well as they could. Someone with a learning disability may be fortunate enough to grow up in a home with parents or guardians who understand their child's difficulties and know how to help. However, another child with the same disability may grow up in a different situation and subsequently have worse circumstantial luck. Depending on what school someone goes to, or where someone grows up, the way they are evaluated may also be unfair if they are not allowed to learn and work in circumstances that provide better conditions for them to produce work.

Third, consequential luck refers to the way a situation actually ends up for someone. This type of moral luck can be thought of in situations where students who may have studied the same way for an exam end up getting different grades due to intervening or non-intervening factors beyond their control. For example, if one student has a pounding headache during an exam, preventing them from focusing, while another student feels perfectly normal. Or, if they got into

a car accident on the way to class and did not have enough time to complete the exam because they entered the classroom too late. In these instances, the relevant outcomes are determined by the external factors of yet a different kind.

Lastly, antecedent luck comes from the circumstances in life that influence who you are and who you will become. For example, your socio-economic class, or the degree of education you have received will change your later courses of action. Certain jobs require higher levels of education, and so, depending on where one had their original schooling, it could change what they are able to do professionally. This is different from consequential luck as it solely refers to someone's background while consequential luck focuses on the outcome/consequences of people's actions. Just as it would be unfair to evaluate the circumstances of the person with bad constitutive luck for biological factors they cannot control, each of the ways that moral luck affects people can lead to unfair evaluation in the educational context. I am arguing, therefore, that evaluation – and teaching methods – must morally take into account how moral luck changes the circumstances of the person.

Evaluation as a Moral Assessment

Evaluation becomes a form of moral assessment because of its fairness-based structure and its impact and effect on the student. Firstly, because the student who completes the work is the entity who then absorbs all the negative or positive comments associated with the grade given, they will feel the impact of those comments first-hand. As discussed above, awarding someone an A grade may have the effect of essentializing them as an A student, in other words, as someone who thinks of themselves as incapable of deserving a grade "worse" than that. (And of course, recipients of less good grades may also come to conceive of themselves as incapable

of earning or deserving better grades.) Secondly, grades are a moral assessment because of how encompassing a student's work can be to their identity. In other words, a student has many different aspects of themselves but their work and the grades they receive are a reflection of them as a person. The grades given in such circumstances come to express to the student, not just that they did or did not do a good job, but something deeper about who they are and what they are capable of. This label of A student, B student, or C student etc., is such an intense label as it affects how the student envisions their worth in the educational context and beyond. Within all these types of moral luck, it would be challenging to evaluate students fairly because moral luck affects each individual differently,[18] and so if the work a student is producing is only that of a C student, the reasoning of why they cannot, or are having trouble progressing, has to be investigated. Students should not have to be labeled as a certain type of student without having the opportunity to grow and change.[19]

The types of moral luck add a disproportionate amount of advantages or disadvantages to certain students depending on their lives. This has to be acknowledged by educators in order to begin making the evaluation process even slightly more fair. With an educator knowing how a student is affected by constitutive luck, they could offer outside help with learning or understanding concepts in different ways for biological reasons, and such make future evaluations more fair to someone who had an easier time learning the content to begin with. Or, for someone whose antecedent luck made them grow up with parents who do not value education, an educator could continue encouraging a student to learn. This is not to say that students who are not as negatively affected by moral luck do not deserve extra help, or extra

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[18] I understand that some people may argue that evaluating student work is not evaluating the student themselves, and so what I am raising as the issues would be moot. I believe that there is no difference between grading the student and their work, as they are one and the same. In Chapter 4 I will explain this argument in more detail.

[19] A clarifying note: I am not saying that teachers are *trying* to essentialize students by giving them grades. Instead, I am observing that this is how students perceive the grades given to them.

support. Any person could wake up late and accidentally sleep through an important class, have a headache while taking a test and do poorly, get a flat tire and miss an exam review period, etc. So, with moral luck acknowledged, a student has more chances of succeeding, but this is not to say that any type of moral luck has to be completely diminished.

Nagel's Own Beliefs

Nagel believes that the problems of moral luck cannot, in principle, be solved. There is nothing that can be said to be truly the fault or privilege of anyone because all actions and choices and consequences are affected by "external determinants."[20] Nagel highlights the many ways in which luck influences actions and events that take place, and holds that "such things [out of someone's control] may create the conditions for action, but action can be judged only to the extent that it goes beyond these conditions and does not just result from them" (3). Circumstances out of our control are always present in daily situations, so how can we determine what to penalize people for? Nagel concludes,"I believe that in a sense the problem [of moral luck] has no solution, because something in the idea of agency is incompatible with actions being events, or people being things" (9). Agency, or autonomy, is always impacted by external factors. As Nagel specifies in his essay, "whether we succeed or fail in what we try to do nearly always depends to some extent on factors beyond our control."[21] Moral luck is then impossible to keep track of and "treat," as it affects every individual differently. For example, if someone was diagnosed with a learning disability early in elementary school, one might initially assume that his moral luck was "treated" with extra time on exams and more support in school. However, Nagel would still say that access to this "treatment" is itself a manifestation of positive moral

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[20] Nagel, Thomas. 1979. "Moral Luck." *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge (England): Cambridge University Press. Print.
[21] Ibid

luck; moreover, there are still countless things that could go wrong for this student when taking an exam. There are multitudes of different ways for moral luck to affect someone; no matter how many times someone tries to fix the problems, there are ways that moral luck will still affect someone positively or negatively. So, how could there then be an equal system to fix the problems that arise from moral luck? With no way to eliminate the effects moral luck may have on someone and their future, there can be no one way to solve the problems.

A Reply to Nagel's Belief: The Problems of Moral Luck Can Be Acknowledged

I would like to reply to Nagel and say that while the problems of moral luck may be unsolvable, there are plenty of ways to minimize the problems it brings forth, especially in terms of evaluation in an educational context. With moral luck at least taken into consideration by educators and educational institutions, the struggles of learning disabilities can be ameliorated, support from faculty can be offered to all students, and tests/assignments can be redistributed if moral luck somehow affected a student's performance. It might be true that complete independence from the effects of educational moral luck, whether positive or negative, is impossible because of all the factors out of one's control, but with support systems in place, the lack of agency may not necessarily be something worrisome or negative. By addressing moral luck, learning outcomes can be greatly improved, and subsequently, so will grades. The clear moral benefits of addressing moral luck make it so that failing to do so, when there are clear ways of intervening for the good, would be a serious moral wrong. As educators tend to spend so much time with each of their students, it can be assumed that educators want to help their students as best they can, and acknowledging moral luck is a way to do that.

Conclusion

In this chapter I began with an introduction on the four types of moral luck in the educational context, and an explanation about how grading comprises a form of moral assessment. That was followed by a counter-argument from Nagel on why we cannot solve the problem of moral luck, and my response that it does not need to be solved, but instead understood and ameliorated. Support can, and should, be offered to counteract its negative effects. In Chapter 4, I explore an example by Robert Wolff which encapsulates the problems of grading in a pessimistic way. I argue against Wolff's pessimistic view about the "unsolvable" nature of the issues created by our education system's approaches to grading.

Chapter 4: An Exploration and Critique of Robert Wolff's Thought Experiment

With the models of grading written about in Chapter 2 in mind, I now explore a thought experiment proposed by Wolff in a chapter of his book called "A Discourse on Grading." The thought experiment follows two university students, John and William, who have drastically different educational experiences, ending with only one student receiving their degree. He writes that there has been major "educational confusion" in universities recently, and he uses the thought experiment as a tool to identify and explain some of the problems with the unfairness of grading, as well as challenge how academic institutions define students as intelligent and worthy of a degree, or not.[22] I will then begin the critical aspect of this chapter. My argument is a critique of Wolff's essay: although I think that Wolff is right in his assessment that evaluation and ranking are pre-professional and professionalizing tools, not educational tools, and that they have immense consequences for John and William and other students like them, Wolff is wrong in his implication that this is an unsolvable structural problem. I object to Wolff by arguing that grades in fact only appear to be an unsolvable problem because in the traditional grading system, and the models of grading that Wolff writes about, there is no consideration of moral luck in the learning process, and so grades do not properly reflect students' full potentials. My reply to this will be developed in Chapter 5, specifically outlining my own ideas of how to solve the problems that Wolff believes are unsolvable.

Wolff's Thought Experiment

Wolff begins his essay by shedding light on the intense focus that students have on their grades. Starting in elementary school, students are given report cards that can sway their perceptions of themselves. Some students might find criticism and evaluation useful feedback, or

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[22] Wolff, Robert. 1969. "Discourse on Grading." *The Ideal of the University.* Beacon Press Boston. Print.

a way to prove how "intelligent" they are or how "good" of a student they are, while others may see it as merely anxiety inducing and even degrading. Wolff brings in an example about two different men: John and William. John loves learning about American history, and is an extraordinary student in that one field, but fails his other courses because he is uninterested in learning other subjects. William, on the other hand, has no interest in learning whatsoever, but manages to pass all his courses with mediocre grades and very little intellectual passion. John ends up not graduating from college while William is awarded his degree and is granted the title of "alum." Wolff asks: "Would anyone deny that a genuine, lasting, disciplined commitment to a single field of inquiry results in a more successful education than a continuous but impersonal fulfillment of an appropriate set of degree requirements? And yet, how many professors and deans — or students for that matter — can be found who will argue for giving John a degree as well as William?" (65). This question indirectly alludes to specific issues caused by moral luck, something I will explore further in my argument. Wolff questions whether someone could find a university, or even a single professor who would say that John should be awarded his degree alongside William, despite his deep interest in learning and his academic success in the field he is passionate about. But, if we consider what educators ought to value we can likely agree that someone with a profound enjoyment of learning and the capacity to produce high quality work is closer to the ideal student. So, despite John's interest in just one subject, his lack of motivation in his other courses makes it so that William is rewarded with the degree, and subsequently entitled to all the possibilities that come with holding a college diploma, while John does not have those opportunities. Wolff uses the example of John and William to demonstrate the ways in which evaluation and ranking (as he defines them) are not a meaningful or appropriate reflection of our academic values. Wolff thinks the stories of the two very different men reveal that academic

institutions are inextricably caught in a bind that, due to the professional need for evaluation and ranking (and perhaps also a somewhat arbitrary focus on academic breadth), pits educational values against professional and economic ones.

How Understanding John and William's Moral Luck Could Have Changed Their Education

I now begin my argument by asking Wolff's readers to imagine how John and William would fare with different assessments, starting with John. John would be evaluated negatively or ranked badly in most of his classes, but perhaps praised greatly in his American history classes. William, despite his relative "successfulness," may also be evaluated or ranked low in most of his courses as his work is not exemplary and does not offer much inspiration. Wolff writes that John is engaged in his courses and William is "thoroughly uninspired," but there are details missing in Wolff's thought experiment that would be helpful to make ethical sense of the situation. For instance, why is John not engaged with his other coursework? Is there a way for John to communicate with his professors about ways he can learn better? And is there a reason that John is failing his other classes?[23] For example, if John had an undiagnosed learning disability that made math and science harder for him, could we blame him for being seemingly uninterested in the other classes? And on William's side of things, why is he so uninspired? If he was able to find a confidant at the school, would he be able to talk through some subjects and find something he could love and dedicate himself to?[24] We can assume that if John and William were both successful enough to get into university to begin with, they must have the capacity to learn to be academically successful. And further, this indicates that there could be educational

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[23] It is possible that John could genuinely be uninterested in other subjects, and if so, these questions would be moot. However, for the purpose of this thesis, I will be writing under the assumption that there is an underlying reason John struggles with his other classwork.

[24] Similarly to what I wrote in footnote 23, it is possible that William is just uninterested in higher education and wanted a different path for his life, however, for the purpose of this thesis I assume that there are other reasons why William is uninspired.

interventions that could help motivate both John and William in some way to enable them both to complete and be successful in their undergraduate experiences. If the questions I posed above were answered, and used to make pedagogical decisions that could help these two students, then both John and William's outcomes could likely be improved. In other words, as I argued in Chapter 3, moral luck needs to be taken into account in order for evaluation and ranking to be fair and accurate. That said, my argument is compatible with much of Wolff's critique of the economically rather than pedagogically motivated ranking function of grades.

Education and Evaluation as a Pair

I invoke the latter part of Wolff's argument to begin my objection. Knowing how embedded grades are in our education system, Wolff writes, "there is no easy way to disentangle education from the essentially extraneous processes of evaluation and ranking… Only a social revolution of the most far-reaching sort could free education from the twin curses of evaluation and ranking" (68). In other words, Wolff thinks that evaluation and ranking are so embedded in our education system that, with the current goals of education, the system would not survive without the two ways of grading. There are plenty of well-regarded institutions that are steadfast in their ways of grading and do not plan on changing their philosophies (and for some students and educators, this works perfectly well for them). For understandable economic and gatekeeping reasons, competition has lodged itself in the education process now, and institutions are drifting further away from the simple goal of education. From what I understand, Wolff believes that there is no way for written evaluations, or more subjective ways of grading, to become as important as rankings or evaluation.

A Reply and Conclusion

     I reply to this challenge of Wolff's in Chapter 5. Simply, if we address cases of moral luck like those of John and William, then the high-stakes professional and economic implications of evaluation and ranking would be less unfair. I present my solution by proposing the acknowledgment of moral luck by offering students a self-evaluation option so that they will be able to have open communication with educators about the factors that are relevant to their academic success. The hope is that people in positions like John and William could have more fulfilling educational experiences if offered the opportunity to reflect on and write about their learning processes and to have this reflection translated into useful educational interventions.

Chapter 5: Self-Evaluation as a Response to the Problem of Moral Luck

This chapter outlines what I believe to be the best response to the problems raised in this thesis: the inevitability of moral luck and the ethical problem of grades evaluating the person, not just the work they turned in. Each form of moral luck plays a role in bringing about students' "successes" or "failures," and so each must be addressed in order to make grading more equitable. With all the ways that moral luck can affect learning, students' accomplishments, or lack thereof (including grades), it would be remiss of educators to not take luck into consideration during the learning process. Because moral luck affects everyone, it is important to note the differences in how people are affected, so that different remedies can be implemented. Some people have overwhelmingly more positive luck while others have more negative luck, and so the universality of the phenomenon produces inequities. With this in mind, it is generally the person themselves who has the most accurate understanding about how moral luck is affecting them, and so, through my proposed model, they bear some personal responsibility to reflect on these circumstances and communicate their situation to teachers. The problems of moral luck in the education context include, but are not limited to, problematic life circumstances which lead to distracted or inconsistent learning, diagnosed or undiagnosed learning disabilities, or racism/misogyny in the classroom. My response and 'solution' to these problems is to offer students the opportunity to complete a self-evaluation questionnaire which would allow for them to answer guided questions about their learning and hopefully be able to have a more transparent and accommodating learning and evaluation process. A possible objection to my proposed solution could be someone who is a proponent of blind grading on the grounds that it allows for true impartiality and equality. I will reply to this objection with an account of why I believe self-evaluation solves more problems than blind grading does, appealing to the ways in which it

better addresses the inequities at hand, and has the resources to offer solutions to those educational inequities.

A Detailed Explanation of Self-Evaluation as a Component of Evaluation

Self-evaluation will allow for the standard grading system, in particular evaluation (as Wolff defines it) to continue mainly as is, but with an added component. While I concur that this means that some of the problematic parts of grading systems will stay the same, this added component forces a confrontation with the ways that moral luck affects students and contributes to a more progressive learning process which subsequently will be expected to affect grades in a positive way. In other words, if students are able to reflect on their work after it is completed and before doing another assignment, then they will be able to see what they can do better, and the professor who reads the self-evaluation will be more aware of how to help the student learn more competently. Self-evaluation can be added to assignments in many forms, most practically through an additional piece of writing alongside an assignment that outlines what happens behind the scenes of a student working. This can include how motivated a student is, how their mental health is, what the student's environment is while working, whether they are able to make progress from their last assignment, and/or if they had access to help when completing the work. This additional piece of writing would be intended to start a conversation with the professor about their writing/editing/studying process, which in turn could help the student get advice on how to continue to progress.

An additional piece of writing, or a conversation with the professor, can ameliorate the problem that forms of moral luck (e.g. affecting motivation and progress) are not directly taken into account by grading systems that focus on the student's work-product alone. Along with

increasing transparency about what the professor is looking for from a student, self-evaluation will allow for students' grades to be more fair; the work itself will ultimately be a more accurate reflection of the student's true abilities rather than of external circumstances that can impede the learning process because motivation, progress, and quality of work will be considered together throughout the learning process.

Within my conversation with the two professors (presented in Chapter 2 of this thesis), I introduced self-evaluation as an opportunity for students to write a supplemental paragraph to their assignments, explaining their working process, what they struggled with, what they are proud of, and even if there were some difficult circumstances presented to the student while they were working i.e. if their moral luck was inopportune. This allows for teachers to have better communication with their students and for students to feel as though the grade they are receiving accurately reflects what they think they deserve. What an educator can hope to come from the completion of the self-evaluation rubric is that once a student knows the grade they are receiving is fair, they may no longer feel like the grade essentializes them. Instead, they can understand that if their grade was lower than they would have liked, it is possible for them to grow and learn (and vice versa, if their grade is good, they can always find ways to be better).

In the following paragraph, I want to address my reference to the self-evaluation rubric as an "opportunity." I envision the addition of self-evaluation to the grading system as something that would be required, however, I believe it is still an opportunity. While some students may view this requirement as something that is intrusive, or a violation of privacy, I specify that the student can answer the questions with as little or as much information as they want. The requirement is put in place because having the rubric as something optional would make students less likely to complete it, and subsequently less likely to reap the benefits. Requiring the students

to look at the questions given to them, and having them at least answer with a "yes" or "no" would give plenty of information to the educator, as well as have the student complete some self-reflection.

With these critiques in mind, I will present an example of what a self-evaluation could look like, as well as a few examples of how self-evaluation will be implemented. The example I will show to my readers is something that could be given out to students in higher education classes. The goal is to get a holistic view of the conditions of the students' work and what factors could have contributed to them not creating their best work, or vice versa. It also will allow for professors to see how they can better their teaching to account for what their students need.

A Sample Self-Evaluation Rubric

The document follows some of the types of moral luck as outlined in Chapter 3, with the goal of ameliorating the problems created. The initial part of the self-evaluation document would involve questions about consequential luck. For example:

1. *Do you feel your work is of good quality?*

2. *Do you think you can do better?*

3. *Are you proud of the work you have done?*

This set of questions offers a look at whether the student is proud of their work. Asking the student to think about answers to these questions forces them to look inward and evaluate themselves. The hope is then that when the next large assignment is completed, and it is known that another self-evaluation assessment will be given, the student will want to see their own growth and answer the questions differently. For instance, if the student did not feel proud of their work initially, they may start the next assignment earlier and try to create work they feel

differently about. These questions can help mitigate consequential luck as they will allow for students to look back and think on the situations in which they completed their work, and how they could maybe do better next time. For example, if a student does not believe that their work is of good quality, the rational next stop would be to question: why not? If there were spelling and grammatical errors that had come from rushed work, a student could use this question to remind themselves that for next time they should start their work earlier and leave time for editing. For question two, it would be a positive and motivating sign if a student said that they do think they can do better. However, if a student said that they do not think they can do better, their answer could prompt a conversation with an educator as to why, and hopefully it could increase motivation. Similarly, question three is important for both the student and the educator as it allows for reflection. Next are questions that surround circumstantial luck:

1. *Are there intellectual, emotional or other psychological factors that are creating obstacles to your class work? Are there ways you (or we) might productively address these factors to make your work a bit easier?*

2. *If you are lacking motivation, or feeling unconfident about your work, is there something that can be done in class, or by me (the educator), to help you make positive changes?*

These questions are meant to allow a student to tell the educator as little or as much as they feel relevant to explain the psychological conditions affecting their work. If a student is struggling to be motivated or care about their work, understanding why this is the case can help a professor devise ways the student can be helped. For example, if someone answered the first question by explaining that they had a learning disability and were struggling to find ways to work successfully, their answers to these questions could start a conversation with the professor on ways to help the student learn more efficiently, like going over class notes right after class with a

friend, or taking an exam in a different room. The second question more directly poses potential changes to be made in the classroom by the educator to further help students learn. Lastly, antecedent luck:

1. *Are there environmental or situational factors that are posing challenges to your class work?*

2. *Are you feeling motivated to complete your class work? In other words do you have intrinsic or extrinsic motivation? If so, what are some of the factors that motivate you?*

3. *How much time has been devoted to your work?*

4. *Do you have an understanding of why this work is important to your overall learning?*

5. *Are you interested in the topics being presented to you?*

The focus of these questions is to determine ways to understand and ameliorate problems caused by antecedent moral luck. A student could answer the first question with a simple yes or no, however, they also have the opportunity to elaborate and explain any sort of factor that is impeding on their ability to do their best work, or complete their work at all. If a student had a sick parent or sibling they had to take care of, either short-term or long-term, it could be helpful for the educator to know and be more lenient with the requests of extensions on work deadlines. If a student answers question two and expresses that they are unmotivated, the professor can include ways to increase motivation. There are plenty of ways an educator can increase motivation. One example is giving praise more frequently than just when grades are given, such as telling a student they made an interesting point right after a student spoke in class. This question can also be especially helpful for the student, as reflecting on what motivates them could allow for important self-discovery about general life passions and more. Question three is simple, and could be helpful for an educator to see if they are asking too much from their

students or not enough. Questions four and five are important for an educator to read. In order

for a student to understand what the purpose of the work given is and why, it might be necessary

for an educator to make the goals of each lesson clear before teaching. In other words, explaining

why editing skills will be helpful in the long term, or why a history lesson is a social necessity to

be aware of, can help students with their interest, or lack thereof.

After completing the previous questions, I believe it is important for the student to look

forward so they can continue progressing. While these next group of questions do not relate to a

specific problem of moral luck, they allow for personal reflection to occur. As stated previously,

I believe that the goal of self-evaluation is to increase the depth and quality of learning, and these

questions can help students contemplate as well as look forward. So, lastly, on the rubric will be

questions like:

1. *How do you feel about the work you have completed looking back at your answers to*
   these questions?

2. *Do you want to feel differently next time?*

3. *How are you going to change your behaviors?*

This will ask the student to look forward and have a concrete plan to change the way they work

and create assignments they can be proud of. When the student is able to write out all the

specifics on what they want in the future, it will help them visualize what they want to do and

find concrete ways to make that happen. If the educator feels it is necessary, they can also add an

open-ended section for the student to let the professor know something that may not have been

covered in the previous questions. Again, I want to reiterate that every question can be answered

with as little or as much detail as the student feels comfortable with sharing.

How Students' Responses to Self-Evaluation Will be Implemented

When a student turns in their answers to the rubric, both the student and educator will have the responsibility to make any necessary changes to their learning or teaching habits and conditions. After a student writes about their level of pride in their work, or motivation levels, the student then can look back and see what they can do differently for next time. For example, if a student does acknowledge in their self-evaluation that they wrote their essay in a loud and crowded part of the library where they were not fully concentrating and then got a bad grade, they will have a reason to change their habits. The ability to reflect on work that a student believes is their best, or was far from their best, will help them determine what to do in the future. For an educator, if after reading a student's answers they realize that most of their students are not motivated, then there can be a shift in how certain subjects are presented. Instead of just teaching about the material, there can be more of an emphasis on why the material is important to learn so that the act of learning can become more active, rather than having the student be unengaged. It is also possible for an educator to understand why a student might be struggling so that they can present ways for the student to be helped.

Overall, the hope is that consistent use of self-evaluation can enable students to hold themselves more accountable for completing the best work they can. Similarly, the rubric should help the teacher be the best they can be. Teaching in itself is a skill that can be continuously worked on and improved.

A Possible Argument For Blind Grading instead of Self-Evaluation

It is plausible that philosophers and educators can look at the self-evaluation rubric and see issues. One counter-argument to the feasibility of a self-evaluation could be the increase of

biases that come from knowing more about each student. The questions above are designed in

such a way that it is possible the educator would likely come to know quite a bit about each

student's home life, mental wellbeing, and general life circumstances. It is unreasonable to ask

an educator to ignore all of their own biases when grading, as it is natural for everyone to have

biases. This is where proponents of blind grading may come in and express their reasoning.

Blind grading both gives the student comfort in knowing that the professor is grading

objectively, and also assures the professor that their own biases about the student cannot affect

the grade directly.

The Problems With Blind Grading

I reply to this counter-argument by arguing that ignoring inequities through blind grading

causes issues of its own. Students never learn in equal ways because of moral luck. Even if blind

grading manages to mitigate bias, it does not allow for all the benefits and progression in

learning that comes from turning in more and more assignments, and just general growth. The

pedagogical choice that an educator has to make requires a type of complex cost-benefit analysis

which I believe inevitably leans toward the benefits of self-evaluation. The ethical benefits of

bline grading are noted. However, I believe the costs of blind grading are outweighed by the

benefits of transparent self-evaluation. If a professor is unaware of whose work they are grading,

then it is impossible for any growth to be noted. Learning is not a linear experience, and as

Dweck writes, having a growth mindset is a necessary feature in successful learning. In a

situation where a student is struggling, but takes past criticism into account when completing a

new assignment and fixes one component, it is crucial that the student knows they have a

noticeable learning curve. With blind grading, the student would just see continuous criticism

and may not realize any progress that is being made (unless they found a way to track their own progress), and so, they could fall into a fixed mindset. Without a mix of criticism, encouragement, and acknowledgement of progress, the grading process could be discouraging to a student. In contrast, with self-evaluation, the professor can make note of progress with each assignment that is handed in and so a student can have concrete proof of what they are doing well and what they are improving on. When a professor is able to know whose work they are grading and have a transparent relationship with the student, then it will be the learning process that reflects moral luck, not the grading process, and so the grade that is given will successfully demonstrate what a student deserves.

Conclusion

To sum this chapter, I proposed a response to the problem of moral luck through a written (or oral, depending on the context, or if preferred) self-evaluation. I want to reiterate that the point of self-evaluation is not to resolve the problems of moral luck, but instead ameliorate the effects. I understand that antecedent luck is in the past, and that the problems of moral luck will be ongoing, however, I do not think this changes the weight of what self-evaluation can do. The goal of this self-evaluation questionnaire is to create a stronger and more equitable learning environment.

Conclusion

Overview of Central Arguments

The goal of this thesis has been to demonstrate that, despite external circumstances and moral luck, there is a way to make evaluation more fair. When acknowledging moral luck throughout the learning process, it allows for more successful learning and subsequently grades that better reflect a student's abilities. I began my argument with an overview of the history of education and its purposes, acknowledging that while the purpose has mostly stayed the same (making access to education more widespread), the tactics to accomplish that goal have changed. Through a discussion of grading systems and the purposes of grading, I wrote about the detrimental consequence of grades becoming so important to the student they begin to seep into their identity, and thus generating an ethical issue that requires attention from educators. From here on, I wrote about the problem of moral luck, and how the factors out of our control begin essentializing students and, unaddressed, produce inequitable outcomes. Nagel writes about how ingrained the problems of moral luck are in our lives, so much so that they become unsolvable. This comes to light through Wolff's example of John and William and how their very different tendencies shape the rest of their lives. I thoroughly believe that with self-evaluation, and corresponding changes to these hypothetical students' learning conditions, incorporated into the grading system, the outcomes of their education would have been different. The ethical issues I raised about the effect of grades on a student's sense of self, as well as life outcomes, is mitigated with self-evaluation incorporated into the learning process. Also, for the appeasement of administrators who may be against the idea of a change in the grading system, an added self-evaluation component can be done without extra resources or funding.

The essentializing (and ethical) issues, are both, at least partially, relieved by the completion of the self-evaluation rubric. It allows for the student to recognize why they received one grade over another and not let the grades feel so essentializing. It also allows the educator to have an understanding of the life circumstances of each student and so can help increase the competency of the students' learning process. With a more open relationship between student and educator, the student will feel more comfortable asking for help and subsequently learn more. I recognize that while self-evaluation is work on the student's part, it also requires the educator to shift their teaching methods to allow for their students' needs. I have made a moral argument against a detached teaching style because I believe that when grading a student's work an educator is also grading the student themselves. This brings forth a moral and ethical responsibility for the educator to account for how the grades given will affect the life and well-being of the student.

Limitations and Further Questions

While I believe strongly that self-evaluation can change the course of a student's learning process, I acknowledge and recognize that there are plenty of limitations to my argument. The act of adding a component of self-evaluation, especially a questionnaire that involves personal questions, will only work if the educator is willing to form a relationship with their students; in large lecture courses at bigger universities, this would be an impossible task. However, I do not think that the challenges of implementing this grading mechanism at larger institutions should lessen the importance of knowing that it can be successfully done in smaller classroom settings.

With the understanding that there are many environments where self-evaluation would be unsuccessful, it is also possible that self-evaluation could be more important to implement at

younger ages when grading may not yet have such an essentializing effect on students (or even when grades are not yet given).

This thesis provided foundations integral to many contemporary issues within the ethics of grading and learning. I look forward to seeing continued reform in our education system.

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