

Thinking about luck

E. J. Coffman

© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2006

Abstract *Luck* looms large in numerous different philosophical subfields. Unfortunately, work focused exclusively on the nature of luck is in short supply on the contemporary analytic scene. In his highly impressive recent book *Epistemic Luck*, Duncan Pritchard helps rectify this neglect by presenting a partial account of luck that he uses to illuminate various ways luck can figure in cognition. In this paper, I critically evaluate both Pritchard's account of luck and another account to which Pritchard's discussion draws our attention—*viz.*, that due to Nicholas Rescher. I also assess some novel analyses of luck that incorporate plausible elements of Pritchard's and Rescher's accounts.

Keywords Luck · Control · Significance · Chance · Risk

1 Introduction

Luck is an intrinsically interesting phenomenon that looms large in numerous different philosophical subfields—e.g., epistemology, action theory, ethics, social and political philosophy, philosophy of law, and philosophy of religion. Unfortunately, work focused exclusively on the nature of luck is in short supply on the contemporary analytic scene. In his highly impressive recent book *Epistemic Luck*, Pritchard (2005) helps rectify this neglect by presenting a partial account of luck that he later uses to illuminate various ways luck can figure in cognition. In what follows, I critically evaluate both Pritchard's account of luck and another account to which Pritchard's discussion draws our attention—*viz.*, that due to Rescher (1995). I also assess some novel analyses of luck that incorporate plausible elements of Pritchard's and Rescher's accounts. Roughly, the analysis of luck eventually defended below says that an event that constitutes a stroke of (good or bad) luck for you (a) has some objective evaluative

E. J. Coffman (✉)
Department of Philosophy, The University of Notre Dame, 100 Malloy Hall,
Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA
e-mail: ecoffman@nd.edu

status for you, (b) lies beyond your direct control, and (c) is such that there was a large chance no event like it would occur.

Two preliminary remarks are in order. First, a remark on the metaphysics of luck. As I understand it, luck is (in the first place) a relation whose domain contains *individuals* and whose range contains *events* (or obtaining states of affairs, or facts): luck obtains between an individual (of a certain kind) and an event. No doubt, it's sometimes appropriate to say of a *group* of individuals that it has had good or bad luck. (The passengers on the *Titanic* would seem to have suffered a stroke of bad luck. Surely, a family one of whose members has just won the lottery has itself enjoyed a stroke of good luck.) Presumably, though, there aren't two irreducibly different phenomena—*individual luck* and *group luck*—in this neighborhood. Rather, the much more natural thought is that *group luck* is reducible to (or, explicable in terms of) *individual luck*, so that the latter is where most (if not all) of the action is.

Second, a remark on how I'll be using "lucky" (and related words) in what follows. For convenience, I'll here let "lucky" apply *both* to subjects who enjoy good luck *and* to subjects who suffer bad luck. For present purposes, then, "lucky" is to be understood as "enjoys good luck or suffers bad luck".

Initially, my discussion will proceed by way of critically assessing accounts of luck recently offered by Duncan Pritchard and Nicholas Rescher. We'll begin by considering a broad thesis some version of which is endorsed by both of these accounts.¹ Reflecting on this thesis—call it the "Significance Thesis"—will help us figure out which kinds of individuals are in luck's domain.

2 Significance

The Significance Thesis places a constraint on your being lucky with respect to an event. It says that you are lucky with respect to an event only if that event is somehow *significant* for you. Surely, some version of this thesis is correct: if an event holds absolutely no significance for you, then that event can be *neither* a stroke of good luck *nor* a stroke of bad luck for you. The interesting issue here is how exactly the Significance Thesis should be explicated.

Here's an accurate paraphrase of Pritchard's (2005, p. 132) version of the Significance Thesis:

Significance_P: Subject *S* is lucky with respect to event *E* only if *S* is capable of ascribing significance to *E*, and would do so were *S* availed of *E*'s relevant properties (i.e., the properties of *E* in virtue of which it has some positive or negative effect on *S*).

Significance_P admirably allows for cases in which a subject *unwittingly* has good or bad luck (and so, doesn't actually ascribe significance to the relevant event). But while Significance_P is in this respect virtuous, it is in another respect vicious. For it excludes from luck's domain certain subjects that can have good or bad luck.

First, Significance_P entails that there couldn't be a lucky subject who (i) is capable of ascribing significance to an event in light of knowledge of its relevant properties, yet (ii) is such that he might not do so in light of such knowledge. But there

¹ See Pritchard (2005, pp. 132–133) and Rescher (1995, p. 32).

can be such cases.² Suppose Blue, who is suffering from a severe case of low self-esteem, unwittingly and narrowly escapes death at t . Blue is lucky with respect to his escaping death at t , notwithstanding his being such that he would not (and so, might not) ascribe significance to his escaping death were he availed of its relevant properties.

Second, Significance_P entails that there couldn't be a lucky subject that is *incapable* of ascribing significance to an event in light of knowledge of its relevant properties. But such cases are possible.³ A toddler who crawls safely across several lanes of free-way traffic during rush hour without being noticed is lucky to have made it through the traffic uninjured. The LaGrange County (Indiana) horse that was fatally struck by lightning on May 11, 2004, suffered bad luck on the indicated occasion. (Incidentally, the horse's owner *both* suffered bad luck *and* enjoyed good luck on this occasion. On the one hand, she was touching the horse when it was struck by lightning. There's the bad luck. On the other hand, she survived an electrical shock that should have killed her. There's the good luck.)

My critical assessment of Significance_P entails that luck's domain contains some sentient nonhuman subjects. Let me hereby record my conviction that the following stronger thesis is true: luck's domain includes all and only sentient subjects, individuals that have inner lives that can go better or worse for them.⁴ By my lights, luck's domain doesn't include nonsentient objects like trees, rocks, books, paintings, and houses: such objects can't have good or bad luck. Granted, there are true sentences that apparently belie my contention here: one might truly say about a cherished family portrait that it's "lucky to have survived the house fire," or about a seaside rock that it's "lucky to have survived the water erosion."⁵ Plausibly, though, the propositions expressed by such sentences are better expressed by *either* (a) a sentence that clearly expresses a proposition about a *sentient* subject's relation to an event involving a *nonsentient* object; or (b) a sentence that clearly expresses a proposition about the extremely low probability of a given event's coming to pass (which is of course compatible with that event's not being lucky for anyone). For example, a true token of "Your family portrait is lucky to have survived the house fire" would seem to express the proposition that you are lucky *vis-à-vis* the fact that the portrait survived the fire; and a true token of "That rock is lucky to have survived the water erosion" would seem to express the proposition that the rock's surviving the water erosion was highly unlikely. So far as I can see, then, the truth of the indicated sentences is consonant with the view that luck's domain includes only *sentient* individuals.

I submit that the following claim explicates the Significance Thesis better than does Significance_P:

² To his credit, Pritchard (2005, p. 143) entertains a version of this objection. He suggests that such a subject can't have good or bad luck "on the grounds that when it comes to meeting [the Significance Condition], luck is, in the relevant sense, in the eye of the beholder." I firmly disagree with Pritchard's treatment of such cases. To my mind, luck is a more "objective" phenomenon than Pritchard's remarks would lead us to believe.

³ Cf. Rescher (1995, pp. 7–8).

⁴ Cf. Rescher (1995, p. 33).

⁵ Thanks to an anonymous referee for the "seaside rock" example.

Significance_O: *S* is lucky with respect to *E* only if (i) *S* is sentient and (ii) *E* has some objective evaluative status for *S* (i.e., *E* has some objectively good or bad, positive or negative effect on *S*).⁶

Observe that *Significance_O* allows luck's domain to include all sentient subjects, not just ones with advanced cognitive and conative capacities. Unlike *Significance_P*, then, *Significance_O* is consistent with cases like those sketched one paragraph back. Moreover, *Significance_O* correctly excludes nonsentient objects from luck's domain.

Rescher's views about the Significance Thesis are somewhat difficult to pin down. On the one hand, some of what Rescher says suggests that he endorses *Significance_O*. Consider the following passage:

Luck pivots on having things go well or ill fortuitously from the angle of its beneficiaries. And as far as the nature of the recipient is concerned, the pivotal question is ... not "Can they reason?" but "Can they suffer?" (p. 8)

On the other hand, some of what Rescher says suggests that he accepts something like *Significance_P*. Consider this passage:

There is no question that animals have interests and desires that can be affected by developments running contrary to any reasonable expectation that could be formed—not, of course, by them; that is actually immaterial, for here an intelligent spectator will do. The crux is that we can do it on their behalf; after all, it is *we* who characterize them as lucky... [T]he fact that we ourselves can make judgments on the beneficiary's behalf serves to keep [certain nonhuman animals] in the picture. (pp. 7–8)

On one natural reading, this passage affirms something like the following:

Significance_R: *S* is lucky with respect to *E* only if there is a subject *S** who is capable of ascribing significance to *E*, and would do so were *S** availed of *E*'s relevant properties.

Significance_R succumbs to objections similar to those lodged against *Significance_P*. According to *Significance_R*, a subject is lucky only if there's a (nondivine, presumably) subject who is capable of ascribing significance to an event in light of knowledge of that event's relevant properties. But that's incorrect. That poor LaGrange County horse would have suffered a stroke of bad luck in being hit by lightning *even if* the electrical storm that took its life had antecedently managed to wipe out all subjects possessed of the relevant cognitive and conative capacities. In short, it's unclear whether Rescher fully appreciates the fact that *Significance_O* is preferable to *Significance_P*, *Significance_R*, and their ilk.

3 Chance

Significance_O delivers a requirement on luck. Clearly, though, satisfying that requirement doesn't *suffice* for luck. Speedy's moving quickly through the grocery store

⁶ I note, in passing, that an event's increasing the chance of your enjoying (suffering) a certain benefit (loss) suffices for that event's having some objective evaluative status for you. For example, an event that increases your risk of physical harm is a bad thing for you, while an event that makes you less vulnerable to physical harm is a good thing for you. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for a remark that led me to add this note.)

checkout line at 3 a.m. has some objective evaluative status for him; but we shouldn't put his quick trip through the checkout line at that time down to good luck. Reflection on such cases reveals another requirement on luck. Speedy's moving quickly through the checkout line at 3 a.m. isn't a stroke of good luck for him because there wasn't a large chance that he would fail to so move through the line at that time. This point suggests what we might call the "Chance Thesis." Loosely, the Chance Thesis says that you are lucky with respect to an event only if there was a large chance the event wouldn't occur. The interesting issue here is how exactly the Chance Thesis should be explicated.

An obvious, initially appealing partial explication of the Chance Thesis invokes indeterminism as follows:

Chance₁: *S* is lucky with respect to *E* only if *E* was not determined to occur—i.e., was not necessitated by prior events and the laws of nature.

To my mind, *Chance₁* is unsatisfactory for the following reason. *Chance₁* entails that there couldn't be lucky subjects in deterministic worlds. Intuitively, though, there *could* be such subjects in such worlds. A range of different cases can be marshaled on this claim's behalf. The winner of a (fair and sufficiently large) lottery in a deterministic world is lucky to have won that lottery, notwithstanding the fact that her lottery win was necessitated by prior events and the laws of nature.⁷ To get another counterexample to *Chance₁*, suppose I live in a deterministic world such that my life depends on a certain sphere's remaining perfectly balanced on the tip of a certain cone.⁸ Pretty clearly, this case could be fleshed out in such a way as to elicit from many the intuition that I'm lucky the sphere remains balanced on the tip of the cone throughout some temporal interval, notwithstanding the fact that the sphere's remaining balanced on the cone's tip throughout that interval was necessitated by prior events and the laws of nature. Finally (and somewhat surprisingly), the claim that there can be lucky subjects in deterministic worlds can be justified by adverting to "Gettier-type cases." Let me explain.

A "Gettier-type case" is one that's relevantly similar to certain famous cases described by Gettier (1963). Roughly, such cases involve a subject who holds a true belief that (a) is based on good evidence yet (b) fails to constitute knowledge, where this failure is somehow due to the subject's being lucky to "get things right" on the occasion in question. Here's a paradigm Gettier-type case due to Lehrer (1965):

Mr. Nogot works in subject *S*'s office. One day, Nogot supplies *S* with excellent evidence for thinking that Nogot owns a Ferrari. *S* comes to believe, on the basis of that excellent evidence, that Nogot owns a Ferrari. *S* then infers from this that someone in his office owns a Ferrari. Now, Nogot has been shamming: he does not own a Ferrari. As it turns out, however, another one of *S*'s colleagues, Mr. Havit, owns a Ferrari, though *S* has no reason whatsoever to think Havit owns such a thing.

S's belief that someone in his office owns a Ferrari is both true and based on good evidence, but it isn't knowledge. The problem, roughly, is that *S*'s "getting things right" on this occasion somehow depends on his enjoying a stroke of good, albeit knowledge-precluding, luck. What's interesting and important about such cases for

⁷ Cf. Pritchard (2005, pp. 126–127).

⁸ This case is inspired by one sketched by Williamson (2000, p. 123).

present purposes is this. The thought that such a case contains a subject who enjoys a certain stroke of good luck *doesn't* depend on the assumption that the case contains some undetermined events: the thought that such a case's subject enjoys a certain stroke of good luck is no less compelling if it's stipulated that determinism holds in the case. Somewhat surprisingly, reflection on Gettier-type cases reveals that there can be lucky subjects in deterministic worlds.

The upshot of the points made in the last two paragraphs is that Chance_I isn't a promising first step toward explicating the Chance Thesis. A more promising explication—one that's roughly equivalent to what Pritchard offers (p. 128)—invokes the concept of *risk*.⁹ The concept of risk is to be understood in terms of the concept of *easy possibility*:¹⁰ there is at time t a *risk* that event E will occur at time t^* iff t is such that E *could easily* occur at t^* . The concept of easy possibility is, in turn, to be explicated by way of the concept of *modal distance*: t is such that E *could easily* occur at t^* iff E occurs at t^* in some of the possible worlds *close to actuality as it is at t* . Finally, modal distance is to be understood in terms of the concept of a *small change*:¹¹ the possible worlds that are close to actuality as it is at t are those obtainable by making no more than a *small change* to the actual world at t , those that differ in no more than a *small way* from the actual world at t . Putting all of this together yields the following explication of the Chance Thesis:

Chance_R: Where t is a temporal interval just before t^* , S is lucky with respect to E at t^* only if there was at t a large chance (risk) that E would not occur at t^* —i.e., only if E does not occur at t^* in at least half the possible worlds obtainable by making no more than a small change to the actual world at t .

Two clarificatory remarks about Chance_R must be made straightaway. First, Chance_R says that whether you are lucky with respect to an event, E , depends on how things stood *just before* E occurred. That's intuitively plausible. Suppose that while there was at the beginning of the universe only an exceedingly small chance that E would occur at t^* , there was just before t^* only an exceedingly small chance that E *wouldn't* occur at t^* . Suppose also that E occurs at t^* . Given that there was, just prior to its occurrence, only an exceedingly small chance it *wouldn't* occur, E couldn't constitute a stroke of good or bad luck for anyone, notwithstanding the way things were at the beginning of the universe. This strongly suggests that whether you are lucky with respect to a given event depends not on how likely the event was at (say) the beginning of the universe, but on how likely the event was *just before* it occurred. Second, Chance_R stipulatively defines "large chance" as "at least a 0.5 chance"; it thus entails that you are lucky *vis-à-vis* a given event at t only if there was, just before t , at least a 0.5 chance (risk) that the event *wouldn't* occur at t . That too is intuitively plausible: if the odds actually *avored* a given event's occurrence just before it occurred, then its occurrence was hardly a stroke of *luck* for you.¹²

Unlike Chance_I , Chance_R allows for the existence of lucky subjects in deterministic worlds. To see that Chance_R allows for the existence of such subjects in such worlds,

⁹ My thinking about risk has benefited from work by John Hawthorne and Timothy Williamson. See Hawthorne (2004, p. 56 & 125) and Williamson (2000, pp. 123–130, 2001, p. 32).

¹⁰ On the concept of *easy possibility*, see (*inter alia*) Sainsbury (1997, pp. 907–919) and Williamson (2000, pp. 123–130).

¹¹ For accounts of modal distance in terms of small change, see (*inter alia*) Sainsbury (1997) and van Inwagen (1997).

¹² See Pritchard (2005, pp. 129–130) for a sympathetic discussion.

just notice that a necessitated event may nevertheless be such that making any of a wide variety of small changes to actuality just before the time at which the event occurred would result in its not subsequently occurring. For concreteness, consider the outcome of a (fair and sufficiently large) lottery in a deterministic world, W . Let t be the time at which that outcome occurs. Plausibly, the lottery's outcome is such that a wide variety of small changes to W just before t would result in that outcome's not occurring, notwithstanding its being deterministically caused.

The natural next question is whether Chance_R delivers a requirement on luck. Though the thought that it does is appealing (especially in light of Chance_1 's failure), there are prominent dissenters here. Writes Rescher (p. 25), for instance:

While good luck is typically a matter of having things go right... unforeseeably, "by chance," it need not necessarily be "against the odds." For sometimes people are lucky even when the odds are on their side. Samuel played Russian roulette and lived to tell the tale. He was lucky—even though only one of the six chambers of his revolver was loaded and the probabilities favored survival.

Let t be the time at which Samuel plays his game of roulette. The class of possible worlds close to actuality at t in which Samuel dies as a result of his game is fairly narrow; for most of the small changes that could be made to actuality at t yield worlds in which Samuel survives his game. Thus, when Samuel played roulette, there wasn't a large chance or risk that he would die as a result. Chance_R thus entails that Samuel isn't lucky *vis-à-vis* his surviving the roulette game. Since Rescher regards Samuel as being lucky to have survived his game, he will likely regard the case of Samuel as casting serious doubt on Chance_R .

I'm disinclined to view Samuel's surviving his game of Russian roulette as a stroke of good luck for him. Thus, I don't think Rescher's case impugns Chance_R . Indeed, I think Chance_R delivers a requirement on luck. Those who agree will be glad to hear that Chance_R can be defended against Rescher's putative counterexample. Over the course of the next three paragraphs, I'll defend Chance_R by sketching two plausible error theories for Rescher's intuition about the case of Samuel.

On the one hand, perhaps Rescher is confusing its being *appropriate* for someone to assert that Samuel is lucky to have survived the roulette game with that assertion's being *true*. That is, perhaps Rescher is thinking along the following lines:

It would be appropriate for someone who cares about Samuel—his mother, say—to tell him that he's lucky to have survived his game of roulette. Now, one's asserting a given proposition is appropriate only if that proposition is true. So, since it would be appropriate for someone who cares about Samuel to tell him that he's lucky to have survived his game of roulette, it must be true that Samuel is lucky *vis-à-vis* his surviving the game.

This line of thought isn't compelling. Granted, it would be appropriate for someone who cares about Samuel to tell him that he's "lucky to have survived his game of Russian roulette." Moreover, I concede that it's natural to regard truth as a requirement on proper assertion. That last thesis is false, though, its naturalness notwithstanding. There can be situations whose urgency justifies the assertion of a false proposition, all things considered. Samuel's mother seems to be in such a situation in the lately described case. For consider: if Samuel's mother tells him that he's lucky to have survived his game of roulette, Samuel may well come to believe that he "cheated death" on the occasion in question. And Samuel's believing that he "cheated death" on this

occasion may well lead him to refrain from playing roulette the next time he gets the urge. Of course, Samuel's so refraining will probabilify his seeing another day. All things considered, then, Samuel's mother seems justified in telling him that he's lucky to have survived his game of roulette, notwithstanding the fact that such an assertion would be false.¹³

We find, in Rescher's own work on the nature of luck, the seeds of another plausible error theory for his intuition about the Russian roulette case. The raw material for this alternative error theory is Rescher's distinction between *luck* and *fortune* (pp. 128–131). (As before, and for convenience, I'll here let "fortunate" (and related words) apply *both* to subjects who enjoy good fortune *and* to subjects who suffer bad fortune. For present purposes, then, "fortunate" is to be understood as "enjoys good fortune or suffers bad fortune".) Contrary to initial appearances, this distinction marks a real difference. You can be fortunate with respect to an event whose occurrence was *extremely* likely, whereas an event is *lucky* for you only if there was a significant chance the event wouldn't occur. Consider: while a lottery *winner* enjoys a stroke of good luck, a lottery *loser* doesn't suffer a stroke of bad luck, though her lottery loss is mildly unfortunate. Now, because *luck* and *fortune* are closely related, we shouldn't be shocked to learn that they are sometimes confused with one another. I submit that Rescher is succumbing to such confusion in judging that Samuel is *lucky* to have survived his game of Russian roulette. What's true, strictly speaking, is that Samuel is merely *fortunate* to have survived his game of roulette. To be sure, Samuel's losing that game would have been a stroke of bad luck for him; but it isn't generally true that the nonoccurrence of an event that would have been a stroke of one kind of luck for a given subject constitutes a stroke of the other kind of luck for that subject. Consider: a lottery loser's loss isn't a stroke of *bad luck* for her, though a lottery win certainly would have been a stroke of *good luck* for her. In sum, then, another plausible error theory for Rescher's intuitive judgment about the roulette case is that his judgment is infected by a confusion between fortune and luck.¹⁴

The last three paragraphs offer two plausible error theories for Rescher's intuitive judgment that Samuel is lucky to have survived his game of Russian roulette. I submit that at least one of those error theories serves to explain away Rescher's intuition. Providing those explanations thus serves to defend Chance_R against Rescher's putative counterexample involving Samuel and his game of roulette.

Before leaving this section, I want to consider another alleged counterexample to Chance_R .¹⁵ Suppose Sal and his thuggish friends spend every Friday night robbing local supermarkets. Due to superstition, Sal has for several months been intending to stay home on Halloween, which falls on a Friday this year. Moreover, the local police chief has for several months been intending to crack down on Sal's gang on Halloween. When Halloween arrives, Sal stays home while his gang goes about its usual business. The local police are out in full force, and arrest all of Sal's friends. Plausibly, when the rest of his gang is caught, Sal is lucky he avoided arrest. Notice, though, that there wasn't a large chance Sal would be arrested on Halloween. Apparently, then,

¹³ Thanks to an anonymous referee for comments that helped me to improve this paragraph's discussion.

¹⁴ Pritchard (2005, p. 144) sketches a similar error theory for Rescher's intuitive judgment about a different case whose subject doesn't seem to be lucky.

¹⁵ Thanks to Wayne Riggs for raising this kind of objection in personal correspondence.

Chance_R is false: one might be lucky *vis-à-vis* an event such that there wasn't a large chance it wouldn't occur.

There are numerous ways to understand this case. Fortunately for Chance_R, each is such that *either* we've no reason to think Sal lucky with respect to his avoiding arrest *or* we've no reason to think there wasn't a large chance Sal would be arrested on Halloween. Start with the police chief's intention to crack down on Sal's gang on Halloween. Either this intention is firm or it isn't (notably, the description of the case leaves this open: that an intention is "long-standing" doesn't entail that it's firm). If the chief's intention *isn't* firm, then many close possible worlds are such that, by Halloween night, the chief has abandoned his "Halloween crackdown" plan; but then it's unclear whether Sal's avoiding arrest on Halloween constitutes a stroke of good luck—Sal may be no more lucky *vis-à-vis* his avoiding arrest than is Samuel *vis-à-vis* his surviving that roulette game. Suppose, then, that the chief's intention is firm, and shift focus to Sal's superstition about Halloween. Either this superstition is "robust" or it isn't. If the former, then it's again unclear whether Sal's avoiding arrest constitutes a stroke of good luck—he may be no more lucky *vis-à-vis* his avoiding arrest than is someone who avoids a well-planned attack on a certain location at a certain time because she firmly intended beforehand to be far away from that location at that time (granted, such a subject seems *fortunate* to have avoided the attack; she doesn't, however, seem *lucky* to have avoided it). On the other hand, suppose Sal's Halloween superstition is rather "fragile". Then many close worlds are such that Sal is out with his gang on Halloween; but then it's plausible that there was a large chance Sal would be arrested on Halloween—and, of course, the attempted counterexample succeeds only if there *wasn't* a large chance Sal would be arrested then. In sum, the lately pressed objection faces a dilemma: *either* we've no reason to think Sal lucky with respect to his avoiding arrest *or* we've no reason to think there wasn't a large chance Sal would be arrested. So far as I can see, then, that objection doesn't seriously threaten Chance_R.

4 Control

We've found, I submit, that Significance_O and Chance_R are plausibly thought to deliver requirements on luck. Because the account of luck we get by regarding the conjunction of those conditions as minimally sufficient for luck is roughly similar to the accounts offered by Rescher (p. 32) and Pritchard (p. 133), it's worth asking at this point whether the indicated conjunction constitutes a satisfactory account of luck. Consider, then,

First Stab: *S* is lucky with respect to *E* at *t* iff (i) *S* is sentient at *t*, (ii) *E* has some objective evaluative status for *S* at *t*, and (iii) there was just before *t* a large chance that *E* would not occur at *t*.

Unfortunately, First Stab is false. This is because it entails that any morally significant action such that there was (just before it occurred) a large chance its agent wouldn't perform it is such that its agent is lucky with respect to its occurrence. Let me explain.

Suppose that, at time *t*, *S* performs a morally significant action such that there was just before *t* a large chance that *S* wouldn't perform that action at *t*. For concreteness, suppose that *S* chooses at *t* to make a large donation to Oxfam, where there was just before *t* a large chance that *S* wouldn't so choose at *t*. First Stab entails that *S* is

lucky with respect to her choosing at t to make a donation to Oxfam. (To see this, just notice that (i) S is sentient at t , (ii) her choice has some objective evaluative status for her at t , and (iii) there was just before t a large chance that she wouldn't choose as she actually chose at t .) More generally, First Stab entails that *any* morally significant action such that there was a large chance its agent wouldn't perform it is such that its agent is lucky with respect to its occurrence. But that seems wrong, at least in cases involving a morally significant action that lies within an agent's direct control (where an action 'lies within one's direct control' if, e.g., it's a *basic* action—one not done by doing something else—performed under ordinary circumstances). An agent in such a case doesn't seem to be *lucky* that his action occurred.¹⁶

The upshot of the last paragraph is that First Stab does not deliver a sufficient condition for luck. The obvious move to make in light of these findings is to modify First Stab in such a way that it no longer counts all the relevant morally significant actions as strokes of luck for their agents. We can so modify First Stab by augmenting it with the 'Lack of Direct Control Thesis'—*viz.*, the thesis that you are lucky *vis-à-vis* a given event only if that event lies beyond your direct control. Such a modification yields the following account of luck:

Second Stab: S is lucky with respect to E at t iff (i) S is sentient at t , (ii) E has some objective evaluative status for S at t , (iii) there was just before t a large chance that E would not occur at t , and (iv) E lies beyond S 's direct control at t .

Before moving on to the question whether Second Stab delivers a minimally sufficient condition for luck, I want to consider two putative counterexamples to the Lack of Direct Control Thesis (and so, to Second Stab). Recall Sal and his gang of hoodlums from above. To get the first alleged counterexample, suppose that one Friday Sal *improbably* chooses to stay home instead of going out to rob supermarkets with his friends. A well-planned crackdown by the local police results in the apprehension of all Sal's friends. Plausibly, Sal is lucky that he chose to stay home. Notice, however, that Sal had direct control over his choice to stay home (that choice was a basic action of his, performed under ordinary circumstances). Apparently, then, the Lack of Direct Control Thesis is false: one might be lucky with respect to an event over which one has direct control.¹⁷

On reflection, this alleged counterexample to the Lack of Direct Control Thesis isn't compelling.¹⁸ We must be careful here to distinguish between the following two events that occur in the lately described case: *Sal's choosing to stay home* and *Sal's avoiding arrest*. To be sure, *Sal's choosing to stay home* lies within Sal's direct control. Thus, if Sal is lucky with respect to *that* event, the Lack of Direct Control Thesis is

¹⁶ Some familiar with the contemporary free will literature may wonder how my contention here connects with the so-called "Luck Objection" to incompatibilist approaches to freedom (i.e., approaches maintaining that freedom is incompatible with causal determinism). Because Chance_R allows that a *determined* event can be such that there was a large chance it wouldn't occur, my contention that S isn't lucky *vis-à-vis* her directly-controlled choice to donate doesn't commit me to the possibility of an undetermined free action. Essentially, all I commit myself to here is the possibility of a directly-controlled event that doesn't occur in at least half the nearby worlds, a possibility simply not addressed—and so, not ruled out—by the Luck Objection. See Chapter 4 of Kane (2005) for a helpful entry-level discussion of the Luck Objection. (In work not yet committed for publication, I defend incompatibilist approaches to freedom by applying certain of this paper's findings to the Luck Objection.)

¹⁷ Thanks to Jeff Green for raising this kind of objection in conversation.

¹⁸ Thanks to David DiQuattro for helping my thinking about such cases.

false (and Second Stab is too strong). Plausibly, though, Sal *isn't* lucky with respect to his *choosing to stay at home*. Instead, Sal is lucky with respect to his *avoiding arrest*, a composite event plausibly thought to comprise (as a proper part) Sal's choice to stay home. Now, this point impugns the Lack of Direct Control Thesis only if Sal had *direct* control over his *avoiding arrest*. But Sal *didn't* enjoy such control over his avoiding arrest: even if we grant that Sal enjoyed *some* nontrivial degree of control over his avoiding arrest (which isn't perfectly clear from the description of the case), it's still plain that Sal exercises too little control over his avoiding arrest for that event to qualify as *directly controlled* by him. To my mind, then, a careful analysis of this case reveals that it does not impugn the Lack of Direct Control Thesis.

The second putative counterexample to the Lack of Direct Control Thesis involves a "Frankfurt-style scenario," a scenario relevantly similar to those obtaining in certain famous cases described by Frankfurt (1969).¹⁹ A nefarious brain scientist, Ned, is *extremely* reliable—though not *infallible*—when it comes to predicting at t_1 whether Jones will at t_2 choose to perform a right action, A, at t_3 . Were he to predict at t_1 that Jones will at t_2 choose to A at t_3 , Ned would interfere so that Jones is unable to make the relevant choice at t_2 . Suppose Ned predicts that Jones *won't* make the relevant choice, and so leaves Jones alone. As it happens, Ned's prediction is wrong: Jones in fact chooses at t_2 to A at t_3 . Because Jones's choice is a basic mental action, he's plausibly thought to exercise direct control over it. Nevertheless, given that Ned's predicting falsely under the relevant circumstances was *extremely* unlikely, Jones is clearly lucky *vis-à-vis* his choice. The upshot is that the Lack of Direct Control Thesis is false: one might be lucky with respect to an event over which one exercises direct control.

As before, careful analysis reveals that this case doesn't impugn the Lack of Direct Control Thesis. Distinguish between the following two events occurring at t_2 : *Jones's being positioned to choose to A* and *Jones's choosing to A*. I'm willing to grant that Jones exercises direct control over *his choosing to A*. So, if Jones is lucky with respect to *that* event, the Lack of Direct Control Thesis is false. Plausibly, though, Jones *isn't* lucky with respect to his *choosing to A*. Rather, Jones is lucky to be *positioned to choose to A*. Now, this point impugns the Lack of Direct Control Thesis only if Jones had *direct* control over his *being positioned to choose to A*. Given Ned's powers, though, Jones clearly *didn't* exercise direct control over his being positioned to choose (at t_2) to A (at t_3). The Lack of Direct Control Thesis is immune to the lately described case, and is still plausibly thought to deliver a requirement on luck.

5 Significant alternatives

A natural question to ask now is whether Second Stab constitutes a satisfactory analysis of luck. Arguably, No: Second Stab fails to deliver a sufficient condition for luck.²⁰ To see this, consider the following kind of case: a positive or good event, E_1 , occurs and lies beyond S 's direct control at t , where there was just before t (i) only a small chance E_1 would occur at t , (ii) a large chance that a distinct but equally good event, E_2 , would occur at t , and (iii) no chance that neither E_1 nor E_2 would occur at t .

¹⁹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing this kind of objection to the Lack of Direct Control Thesis.

²⁰ Thanks to Jeff Green for pressing this kind of objection in conversation.

Second Stab entails that S is lucky *vis-à-vis* E_1 . Intuitively, though, S needn't be lucky *vis-à-vis* E_1 . For concreteness, consider the following case.

Suppose that S is on a game show, and that there was just before t no chance S would neither receive the prize concealed by Door 1 nor receive the prize concealed by Door 2. Now, let E_1 be S 's receiving the prize concealed by Door 1, and let E_2 be S 's receiving the prize concealed by Door 2, where there is just before t only a small chance that E_1 will occur at t . Further, suppose the prizes concealed by Doors 1 and 2 are equally good for S . Finally, suppose E_1 occurs at t . Intuitively, S 's receiving the prize concealed by Door 1 doesn't constitute a stroke of *good luck* for S . But Second Stab entails that it does.

Second Stab thus gives way to the more complex but more accurate

Third Stab: S is lucky with respect to E at t iff (i) S is sentient at t , (ii) E has some objective evaluative status for S at t , (iii)' there was just before t a large chance that no event as significant as E would occur at t ,²¹ and (iv) E lies beyond S 's direct control at t .

Clause (iii)' renders Third Stab impervious to the lately described kind of counterexample to Second Stab. Third Stab entails, as a satisfactory account of luck should, that E_1 isn't a stroke of good luck for S , since there was just before t a large chance that an event as significant as E_1 would occur at t . Notice, finally, that the lately described case impugns not only Second Stab, but Pritchard's and Rescher's accounts as well. Third Stab is thus superior to all of those accounts.²²

Unfortunately, some reflection shows that Third Stab isn't a satisfactory account of luck. The problem is that clause (iii)' makes Third Stab too strong: that clause renders Third Stab unable to capture certain clear cases of luck. We can construct a case showing that clause (iii)' doesn't state a requirement on luck by adding a twist to the Gettier-type case described above. Let t be the time at which S forms his luckily true belief that someone in his office owns a Ferrari. Now, suppose there was just before t a large chance that God would at t whisk S away into the Beatific Vision. Presumably, S 's being whisked away into the Beatific Vision is (at least) as significant as S 's believing truly that someone in his office owns a Ford on the basis of evidence cooked up by the shamming Mr. Nogot (call the latter event ' E '). So, there was just before t a large chance that an event as significant as E would occur at t . Third Stab thus entails that S isn't lucky with respect to E . Intuitively, though, S is lucky to believe truly that someone in his office owns a Ferrari on the basis of the evidence supplied by Nogot. Third Stab is too strong.

Third Stab thus gives way to the even more complex but even more accurate

Fourth Stab: S is lucky with respect to E at t iff (i) S is sentient at t , (ii) E has some objective evaluative status for S at t , (iii)'' there was just before t a large chance that no event *sufficiently similar and equal in significance to* E would occur at t , and (iv) E lies beyond S 's direct control at t .

Admittedly, Fourth Stab is somewhat murkier than Third Stab. The former, however, has the virtue of yielding correct verdicts about the last two cases we've encountered.

²¹ Presumably, condition (iii)' entails condition (iii)—there was a large chance that no event as significant as E would occur only if there was a large chance that E itself would not occur.

²² Third Stab is also superior to the account of luck sketched by Latus (2003), which also falls prey to the lately described case.

With respect to the case involving the game show, Fourth Stab entails that *S* isn't lucky with respect to her receiving the prize concealed by Door 1. That's because clause (iii)' isn't satisfied: there was just before *t* a large chance that an event as significant as *and sufficiently similar to S's* receiving the indicated prize would occur (viz., her receiving the prize concealed by Door 2). With respect to the amplified Gettier-type case, Fourth Stab is consistent with *S's* being lucky to believe truly that someone in his office owns a Ferrari on the basis of Nogot's evidence (again, call this event 'E'). For clause (iii)' is satisfied: though there was just before *t* a large chance that an event as significant as E would occur at *t*, there was also just before *t* a large chance that no event as significant as *and sufficiently similar to E* would occur at *t*. (I here assume that *S's* being whisked away by God into the Beatific Vision differs a great deal from *S's* holding a true belief on the basis of Nogot's cooked-up evidence.)

6 Conclusion

It's time to take stock. Fourth Stab is more satisfactory than are the analyses of luck offered by Pritchard and Rescher. Fourth Stab is like those accounts in that it involves a version of the Significance Thesis. It's unlike those accounts in that it side-steps cases like the one that led to our augmenting Second Stab with clause (iii)'. It's like Pritchard's account in that it invokes the concept of *risk*. It's unlike Pritchard's account in that it involves a version of the Lack of Direct Control Thesis. Fourth Stab is like Rescher's analysis (see pp. 25–26) in that it implies that an event with respect to which one is lucky is such that one couldn't have rationally expected it to occur. (Presumably, that last claim is entailed by the conjunction of Chance_R and the Lack of Direct Control Thesis.) It's unlike Rescher's account in that it involves Chance_R .

I leave as important homework for myself and interested readers further exploration of Fourth Stab and other accounts of luck in the vein of that offered by Pritchard, to whom we should be grateful for sparking, and contributing significantly to, fresh discussion of the important concept of luck.²³

References

- Frankfurt, H. (1969). Alternate possibilities and moral responsibility. *Journal of Philosophy*, 66, 829–839.
- Gettier, E. (1963). Is justified true belief knowledge? *Analysis*, 23, 121–123.
- Hawthorne, J. (2004). *Knowledge and lotteries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kane, R. (2005). *A contemporary introduction to free will*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Latus, A. (2003). Constitutive luck. *Metaphilosophy*, 34, 460–475.
- Lehrer, K. (1965) Knowledge, truth, and evidence. *Analysis*, 25, 168–175.
- Pritchard, D. (2004). Epistemic luck. *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 29, 193–222.
- Pritchard, D. (2005). *Epistemic luck*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²³ Portions of this paper were presented at the University of Notre Dame, the 2004 University of Rochester Graduate Conference in Epistemology, and a meeting of the Central States Philosophical Association (2004). Thanks to those in attendance at these sessions for helpful discussion of relevant issues. Special thanks to Thad Botham, David DiQuattro, Chris Green, Jeff Green, Matt Kennedy, Duncan Pritchard, Wayne Riggs, Donald Smith, and an anonymous referee.

- Rescher, N. (1995). *Luck: The brilliant randomness of everyday life*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Sainsbury, R. M. (1997). Easy possibilities. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 57, 907–919.
- van Inwagen, P. (1997). Against middle knowledge. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 21, 225–236.
- Williamson, T. (2000). *Knowledge and its limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Williamson, T. (2001). Comments on Michael Williams' Contextualism, Externalism, and Epistemic Standards. *Philosophical Studies*, 103, 25–33.