STROKES OF LUCK

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Abstract: This essay aims to reorient current theorizing about luck as an aid to our discerning this concept’s true philosophical significance. After introducing the literature’s leading theories of luck, it presents and defends counterexamples to each of them. It then argues that recent luck theorists’ main target of analysis—the concept of an event’s being lucky for a subject—is parasitic on the more fundamental notion of an event’s being a stroke of luck for a subject, which thesis serves as at least a partial diagnosis of the leading theories’ failure. Next, it develops an analysis of strokes of luck that utilizes insights from the recent luck literature. Finally, having set out a comprehensive new analysis of luck—the Enriched Strokes Account of lucky events—the essay revisits the initial counterexamples to the literature’s leading theories and argues that the Enriched Strokes Account properly handles all of them.

Keywords: chance, control, fortune, freedom, intentional action, luck, responsibility.

A wide range of debates across such areas as epistemology, ethics, philosophy of action, philosophy of law, and political philosophy center on luck-involving claims like these:

• If you know, then it’s not lucky that you believe accurately.
• If it was lucky that you acted as you did, then you did not freely so act.
• If you and I behave in the same way but my conduct has worse results than yours through sheer bad luck, I am no more blameworthy than you are for so behaving.
• We should redistribute resources so as to enhance the prospects of those who, through sheer bad luck, are among our worst off.
• We can properly punish successful criminal attempts more severely than ones that fail only by luck.

Such claims can impart a strong sense that “[t]he concept of luck plays a crucial role in many philosophical discussions” (Lackey 2008, 255). Under this impression, a number of philosophers have recently begun developing
and evaluating new, and unusually rigorous, accounts of luck. This research program promises dividends whether or not the concept of luck really is as important as claims like those above suggest. If the concept actually does play a “crucial role” in some or other of the indicated debates, then working toward its correct analysis will advance those debates rather directly, by progressively clarifying claims that drive them. But perhaps initial appearances mislead: maybe those discussions don’t really revolve around luck, but instead revolve around some similar, more or less closely related notion(s). If so, then homing in on the correct analysis of luck should help us recognize that our focus on it is misplaced, which should in turn lead to beneficial clarification of claims like those above.

This essay aims to reorient current theorizing about luck as an aid to our discerning the concept’s true philosophical significance. After introducing the literature’s leading theories of luck, I present and defend counterexamples to each of them (sections 1 and 2). Next, I argue that recent luck theorists’ main target of analysis—the concept of an event’s being lucky for a subject—is actually parasitic on the more fundamental notion of an event’s being a stroke of luck for a subject, which thesis will serve as at least a partial diagnosis of the leading theories’ failure (sections 3 and 4). I then develop an analysis of strokes of luck that utilizes insights from the recent luck literature (section 5). Finally, having set out a comprehensive new analysis of luck—what I call the Enriched Strokes Account of lucky events (section 6)—I revisit the initial counterexamples to the literature’s leading theories and argue that the Enriched Strokes Account properly handles all of them (section 7).

Before diving in, let me flag an important assumption and describe how I use some important terms in this essay. Following other contributors to the recent luck literature, I assume that the luck relation(s) can relate (a) individuals for whom things can go better or worse to (b) events proper as well as obtaining states of affairs (or facts). What I call “events proper” are concrete-object-like entities that have spatiotemporal locations and are denoted by perfect gerundial nominals—for example, “Ann’s catching of the ball,” “the shark’s biting of Bob.” States of affairs, by contrast, are proposition-like entities that obey Boolean principles and are denoted by imperfect gerundial nominals—for example, “Ann’s catching the ball,” “the shark’s biting Bob.” Accordingly (and in line with other luck theorists), I use “event” in a broad sense that covers events proper as well as states of affairs. I use “happen” in a broad sense that covers both occurrence (for events) and coming to obtain (for states of affairs).


2 In Coffman forthcoming, I bring the Enriched Strokes Account of lucky events to bear on some central debates in epistemology and philosophy of action.

3 The last two sentences owe much to Bennett 1988 as well as Paul and Hall 2013.
use “do” in a broad sense that covers both performance (for events) and actualization (for states of affairs).

1. Three Leading Theories of Luck

Say that possible world \( W_1 \) is close to world \( W_2 \) before time \( t \) iff \( W_1 \) differs no more than slightly from \( W_2 \) up to (but not including) \( t \). With this stipulative definition in hand, we can state the literature’s three leading accounts of luck as follows:

*The Modal Account:* Event \( E \) is at \( t \) (un)lucky for subject \( S \) = df. \( (E \) happens at \( t \) and (i) \( E \) is in some respect good (bad) for \( S \) and (ii) \( E \) doesn’t happen around \( t \) in a wide class of possible worlds close to the actual world before \( t \).*

*The Control Account:* \( E \) is at \( t \) (un)lucky for \( S \) = df. (i) \( E \) is in some respect good (bad) for \( S \), (ii) \( S \) hasn’t successfully exploited \( E \) for some purpose, and (iii) \( E \) isn’t something \( S \) did intentionally.

*The Mixed Account:* \( E \) is at \( t \) (un)lucky for \( S \) = df. (i) \( E \) is in some respect good (bad) for \( S \), (ii) \( E \) doesn’t happen around \( t \) in a wide class of worlds close to the actual world before \( t \), and (iii) \( E \) isn’t something \( S \) did intentionally.

A few remarks about each account’s condition (i), and the Modal and Mixed Accounts’ condition (ii). Condition (i) seems the best way to understand the so-called significance condition on luck. Since an event can be good for you in one respect but bad for you in another, accounts of luck that utilize (i) correctly allow that an event can be both lucky and unlucky for you (cf. Ballantyne 2012, 331). For example, your lottery win may be good luck in that it enables you to retire early, but bad luck in that it makes you a salient target for extortion.

For statements of the “chanciness” condition on luck that resemble the Modal and Mixed Accounts’ condition (ii), see Pritchard 2005, Coffman 2007, and Levy 2011. It’s important to state (ii) with “around \( t \)” instead of “at \( t \).” If (ii) is stated with “at,” each account’s right-to-left conditional would be vulnerable to this sort of counterexample: Under perfectly normal conditions, you (automatically, non-intentionally) inhale

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4 For careful development of an influential version of the Modal Account, see Pritchard 2005. (Henceforth, I’ll typically suppress the parenthetical “occurrence” clause, which should be assumed in all the accounts of luck discussed below.)

5 This nuanced version of the Control Account is due to Riggs 2009. For simpler versions that don’t include anything like condition (ii), see Nagel 1976, Zimmerman 1987, Statman 1991, and Greco 1995. We’ll consider Riggs’s rationale for adding condition (ii) below.


7 For the best available discussion of the “significance” (or, perhaps better, “value”) condition, see Ballantyne 2012.
wholesome air at t. Inhaling wholesome air is good for you, and it doesn’t happen at t in a wide class of worlds close to the actual world before t (in most such worlds, you’re either exhaling or “idle” at t). If (ii) is stated with “at,” each account’s right-to-left conditional implies incorrectly that you are at t lucky to be inhaling wholesome air. With “around,” each account’s right-to-left conditional avoids this implication (assuming that you inhale wholesome air around t in the vast majority of worlds close to the actual world before t). 8

Moreover, (ii) allows the Modal and Mixed Accounts to countenance lucky events in settings where causal determinism obtains. 9 Numerous cases illustrate this possibility (cf. Pritchard 2005, Coffman 2007, Levy 2011). Winning the lottery in a deterministic world is lucky for you, notwithstanding the fact that your win was necessitated by prior events and the laws of nature. For another example, suppose you live in a deterministic world where your life depends on a certain sphere’s remaining perfectly balanced on the tip of a particular cone throughout some temporal interval. 10 We can fill in the details so as to elicit the intuition that you are lucky the sphere remains perfectly balanced on the tip of the cone throughout that interval, notwithstanding the fact that the sphere’s remaining so balanced was necessitated by prior events and the laws of nature.

Each of our leading accounts issues correct verdicts about certain clear cases of luck like these:

**Good Lottery**: You habitually play numbers corresponding to your own birthday in the state lottery. On this occasion, however, you seriously contemplate playing numbers corresponding to your mother’s birthday. In the end, you stick with standard practice and play your own numbers. Lo and behold, you win!

**Bad Lottery**: You live in a corrupt state where citizens are forced to play in a lottery whose “winners” lose their life savings to the governor. As before, you vacillate between playing your mother’s birthday numbers and your own birthday numbers. In the end, you stick with your own numbers. Lo and behold, you “win”!

In each example, your lottery win isn’t something you did intentionally; you haven’t yet exploited your win for some purpose; and, in a wide class of worlds close to the actual world before the time at which you win, you don’t win around then. 11 So, provided that your win in *Good Lottery* is

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8 Thanks to Georgi Gardiner for helping me get clearer on these issues.
9 “Causal determinism” here denotes the thesis that “there is at any instant exactly one physically possible future” (van Inwagen 1983, 3).
10 This case is inspired by one due to Williamson 2000, 123.
11 Consider various small changes we could make in the actual world before the time when you won (I assume you played “062976”): “6” is the penultimate number selected; “5” is the
good for you—and that your “win” in *Bad Lottery* is bad for you—each of our leading accounts entails that your win is (un)lucky for you. Unfortunately, as we’re about to see, each account is also vulnerable to successful counterexample.

### 2. Counterexamples to the Leading Theories

Start with the Modal Account. Over the next few paragraphs, I’ll defeat Levy’s (2011, 20–22) attempted defense of condition (ii)’s necessity for luck from the following counterexample due to Lackey (2008, 261, paraphrased):

*Buried Treasure*: Sophie buries her treasure at the one spot where rose bushes can grow on the northwest corner of her island. Sophie was set on burying her treasure on the island’s northwest corner in a spot that supports rose bushes: that’s her favorite part of the island, and roses are her favorite flowers. All this is unbeknownst to Vincent, who shows up one month later at the exact same spot where Sophie buried her treasure. Vincent’s reasons for digging up that spot are different from, and completely unrelated to, Sophie’s: Vincent is set on planting a rose bush in his mother’s memory on that part of the island. As Vincent digs, he’s shocked to find buried treasure.

Finding Sophie’s treasure when he does seems lucky for Vincent. But given the details, Vincent finds Sophie’s treasure around that time in the vast majority of possible worlds close to the actual world before he finds it. *Buried Treasure* looks to be a counterexample to (ii)’s necessity for luck.

Levy (2011, 20–22) attempts to defend (ii) from cases like *Buried Treasure*. We can understand Levy as trying both to undercut and to rebut the judgment that Vincent is lucky to find Sophie’s treasure. As for the undercutter, Levy suggests that the objector’s judgment that Vincent is lucky to find the treasure stems from the fact that the discovery seems lucky to Vincent. But since E’s seeming lucky to S is consistent with E’s not actually being lucky for S, the objector’s reason for reckoning Vincent’s discovery lucky doesn’t justify that judgment.

Levy’s attempt to rebut the judgment that Vincent is lucky to find Sophie’s treasure takes off from the following case:

*Buried Treasure*\*: Unbeknownst to Vincent, Sophie buried the treasure in the spot at which he found it because Vincent’s eccentric great-uncle wanted him to have the riches (perhaps Sophie was unaware of the plan; perhaps Vincent’s penultimate number selected; and so on. If things had been slightly different in one of these ways before the time when you won, you wouldn’t have won around then. So, in a wide class of worlds close to the actual world before the time when you won, you don’t win around then.

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great-uncle is a neuroscientist with the power to implant in Sophie a love of roses, knowing it will lead her to bury her treasure in the one spot where he knows Vincent will dig). In that case, it will seem to Vincent very lucky that there was treasure in the precise spot at which he dug, but luck has nothing to do with it; his finding the treasure was planned. Indeed, that might be precisely how Vincent’s great-uncle thinks of his plan: he has, as he might say, “left nothing to chance.” (Levy 2011, 21)

According to Levy, if Vincent knew all the details of *Buried Treasure* and how that case relates to *Buried Treasure*\(^*\) (in which Vincent’s discovery clearly isn’t lucky), Vincent should think he really isn’t lucky in *Buried Treasure* after all. The fact that Vincent should think this in light of such knowledge is evidence that he isn’t lucky in *Buried Treasure*.

*Reply*: We can sidestep Levy’s attempted undercutter by deleting from *Buried Treasure* the unnecessary detail that Vincent is surprised to find Sophie’s treasure, and stipulating instead that Vincent was confident he’d make such a discovery despite having no evidence whatsoever for this proposition. The discovery no longer seems lucky to Vincent, but it still seems lucky for him (cf. Steglich-Petersen 2010, 365ff.). Thus, the basis for our intuition that the discovery is lucky for Vincent can’t just be that it seems lucky to him. As for the attempted rebutter, note that we must give its occurrences of “should” an “epistemic” reading.\(^{12}\) But since there’s a highly relevant difference between *Buried Treasure* and *Buried Treasure*\(^*\) (viz., the presence of the great-uncle’s planning/design), it’s not at all clear that Vincent should (epistemically) infer, from the details of *Buried Treasure* and its relation to *Buried Treasure*\(^*\), that he’s not lucky in the former. Indeed, that seems like a pretty weak analogical inference, given the highly relevant difference between the two cases in terms of overall planning/design (cf. Lackey 2008, 262–63).\(^{13}\)

Having defended Lackey’s counterexample to the Modal Account’s left-to-right conditional, let’s consider its right-to-left conditional. Contrary to this portion of the Modal Account, a morally significant yet “modally fragile” choice needn’t be a lucky occurrence (cf. Latus 2003, Coffman 2007, Lackey 2008). Suppose that you choose at t to make a substantial donation to Oxfam, where there was just before t a large chance you would not so choose at t (you had fairly strong “self-interested” reasons to omit such a choice, and so on). The Modal Account entails that you’re lucky you chose to donate. But suppose your relevant

\(^{12}\) If we don’t give Levy’s “should” an “epistemic” reading, then we should (epistemically) reject his assumption that a subject’s being such that the subject should self-ascribe luck is evidence that she is in fact lucky.

\(^{13}\) Some theorists have inferred, from the success of counterexamples like *Buried Treasure*, that the kind of chance or improbability related to luck is not *metaphysical* but instead *epistemic*. One prominent recent proponent of this type of view is Steglich-Petersen (2010, 369; cf. Rescher 1995, 28–34). See my footnote 24 for brief critical remarks on Steglich-Petersen’s proposal, which I discuss at greater length in section 1.4 of Coffman forthcoming.
reasons inclined you at least somewhat toward making the donation, and that the choice and subsequent donation were made intentionally, freely, and knowingly. Then your choosing to donate wasn’t—or at least, it needn’t have been—lucky for you, notwithstanding the fact that your choice was both modally fragile and good for you.

We turn now to the nuanced version of the Control Account recently developed by Riggs:

\[ E \text{ is at } t \text{ (un)lucky for } S = df. (i) E \text{ is in some respect good (bad) for } S, (ii) S hasn’t successfully exploited } E \text{ for some purpose, and (iii) } E \text{ isn’t something } S \text{ did intentionally. (Riggs 2009, 220) } \]

Riggs’s addition of (ii) to simpler versions of the Control Account immunizes his analysis against cases involving significant states of affairs that you didn’t bring about intentionally but are nevertheless not lucky for you, given their “modal stability.” Despite the fact that you didn’t intentionally bring about the sun’s rising this morning or the continued functioning of the electricity in the room you’re now in (assuming you’re currently inside, and so on), neither of these states of affairs counts as lucky for you. While such examples refute simpler species of the Control Account, they don’t refute Riggs’s version (assuming you’ve successfully exploited the indicated states of affairs for some purpose or other, which you presumably have). Moreover, Riggs’s endorsement of (ii) is independently motivated, for he adds it in light of intuitions about this fascinating case:

\textit{African Expedition:} Smith plans an expedition into the wilds of Africa where certain tribes of Africans with exotic customs were known to live. Smith is constrained... to make this trip during a particular month of a particular year. He proposes the trip to his fellow adventurer Jones, including the specific times that he means to travel. Jones agrees to tag along. As it happens, the particular tribe that lives in the area that Smith and Jones visit has a custom of sacrificing people from outside the tribe on the equinoxes of the year. The autumnal equinox happens to fall during the time that Smith and Jones are in the area, so they are captured and held until that day so that they can be sacrificed.... As the tribesmen approach to kill them..., there is a total eclipse of the sun. The members of this tribe always take such exotic natural occurrences to signal the anger of their gods at them for whatever they happen to be doing at the moment. Consequently, they set their captives free.... Smith says to Jones, “That solar eclipse was an amazing stroke of good luck!” Jones replies, “Don’t be absurd! There was nothing lucky about it. I knew all along that these people would likely try to sacrifice us on the equinox if we were captured, but I also knew that there was a total eclipse of the sun due on that very day, and that this tribe would react to that event by letting us go. Did you

\[ 14 \] Remember that “modally fragile” doesn’t entail “undetermined.” My claims here are thus neutral on the issue whether undetermined events can be acts done intentionally, freely, and knowingly.

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really think I would be stupid enough to fall into such a situation without having a plan to extricate myself?” (Riggs 2009, 216)

According to Riggs, “Smith was lucky that the eclipse happened, and Jones was not” (2009, 217). Obviously, neither adventurer intentionally brought about the eclipse, so we’ll need something other than (iii) to capture our sense that the eclipse was lucky for Smith but not for Jones. Here’s where (ii) comes in. Since only Jones successfully exploited the eclipse for some purpose—that is, only Jones “planned a course of action that assumed that [the eclipse] would occur,” which secured his survival (2009, 218)—(ii) and (iii) together imply that the eclipse was lucky only for Smith.

Alas, Riggs’s Control Account’s right-hand side doesn’t suffice for luck. Suppose that Katelyn lives and works in an underground facility that is, unbeknownst to her, solar powered. This morning’s sunrise was good for Katelyn (it kept her facility running), not intentionally brought about by her, and not successfully exploited by her for some purpose (having been underground for so long, Katelyn has become oblivious to sunrises, and thus doesn’t plan any courses of action assuming that the sun will rise). Riggs’s Control Account implies, incorrectly, that Katelyn was lucky the sun rose this morning.

As for the left-to-right conditional of Riggs’s Control Account, cases like the following show that (ii) isn’t required for luck:

**Kidnapping:** My son Zachary is kidnapped. The kidnappers communicate to me that I can have Zachary back as soon as I tell them that I can pay a huge ransom. Once I tell them this, I’ll have twenty-four hours to deliver the payment; if I don’t get the money to them before the deadline, they’ll recapture Zachary and increase the ransom. An informant I know to be extremely reliable tells me that tonight’s lottery will be rigged in my favor. According to my informant, the lottery officials have heard about my family’s plight and want to help us out. So I form a justified belief that I’ll win tonight’s lottery. Now, on this occasion, my reliable informant is mistaken: tonight’s lottery won’t be rigged in my favor. As it happens, though, I’m going to win it fair and square! So I have a justified and true belief that I’m going to win tonight’s lottery. I phone the kidnappers to tell them that I can pay the ransom. They release Zachary, reminding me that if they don’t have the money in twenty-four hours, they’ll recapture him and increase the ransom. All along, I’m thinking: “No problem—I’ll have my lottery winnings in hand with plenty of time to spare!” I win the large, fair lottery that evening.

My lottery win was a huge stroke of good luck for me. And it’s a fact that I successfully exploited for the purpose of getting Zachary back: I planned a course of action assuming I would win, which resulted in Zachary’s safe
return (compare Jones’s relation to the eclipse in *African Expedition*). Moral: An event can be lucky for you *even if* you successfully exploit it for some purpose.

As for condition (iii) of the Control Account, cases like the following show that it’s not necessary for luck:\(^\text{15}\)

*Distracted Driver:* Our department meeting just happens to end early for once. As a result, I’m early to pick up my son Evan from school. Upon arriving, I spot him playing in the street. A car, whose distracted driver is texting on her cell phone, speeds toward Evan. But I’m in a position to push Evan out of the car’s path, and I of course do so. Hugging Evan tightly moments later, I say: “I’m so lucky you’re safe!”

If your intuitions follow mine here, this self-ascription of luck will strike you as true *on balance* (more on this qualification in a moment). The seeming truth (on balance) of that self-ascription can be bolstered by the even stronger sense that the self-ascription is fully appropriate, combined with the “general presumption that, where speakers are not basing their claims on some false beliefs they have about underlying matters of fact, how they naturally and appropriately describe a situation . . . will be a true description” (DeRose 2009, 51). I conclude, then, that I was (at the indicated time) lucky that Evan was safe. Note, finally, that we can understand this case so that Evan’s safety is something I brought about intentionally (by pushing him out of the car’s path). Moral: An event can be lucky for you *even if* it’s something you did intentionally.

Now, why the “on balance” qualification? Because I expect that some readers will feel some inclination to deny that I am (at the relevant time) *lucky* that Evan is safe (cf. Levy 2011, 22–23). I can understand such doubt, having recently harbored it myself (cf. Coffman 2009, 503). But I now view such doubt as a mistaken response to a different, though closely related, fact—viz., that it’s not a *stroke of good luck* for me that Evan is safe. To be sure, Evan is safe *by* a stroke of good luck for me (and for him)—viz., my becoming positioned to save him. But Evan’s safety isn’t *itself* a stroke of good luck for me (or for him). In the next section, I bolster this error theory by defending the crucial distinction between *lucky events* and *strokes of luck* on which it depends.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{15}\) For two additional structurally similar examples, see Lackey’s “Demolition Worker” and “Derek” cases (Lackey 2008, 259–60).

\(^{16}\) The error theory sketched here will serve, mutatis mutandis, to defend Lackey’s (2008, 259–60) “Derek” counterexample to the Control Account from the claim that the event she deems lucky for her subject (viz., the making of a free throw) really isn’t. Matters are more complicated when it comes to Lackey’s “Demolition Worker” case, due to some ambiguity in its details; for pertinent discussion of this case, see section 2.2 of Coffman forthcoming.

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section 6, I revisit *Distracted Driver* to show that my overall account of luck yields (what I’m claiming are) the correct verdicts about the case.

We’ve now seen counterexamples to both directions of both the Modal and the Control Account. As for the Mixed Account, *Buried Treasure* and *Distracted Driver* together show that neither (ii) nor (iii) is necessary for an event’s being lucky for you. From the success of counterexamples like *Buried Treasure* and *Distracted Driver* to conditions like (ii) and (iii), Lackey concludes that “the conditions proposed by [the literature’s leading accounts of luck] . . . fail to capture what is distinctive of, and central to, the concept of luck” (2008, 255). Call this Lackey’s Inference. In what follows, I’ll present and defend a new account of luck on which (ii) and (iii) are requirements on an event’s being a *stroke of luck* for a subject, a notion on which the concept *lucky event* is parasitic. If such an approach to luck is correct, then there’s a clear sense in which (ii) and (iii) are (in Lackey’s words) “distinctive of, and central to, the concept of luck” after all. By the end of this essay, then, I believe we’ll be in a position to deem Lackey’s Inference hasty.

3. Lucky Events and Strokes of Luck

Besides their vulnerability to counterexample, the leading theories of luck have another—and, as will become clearer as we proceed, related—defect in common: their proponents have assumed, at least implicitly, that the locution “is (un)lucky for” expresses the most fundamental or basic luck concept. This assumption should strike us as dubious after some reflection on a different locution we frequently use to ascribe luck: “is a stroke of good (bad) luck for.” The locutions in question are not equivalent. To see this, extend *Good Lottery* so that the lottery officials are now handing you the lottery’s large cash prize. Intuitively, you’re lucky to be receiving the prize. But while you are receiving the prize *by* a stroke of good luck (your lottery win), your receiving the prize isn’t *itself* a stroke of good luck for you (you’re the rightful winner, after all). For another illustration of the point, extend *Bad Lottery* so that the governor is now transferring your life savings into his checking account. Intuitively, you’re unlucky to be losing your life savings to the governor. But while you are losing your life savings to the governor *by* a stroke of bad luck (your lottery “win”), the governor’s taking your life savings isn’t *itself* a stroke of bad luck for you (after all, you’re the rightful “winner”). Moral: An event that isn’t itself a stroke of good (bad) luck for you may nevertheless be (un)lucky for you.

Keep reflecting on how *is (un)lucky for* might relate to *is a stroke of good (bad) luck for*, and (I predict) you’ll eventually feel tempted to deem the latter more fundamental than the former. Whereas there are no promising accounts of *is a stroke of luck for* in terms of *is lucky for* on the horizon, there is a promising analysis of the latter in terms of the former:
an event that’s \textit{(un)lucky} for you is one that’s either \textit{itself} a stroke of good (bad) luck for you or one that’s good (bad) for you and due primarily (chiefly, mainly) to some \textit{prior} stroke of good (bad) luck for you. More precisely:

Event $E$ is at $t$ \textit{(un)lucky} for subject $S$ = df. (i) $E$ is in some respect good (bad) for $S$ and (ii) there’s a stroke of good (bad) luck for $S$, $E^*$, such that \textit{either} (a) $E = E^*$ or (b) $E^*$ is a primary (chief, main) contributor to $E$.

Call this the \textit{Strokes Account} of lucky events. This proposal differs crucially from the three leading accounts in that it sees \textit{is lucky for} as disjunctive—as admitting a “direct/indirect” distinction—in a way similar to (for example) \textit{is morally responsible for}: $S$ is morally responsible for an act $A$ iff $S$ is either directly or indirectly morally responsible for $A$, where (i) $S$ is \textit{directly} morally responsible for $A$ iff $S$ is responsible for $A$ but not in virtue of being responsible for something else; and (ii) $S$ is \textit{indirectly} morally responsible for $A$ iff $S$ is responsible for $A$ in virtue of being responsible for something else (cf. Mele 2006, 86–87). Similarly, the Strokes Account’s proponent distinguishes between (i) lucky events that \textit{do} inherit their status as such from some other events and (ii) lucky events that \textit{don’t} inherit their status as such from any other events (where the latter notion is, the Strokes Account’s proponent suggests, commonly expressed in ordinary discourse by “is a stroke of good [bad] luck for” and cognate locutions). \footnote{Thanks to Devon Bryson, David Palmer, and Carolina Sartorio for helping me develop this analogy.}

Right away, I must say something about “is a primary (chief, main) contributor to.” I intend to use that expression and related ones—for example, “primarily (chiefly, mainly) because”—in their ordinary senses. Such expressions have the same meanings here as they do in familiar bits of discourse like these: \footnote{The first two examples are adapted from Bennett 1988, 21ff.}

- My having to study \textit{Julius Caesar} in high school is a primary contributor to my present hatred of the work.
- The wind’s kicking up when it did was a chief contributor to the fire’s spreading into the new timber.
- The driver’s reckless behavior was a main contributor to Sara’s becoming a widow.

Call the relation that “is a primary (chief, main) contributor to” expresses in the above sentences the \textit{primary contribution relation}; the following claims display its converse:
• I now hate *Julius Caesar* primarily because I had to study the work in high school.
• The fire’s spreading to the new timber was due mainly to the wind’s kicking up when it did.
• Sara is a widow chiefly because of the driver’s reckless behavior.

We can tighten our grip on the primary contribution relation by noting that it’s neither necessary nor sufficient for *causal* contribution. First, causes needn’t be primary contributors. The Big Bang, nearly all theorists of causation will agree, is a cause of every subsequent event. So the Big Bang is among the causes of every human birth and death. But no human birth or death has been due primarily to the Big Bang.19 Second, primary contributors needn’t be causes. Suppose that, at noon, I (Sara’s husband) am fatally struck by a reckless driver while crossing the street. Sara becomes a widow, and this is due primarily to the reckless driver’s behavior. But while the reckless driver’s behavior was surely a cause of my death, it wasn’t also a cause of Sara’s widowing; the latter is instead a “non-causal consequence” of the driver’s behavior.20 I hasten to add, though, that primary contribution is *like* causal contribution in that both are objective, mind-independent, “out in the world” phenomena (cf. Bennett 1988, 32).

Why “is a primary *contributor to*,” rather than “is a primary *cause of*”? The latter would make the Strokes Account too strong. We can imagine that Sara’s widowing is unlucky for her, given the way it relates to a certain stroke of bad luck for her—for example, a reckless driver’s fatally striking me as I cross the street. But again, the driver’s fatally striking me doesn’t *cause* Sara’s widowing. So, if we replace “is a primary contributor to” with “is a primary cause of,” the Strokes Account won’t issue the correct verdict that Sara is unlucky to be a widow.

Why “is a primary *contributor to*,” rather than merely “contributes to”? The latter would make the Strokes Account too weak.21 Suppose you narrowly escaped death once as a toddler; your survival then was a stroke of good luck for you. If we go with “contributes to,” the Strokes Account’s right-to-left conditional will imply that every later significant event to which your survival contributes is lucky for you. Since your

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19 Cf. Lewis 1986, 23: “[The Big Bang], I take it, is a cause of *every* later event without exception. Then it is a cause of every death. But the Big Bang did not kill anyone.”

20 For starters, since my death arguably doesn’t cause Sara’s widowing (these happen simultaneously, and possibly at great spatial distance), there seems to be no causal chain connecting the driver’s behavior to Sara’s widowing (cf. Kim 1974).

21 The following argument can be adapted to show that replacing “is a primary contributor to” with “is counterfactually sufficient for” would also make the Strokes Account too weak. I leave such adaptation as homework for interested readers. In section 1.3 of Coffman forthcoming, I show that replacing “is a primary contributor to” with “is counterfactually necessary for” would make the Strokes Account too strong.
survival presumably contributes to every later event that involves you, the Strokes Account’s right-to-left conditional will imply that every later significant “you-involving” event is lucky for you. But such a proliferation of luck would be unacceptable (cf. Levy 2009, 497). Why so? Because the luck analyst’s quarry is a phenomenon one paradigm of which is your winning a large fair lottery, and the presence of which can arguably keep true beliefs from constituting knowledge, rational actions from qualifying as free, and so on. Assuming that “lottery win”—type events aren’t ubiquitous—and that our ability to gain/retain knowledge, and to act freely, isn’t under constant threat from luck—the luck analyst’s quarry simply can’t be as common a phenomenon as the “contributes to” version of the Strokes Account would have it (cf. Lackey 2008, 258).

Happily, the right-to-left conditional of the official statement of the Strokes Account doesn’t yield the same unacceptable proliferation of luck. In the case under consideration, for example, we can safely suppose that your survival as a toddler isn’t a primary contributor to every later event in which you’re involved. Now it is arguable that, in the envisaged case, every later event that involves you (or at least, every such event of which you’re the sole subject) counterfactually depends on your survival as a toddler (if you hadn’t survived, that event wouldn’t have happened). But counterfactual dependence doesn’t suffice for primary contribution. Everything downstream from the Big Bang counterfactually depends on it, but it’s not the case that everything downstream from the Big Bang (e.g., your currently reading this sentence) is due primarily to the Big Bang. It’s also arguable that, in the imagined case, for every later moment at which you exist, you exist then primarily because you survived as a toddler. But that too is compatible with the claim that your survival as a toddler isn’t a primary contributor to every later event that involves you. Generally speaking, even if X’s existence at t is due primarily to Y, some X-involving events at t may not be at all due to Y. The official statement of the Strokes Account, in terms of the primary contribution relation, seems not to suffer from a problematic over-ascription of luck.

I’ve now provided a sampling of highly intelligible claims in which the primary contribution relation, or its converse, figures prominently; further clarified the primary contribution relation by distinguishing it from causal contribution; and indicated why I’ve formulated the official version of the Strokes Account in terms of primary contribution, rather than employing some other similar “generative” relation(s). I hope this material will help persuade any initially skeptical readers that the primary contribution

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22 Cf. Sosa 2007, 95: “Something may explain the existence of a certain entity . . . without even partially explaining why it has a given property. That it was made in a Volvo factory may explain the existence of a certain defective car, for example, without even partially explaining why it is now defective.”
relation is sufficiently intelligible for the work I want it to do here—viz., illuminating the relation expressed by “is (un)lucky for.”

4. The Strokes Account of Lucky Events: Further Support and Defense

I turn now to providing further argument for, and defense of, the Strokes Account. Our extended versions of Good Lottery and Bad Lottery strongly confirm the account. Recall the extended version of Good Lottery, in which the lottery officials have just handed you the lottery’s large cash prize. Here are two related facts:

- You were lucky that your birthday numbers won.
- You were lucky to receive the lottery prize.

The Strokes Account smoothly explains both facts. It was a stroke of good luck for you that your birthday numbers won, and you received the lottery prize primarily because your numbers won. Combined with these claims, the Strokes Account entails the above facts. That the Strokes Account so smoothly explains those facts counts significantly in its favor.

Now recall the extended version of Bad Lottery, in which the governor has just transferred your life savings into his checking account. Consider two related facts:

- You were unlucky that your birthday numbers “won.”
- You were unlucky to lose your life savings to the governor.

Again, the Strokes Account easily explains both facts. It was a stroke of bad luck for you that your birthday numbers “won,” and the governor took your savings primarily because your numbers “won.” Combined with these claims, the Strokes Account entails the above facts. That the Strokes Account so easily explains those facts further confirms it’s on the right track.

My overall case for the Strokes Account will accumulate gradually throughout the remainder of the essay as we test the account against additional cases; enrich it with an analysis of strokes of luck; and show how the enriched account can properly handle all the earlier counterexamples to the leading theories of luck. I’ll devote the rest of this section to defending

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23 Of course, “is a primary contributor to” (and so on) is vague. But that’s not obviously a strike against analyzing luck in terms of primary contribution. Indeed, the observation may well count in favor of such an analysis, given the vagueness of “is (un)lucky for.”

24 In light of cases like Buried Treasure, Steglich-Petersen (2010, 369) proposes this “ignorance” requirement on luck: E is at t lucky for S only if, just before t, S wasn’t positioned to know E would occur then. Our lottery cases reveal that this proposal has counterintuitively skeptical consequences. The proposal implies, e.g., that just before I received the lottery prize, I wasn’t in a position to know that I’d soon receive the prize.
the Strokes Account from some challenging objections to its left-to-right conditional. Let’s start with this neat attempted counterexample:

*Drawing Marbles:* An opaque jar holds ninety-nine red marbles and one green marble. Each trial consists of drawing, and then replacing, a single marble. You bet that the green marble will be drawn at least once over the course of 450 trials. The odds are squarely in your favor: there’s about a 99 percent chance that at least one draw will produce the green marble. All 450 trials take place; alas, the green marble is never drawn.

You were unlucky that the green marble was never drawn. But this case doesn’t seem to involve any strokes of bad luck for you. For, in each trial, there was only a 1 percent chance that the green marble would be drawn. True, in each trial, it would have been a stroke of good luck for you had the green marble been drawn. So in each trial, you failed to enjoy a stroke of good luck. But failing to enjoy a stroke of good luck doesn’t suffice for suffering a stroke of bad luck. Consider: Winning the lottery is a stroke of good luck, but simply failing to win isn’t itself a stroke of bad luck (cf. Levy 2011, 33). *Drawing Marbles* thus impugns the left-to-right conditional of the Strokes Account. 25

*Reply:* The objector must be thinking that the complete 450-trial process couldn’t *itself* be a stroke of bad luck for you. Why think that? The reasoning would presumably go something like this:

None of the individual trials was itself a stroke of bad luck for you. And if none of the individual trials was a stroke of bad luck for you, then neither was the whole process made up of all those individual trials.

I accept the first premise but reject the second. The general thought underlying the second premise would have to be something like this:

If E is a composite event none of whose individual parts was a stroke of good (bad) luck for S, then E isn’t *itself* a stroke of good (bad) luck for S.

There are clear counterexamples to this principle. I am truly awful at darts. But I learn that I’ll receive a big cash prize if I make a bull’s-eye on my next throw. I try my hardest to make a bull’s-eye; lo and behold, I succeed! We can understand this case so that making the bull’s-eye was a stroke of good luck for me. Compatibly with such an understanding of the case, we can fill

25 Thanks to Georgi Gardiner, Maria Lasonen-Aarnio, and Doug MacLean for suggesting cases that inspired this one.

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in the details so that each of the individual parts or “steps” of making the bull’s-eye was itself highly likely to happen, given how things stood just before it happened. What emerges is a case in which making the bull’s-eye was a stroke of good luck for me, even though none of the bull’s-eye’s individual parts or “steps” was itself a stroke of good luck for me.\textsuperscript{26}

In the next section, I start developing an analysis of \textit{strokes of luck} on which a composite event like making a bull’s-eye or a multi-trial marble-drawing process can count as a stroke of good or bad luck for a subject. Once this analysis is on the table, I’ll return to \textit{Drawing Marbles} to verify that it implies that the whole 450-trial process is itself a stroke of bad luck for you. That will complete my defense of the Strokes Account from this case.\textsuperscript{27}

Here’s another, somewhat simpler attempted counterexample to the Strokes Account’s left-to-right conditional. At the conclusion of the extended version of \textit{Good Lottery}, you are lucky that you played your birthday numbers. But playing your birthday numbers needn’t itself have been a stroke of good luck for you: we can safely suppose that there were no hidden obstacles to your selecting those numbers; that you played those numbers intentionally, knowingly, and freely; and so on. Further, we can suppose that your playing those numbers was not due primarily to any other stroke of good luck for you. So the Strokes Account’s left-to-right conditional implies incorrectly that you are not, at day’s end, lucky you played your birthday numbers.

\textit{Reply:} Once we get clearer on what’s true of this case, and how the Strokes Account bears on it, we’ll see that the case doesn’t threaten the account. Notice first that the critic expresses the objection’s initial premise by way of a \textit{present tense} ascription of luck regarding an \textit{earlier} event: “. . . you are lucky that you played your birthday numbers.” Now, like all the going accounts of luck set out above, the Strokes Account’s analysandum is a relation that a subject S bears to an event E at a time t only if E happens (occurs, comes to obtain) at t. Initially, then, it’s not at all clear that the Strokes Account’s analysandum is the relation at play in the critic’s first premise.

This lack of clarity raises a difficult question: How exactly we should interpret that first premise? This question is difficult because we can use \textit{present tense} ascriptions of luck regarding \textit{earlier} events to make any of a

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Objection:} \textit{Drawing Marbles} is sufficiently structurally similar to \textit{Buried Treasure} so that either each outcome (treasure find, 450 straight “red” draws) is lucky or neither is. But you’ve deemed one lucky and the other not. \textit{Reply:} Actually, these cases are structurally quite different. \textit{Drawing Marbles} features a “fragile” outcome of multiple individually “robust” phenomena. By contrast, \textit{Buried Treasure} should be read as featuring a “robust” outcome of phenomena at least some of which were individually “fragile” (cf. Lackey 2008, 263–64). (Thanks to Lee Whittington for comments that led me to add this note.)

\textsuperscript{27} Thanks to Georgi Gardiner and Lee Whittington for helping me think through this objection.
number of different claims. Notably, if given a “strict and literal” reading, any such ascription of luck is arguably false. For if an event has already happened, then there’s a clear sense in which the event’s occurrence is now “fixed”—this is the status labeled “the necessity of the past” or “accidental necessity” in the literature on human freedom and divine foreknowledge. But if an event’s occurrence is now “fixed” in the relevant sense, then the event’s occurrence is not now lucky for anyone—though, of course, it may well be that the event was lucky for someone when it happened.

A present tense ascription of luck regarding an earlier event might be either of the following (or something else—I needn’t, and so won’t try to, exhaust the possibilities here):

- A disguised past tense ascription of luck to the earlier event. For example: by uttering “I’m lucky I won the lottery,” I can convey [Winning the lottery was lucky for me].
- A disguised past tense ascription of ignorance regarding some of the earlier event’s later positive consequences (cf. Levy 2011, 20). For example: by uttering “I’m lucky I sold my stocks before the market crashed,” I can convey [I unwittingly protected myself from the crash by selling my stocks].

Reflection on these two different uses of the relevant kind of luck ascription yields (what strike me as) the two most charitable interpretations of the critic’s first premise. On the one hand, the critic’s claim might be that at the time you played your birthday numbers, you were lucky to be playing those numbers. If so, then that premise is dubious: the very reasons given for thinking that playing your birthday numbers wasn’t (when you played them) a stroke of good luck for you also support the claim that playing those numbers wasn’t (when you played them) lucky for you. On the other hand, the critic might be claiming that, when you played your birthday numbers, you were unwittingly selecting what would turn out to be the lottery’s winning numbers. If so, then while the pertinent premise is of course true, it’s irrelevant to the Strokes Account. For on this second interpretation, the relation at play in that premise can’t be the Strokes Account’s analysandum: ignorance of a current act’s later positive consequences is far too common a phenomenon to be the luck analyst’s quarry. Upshot: Neither of the suggested interpretations of the critic’s first premise yields a successful objection to the Strokes Account.

Having provided some initial support for and defense of the Strokes Account, I now move on to developing an analysis of strokes of luck that utilizes insights from the recent luck literature. As we’ll see, when we plug this analysis into the Strokes Account, the result is a comprehensive new theory of luck that can handle all the earlier counterexamples to the literature’s leading accounts.
5. Strokes of Luck: An Analysis and Some Important Implications

Bracketing a few bells and whistles that needn’t detain us here, we get my favored analysis of strokes of luck by simply “copying-and-pasting” the right-hand-side of the Mixed Account:\(^{28}\)

The Analysis: Event E is at t a stroke of good (bad) luck for subject S = df.

1. E is in some respect good (bad) for S,
2. E doesn’t happen around t in a wide class of worlds close to the actual world before t, and
3. E isn’t something S did intentionally.

A few initial remarks about the Analysis. First, the Analysis has it that whether E is at t a stroke of luck for S depends on how things stood just before t (i.e., all the way up to, but not including, t). That’s intuitively plausible. Suppose that, while there was around the time of the Big Bang only a minuscule chance that E would eventually happen at t, there was just before t only a minuscule chance that E wouldn’t happen at t. Suppose E happens at t. Given that there was, just beforehand, only a minuscule chance that E wouldn’t happen then, E shouldn’t count as a stroke of luck for anyone. Moral: Whether E is at t a stroke of luck for S depends (not on how likely it was at, for example, some point in the remote past that E would happen at t, but) on how likely it was just before t that E would happen then.\(^{29}\)

Now let’s take a closer look at condition (3). Question: Armed only with (3), can the Analysis capture all there is to the platitude that “strokes of luck are uncontrolled”? Or must we add more conditions to fully capture the “out of control” requirement on an event’s being a stroke of luck for a subject? I’ll explore this relatively large question by way of two comparatively smaller ones:

The Connections Question: Can the Analysis (as currently formulated) honor the most obvious connections between the concepts of directly free action and stroke of luck?\(^{30}\)

\(^{28}\) For bells and whistles, see section 5 of Coffman 2007 and section 2.2 of Coffman forthcoming.

\(^{29}\) Following other theorists of luck (Pritchard [2005], Levy [2011]), here and elsewhere I employ a familiar notion of objective (metaphysical) chance on which the chance, just before t, that an event E will happen at t is equal to the “size” of the set of worlds close to actuality before t in which E happens at t, divided by the “size” of the whole set of worlds close to actuality before t (cf. van Inwagen [1997, 231ff.] and Williamson [2000, 123–24]).

\(^{30}\) In section 2.1 of Coffman forthcoming, I consider how stroke of luck relates to knowingly performed action. Following Mele and Moser (1994, 45), I maintain that foreseen side-effects of intentional actions can count as things one does knowingly but not intention-ally. If so, the Analysis leaves it open that something you did knowingly was also a stroke of luck for you. I describe a “side-effect action” case that illustrates this possibility.
Take the Connections Question first. It’s extremely plausible to think that directly free acts—that is, free acts that don’t owe their status as such to any other free acts (cf. Mele 2006, 87)—can’t be strokes of luck for their agents.32 Supposing that’s right, can the Analysis honor this truth “as is”? Yes, given the intuitively plausible assumption that any directly free act is something its agent does intentionally. Suppose that’s right: an agent’s act is directly free only if the agent does that act intentionally.33 The left-to-right conditional of the Analysis entails that nothing an agent does intentionally is a stroke of luck for the agent. Therefore, given one intuitively plausible assumption about the nature of directly free action, the left-to-right conditional of the Analysis entails that nothing an agent does with direct freedom can be a stroke of luck for that agent.

On to the Abilities Question. Many theorists of luck endorse something along these lines: E is a stroke of luck for S only if S lacks “control over” E.34 Unlike “control of,” to say that you have “control over” E implies that you are free to produce and/or to prevent E (where S is “free to” produce/prevent E iff S both has it within her power and knows how to produce/prevent E). Many theorists thus endorse a requirement for E’s being a stroke of luck for S on which S isn’t both free to produce E and free to prevent E. Do strokes of luck really relate to agents’ abilities as the theorists currently in focus seem to think?

Over the next few paragraphs, I’ll argue for two theses:

Thesis 1: Possibly, E is a stroke of good luck for S, yet S is both free to produce E and free to prevent E.

Thesis 2: Possibly, E is a stroke of bad luck for S, yet S is both free to produce E and free to prevent E.

31 In line with my broad use of “do,” I here use “produce” (“prevent”) in a broad sense that covers both causal production (causation of omission) for events proper and actualization (keeping from obtaining) for states of affairs.

32 Something like the claim to which this note is appended animates the so-called Luck Argument(s) against libertarianism about metaphysical freedom (the thesis that metaphysical freedom exists and is incompatible with the truth of causal determinism). For a helpful critical survey of historical and contemporary “luck-driven” arguments against libertarianism, see Franklin 2011. I discuss such argumentation at length in chapters 5 and 6 of Coffman forthcoming.

33 If a skeptical interlocutor pressed for further reasons to accept this claim, I’d lead with the following argument: Any directly free act is an act its agent does for a reason (cf. Levy 2011, 64). Any act an agent does for a reason is something its agent does intentionally (cf. Mele and Moser 1994, 64). Therefore, all directly free acts are done intentionally.

If Theses 1 and 2 are true, then E can be a stroke of (good or bad) luck for you despite the fact that you have “control over” E, in the sense of “control over” that proponents of the above popular construal of the “out of control” requirement on strokes of luck seem to have in mind. In light of the two upcoming examples that I’ll call Rigged Lottery and Two Buttons, we should conclude that strokes of luck don’t relate to agents’ abilities as many theorists of luck seem to think.

First, a case that supports Thesis 1:

Rigged Lottery: Without your having had any say in the matter, you find yourself holding a ticket in a lottery that has been rigged in your favor. There are two ways you can win: press a button that will make you the (illegitimate) winner, or let the lottery proceed fairly in hopes that your number will be the one selected. For you to win either way, you must keep your ticket. Although you’re free to make yourself the winner, you refrain from intervening. Indeed, given your character, there was almost no chance you’d exploit the set-up to win illegitimately. Lo and behold, you win fair and square!

Your legitimate lottery win was a stroke of good luck for you. But now consider the fact that you won the lottery (period). You were free to make yourself the winner, and you were also free to prevent your winning (by destroying your ticket). So, if your winning (period) was a stroke of good luck for you, then Thesis 1 is true. Was it indeed a stroke of good luck for you that you won (period)?

If we try to argue for the conclusion that your winning was a stroke of good luck for you, this reasoning will occur to us fairly early on:

It was a stroke of good luck for you that you won legitimately. That you won legitimately entails that you won. The relation being a stroke of good luck for is “closed under entailment”: if it was a stroke of good luck for you that P and P entails Q, then it was also a stroke of good luck for you that Q. Therefore, it was a stroke of good luck for you that you won.

But this argument fails, since being a stroke of good luck for clearly isn’t closed under entailment (cf. Dretske 1970, 1008–9). Suppose you legitimately win a large, normal lottery. Your legitimate win is a stroke of good luck for you. That you legitimately win entails that there’s a legitimate winner. But no one is lucky that there’s a legitimate winner, not even you (that there would be a legitimate winner was guaranteed).

Of course, the fact that the above argument fails is no reason to think that your winning (period) in Rigged Lottery wasn’t a stroke of good luck for you. Indeed, although I myself have recently claimed that your
winning wasn’t a stroke of good luck for you (cf. Coffman 2009, 503–4), I now feel no inclination at all to say this, and instead feel a strong inclination to say that your winning was in fact a stroke of good luck for you—as have many people with whom I’ve discussed such cases. So far as I can see at present, then, Rigged Lottery establishes Thesis 1.

Turning to Thesis 2, consider this case:

Two Buttons: You confront a device with two buttons, green and red. If you press the red button, you’ll immediately suffer a painful sensation (100 percent chance). If you press the green button, there’s a 99 percent chance you’ll enjoy a pleasant sensation and only a 1 percent chance you’ll suffer a painful sensation. You’re free to do any of the following: press the red button; press the green button; omit pressing either button. Reasonably expecting to enjoy the pleasant sensation, you freely press the green button. You suffer a painful sensation.

Your suffering that painful sensation was a stroke of bad luck. Note that the Analysis entails as much: suffering the painful sensation was bad for you; in a wide class of worlds close to the actual world before you suffer the painful sensation, you don’t suffer such a sensation; and, finally, suffering the painful sensation wasn’t something you did intentionally. Nevertheless, you were free both to produce the painful sensation (you were free to press the red button) and to prevent it (you were free to omit pressing either button). So Two Buttons establishes Thesis 2.

We’ve been considering whether the Analysis can—armed only with condition (3)—capture what truth there is in the platitude that “strokes of luck are uncontrolled.” We’ve made progress on that question by answering two comparatively smaller questions: the Connections Question and the Abilities Question. I’ve argued for an affirmative answer to the Connections Question: the Analysis can capture the most obvious connections between the concepts of directly free action and stroke of luck. And reflection on the Abilities Question has revealed that we shouldn’t require, for an event’s being a stroke of luck for you, that you lack either freedom to produce that event or freedom to prevent it. So reflection on the Abilities Question hasn’t uncovered any new reason to think that the Analysis can’t capture what truth there is in the pertinent platitude. On the basis of these answers to the indicated questions, then, I’m cautiously optimistic that condition (3) exhausts the “out of control” requirement on an event’s being a stroke of luck for a subject.

Call the conjunction of the Strokes Account with the Analysis the Enriched Strokes Account of lucky events. Now is as good a time as any to

35 Wayne Riggs has been especially influential on this front.
36 Special thanks to Doug MacLean and Susan Wolf for extremely helpful conversation about the issues explored in this section.

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note that, since key notions involved in (1) and (2) of the Analysis admit of degrees, those conditions allow us to capture the fact that luck itself comes in degrees.\(^{37}\) To illustrate: a proponent of the Enriched Strokes Account can say that some extremely positive (negative) and unlikely event was a huge stroke of good (bad) luck for you, and that any positive (negative) event to which that huge stroke of good (bad) luck is a primary contributor is itself extremely (un)lucky for you; that some slightly positive (negative) and fairly likely event was only a small stroke of good (bad) luck for you, and that any positive (negative) event to which that small stroke of good (bad) luck is a primary contributor is only slightly (un)lucky for you; and so on. Next on the agenda is to verify that the Enriched Strokes Account vindicates some not-yet-fully-substantiated claims I relied on in earlier sections, and to defend the account from a challenging charge of incoherence.

6. The Enriched Strokes Account of Lucky Events: Further Support and Defense

In earlier sections, I relied on the following not-yet-fully-substantiated claims:

- In *Distracted Driver*, Evan’s eventual safety was not itself a stroke of good luck for me (or for him). It was, however, a stroke of good luck for me (and for him) that I was in a position to save him, and lucky for me (and for him) that he ended up safe (section 2).
- In *Drawing Marbles*, it was a stroke of bad luck for you that the green marble wasn’t drawn in any of the 450 trials (section 4).

Start with *Distracted Driver*. Just before saving Evan, I became positioned to save him. Once I became so positioned, it was guaranteed that I would soon save Evan. So Evan’s eventual safety doesn’t itself meet condition (2) of the Analysis. The Analysis thus implies that it wasn’t a stroke of good luck for me (or for Evan) that he ended up safe. My becoming positioned to save Evan, however, was clearly a primary contributor to his eventual safety. Further, my becoming so positioned was good for me (and for Evan); we can safely suppose that it doesn’t happen around the relevant time in a wide class of worlds close to the actual world beforehand; and it’s not something that I (or Evan) did intentionally. The Enriched Strokes Account thus implies both that my becoming positioned to save Evan was a stroke of good luck for me (and for him) and that it was lucky for me (and for him) that he ended up safe.

Now recall *Drawing Marbles*. The fact that all 450 trials failed to produce a green marble was bad for you, and not something you did

\(^{37}\) If acts can be done more or less intentionally—an issue I take no stand on here—then (3) also helps capture comparative facts about luck.
intentionally. So whether the trials’ failure to produce a green marble was a stroke of bad luck for you comes down to whether there was—before the stretch of time over which all those individual trials took place (label it “t”)—a sufficiently large objective chance that at least one trial would then produce a green marble. More precisely, we need to ask whether the following is true: In a wide class of worlds close to the actual world before t, at least one trial produces a green marble during t.

We should answer this question affirmatively. Recall that, before the trials took place, there was roughly a 99 percent chance that at least one trial would produce a green marble during t. So, in almost all of the worlds close to the actual world before t, at least one of the trials produces a green marble during t. So, not only was it the trials’ failure to produce a green marble bad for you, and not something you did intentionally; there was also, before the stretch of time over which it happened, a sufficiently large chance it wouldn’t happen during that period. The Analysis thus vindicates the claim that the trials’ failure to produce a green marble was itself a stroke of bad luck for you. More generally, the Analysis clearly and correctly allows for the possibility that some composite event is itself a stroke of (good or bad) luck for you, despite the fact that none of its individual parts or “steps” is.

I’ll devote the rest of this section to defending the Enriched Strokes Account from a challenging objection inspired by both Latus (2003, 467ff.) and Levy (2011, 16–17, 29ff.). Suppose a subject, S, survives a game of Russian roulette in which only one of the revolver’s six chambers is loaded. Alternatively, consider a subject S’s being born with an exceptionally happy temperament. It seems that if the Analysis is correct, then we can understand S’s case so that it doesn’t involve any strokes of good luck for S. And if we can so understand S’s case, yet S was nevertheless lucky to survive the game of roulette—or to be born with an exceptionally happy temperament—then the Strokes Account is false. But, the objection continues, S was lucky to survive the game—or to be born with an exceptionally happy temperament. Therefore, it seems that if the Analysis is true, then the Strokes Account is false. Upshot: The Enriched Strokes Account combines two incompatible views!

This objection rests on two basic premises:

**Premise 1:** If the Analysis is correct, then S’s case needn’t involve any strokes of good luck for S.

**Premise 2:** S was lucky to survive the roulette game—or, to be born with an exceptionally happy temperament.

I will argue that neither of the two envisaged cases is such that both premises are true of it.

Consider, first, S’s surviving the roulette game. As it’s described, there was roughly a 17 percent objective chance that S would not survive the
game. That’s a sufficiently large chance of death for S’s survival to satisfy my intended reading of condition (2) of the Analysis.\(^{38}\) So, contrary to the objector’s suggestion, since S’s survival is also in some respect good for S and not something S did intentionally, the Analysis issues the intuitively correct verdict that S’s survival was indeed a stroke of good luck for him.

Now, the objector might try to sidestep this reply by invoking what I’ll call the

**Inverse Proportionality Thesis (IPT):** The degree of chanciness required for an event to count as lucky for one is *inversely proportional* to the degree to which the event is good for one.

Latus (2003, 467–68) explicitly endorses IPT.\(^{39}\) If IPT is true, then we can simply modify the Russian roulette case so that there was only a minuscule chance that S would die. So modified, S’s survival will be too probable to satisfy condition (2) of the Analysis, yet (claims the critic) will still count as lucky.

Far from revitalizing the above argument, such a move would actually render it irrelevant to the Strokes Account. To begin to see this, note that luck runs riot under IPT: for any event E that’s extremely significant for—but not done intentionally by—S, E will count as *lucky* for S provided that there was at least an extremely small objective chance that E wouldn’t happen. There’s an endless supply of examples that illustrate how luck proliferates given IPT; we’ll consider just one, picked more or less at random. I recently survived a routine flight from Chicago to South Bend. Surviving that flight was extremely significant for me, and didn’t count as something I did intentionally. Further, we can suppose that there was at least an extremely small objective chance I wouldn’t survive the flight (think: mechanical problems, pilot errors, wayward geese, blood clots, Large Hadron Collider catastrophe, . . .). IPT implies that I was lucky to survive my routine flight from Chicago to South Bend. More generally, IPT entails that a truly staggering number and variety of events are lucky for us.

But this means that, whatever relation is at play in IPT (assuming that the principle is indeed true), it’s not the Strokes Account’s analysandum (cf. Lackey 2008, 258). The luck analyst’s quarry, remember, is a phenomenon one paradigm of which is you winning a large fair lottery, and the presence of which can arguably keep true beliefs from constituting knowledge, rational actions from qualifying as free, and so on. Accordingly, the luck analyst’s quarry simply can’t be as pervasive as is the relation at play

\(^{38}\) Contrast Coffman 2007, 390f., which I now deem mistaken.

\(^{39}\) According to Levy (2011, 17), “the degree of chanciness necessary for an event to count as lucky is *sensitive* to the significance of that event for the agent” (my emphasis). However, Levy (2011, 17) also explicitly agrees with me that “there is a threshold, even for an event as significant for the agent as the death [S] risks, below which surviving is merely fortunate and not lucky (suppose that the probability of the gun’s firing was 0.00001%).”
in IPT. Tying the above argument to IPT would therefore render it irrelevant to the Enriched Strokes Account. I conclude, then, that however exactly we fill in its details, the Russian roulette case isn’t such that both Premises 1 and 2 are true of it.

On to the “happy temperament” case. From such claims of “constitutive luck” as that S was lucky to be endowed with an exceptionally happy temperament, Levy (2011, 32ff.) infers that the following condition suffices for your being lucky relative to some positive character trait:

Your having the pertinent trait is good for you, you lack control over having the trait, and the trait is sufficiently rare across human experience.

I agree with Levy that you should think some such condition suffices for luck with respect to some positive trait if you deem S lucky to have his exceptionally happy temperament. But we now have all we need, I believe, for a reductio of the claim that S is lucky to have such a temperament (cf. Rescher 1995, 28–29). Suppose that, on the basis of firmly held intentions formed long ago, S’s parents intentionally “engineered” S so as to ensure that S would be “hard-wired” with an exceptionally happy temperament. We can easily fill in the details so that S isn’t lucky to have his exceptionally happy temperament. But just as clearly, S’s having that rare positive trait may be good for, and uncontrolled by, S. So the proposed sufficient condition for luck relative to some positive trait turns out on closer inspection to be insufficient. Finally, since we were led to that mistaken condition by the claim that S is—in the original, “manipulation-free” case—lucky to have an exceptionally happy temperament, we should conclude that S is not in fact lucky to have such a temperament in the original case.

In response, Levy might concede that in the “manipulation-involving” case, S isn’t lucky to have the relevant sort of temperament, but then weaken the above alleged sufficient condition by replacing its antecedent with the following, logically stronger proposition:

Your having the pertinent trait is good for you, no one has direct control over your having the trait, and the trait is sufficiently rare across human experience.

The revised sufficient condition will be immune to “manipulation-involving” examples. Unfortunately, though, there are plausible counterexamples even to the revised condition. Suppose it’s at least (conceptually)

40 Cf. Levy’s (2011, 21–22) own claims about the case he calls “Buried Treasure*,” discussed in section 2 above.

41 Thanks to Lee Whittington for suggesting that such a move should be discussed.

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possible that there be a divine human being.42 If there were such a being, she would essentially or necessarily exemplify such features as omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence. Such traits would be good for their possessor, and rare across human experience. So, provided that no one has control over properties a thing exemplifies essentially or necessarily, the weaker putative sufficient condition implies that a divine human being would be lucky to be omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. But that’s a mistake: if there were a divine human being, she wouldn’t be lucky to have such traits.43 Therefore, the weaker alleged sufficient condition for luck relative to positive traits isn’t credible enough to ground a successful objection to the Enriched Strokes Account.

The upshot of the last few paragraphs is that, while Premise 1 may be true of the “happy temperament” case, Premise 2 isn’t. And yet there does seem to be a kernel of truth in many such “constitutive luck” claims. Let me offer a pair of complementary error theories for such claims.

To begin to see the first error theory, consider the important distinction between luck and fortune. Whereas an event is (un)lucky only if it’s properly related to a stroke of luck, you can be (un)fortunate relative to an event even if there are no strokes of luck in its vicinity. Rescher helpfully draws the luck/fortune distinction in these passages:

You are fortunate if something good happens to or for you in the natural course of things. But you are lucky when such a benefit comes to you despite its being chancy. . . . Fate and fortune relate to the conditions and circumstances of our lives generally, luck to the specifically chancy goods and evils that befall us. Our innate skills and talents are matters of good fortune; the opportunities that chance brings our way to help us develop them are for the most part matters of luck. . . .

The positive and negative things that come one’s way in the world’s ordinary course—including one’s heritage (biological, medical, social, economic), one’s abilities and talents, the circumstances of one’s place and time (be they peaceful or chaotic, for example)—all these are matters of what might be characterized as fate and fortune. People are not unlucky to be born timid or ill-tempered, just unfortunate. But the positivities and negativities that come one’s way by chance and unforeseen happenstance . . . are matters of luck. (Rescher 1995, 28–29)

Despite the fact that luck and fortune can be so distinguished on reflection, they are also (and obviously) closely related—for example, like (un)lucky events, (un)fortunate events must be good (bad) for you, and also in some sense “uncontrolled.” Given the close similarity between luck and fortune, we shouldn’t be too surprised to find theorists sometimes

42 Morris 1986 is a “contemporary classic” in defense of this possibility.
43 Notably, Levy (2011, 30) concedes the plausibility of the claim that one isn’t lucky relative to properties one exemplifies necessarily or essentially.
running them together. With the luck/fortune distinction in hand, then, we can plausibly conjecture that Levy has confused these notions in claiming that S is *lucky* to have an exceptionally happy temperament. What’s true is that S is (merely) *fortunate* to have his exceptionally happy temperament—S has been “blessed with” such a temperament.

A second error theory for Levy’s judgment about the temperament case invokes the familiar distinction between (a) an assertive utterance’s having true propositional content and (b) the utterance’s conveying some or other true proposition(s) similar to its actual propositional content. We can imagine circumstances in which assertively uttering a sentence of the form “S is lucky to have his exceptionally happy temperament” conveys one or another of a range of similar (to the utterance’s actual content) truths more effectively than would a counterpart utterance that replaces “lucky” with “fortunate.” Such conveyed truths might include any of the following:

- *In anyone’s mouth*: S hasn’t done anything to earn (deserve, merit) such a temperament.
- *In S’s mouth*: S is grateful to have such a temperament; S recognizes that many people fail to enjoy such a temperament through no fault of their own.
- *In someone else’s mouth*: S should be grateful to have such a temperament; S should recognize that many people fail to enjoy such a temperament through no fault of their own.

Since assertive utterances of sentences of the form “S is lucky to have his exceptionally happy temperament” can very effectively convey any of the above (and, in all likelihood, various other) kinds of truths, it’s quite understandable how one could end up thinking that the actual propositional content of such an utterance is true—even if, as I’ve suggested, the proposition such an utterance strictly expresses is false. Perhaps Levy’s (and others’) sense that such an utterance’s actual propositional content is true stems from conflating that content with some or other similar truth(s) conveyed or implicated—though not strictly expressed—by the utterance.44

This concludes my defense of the Enriched Strokes Account from the challenging objection discussed over the past several paragraphs. In the next section, I draw things to a close by revisiting our earlier counterexamples to the literature’s leading theories of luck to show that the Enriched Strokes Account can properly handle all of them.

44 Similar points can be applied to paradigm ascriptions of “circumstantial luck” (cf. Nagel 1976)—for example, “lucky to have been outside Germany when the Nazis came to power,” “lucky to have such a wonderful family,” and so on. For a complementary perspective on such ascriptions of luck that also takes into account fascinating recent psychological work on luck ascriptions, see Pritchard and Smith 2004, especially pp. 12 and 24.
7. The Enriched Strokes Account and the Counterexamples to the Leading Theories

There are six cases to discuss here; I’ll take them in order of appearance. First, *Buried Treasure*, which shows that condition (ii) of the Modal and Mixed Accounts isn’t required for an event’s being lucky for an agent. The Enriched Strokes Account vindicates the intuitive claim that Vincent’s lucky discovery was due primarily to a stroke of good luck for him—viz., his forming an intention whose execution was counterfactually sufficient for discovering the treasure (that is, an intention such that he would discover the treasure were he to execute it). The Analysis implies that Vincent’s forming such an intention was a stroke of good luck for him: forming such an intention was good for Vincent; it wasn’t something he did intentionally; and—we can safely suppose—it doesn’t happen around the relevant time in a wide class of worlds close to the actual world just beforehand (more on this claim in a moment). Further, since Vincent’s forming such an intention is clearly a primary contributor to his subsequent discovery (which, obviously, is in some respect good for him), the Strokes Account implies that his discovery is itself lucky. The Enriched Strokes Account can deliver the correct verdict on *Buried Treasure*.

**Pointed question:** How is it “safe” to suppose that, in a wide class of worlds close to the actual world before Vincent makes the relevant choice, he doesn’t so choose around then? Here, it’s essential to keep in mind that Lackey (2008, 261–62) offers *Buried Treasure* as a clear counterexample to the alleged necessity of the Modal (and Mixed) Account’s condition (ii) for an event’s being lucky, and that I’m accepting the case as such. Obviously, if *Buried Treasure* is to have any chance of achieving Lackey’s aim, it must elicit from us a sufficiently strong sense that Vincent’s discovery is lucky. Charity thus demands that we (try to) interpret *Buried Treasure* so that it elicits such a sense from us. Now, consider a reading of Lackey’s example in which antecedent factors—personal and/or impersonal—align so as to make Vincent’s choice (as opposed to the later discovery) appear around the time he actually makes it in the vast majority of worlds close to the actual world just beforehand. I submit that, once we’re forced to so interpret the case, whatever sense we may initially have had that Vincent’s treasure find was lucky will start to evaporate—the discovery will instead start seeming “fated.” I read the following portion of Lackey’s commentary on *Buried Treasure* as an attempt to forestall precisely the sort of interpretation now under consideration: “Counterfactual robustness [of

45 Note that I’m not claiming that Vincent didn’t intentionally choose to plant roses in his mother’s memory on the northwest part of the island. Rather, my claim here is just that Vincent didn’t intentionally form an intention possessed of the relevant counterfactual property—viz., being such that he’d find buried treasure were he to execute it.
Vincent’s discovery is ensured in buried treasure through absolutely no deliberate intervention of any sort; instead, circumstances just happen to fortuitously combine in such a way so as to make Vincent’s discovery appear both in the actual world and in all of the relevant nearby worlds. Indeed, it is precisely because of this fortuitous combination of circumstances that the discovery of the buried treasure is so clearly a lucky event” (Lackey 2008, 263). We should assume, then, that there are no antecedent factors aligning so as to make Vincent’s choice appear around the time he actually makes it in the vast majority of worlds close to the actual world just beforehand. And this means that we can indeed safely suppose that Vincent’s choice doesn’t happen around the relevant time in at least a wide class of relevant worlds.

Next, the Oxfam donation case, which refutes the Modal Account’s right-to-left conditional. Since choosing to make the donation is something you did intentionally, the Analysis entails that your choice to donate wasn’t itself a stroke of good luck for you. Moreover, the case is naturally understood so that your choice wasn’t due primarily to some other stroke of good luck for you. Unlike the Modal Account, then, the Enriched Strokes Account delivers the correct verdict that your choosing to donate was not lucky for you.

On to African Expedition, which also shows that (ii) of the Modal and Mixed Accounts isn’t required for an event’s being lucky for an agent. The Enriched Strokes Account honors Riggs’s suggestion (2009, 217) that visiting the pertinent area during a period when there would be a life-saving eclipse was lucky for Smith, but not for Jones. Smith visited that area during a period when there would be a life-saving eclipse primarily because he’d earlier become constrained to visit the area during the indicated period. The Analysis implies that Smith’s becoming constrained to visit the area during that period was a stroke of good luck for him: his becoming so constrained was clearly good for him; it wasn’t something he did intentionally; and, we can safely suppose, it doesn’t happen around the relevant time in a wide class of worlds close to the actual world just beforehand. Therefore, since Smith’s visiting the area during a period when there would be a life-saving eclipse was clearly good for him, the Enriched Strokes Account implies correctly that Smith’s visiting the area during a period when there would be a life-saving eclipse was lucky for him. Note, finally, that the Enriched Strokes Account also implies correctly that Jones wasn’t lucky to visit the area.

46 In line with the recent discussion of Buried Treasure, it’s worth noting that if we interpret African Expedition in such a way that antecedent factors aligned so as to guarantee that Smith would become so constrained around the relevant time, then whatever sense we may initially have had that Smith was lucky to visit the area during a period when there would be a life-saving eclipse will start evaporating—his visiting the area then will start seeming fated.
during such a period, for the case harbors no strokes of good luck for him.47

We finish with three relatively “easy” examples: Katelyn and her solar-powered underground facility, *Kidnapping*, and *Distracted Driver*. The first of these examples refutes Riggs’s Control Account’s right-to-left conditional. The Enriched Strokes Account, by contrast, correctly implies that the sun’s rising on the morning in question wasn’t lucky for Katelyn. The Analysis entails that the sunrise wasn’t itself a stroke of luck for Katelyn: it was too objectively likely to meet condition (2). And the case is naturally understood so that the sunrise wasn’t due primarily to some other stroke of luck for Katelyn. Unlike the Control Account, then, the Enriched Strokes Account issues the correct verdict that the sun’s rising on the morning in question was not lucky for Katelyn.

*Kidnapping*, recall, shows that an event can be lucky for you even if you successfully exploit the event for some purpose—and so, that the Control Account’s condition (ii) isn’t required for an event’s being lucky for a subject. The Enriched Strokes Account, by contrast, entails that my lottery win in this case was a stroke of good luck for me, despite the fact that I exploited it for some purpose (viz., to get Zach back): the win was good for me; it wasn’t something I did intentionally; and it doesn’t happen around the relevant time in a wide class of worlds close to the actual world just beforehand. Finally, as for *Distracted Driver*—which shows that condition (iii) of the Control and Mixed Accounts isn’t necessary for an event’s being lucky for an agent—I’ve already argued that the Enriched Strokes Account issues the correct verdicts on this case (section 6): despite being something I brought about intentionally, Evan’s eventual safety was lucky for me; for his eventual safety was due primarily to my becoming positioned to save him, which was itself a stroke of good luck for me.

This completes my argument that the Enriched Strokes Account can properly handle all the cases that make trouble for the literature’s leading theories of luck. We therefore have strong reason to think that (what I earlier dubbed) Lackey’s Inference is indeed hasty. We can (and should) agree with Lackey that cases like *Buried Treasure* and *Distracted Driver* show that conditions (ii) and (iii) of the Mixed Account are unnecessary for an event’s being lucky for a subject. But I’ve now presented a strong cumulative case for the Enriched Strokes Account, which—while consistent with Lackey-type counterexamples to the leading theories of lucky events—entails that conditions (ii) and (iii) are nevertheless (in Lackey’s words) “distinctive of, and central to, the concept of luck.” For, according

47 Wasn’t Smith’s becoming so constrained also a stroke of luck for Jones? No, for Smith’s *becoming* so constrained wasn’t in any way good for Jones (at that point, recall, Smith hadn’t yet invited Jones on the trip). True, Smith’s *being* so constrained when issuing his invitation was good for Jones. But since there was just beforehand no chance that Smith wouldn’t be so constrained then, Smith’s *being* so constrained was not a stroke of good luck for anyone.
to the Enriched Strokes Account, (ii) and (iii) are requirements on an event’s being a stroke of luck, a notion on which the concept lucky event is parasitic.

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