Luck and interests

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Abstract Recent work on the nature of luck widely endorses the thesis that an event is good or bad luck for an individual only if it is *significant* for that individual. In this paper, I explore this thesis, showing that it raises questions about interests, well-being, and the philosophical uses of luck. In Sect. 1, I examine several accounts of significance, due to Pritchard (2005), Coffman (2007), and Rescher (1995). Then in Sect. 2 I consider what some theorists want to 'do' with luck, taking important examples from epistemology (explaining Gettier-style examples) and political philosophy (offering a rationale for the just distribution of resources in society), while suggesting implications for significance. Drawing together lessons from Sects. 1 and 2, I develop a new account of significance in Sect. 3 before concluding with reflections on the debate in Sect. 4.

Keywords Luck · Interests · Well-being · Anti-luck epistemology · Luck egalitarianism

Work on the nature of luck offers potential lessons for discussions of epistemology, free will, ethics, and distributive justice. Recent work on luck has centered on proposed necessary conditions for an event to count as lucky for an individual (see Lackey (2008), Coffman (2007, 2009), Riggs (2007, 2009), Levy (2009), Pritchard (2005), Steglich-Peterson (forthcoming), and Latus (2003)). Here, I'll discuss one such condition: event E is lucky for individual X only if E is somehow significant for X.

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Everyone agrees that luck requires significance, but there is conflict over how to understand it. Significance is thought to make the difference between a merely unlikely event and a lucky one. An unlikely landslide that didn't affect anyone, for example, isn't lucky because it is significant for no one.[1] All agree that for an event to be significant for someone, she must have *interests*. A lucky event somehow benefits the individual while an unlucky one brings detriment. The consensus just is, at bottom, that if an event is lucky for an individual, then it's somehow *good for* or *bad for* her.

And then agreement runs dry—those working on luck have pursued conflicting ways to understand significance. According to Pritchard (2005), an event is lucky for an individual only if she would ascribe significance to that event were she apprised of the relevant facts about it. Rescher (1995) and Coffman (2007) claim that whether an event is lucky depends on its objectively positive or negative effects upon an individual's mental states. Both of these accounts rely on controversial theses about value.

Here is the plan for the paper. I shall argue that the existing accounts of luck's significance are unsatisfying. A large part of the trouble is that the standard accounts neglect a particular class of interests that has a venerable history in moral theory. Once we allow in these other interests, alternative approaches become plausible. In Sect. 1, I will examine several accounts of significance in light of various examples, while distinguishing between two kinds of interests an individual may have. Then in Sect. 2 I'll consider what some theorists want to 'do' with luck—for instance, they use luck to characterize what goes on in Gettier-style examples or to offer a rationale for the just distribution of resources in society—while suggesting implications for significance. I will develop a new account in Sect. 3 before concluding with some general reflections on the debate over significance in Sect. 4.

The kind of significance necessary for luck has considerable implications for our overall understanding of luck and its philosophical applications. As we proceed, we'll discover that accounts of significance quite naturally fall out of divergent thoughts on interests, well-being, and the theoretical uses of luck.

Before I continue, here are four assumptions that guide recent discussion of luck. (*a*) Luck comes in good and bad varieties. Often, though, I'll use the term 'luck' as shorthand for either 'good or bad luck'.[2] (*b*) Luck involves a *relation* between an individual and an event (or fact or obtaining state of affairs). Whenever there is an instance of luck, an event is lucky *for* an individual or individuals; and one event could be good luck for one individual and bad luck for another. (*c*) Luck comes in degrees.[3] The degree of a stroke of luck, its relative 'luckiness', depends on various features of the event and the lucky individual. For example, the likelihood of the event matters: winning a fair lottery with one thousand tickets is lucky; but winning a one-million-ticket lottery is *luckier*. The relative worth of the event's effects also matters: for most of us,

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[1] Pritchard (2005, p. 132). Rescher writes that "[i]t is only because we have interests—because things can affect us for better or for worse—that luck enters in. A person is not ordinarily lucky to encounter pigeons in the park or to see a cloud floating overhead, since such things do not normally affect one's well-being. (It would be different if one had a bet on the matter.)" (1995, p. 32)

[2] Sometimes, 'luck' is used in a value-neutral sense ("If it weren't for my bad luck, I'd have no *luck* at all"), without implying an event is good or bad. See Riggs (2007, p. 334).

[3] Pritchard (2005, p. 142, n 11) and Riggs (2007, p. 334).

winning several million toothpicks wouldn't be as lucky as winning several million dollars. (*d*) Both individuals and groups may be lucky. I'll assume that 'group luck' is reducible to, or explicable in terms of, 'individual luck'.[4]

[1] Luck requires significance and significance, in turn, requires interests. So, what's lucky for someone depends on what's good or bad for her. A touch more specifically, an event is significant for an individual only if she has an interest that's impacted by that event. Beyond that, there is substantial disagreement over significance. This conflict won't be surprising once we see how significance 'rides piggyback' on disputed questions about interests.

Pritchard (2005, pp. 132–133) has given us one influential account of luck's significance, with endorsement from Riggs (2007):

L1   Individual X is lucky with respect to event E only if (*i*) X is capable of ascribing significance to E and (*ii*) X would do so were X apprised of the properties of E in virtue of which E has a positive or negative effect on X.[5]

L1 is roughly similar to "informed desire" accounts of interests, according to which someone's interests are just what a fully informed and rational version of herself would want. Here is an alternative account of significance, advanced by Rescher (1995, p. 32) and Coffman (2007, p. 388):

L2   Individual X is lucky with respect to E only if (*i*) X is sentient and (*ii*) E has some objectively positive or negative effect on the mental states of X.

And you'll notice that L2 is reminiscent of "mental state" theories of well-being. On such views, what affects well-being is only what enters experience.[6]

I shall dig into L2 first by raising a potential problem: sentient individuals can be lucky when it isn't *sentience* that makes an event significant for them. Then I'll return to L1 and apply some of what we've learned. An example:

> WILSON'S BRAIN. A group of rogue neuroscientists have Wilson's name and address, among thousands of others, in their database of "involuntary research subjects". For tonight's operation, they've randomly picked Wilson. The group kidnaps Wilson while he is sleeping at home and transports him unawares to their laboratory. Once in their care, the scientists extract Wilson's brain, plop it in a vat of nutrients, and use a computer to present him with experiences in concord with his earlier life. Poor Wilson can't discern any difference between his pre-surgery experiences and those stimulated in the laboratory. He doesn't suspect that his present experiences are unconnected with the real world.

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[4] Coffman (2007, p. 386).

[5] L1 follows the paraphrase of Pritchard's (L2) due to Coffman (2007, p. 386). I'm unsure what it is for someone to *ascribe significance to* an event or to be *apprised of* certain properties. Perhaps these two involve forming judgments or beliefs, but I'll assume nothing substantive about these notions. The modality of "capable" is briefly discussed below.

[6] In fairness, Coffman's account, unlike Rescher's, can be read as allowing E to affect X *without* thereby having an effect on X's mental states. But then it's less than obvious why (*i*) is required: why must X be sentient if it's not X's mental states that are affected by E?

Wilson undoubtedly suffers bad luck at the hands of these reprehensible scientists. The event in question has negative effects for him. For one, his relationships and goals in the real world come to a close. For another, he loses his body.

It is notable that WILSON'S BRAIN flags a difference between L1 and L2. The example brings no difficulty for L1, as Wilson is capable of ascribing significance to the kidnapping and (we may suppose) he would do so were he apprised of the facts. On the other hand, L2 can't explain why this example involves luck.

The example challenges L2 doubly. First, Rescher and Coffman appear to take the "objectively negative" effects of unlucky events as affecting individuals' *interior lives*; unlucky events induce suffering, sorrow, anguish or somehow downgrade a better state. (Similar remarks apply to their understanding of "objectively positive" effects.) We may envision, however, that Wilson's experiences in the laboratory go exactly as his experiences would have gone if he hadn't been kidnapped: his interior life isn't at all harmed or hampered by the unlucky event.[7] So, the approach to significance in L2 does not imply that the kidnapping event is unlucky for Wilson. Second, Rescher and Coffman appear to make a false assumption: that the good or bad effects in virtue of which an event is lucky must have some discernable impact on the individual's interior life—in brief, such effects "leave a trace".[8] But WILSON'S BRAIN undermines that assumption, for the effects of the kidnapping event leave no trace on Wilson's interior life.

Another point raised by WILSON'S BRAIN is that facts about luck don't always 'track' facts about individuals' interior lives. An example will show why. Imagine that Rex suffers from anorexia nervosa.[9] He doesn't want to gain weight and so desires to forgo eating. By an unlikely accident, Rex's water faucet is connected to a tank filled with nutritional supplement. Rex drinks the water-like supplement and so maintains a healthy body weight, despite concerted efforts otherwise. A natural reaction is that Rex enjoys good luck.[10]

What makes Rex lucky? It's not that his *desires* are satisfied—they're frustrated. (We can even suppose that Rex doesn't desire to continue living unless he loses weight.) Quite plausibly, he is lucky with respect to the supplement-tank-to-faucet event because his *needs* are satisfied.

Let me say what I mean by 'desires' and 'needs'. Suppose that nutrition is something you need, but it is also something you might desire. It's useful to distinguish between two kinds of interests here. The first kind is *subjective interests*. These interests require someone to form, or be disposed to form, a mental state, such as a desire or preference or liking or consciously adopted goal. Subjective interests contrast with *objective interests*. Included here are interests that depend on particular natural and

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[7] Coffman and Rescher apparently think of mental states as states that affect an individual's interior life. But if mental contents are taken more broadly, the difficulties I've mentioned can be avoided. Suppose envatted Wilson has mental states whose contents are different from those of unenvatted Wilson. Then envatted Wilson is unlucky, though for reasons having to do with the broad contents of his mental states.

[8] Thanks to E.J. Coffman for this second idea.

[9] Chris Freiman suggested an example like this one to me.

[10] Perhaps Rex also enjoys bad luck, given that his desires are frustrated. Nevertheless, there is also a clear sense in which he has good luck. In Sect. 3, I'll discuss cases of "mixed luck".

biological facts, which concern health or goal-directed activity. Interests like that are sometimes thought to be found in all creatures, great and small—from sunflowers to lemurs to elephants—which undergo metabolism, grow, respond to stimuli, reproduce, and adapt to environments. Critically, many take objective biological interests to be compatible with contemporary biological and evolutionary sciences: such interests needn't be spooky or old-time Aristotelian (see Foot (2001, Chap. 2) and Varner (1998, Chap. 3)). And objective interests, as I'm thinking of them here, may also include the kind of items posited by "objective list theories" of well-being (see Hurka (1993)). Items on objective lists, like friendship and knowledge and freedom, consist neither in mere desire-satisfaction nor pleasurable experience.[11]

So: you may have an interest in (i.e., need) nutrition, and you might also take an interest in (i.e., desire) nutrition. But objective and subjective interests can be torn asunder, just as they are in Rex's case: someone can have an interest (objective) in something even though he never takes an interest (subjective) in it, and vice versa. Another way to see the distinction: eating unhealthy food might *feel* good and someone might desire it, but we'll nevertheless judge that it is bad for her. Someone can take an interest (subjective) when she doesn't have an interest (objective) in it.[12]

Returning to WILSON'S BRAIN, we now have an attractive way to describe the problem with L2. Why not just say that while the kidnapping leaves Wilson's subjective interests untouched, his objective interests are affected? On such a view, L2 mistakenly ties luck-facts to only one sort of interest and thus comes up short: facts about luck may not track facts about individuals' mental states. A lucky event can advance or frustrate either subjective *or* objective interests, but L2 ignores the latter possibility. In fairness to Rescher and Coffman, L2 was designed with an eye on subjective interests alone. Witness Rescher:

> 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?" (1995, p. 8)[13]

Yet if we think there are objective interests, those might be one place to look for a better account of luck's significance. For now, hold that thought and consider Pritchard's L1.

After exploring L2 and the two kinds of interests, we're able to see that L1 is not committed to any particular account of interests. L1 has it that lucky individuals must

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[11] Depending on one's thoughts regarding biology and well-being, say, the objective interests one recognizes will vary. Someone might even think that plants can have luck.

[12] Observers of debates in ethics and environmental ethics know well that the above distinction between needs and desires is contested. Disputes in environmental ethics, for example, sometimes turn to the question of whether entities like plants and non-sentient animals (insects and micro-organisms) can have interests. Feinberg (1974), among others, contends that having an interest requires some "cognitive awareness". By his count, trees and amoebas don't have interests. On the other hand, Varner (1998) and O'Neill (1992) say that interests are shared by all living things. The difference between these positions? Some identify interests with (something like) desires or preferences; others think interests involve needs.

[13] Rescher appears to think that both pain and pleasure are relevant to how things go for an individual, despite his emphasis on suffering here. The questions ("'Can they reason?' but 'Can they suffer?'") allude to a well-known passage from Bentham.

have special capacities: they can be apprised of facts and ascribe significance to events. By itself, this says nothing about interests. Suppose someone possesses those critical capacities and some event has a positive or negative effect on her. That effect may impact upon her subjective interests, objective interests, or both. Thus, L1 is at least compatible with a case of luck where an individual's objective interests are at issue.

If there are objective interests, there's trouble for L1: it doesn't capture every case of luck featuring an individual with objective interests. There are lucky individuals that have such interests but lack the capacities mandated by L1.[14]

> NEWBORN. McElroy is pulling his new baby brother around the neighbourhood in a wagon. McElroy lets go of the wagon's handle and the wagon rolls away, gaining speed as it continues downhill toward a busy intersection. At the moment oncoming traffic stops for a red light, the wagon zooms through the intersection and safely comes to a stop on the other side.

The unlikely event that saves this child is surely lucky for the newborn. L1 doesn't capture that result, though, for presumably newborns are unable to be apprised of facts or ascribe significance to events like this one. (What would it mean for a newborn to do that?) Try another example:

> IMPAIRED. Brown works at a fruit juice company's warehouse. An overpressurized barrel of juice concentrate explodes and she is instantly knocked out. The event leaves Brown with severe head trauma: she isn't now capable of ascribing significance to events.

Brown is clearly unlucky and L1 has difficulty explaining why. As with NEWBORN, we have a lucky individual who's unable to ascribe significance to the relevant event. (It's worth commenting on a term employed in these two examples. Both the newborn and Brown are *unable* to ascribe significance to the relevant events. Since the meaning of possibility terms like 'unable' and its cohorts can be difficult to pin down, it will help to say what I do *not* mean by 'unable' here. Suppose that Buxtehude, that master of 17th century North German polyphony, is snoozing. It is true to say—in some sense of 'able'—that Buxtehude is able to play the pipe organ. In the above examples, I don't use *that* sense of the possibility term. Although Pritchard doesn't settle the matter, I read L1 in such a way that "X is capable of ascribing significance to E" involves something like the sense of 'able' we use when talking about Buxtehude, not the newborn or poor Brown.) Another example:

> ANTS. An ant has collected a bread crumb on a picnic table. With the food in its mandibles, the ant is dutifully returning to the colony. On a nearby baseball field, McCoy is at bat and swings hard. *"Foul ball!"* A fluke gust of wind blows the ball toward the table, flattening the ant. Later on, a second foraging ant grabs another crumb on the table. Nearby, a park employee is hosing down tables. If the employee isn't delayed, the water will certainly drown the ant. Just as the ant is about to be doused, McCoy hits another ball foul, which lands near the

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[14] See Coffman (2007, p. 387) and Rescher (1995, pp. 7–8).

employee: he reluctantly stops spraying, picks up the ball and throws it back, while the ant continues to the colony unharmed.

Luck plausibly strikes here twice, though I know mileage varies. Some people, but not all, will think the first ant has bad luck while the second has good luck. Of course, ants can't be apprised of facts or ascribe significance to facts. L1 therefore fails to explain how newborns, ants, or cognitively impaired juice factory workers can be lucky.

So far I've argued that L1 and L2 have trouble handling particular examples. One way to make sense of the examples is to summon objective interests. But can the presence of luck in these cases be explained some other way? I've suggested that luck-facts don't always track facts about lucky individuals' interior lives, but that doesn't entail that luck-facts sometimes track facts about objective interests. There may be an alternative explanation.

A potential explanation is that infants, ants, and company are lucky only because there's someone, like you or me, who can ascribe significance to the lucky events and would do so if apprised of particular facts. Without bystanders like us to consider those events as significant, so goes this explanation, individuals like them can't be lucky (see Rescher (1995, pp. 7–8)). This thought suggests a modification for L1:

L3   Individual X is lucky with respect to event E only if (*i*) there is a (possibly distinct) individual X* who is capable of ascribing significance to E and (*ii*) X* would do so were X* apprised of the properties of E in virtue of which E has a positive or negative effect on X.

This account of significance won't do. Pretend, for example, that McElroy's baby brother hurtles through the intersection to safety and, just then, everyone capable of ascribing significance is annihilated by the Doomsday Machine.[15] L3 yields the wrong result by failing to count the infant as lucky.

A second explanation is that creatures like newborns and their ilk are lucky only if some suitably reflective bystander—if there were one—*would* ascribe significance to particular events. Thus:

L4   Individual X is lucky with respect to event E only if (*i*) were there a (possibly distinct) individual X* capable of ascribing significance to E and (*ii*) were X* apprised of the properties of E in virtue of which E has a positive or negative effect on X, then X* would ascribe significance to E.

L4 bears a likeness to "ideal observer" theories in metaethics. Moral truth, according to these theories, is "constructed" or determined by the positions that subjects would take from a rational and dispassionate standpoint. According to L4, it is not ants or newborns that would ascribe significance to some particular event. They can't. Their luck depends on someone, or something, else altogether.

Perhaps this approach shows promise. Arguably anyway, L4 captures the above examples of luck. That is, someone might claim that, given L4, were there some individual, X*, capable of ascribing significance to the events in the examples and were X* apprised of the relevant properties of those events, then X* would ascribe significance to them.

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[15] Cf. Coffman (2007, p. 388).

Be mindful of L4 as we proceed, then. One question for accounts of luck's significance is whether examples like NEWBORN, IMPAIRED, et al. can be explained without appealing to objective interests. If something along the lines of L4 is unsatisfying, we'll be pressed at least sometimes to account for significance with objective interests. The upshot of the arguments in Sect. 2 is that L4 isn't satisfying, given what some philosophers want to 'do' with luck. I will conclude in Sect. 3 by developing an account of significance that gives objective interests a role.

[2] Recent work on luck's nature is a "spinoff" from discussions of epistemology, free will, ethics, and distributive justice. In those discussions, luck appears to play a key role. And so the task of clarifying luck is thought to illuminate the issues—to say nothing of being interesting in its own right.

With theorists now arguing over accounts of luck's nature—see Lackey (2008), Coffman (2007, 2009), Riggs (2007, 2009), Levy (2009), Steglich-Peterson (forthcoming), among others—it is worth revisiting the original issues. In small measure, I shall attempt that here. First, I will argue that an account of significance that admits only subjective interests fits poorly with the idea that Gettier-style examples involve a belief that's "true by luck". Then I'll explore questions about whether luck is to be understood 'realistically'. These questions hold implications for "anti-luck" epistemology and "luck egalitarianism" as well as overall accounts of luck. Finally, I will offer a challenge for accounts of significance that invoke bystanders or "ideal observers".

Let's recollect a classic Gettier-style example, due to Roderick Chisholm (1966, p. 23, fn 22):

> SHEEP DOG. While gazing over a field, you see what looks to be a sheep. You come to believe there is a sheep in the field. And you're right: just beyond a hill in the middle of the field, there's a sheep. It's out of view, though, and you have no idea it is there. What you see is a dog, convincingly dressed up as a sheep. You have a justified true belief that there is a sheep in the field. But does that belief count as knowledge?

Conventional wisdom says that you don't know a sheep is in the field, because your belief is "true by luck". And it came to pass that epistemologists received their slogan: "knowledge excludes luck". (See Riggs (2007), Pritchard (2005) and Engel (1992).)

What does it mean for a belief to be "true by luck"? At least this. Events are lucky for individuals and the relevant event in SHEEP DOG is *having a true belief that a sheep is in the field*. That event, so it must be, is lucky for you. Recall that luck requires significance and that, in turn, requires interests. Thus, having a true belief must be somehow significant for you. Ears should perk up here. What if you fail to have an appropriate interest? Isn't it possible the event of having a true belief about a sheep is neither good nor bad for you?

Indeed. If there are only subjective interests, SHEEP DOG may not feature a belief that's "true by luck". Maybe you're somewhat apathetic: you don't desire or prefer true (or false) beliefs regarding sheep in fields. Maybe such beliefs are trivial, you opine, and you don't prefer them turning out either way. Then there is no way to explain how

having a true belief about a sheep is lucky for you. Your belief is true, to be sure, but not "true by luck".

Calling on L4 won't obviously help. Even if there were someone capable of ascribing significance to the event of your having a true belief, this subject would need to be apprised of the positive or negative effects of the event on you. And what are those? That appears to depend on what you think about interests. Suppose you accept an "informed desire" account of interests: your interests depend on what a rational and informed version of yourself would desire. Though we've assumed you actually lack a relevant desire or preference, an idealized you may desire true beliefs regarding sheep in fields.[16] The trouble here, briefly, is that adding rationality and information doesn't *guarantee* you'll have an interest in the relevant true belief. Why think that the idealized you must care? Presumably, you could be fully rational and informed while failing to desire true beliefs regarding sheep in fields.

So: I expect that at least some epistemologists will insist that Gettier-style examples always involve luck. Proponents of an "anti-luck" epistemology—more on this momentarily—will want to say that. They may insist that the restrictive assumption about subjective interests must go: in SHEEP DOG, you always have an objective interest in having a true belief that a sheep is in the field, even though you fail to desire as much. Insofar as luck plays an essential role in Gettier-style examples, there's reason to appeal to objective interests when accounting for luck.[17]

Let's move to a further issue. Imagine a disagreement over whether an event is lucky for some individual. Surely two people, each apprised of the relevant facts, can conflict over whether to ascribe significance to an event.[18] One person thinks the event is significant for an individual; the other demurs. Who's right here? Is the event lucky or not?

The possibility of a disagreement like this raises a question. Can it be adjudicated? Perhaps there is a fact or facts that we may appeal to in order to show who's right. Or perhaps a dispute about luck is more like, say, a dispute over which flavour of ice cream tastes better than the rest. More carefully, here are the two options:

Realism: Truths about luck obtain independently of any subject's standpoint in the sense that luck-facts don't obtain by virtue of an ascription of significance by an actual or possible subject. Roughly, a subject actually or counterfactually ascribing significance to an event isn't what determines the truth about luck.

Constructivism: Truths about luck depend upon a subject's standpoint in the sense that luck-facts obtain only in virtue of an ascription of significance by an actual or possible subject. Roughly, a subject actually or counterfactually ascribing significance to an event is what determines the truth about luck.

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[16] A more subtle version of this theory: interests are determined by what an ideal version of yourself would want for your actual self. What I say applies to this subtler theory.

[17] For more discussion along these lines, see Ballantyne (manuscript).

[18] Pritchard and Smith (2004, Sect. 2) review work from psychology that shows "reliable individual differences exist with respect to beliefs about luck." Such individual differences make for disputes about luck, of course. Alex Skiles reminded me that reasonable disagreements about whether an event E is lucky often turn on how *likely* E is, not on whether E is *significant*. Even so, there may be reasonable disputes over E's significance; see Pritchard (2005, p. 144) for one example.

Within the discussion over luck's nature, both Realism and Constructivism find supporters. Pritchard notes that his account implies that luck is "in the eye of the beholder" (2005, p. 143). As we found with Pritchard's L1, an event is lucky for someone just if she would ascribe significance to that event were she apprised of the relevant facts. So, if she wouldn't find the event significant when apprised of the facts, it isn't lucky. Pritchard thus affirms Constructivism about luck.[19] Rescher and Coffman, on the other hand, plump for Realism with L2: whether an event is lucky or not, they say, depends on its objectively positive or negative effects upon an individual's mental states.[20] Even if the individual would (or does) fail to find an event significant, it may be lucky nonetheless.

Keeping at hand the distinction between Realism and Constructivism, let us consider L4 and the disagreement over some event's significance. Suppose, for starters, that the proponent of L4 accepts Constructivism—truths about luck depend on a subject's standpoint. Suppose also that there is a dispute between two subjects: one says an event E is lucky for individual X while the other demurs. Then it follows from Constructivism that, relative to one subject, E is lucky for X and, relative to the other, E isn't lucky for X. Thus, L4 together with Constructivism appears to collapse into what we might call *Relativism* about luck, namely, that relative to different subjects' standpoints, E can be both lucky and not lucky for the very same individual.[21]

Does that sound strange? Expected luck to be more than that? Strangeness and failed expectations aside, I will make two points about this result. First: though the proponent of L4 may embrace Relativism, it may be worth resisting, for luck is often employed for philosophical purposes that demand more. I'll illustrate the point with an example from epistemology and one from political philosophy. Second: Relativism may not allow L4 to account for the earlier examples.

Epistemologists like Pritchard (2005), Riggs (2007, 2009), Becker (2008) and Engel (1992), among others, begin with the truism that "knowledge excludes luck" and then develop "anti-luck" epistemologies. Their shared strategy is to understand knowledge by way of saying something about luck, though their views of knowledge look quite different.[22] But if an anti-luck epistemology is based upon a relativistic account of luck's nature, what becomes of knowledge? Suppose that Red and Green have the same information about X's true belief that *p*—the circumstances in which X formed that belief, the external environment, and so on. Red thinks X's belief that *p* is true as a matter of luck (in the "Gettier-example" way); Green thinks X's belief, though true, isn't true by luck. Given Relativism about luck and supposing that knowledge excludes luck, does X count as knowing *p* relative to Red's ascription but not Green's

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[19] From the cover of Oprah Winfrey's *O Magazine* (February 2009): "How to Make Your Own Luck / Are You Open to Happiness and Success?" Winfrey may well accept something like Constructivism.

[20] See, especially, Coffman (2007, p. 387, fn 2).

[21] Note that L1 and L3, which prefigure L4, don't clearly imply Relativism when joined with Constructivism. On those earlier accounts, it is an ascription by *the subject of the lucky event* that matters, not an ascription by some other (possibly, non-actual) subject(s). But then it doesn't seem there could be reasonable disagreement over whether an event is significant: how could someone sensibly think that an event is both significant and demur (in the same sense)?

[22] See Pritchard (2007) for an overview of anti-luck epistemology.

ascription? It seems so. Relativism, then, may not comport well with an anti-luck epistemology.[23]

And there's more. Relativism plus anti-luck epistemology appears to imply the denial of a traditional epistemological thesis on which knowledge is "purely epistemic" and doesn't include any practical or pragmatic factors.[24] The thesis is that for any two possible subjects S and S*, if S and S* are alike with respect to the strength of their epistemic position regarding true proposition p, then S and S* are alike with respect to being in a position to know that p (see Fantl and McGrath (2007)). Let us suppose Blue is ascribing luck to subjects S and S*, both of whom have identical epistemic positions with respect to a true proposition p. Blue ascribes "Gettier-example" luck in S's case but fails to ascribe any luck in S*'s case. Then it seems that S and S* are not alike with respect to being in a position to know p, given that only S's belief is true in the lucky way that excludes knowledge. If that's so, a relativistic anti-luck epistemologist may need to deny the traditional thesis mentioned above.

Another example suggests why theorists may want to avoid Relativism. According to some political philosophers, picking up on themes from John Rawls (1971, pp. 74–75), luck figures centrally into questions of distribution and equality. Richard Arneson writes of this general position:

> The concern of distributive justice is to compensate individuals for misfortune. Some people are blessed with good luck; some are cursed with bad luck, and it is the responsibility of society—all of us regarded collectively—to alter the distribution of goods and evils that arises from the jumble of lotteries that constitutes human life as we know it… Distributive justice stipulates that the lucky should transfer some or all of their gains due to luck to the unlucky. (2008, p. 80)

So-called "luck egalitarians" may accept L4 and Relativism with it. But suppose there's sensible conflict about who is subject to good or bad luck with respect to abilities, circumstances and resources, and to what extent. One person may say that particular individuals are born with good luck; another may insist those same individuals have worked for what they have and so their goods aren't due to sheer luck. If, relative to different subjects' standpoints, an event can be both lucky and not lucky for an individual, or lucky to quite different degrees, will there be an objective fact about what justice requires? It seems not. Yet justice may need a firmer foundation.

There's a further point in all of this. L4 together with Relativism about luck doesn't clearly account for each of the above examples. The argument in Sect. 1 proceeded by testing particular accounts of luck's significance against examples of luck. But L4 plus Relativism may fail to deliver the correct assessments of whether those examples

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[23] Two notes. First: it may be that a contextualist "anti-luck" epistemologist like Heller (1999) will embrace Relativism; I'll leave discussion of that aside here. Second: a similar lesson applies to accounts of significance that imply Constructivism but stop short of Relativism. Suppose that truths about luck depend on a subject's standpoint and that two subjects both truly believe p. Then if the subjects were in similar circumstances and could sensibly take different views about whether p is true by luck, one might know p while the other doesn't.

[24] I explore the connections between anti-luck epistemologies and pragmatic encroachment more fully in Ballantyne (manuscript).

indeed feature luck. There could be, for instance, disagreement over NEWBORN, IMPAIRED, et al. Then it would be both true and false, relative to different subjects, that the events count as lucky. So, it isn't clear that L4 joined with Relativism captures the above examples in the sense that it delivers unambiguous results.

Even supposing that L4 accommodates those examples, it faces a serious challenge. Suppose that bystanders ("ideal observers") count particular events as significant for newborns, ants, and the like. We should ask how bystanders do that. Presumably, they won't count unlikely events as significant for *everything*. The domain of luck is limited, after all: no bystander counts the unlikely landslide as significant for a sliding rock. How then do the bystanders discriminate? How do they count certain events as significant for the right individuals? One possibility is that the bystanders can rely on the presence of objective interests. Rocks don't have interests, but newborns and their cronies arguably do. If that bunch lacked interests, how could the bystanders distinguish them from rocks? Maybe there is a good answer. Yet, if interests do indeed aid the bystanders' discrimination here, L4 is parasitic on the idea *that newborns and company have interests to begin with*. The activity of ascribing significance to events adds nothing new; bystanders seem to be parasitic on interests. So why give them a role in the first place?

We can continue to twist the knife by posing a Euthyphro-esque question. Is an event significant because bystanders ascribe it significance, or is it ascribed significance by bystanders because it is significant?[25] If bystanders ascribing significance to events is constitutive of significance, just as L4 has it, then presumably an event could be lucky for *anything*. For instance, bystanders could ascribe significance to the unlikely landslide for a tumbling rock. That has got to be wrong, however, and a reasonable assumption is that things like rocks are *never* lucky. Note well: such an assumption implies an objective fact or standard—something beyond the ascribing activity of bystanders—that constitutes significance. An assumption like that is inconsistent with L4.

To keep Relativism and the Euthyphro-esque problem at bay, the friend of L4 may prefer Realism. L4 might be coupled with the idea, found in L2, that there are *objective facts*—ones distinct from any subject's standpoint—that determine whether some event has an effect on the individual and is thereby significant. Revise L4:

L5   Individual X is lucky with respect to event E only if (*i*) were there a (possibly distinct) individual X* capable of ascribing significance to E and (*ii*) were X* apprised of the properties of E in virtue of which E has an objectively positive or negative effect on X, then X* would ascribe significance to E.

This won't satisfy. Notice first that X*—a bystander—begins to vanish as part of what is necessary for luck. The objective effects of E upon X obtain *independently of any subject's standpoint*. And since the effects of E on X are an objective, realistic matter, it is unclear whether requiring *that a bystander*—possibly a non-actual subject—*would ascribe significance to E* does any work over and above E's objective effects. There's a kind of redundancy here. Think about it like this: stipulate that E has

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[25] In Plato's *Euthyphro*, Socrates asks Euthyphro: "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?" (10a)

particular objective effects on X. And then add the following bit about the bystander: if X* exists, X* would ascribe significance to E on the basis of its objective effects. When it comes to determining whether E is lucky, what does a bystander accomplish that E's objective effects didn't already do? Nothing. As I noted earlier, bystanders are sometimes like parasites. And we all know what to do with parasites.

[3] Insofar as we think some individuals have interests, we'll think they can be lucky with respect to those interests. I will employ this idea in setting out a new account of the kind of significance necessary for luck. It is this:

L6   Individual X is lucky with respect to E only if (*i*) X has an interest N and (*ii*) E
       has some objectively positive or negative effect on N (in the sense that E is good
       for or bad for X).

I'll soon motivate L6, but some preliminary remarks are in order. What I mean by 'interest' is inclusive: both objective and subjective interests find a home. Subjective interests, you'll recall, are associated with mental states like desires, preferences, and consciously adopted goals. Objective interests are often tied to health or proper biological function; and they're the sorts of interests some people say we have in leading a life that includes knowledge or friendship. Even if we take no interest (subjective) in such things, we still have an interest (objective) in them.

An individual's interests may conflict. Suppose, for instance, that seven-year-old Tony hopes to become a horse racing jockey. Knowing that jockeys are of small stature, he desires to remain child-size. But height is strongly determined by genes, plus environmental factors like diet, and Tony's genes are such that, if he eats properly, he will clear six feet. It is an objective interest, let's say, for him to eat enough (and thereby to exceed child-size). Here, a subjective interest clashes with an objective one.

This point about conflicting interests has important consequences. For starters, when interests conflict, a single event can be both good *and* bad luck for one individual. It has been appreciated that an event may count as good luck for one individual and bad for another.[26] But, as L6 reveals, an event may be good luck relative to one interest and bad luck relative to another interest. Common talk of "mixed blessings" reflects this truth about luck. L6 helps us better understand cases of "mixed luck" by revealing that luck is more complicated than it may first appear and, notably, its competitors don't immediately explain how a single event can be different strokes of luck for an individual. Significance involves (at least) a three-part relation between a subject, an event, and an interest. When there are many and conflicting interests in play, one event may count as different strokes of (good or bad) luck for an individual.

When interests clash, how do we determine the nature and extent of the luck? In brief, the details of the example must be filled in to clarify which interest is the salient one for making the event a matter of (good or bad) luck. Let me illustrate the point. During an unlikely episode on the playground, Tony is exposed to nuclear fallout that stunts his physical and mental growth. We would deem this good luck with respect to

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[26] See, e.g., Rescher (1995, p. 20): "It was a matter of bad luck for the Spain of King Philip II when a storm scattered the Invincible Armada in the English Channel. But it was a matter of good luck for Queen Elizabeth's subjects."

his desire (to become a jockey) and bad luck with respect to various other subjective and objective interests of his. What we should think about the presence of luck—whether it is good or bad, and how much there is—depends on the details.

So much for preliminaries. Let us see how L6 makes sense of examples of luck. The unlikely landslide that didn't affect anyone is not lucky: L6 delivers the right result because no individual has any interest furthered or frustrated by the landslide. A range of lottery examples is also captured by L6. If Evelyn's desire is to retire early and become a philanthropist, a lottery win satisfies her desire and is thus *good* luck. Suppose that Jones has been threatened with death by a nefarious crime syndicate; if he buys the winning lottery ticket, he dies. Then a win would be decidedly *bad* luck, for Jones' desire to stay alive would be frustrated. Or suppose, for example, that you've purchased a ticket for a fundraising lottery at the University of Southern North Dakota at Hoople. You win and you're initially thrilled, imagining what you will do with the winnings. Then you learn the grand prize is a combine harvester. As it happens, you aren't a farmer and the contest rules stipulate that you can't sell or give away the prize. You're baffled and at a loss as to what you'll do with a combine harvester. For you, the lottery win is not obviously a (considerable) stroke of luck, either good or bad. L6 explains why: given your interests, the event doesn't bring much in the way of an objectively positive or negative effect; it doesn't advance or frustrate your interests.[27]

And L6 successfully handles NEWBORN, IMPAIRED, ANTS, and WILSON'S BRAIN. Plausibly, the subjects in question have an array of objective interests that are either advanced or frustrated by the events in question. Those events thus have an effect on the subjects with respect to their interests. For instance, since it is an objective interest of ants to eat and reproduce, the event that allowed one to survive is its good luck; the event that squashed another is its bad luck. And Wilson has various objective interests, many of which are frustrated by his kidnapping, so the event is bad luck for him.

So L6 is motivated: it covers a range of examples, including those that blocked earlier accounts of luck's significance. For theorists who want a suitably 'objective' notion of luck, L6 is satisfying, too.

Before I conclude, here is one final cheer for L6. It is resistant to counterexamples. Just consider how putative counterexamples would go. They must (*a*) feature an individual X who is lucky with respect to E, where either (*b*) X has no objective or subjective interests or (*c*) X does have interests but E has no objectively positive or negative effect on any of X's interests. Finding examples in which (*a*) and either (*b*) or (*c*) are true isn't easy. No matter; let us try.

Consider first a putative example of a lucky event that has no effect on an individual's interests [viz., (*a*) and (*c*)]. Johann has won the state lottery, let's imagine, but his prize—a fistful of hyper-inflated Weimar banknotes (circa 1923)—is entirely worthless to him. Someone might assert that Johann is lucky to win even though the event has no effect, good or bad, upon his interests. If that is so, L6 doesn't express a necessary condition on luck. In reply, I doubt that winning is lucky for Johann. If

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[27] An individual can adapt to a situation by changing interests or acquiring new ones. Once where there wasn't luck, there luck will be. Example: after winning that combine harvester, you decide to try farming. Then the win is lucky for you.

the prize is *entirely* worthless to him—it's not even enough cash to stoke his fireplace, say—a win is not obviously either good or bad luck. It would be akin to that unlikely landslide that affected no one. With respect to his interests, it would be no different for Johann if his ticket hadn't been drawn at all.

A second example stars an allegedly lucky individual without interests [viz., (*a*) and (*b*)]. The town council of Duck River has organized a rubber duck river race. Thousands of yellow ducks are sold as entrants, and if your duck crosses the finish line first, you win a prize. Pretend that your entrant wins: "This is one lucky duck!" you might boast, insisting that it's lucky despite lacking interests. The duck, if indeed lucky, supplies a counterexample to L6. In reply, I propose that (essentially) *non-living* objects like your rubber duck never have luck. Though it may seem proper to assert sentences like "This duck is lucky," the propositions expressed by such sentences are better expressed in one of two other ways.[28] First of all, those sentences might actually express a proposition about a living individual's relation to an event that involves a non-living thing. *You* are lucky that your duck won, for instance; but the win isn't lucky for *the duck*.[29] Alternatively, the sentences in question might express a proposition about the low probability of some event's obtaining. For example, it is improbable that your duck wins; but that is consistent with the relevant event not being lucky at all. As I see it, the proposed counterexample to L6 won't do.

[4] We have seen how alternative accounts of luck's significance connect with conflicting ideas about interests, well-being, and the theoretical uses of luck. To close our discussion, I shall offer a proposal: disputes over significance are largely driven by what we think about interests and what we want to 'do' with luck.

There will be conflict over L6 and inevitably so. Suppose I accept L6 while you reject it. Our divergence here may arise from disagreements on issues independent of significance. Here are just three possibilities out of many. (*i*) You believe the strategy to reach L6 fails because you *deny* that newborns, ants, and company could have luck. Our dispute hits bedrock, for you will doubt precisely what I affirm: that those creatures have interests. (*ii*) You accept L4 since, by your thinking, luck is "in the eye of the beholder" and L4 correctly explains NEWBORN, IMPAIRED, et al. But I prefer L6 and insist that theoretical uses of luck require more than Subjectivism or Relativism. Here, we take opposite corners because you think that "anti-luck" epistemology, "luck egalitarianism" and the like are consonant with Subjectivism and Relativism. (*iii*) You deny L6 because, according to you, L4 accommodates the examples. The creatures in question can have interests, you say, but it's an "ideal observer" or bystander that makes something good or bad for an individual, not natural or biological facts. The two of us accept conflicting theories about the nature of interests.

Luck's significance hangs on complex philosophical questions. The moral: don't expect more agreement about significance than we find over those questions. Consensus here would be lucky indeed.[30]

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