

No Luck for Modal Luck Theory
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NB: This paper is abandonware: see fn3.

Bad and good luck alike can do you in—morally or epistemically speaking. For luck undermines the moral or epistemic credit that might have otherwise been coming your way. So it's no surprise that thinking about luck is all the rage these days—among philosophers, that is. Many accounts of luck are *modal*. They say that luck is at least in part a matter of what could have been. So you enjoy good luck in some respect, for example, just if that condition is good for you and things could very well have gone otherwise. There's something to the thought, no doubt. But in this note, I will show that one important expression of it is wrong. My target:

Consensus: S is lucky with respect to event e only if: possibly, e does not occur.
Put differently: S is lucky with respect to proposition p only if: possibly, p is false.

Everyone who gives a modal account of luck endorses Consensus.¹ To be sure, the modal theorists disagree about details (some maintain, for example, that worlds in which e does not occur must be sufficiently nearby to actuality; others say there are additional conditions on luck that concern control and interests). But Consensus or theses that obviously entail it are widely endorsed.

Consensus is false:

Counterexample: Clara is lucky to have the parents she in fact has. But, as per origins essentialism, Clara could not have had any other parents.²

Counterexample is a counterexample to Consensus. For Counterexample shows us a possible scenario in which someone is lucky with respect to some condition or event (having certain parents) but where that condition or event is not contingent.³

One reaction would be to find some elements of contingency in Counterexample and to declare that it is for these elements alone that Clara is lucky. Let us think through two versions of this reaction.

Version 1: *Clara's parents are so-and-so* is—even granting origins essentialism—

¹ Coffman (2007), Levy (2009), Peels (2015), and Pritchard (2005, 2014), to cite just a few. For more citations and helpful discussion of luck's recent role in epistemology, see Ballantyne (2014) and Baumann (2014).

² On origins essentialism, see Kripke (1980): 114-116.

³ Hales (2016) independently advances counterexamples to Consensus that he calls *luck-necessities*. Hales has the scoop here; there is, so far as I can tell, no important difference between Hales' examples and the ones on offer here.

contingent. It could have been false, had Clara never existed, after all (if Clara exists, she doesn't have so-and-so, or anyone else, as parents). And so there is, even given origins essentialism, an element of contingency in Counterexample. Clara is lucky that *Clara's parents are so-and-so*, to be sure, but *that* is a merely contingent truth.

This reaction is not promising. For there is a necessary truth in the neighborhood for which Clara is still lucky: *if Clara exists, her parents are so-and-so*.

Version 2: Clara is not lucky that *Clara's parents are so-and-so* or *if Clara exists, her parents are so-and-so*. Clara is lucky, instead, that her parents love her, that they are of ample means, and so on. And those are merely contingent truths. So the things for which Clara is lucky are, as per Consensus, mere contingencies.

This reaction isn't promising either. For it *seems* that Clara could reasonably feel lucky, not just that so-and-so love her and are of ample means, but that so-and-so *themselves* are her parents. This feeling of *de re* luck, as we might call it, could be an element of Clara's love for her parents—attachment to so-and-so *themselves*, and not merely attachment to their contingent situation. Clara might even reasonably (after brushing up on her Kripke, say) take great joy in and feel lucky indeed that, come what may, it simply *must* be the case that if she exists, so-and-so are her parents.

Another reaction to Counterexample is this: to concede that Consensus is false and to, accordingly, develop accounts of luck that are not committed to it. Yet another reaction would be to dramatically rethink luck's role in epistemology and moral philosophy. These are the reactions I recommend.

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