

Comments on Wayne Riggs's "On Luck and Value"

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Thank you Wayne for an incisive and challenging paper!

Wayne Riggs has written an incisive paper, rich with (allegedly) debilitating counterexamples, and an honest admission that there is at least one spot where his own view may run counter to our intuitions. Riggs is a philosopher's philosopher.

He argues that his control theory of luck is superior to Duncan Pritchard's safety theory of luck. Riggs's argument is divided into four parts. First, Riggs contends that Pritchard's general account of lucky events is subject to counterexamples—he thinks Lackey's buried treasure case demonstrates that Pritchard's safety condition is not necessary for luck, and that the case of Smarty and the Vindictive Hacker suggests that Pritchard's safety condition isn't sufficient either.¹ Second, he argues that Pritchard's anti-luck theory of knowledge fails; specifically, that the CIA case shows that true, safe beliefs are not sufficient for knowledge because safe beliefs can still be true via luck. Third, Riggs explains and defends his control theory, according to which an event is lucky iff it is either not the product of the agent's abilities or skills, or it was not intended by the agent. Finally, he responds to two objections—that his theory counts too many events as lucky², and that it fails to account for perceptual knowledge—and in so doing qualifies his control theory. Here, I focus on three issues. First, I try to help defenders of safety respond to two of Riggs's counterexamples. Second, I briefly describe a "perspectival" notion of luck, different versions of which are incorporated into Riggs's and Pritchard's theories. Third, I

¹ As Riggs acknowledges, the Smarty case commits him to claiming that the agent in the barn façade case *does* have knowledge.

express two concerns about Riggs’s attempt to account for perceptual knowledge. (If Riggs is only obligated to explain high-grade [and not low-grade] knowledge, then these concerns are not serious.)

(1) How might one defend a safety account of luck against the Buried Treasure, and CIA cases? In the Buried Treasure case, it is claimed that in every nearby possible world, Sophie buries her “treasure” in the exact spot that Vincent plants his rose bush. Lackey and Riggs agree that Vincent “was astonished to find buried treasure” in that spot, and that his doing so was “clearly lucky”.³

But, was it clearly lucky? Defenders of the safety account can simply deny that Vincent’s discovery of buried treasure was lucky. After all, there are *no* nearby possible worlds in which Vincent fails to dig in that precise spot, and *no* nearby possible worlds in which Vincent fails to discover buried treasure. Given the description of the case, and the way in which the initial conditions are fixed, it is objectively *likely*—not objectively *lucky*—that Vincent discovers the treasure. In short, finding buried treasure isn’t always lucky (and this is one case where it isn’t). Defenders of safety might go on to argue that Vincent’s discovery only *seems* lucky because of a “bait and switch”—a surreptitious alteration of initial conditions. Vincent’s act can be described in at least two different ways: ‘digging in the same spot as Sophie’, and ‘discovering buried treasure’. The initial conditions of ‘digging in the same spot as Sophie’ are fixed by: Sophie’s and Vincent’s talents in detecting rose-friendly soil, the requirement that each must find a spot in the NW

² One possible response to this objection is to restrict one’s definition of luck to actions rather than to events. Of course, in so doing, one sacrifices a general account of lucky events.

³ Defenders of the safety account might initially reply that there *are* nearby possible worlds in which Vincent plants his rosebush in a different spot—worlds in which he is driving in, say, the SE corner of the island, and discovers a spot there. But, since the example can easily be fixed to avoid this problem (by adding that

corner of the island, and other features of the example. These initial conditions guarantee that there are no nearby worlds in which Sophie and Vincent dig in different spots (and thus, for safety theorists, that Vincent's digging in the same spot is not lucky.) But when we switch to the description 'discovering buried treasure', might we also unwittingly switch our initial conditions? Might we ignore the initial conditions laid out in the example, and revert to our intuitions about the improbability of discovering buried treasure? In ordinary circumstances, there are many nearby possible worlds in which Vincent (or any one of us) fails to discover buried treasure. This unwitting and illegal substitution would certainly explain why Vincent's discovery of buried treasure *seems* lucky, even though he makes the same discovery in every nearby possible world.

Riggs may reply that these are not two descriptions of the same act; but two different acts, one (digging in the same spot) entailing, bringing about, or otherwise co-occurring with the other (discovering buried treasure). In that case, we should ask the following question: must lucky acts be entailed by or co-occur with other lucky acts; or can lucky acts be entailed by or co-occur with non-lucky acts? (To clarify, Vincent's digging in the same spot entails or co-occurs with his discovery of buried treasure. In order to claim that Vincent's discovery of buried treasure is lucky, must one also claim that his digging in the same spot is lucky? Or, alternatively, can one claim that his discovery is lucky even though his act of digging is not?) Riggs might claim that it is the entailment or co-occurrence itself that is lucky: that "there is no 'deliberate or otherwise relevant connection' between the two elements of the case..."⁴ But, defenders of safety can respond as follows: in every nearby

Vincent's spot must be in the NW corner), we should assume that there are no nearby worlds in which Vincent and Sophie dig in different spots.

⁴ P. 6; here Riggs is quoting and agreeing with Lackey.

possible world, whenever Vincent digs in the same spot he discovers buried treasure; so, contra Riggs, the co-occurrence of the two acts is objectively likely, not lucky. In other words, nearby possible worlds show us which connections are relevant. (Admittedly, this may result in a stalemate of competing intuitions.)

In Riggs's astutely constructed CIA case, the North Korean government convinces its citizens that all Americans despise Asians. As it happens, the CIA has only one agent who can handle a particular mission in North Korea, and this agent does despise Asians. Let's call this agent CIA1. A North Korean villager recognizes CIA1 as an American and, as a result, believes that he despises Asians. Riggs argues that although the villager's belief is true and safe—that there are no nearby worlds in which he comes to this belief in the same way and it is false—it is still a matter of luck that his belief is true. In short, a belief can be true and safe, but fail to constitute knowledge. Here, defenders of veritic safety can either (I) deny that the villager's belief is safe, or (II) argue that if it is safe, the villager has knowledge. Pursuing the first strategy (denying that the belief is safe), it appears that there are nearby possible worlds (including the actual world) in which the CIA is far better staffed. The CIA employs multiple operatives who can easily handle the mission in North Korea—some of them are racists, but most of them are not. They send an operative who is not racist—CIA2. The villager recognizes CIA2 as an American and as a result forms the belief that he despises Asians, but this time the villager's belief is false. It is this lack of safety that accounts for our intuition that the belief is true as a matter of luck. If the CIA had sent someone else (a non-racist), the villager would have formed a false belief.

Riggs will likely respond that I have described a different belief, or at least a world in which the villager did not come to his belief in “the same way”. According to Riggs, to

form his belief in the same way, “the very same operative with the very same prejudices”⁵ (CIA1) must be the subject of the villager’s belief. But, why must that be the case? Why doesn’t the villager count as forming beliefs in the same way whenever he forms a belief that some person *p* despises Asians because he thinks that *p* is an American and that all Americans despise Asians? Pritchard thinks that the agent forms his belief in the same way if the *external* conditions are the same.⁶ But, is Pritchard committed to the claim that the villager’s belief must be about CIA1? Riggs has constructed this example to force Pritchard’s hand.

Suppose defenders of safety agree with Riggs that the villager’s belief must have exactly the same referent (CIA1). In that case, defenders of safety may claim that the safety conditions are met and luck disappears, thus pursuing strategy (II). If in every nearby possible world (a) the villager believes that *CIA1* despises Asians and (b) CIA1 does despise Asians; then it is objectively likely, not lucky, that the villager’s belief is true. The villager’s belief is objectively likely to be true even though he falsely believes that all Americans despise Asians. After all, the villager’s belief is only about CIA1, not about any given person he thinks is an American.

(2) In using counterexamples to draw conclusions about luck, we are appealing to our intuitions. It is worth noting that intuitions consistent with safety or, alternatively, with control are not the only available options. One presumably intuitive way of responding to the buried treasure case is to argue that Vincent’s discovery of buried treasure was lucky, given what he had to go on, given his epistemic perspective. In other words, given his

⁵ Riggs, 10.

⁶ Pritchard restricts initial conditions to the same external conditions rather than the same internal conditions, *Epistemic Luck*, p. 152-157.

beliefs, evidence, knowledge, and information, Vincent did not expect or predict that he would discover buried treasure. (Recall that in Lackey's example, Vincent is "astonished" to discover treasure.) Vincent was lucky to find the treasure not because he failed to in nearby possible worlds, but because given what limited information he had, he did not expect to find any. Let's call this general notion of luck "perspectival". It is meant to include Pritchard's notion of reflective luck. Since, reflective luck is distinct from veritic luck, this response to the buried treasure case is available to Pritchard.

As Riggs demonstrates in his gentleman adventurers case, perspectival luck, or something that includes it, is also distinct from his own unqualified control notion of luck. Recall that in this example, Smith is lucky that the eclipse occurred when it did but Jones is not, even though Jones has no control over the eclipse. Jones is not lucky because (1) he "knew all along" that they would be captured, and that the eclipse would result in their release.⁷ And, (2) because he "exploited those facts to his own advantage...he took them into account and planned a course of action that assumed that those things would occur."⁸ Riggs incorporates this into a revised version of his account of luck, according to which: E is lucky for S iff: (a) E is out of S's control and (b) S did not successfully exploit E for some purpose.

(3) Pritchard's safety account is better suited to explain externalist, low-grade knowledge than it is to explain high-grade, internalist knowledge. Recognizing and attempting to remedy this, Pritchard appeals to reflective epistemic luck. Riggs's control account is better suited to explain high-grade, internalist knowledge than it is to explain low-grade externalist knowledge. Recognizing and attempting to remedy this, Riggs appeals to

⁷ Riggs, 15

“epistemic quality control”. My view is that we should stick with what we are good at—we should first provide plausible independent accounts of low- and high-grade knowledge, and only then look to see what they have in common and how far each can be stretched. Does Riggs succeed in explaining low-grade knowledge; or is his account overextended?

We can surmise that on Riggs’s view, if S knows that p then her belief is not true as a matter of luck, and consequently, S *either* has control over her belief that p or S exploited her belief that p.⁹ Let’s suppose that the knowledge in question is visual, and let’s treat each disjunct separately. Is it true that if S knows that (say) the wall is white, then S exploited her belief that the wall is white? No. Exploitation is internalist—it requires knowing that one knows that p (or, perhaps, some slightly weaker internalist constraint), and planning accordingly. Since S can know that the wall is white without engaging in plans of any kind, the exploitation disjunct will not help explain perceptual knowledge.

Is it true that if S knows that the wall is white, then S has control over her belief that the wall is white? Riggs argues that S does have control over her perceptual beliefs. Specifically, S exercises epistemic quality control: she has “the ability to withhold commitment to appearances, when [she has] some reason for doing so.”¹⁰ I have two concerns. For the sake of argument, let’s grant that human adults typically possess the ability Riggs describes, and that exercising this ability constitutes an intellectual action that is under our voluntary control. Let’s also grant that when a belief results from this ability, the agent exercises some degree of control over that belief. My first worry is that this falls short of showing that we exercise control over all, or even most, of our visual beliefs.

⁸ Riggs, 16

⁹. In “On Luck and Value”, Riggs does not explicitly state his revised anti-luck account of knowledge. Hence the above is an approximation.

Although human adults subject some of our “appearances” to scrutiny (when we have reason to be skeptical, we “stop the assembly line”, consider the evidence, and either accept the appearance in question as veridical, or reject it as fanciful), we do not evaluate all of our appearances in this way. If we did, forming mundane beliefs about our environment (e.g. the wall is white, there is a big truck coming toward me, etc.) would be slow and arduous. Some, and arguably, most visual beliefs are produced not by the ability Riggs describes, but by an automatic, involuntary process that involves no intellectual action on the part of the agent (the visual belief-forming faculty described by reliabilists). Presumably, an even stronger claim can be made about the visual beliefs of children, who have not yet learned how to detect and evaluate suspicious appearances. In short, the belief that the wall is white can be produced by different belief-forming processes: the ability Riggs describes, or an automatic visual belief-forming process (etc.). Whether the agent has control over her belief that the wall is white depends on which process actually produced her belief, not on which process could have produced it but didn’t. In cases where this belief is produced automatically, it is not under the agent’s control. It could have been under the agent’s control, had it been produced by a different process, but it isn’t. Must Riggs admit that such beliefs cannot constitute knowledge?

My second concern is that in addressing the above objection, credit theorists will drain the power from their notions of control and credit, and ultimately hobble their own theories. One of the strengths of credit theories is that they are well-suited to explain high-grade knowledge—knowledge that results from active inquiry and from acquired habits of intellectual action and intellectual motivation. Weakening the notions of control and credit,

¹⁰. Riggs, 19.

so that they apply to beliefs produced by natural involuntary faculties, may well undermine the ability of credit theories to explain high-grade knowledge.

Thanks again for a terrific paper!