Handout on Lee John Whittington, "Getting Moral Luck Right"

I. Central Problem & Aim of the Essay

- **The Problem:** Moral luck appears to conflict with a foundational ethical intuition: agents should not be morally assessed for outcomes beyond their control. Yet, in practice, we often do just that.

- **Whittington's Task:** To provide a refined **modal account** of *resultant moral luck*—a type of moral luck where an agent is morally evaluated based on the outcomes of their actions—while addressing two key shortcomings in prior modal accounts (by Pritchard and Driver):

  1. **The Inclusivity Problem:** Too many cases get classified as moral luck.

  2. **The Significance Problem:** The wrong kind of value gets used to assess the luck.

II. Background: What Is Moral Luck?

- *Paradigmatic case:* Two reckless drivers—only one hits a pedestrian. That driver seems more blameworthy, even though the outcome was out of their control.

- **Types of Moral Luck** (Nagel):

  - **Resultant luck:** Concerning outcomes.

  - **Circumstantial luck:** Situational factors.

  - **Constitutive luck:** Traits of character or temperament.

  - **Causal luck:** The chain of events leading to one's actions.

- **Philosophical tension:** Our judgments (blaming the unlucky driver more) conflict with the idea that we shouldn't blame for what's beyond control.

III. Two Main Accounts of Luck

1. The Lack of Control Account (LCAL)

- Luck = lack of control + significance for the agent.

- Problem: **Overgenerates** luck. E.g., the sun rising is out of your control and significant but not "lucky".

2. The Modal Account (MAL)

- Proposed by Duncan Pritchard.

- **Two conditions:**

  1. Event occurs in the actual world but not in nearby possible worlds.

  2. Event is significant for the agent.

- Advantage: Captures **chanciness**, avoids false positives like LCAL does.

IV. Modal Accounts of Moral Luck: Pritchard and Driver

Pritchard's Moral Luck (2006):

- Moral luck occurs when:

  - The event (e.g., hitting a pedestrian) happens in the actual world.

  - But would not happen in nearby worlds where the *initial conditions are fixed*.

- Example: Driving on a quiet country road vs. a busy street—only the former features modal luck.

Driver's Contrastivist Modal Account:

- Adds **contrastive reasoning**: Luck is always "lucky that *p* rather than *q*".

- Adds **interest-based significance condition**: Luck is good or bad depending on the agent's interests.

- Advantage: Can explain how someone can be both lucky and unlucky depending on the contrast used (e.g., Sandra and the flu).

V. Whittington's Critique of Existing Modal Accounts

1. Inclusivity Problem

- Some cases are labeled "moral luck" when they shouldn't be.

- *Example 1:* Emily saves someone from a fire. Nearby earthquake could've prevented it—but that doesn't make it moral luck.

- *Example 2:* Sam mistakenly thinks Craig lives at No. 9 but ends up killing him at No. 6 due to a flipped door number. Feels lucky, but *not* morally lucky.

- **Core Insight:** These modal accounts don't specify *what* needs to remain fixed across possible worlds to isolate moral luck.

VI. Whittington's Proposed Solution: Action-Oriented Modal Account

Action-Oriented Fixing:

- Fix not just the agent and initial conditions—but **the performance of the action itself**.

- Moral luck = when:

    1. The agent performs the *same action* across possible worlds.

    2. But the **outcomes differ** across these worlds.

    3. The outcome has *moral value*.

"S is morally lucky that E iff:
 (1) S's action had been performed in the same way as in the actual world but the results (E) would have been different in a wide set of relevant nearby possible worlds.
 (2) The results (E) of S's action are of positive or negative moral value."

Why It Works:

- **Excludes** Emily and Sam-type cases: performance fixed = no moral luck.

- **Preserves** classic cases: e.g., reckless driver hitting someone.

- **Adds Precision:** Mirroring how epistemologists fixed "belief formation" to distinguish epistemic luck from mere truth.

VII. Second Problem: The Significance Condition

Issue: Wrong Kind of Value

- Driver ties luck's significance to **agent's interests**.

- *Problematic Result:* A **sadistic truck driver** enjoys hitting a pedestrian. Under Driver's account, this is *good* moral luck.

- Conversely, a failed murderer may be said to suffer *bad* luck for failing, since his interests were thwarted.

- This misclassifies the **moral** evaluation of the luck.

VIII. Second Solution: Relativizing Significance to Moral Value

- **Fix:** Replace "interests-based" significance with **moral significance**, which depends on your ethical theory.

    - *Utilitarian*: Overall pain/pleasure caused.

    - *Virtue ethics*: Expression of virtuous/vicious traits.

- **Conclusion:** Whether luck is *morally good or bad* depends not on the agent's desires, but on the ethical *valuation of the outcome*.

IX. Final Account: Action-Oriented Modal Moral Luck (with Moral Value)

S is morally lucky that E iff:

- (1) S's action had been performed in the same way as in the actual world but the results (E) would have been different in a wide set of relevant nearby possible worlds.

- (2) The results (E) have moral value (positive or negative) determined by the moral theory in play.

- **What ties luck to the agent** is not how the outcome affects them, but the fact that **they performed the action**.

- This avoids problems with consequentialist vs. virtue-ethical evaluations of outcomes and is flexible across moral theories.

X. Concluding Thought

Whittington's account seeks to **refine moral luck analysis** by:

- Fixing action performance across possible worlds.

- Shifting from interest-based to moral value-based significance. Together, these revisions preserve **intuitive judgments**, respect **moral theory plurality**, and offer a **more rigorous metaphysical grounding** for understanding moral luck.