Epistemic Luck and Anti-Luck Epistemology in the View of Duncan Pritchard

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Abstract

The problem of epistemic luck arises when a person has a true belief that is only true by luck. Before Gettier, it was believed that the element of justification would be sufficient for knowledge; but he showed that it is possible to have a justified true belief that is not an example of knowledge because of the intrusion of luck. Duncan Pritchard has examined epistemic luck in an extensive and detailed manner. He offers a modal account of luck based on two elements: a possible-worlds analysis of counterfactual conditions and a significance condition for the factors that make the truth of the belief lucky. Pritchard argues for the superiority of this account to those that focus on whether the truth of the belief is "accidental" and on whether the believer has sufficient control over the belief. Epistemic luck may be "reflective" or "veritic". Both undermine knowledge claims, although Pritchard gives the central role to veritic luck in his anti-luck epistemology, which is based on two elements: a safety principle and a condition to ensure that the cognitive faculties of the agent are not impaired. In this article, we will describe, analyze, and subsequently, evaluate the viewpoint of Pritchard. In addition to the critiques offered by others, ambiguities in his counterfactual account of luck and other components of his theory detract from his theory.

Keywords: epistemic luck, modal account, possible worlds, Duncan Pritchard, anti-luck epistemology, safety principle, cognitive faculties, virtue epistemology.

Introduction

The problem of epistemic luck in post-Gettier philosophical literature refers to the insufficiency of the tripartite definition of knowledge. Examples in which we have justified true belief that are not instances of knowledge are now well known. In these examples, luck plays a central role in the process of acquiring true belief. Duncan Pritchard has examined this topic extensively and in detail. His analysis is presented in four stages: anti-luck epistemology, anti-luck virtue epistemology, anti-risk epistemology, and anti-risk virtue epistemology. The aim of this article is to examine the first two stages analytically and critically. Pritchard's turn from luck to risk will be studied in another article. We conclude that the ambiguity of some of his statements and key concepts are liabilities for his theory.

Modal account of luck

Pritchard, after criticizing rival accounts, defends a modal account of luck. This account is based on two principles: 1) the principle of possible worlds, for which Pritchard is indebted to David Lewis. There are many ways things could have been besides the way they actually are. He identifies possible worlds with "ways things could have been". Possible worlds are counterfactual ways things could be that are more or less similar to the actual world and are considered to be closer or further from the actual world, respectively. So, a lucky event like a lottery win occurs in the actual world but does not occur in a wide class of the nearby possible worlds where the relevant initial conditions for the event are the same. This makes the win "lucky". After reviewing the conception of possible worlds, this article draws attention to the degree of luck of an event. Pritchard (2005) holds that the degree of luck is determined by the proportion of close possible worlds in which it would fail to occur. In another article (2014), he takes a different position and says that the degree of luck involved varies in line with the modal closeness of the world in which the target event fails to occur. 2) The significance condition, which Pritchard has explicated in three different ways over the course of his writing on this topic. First, in (2004) he adds this condition to his modal account and states that there should be an agent who is affected by a lucky event so that good luck or bad luck can be attributed to him. Then, in (2014), he omits the significance condition from his modal account and takes luck to be a metaphysical and objective phenomenon independent of subjective factors such as significance. Finally, in (2020), he settles on a minimal account of significance.

The modal account by Pritchard, even though some elements of it have changed through the years, can be articulated as follows: a significant event E is lucky for an agent S at time t if, and only if, E occurs in the actual world at t but does not occur at t in a wide proportion of close possible worlds in which the relevant initial conditions for E are the same as in the actual world.

Types of epistemic luck

Compatible types of epistemic luck may be categorized on the basis of whether luck is relevant to the content, capacity, or evidential weight of the belief. These types are obtained inductively and more can be found. They are epistemically harmless and are concerned with luck in the preconditions for knowledge. Forms of luck that are incompatible with knowledge are veritic and reflective, and they infect the core epistemic relation between an agent and a true proposition which is pivotal to knowledge possession. The concentration of Pritchard's ant-luck virtue epistemology is to omit veritic epistemic luck which is of two types: intervening and environmental. Environmental epistemic luck is something about which Sosa and Pritchard

differ. According to Sosa's point of view, environmental epistemic luck has no effect on the justification or formation of a belief.

Anti-luck virtue epistemology

After defining epistemic luck and getting familiar with its types, Pritchard presents his anti-luck epistemology, the main principle of which is *safety*. But because this principle is not sufficient for removing veritic epistemic luck, he proposes an anti-luck virtue epistemology that has two main elements: the safety principle and the ability intuition. Pritchard believes that this epistemology can deal with Gettier cases and the like which are undermined by the intrusion of luck. His anti-luck virtue epistemology is influenced by Greco and Sosa and his view has affinities to reliabilism.

We can articulate the final version of his safety principle as follows: if an agent A knows a contingent proposition P, then in nearly all possible worlds in which he forms his belief about P in the same way as he forms his belief in the actual world, that agent only believes that P when P is true.

About the ability intuition, he thinks of it in terms of dispositions that should be both reliable and suitably integrated with the agent's other belief-forming dispositions.

Discussion

For evaluating Pritchard's point of view, first remember that in virtue epistemology, knowledge is a skillful achievement that is achieved through cognitive abilities and leaves no room for the influence of luck. But, as Hales implies, there are cases of skillful achievements that are lucky. Second, as Bricker demonstrates, cognitive neuroscience and a number of recent EEG studies can introduce a new challenge to this account, especially to the counterfactual principle. Third, a general problem with his view is that his modal account and his epistemology and their elements are not free from ambiguity. It is natural and logical that a philosopher changes and completes his position over time, but it seems that Pritchard has chosen his path with more ambiguity in some cases. For example, a counterfactual theory is one of the most important elements of his modal account, but the metric that determines the distance from the actual world is notoriously unclear. His view has wavered about whether the relevant possible worlds are the nearest ones, or all those that are nearby, or any possible world sufficiently near. There are also unanswered questions about the number of possible worlds and other components of his theory.

Conclusion

We conclude that, despite his commendable efforts, the ambiguities of some of his statements and key concepts are liabilities his position has been unable to remove.

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