

## Luck and Significance

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*Children need encouragement. So if a kid gets an answer right, tell him it was a lucky guess. That way he develops a good, lucky feeling.*

—Jack Handey

Philosophical debates about the nature of luck have for the most part endorsed the following condition:

*Significance-generic*: event E is lucky for subject S only if E is significant for S.

The condition leaves open several questions about how events are significant. For an event to be significant for someone, must she consciously take an interest in it? Must she know the event's likelihood? Does she need to think of the event as being good or bad for her? Recent debates over significance take up these questions. Luck theorists have bracketed the correctness of Significance-generic in order to examine the kind of significance operative in that condition (see Rescher 1997: chapter 1; Pritchard 2005: chapter 5; Coffman 2007; Ballantyne 2012; and Whittington 2016).

In this chapter, we describe and evaluate four potential specifications of Significance-generic. We then consider the possibility that debates over significance are fundamentally misguided—a position defended by Duncan Pritchard (2014). In his early work on luck, Pritchard defended a significance condition for luck (2005: 132–3). More recently, he has changed his tune, insisting that “the very idea of adding a significance condition to the modal account of luck is wrongheaded” (2014: 604). If Pritchard is correct, Significance-generic is false and debates over the best account of significance are for naught. We examine Pritchard's challenge and ask whether it can be met.

### 1. Varieties of Significance

Why think that luck requires significance in the first place? We can begin to see why by considering a pair of scenarios. In the first, an active chocolate factory suffers an unlikely meltdown, causing chocolate production to cease immediately. In the second, an abandoned chocolate factory suffers an equally unlikely meltdown, but without impacting chocolate production. The former event is unlucky—dire, even. The latter event is neither lucky nor unlucky. What accounts for the difference? Facts about significance.

An unlikely meltdown that affects no one is not lucky. That's because it's significant for no one (cf. Pritchard 2005: 132). Nicholas Rescher notes 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" (1995: 32). Rescher observes that things would be different between you and the pigeons if you had bet \$100 on their presence in the park, because money is something you care about.

Most discussions of luck focus on cases where an event is good or bad, in some sense, for someone. When you win the lottery, that's good luck for you. When you get hit by a falling meteorite, that's bad luck for you—and good luck for your nemesis. Philosophers have generalized from these sorts of observations to the claim that, in general, an event is lucky for someone only if it is good or bad for her.

As noted, debates over luck's significance tend to focus not on Significance-generic itself, but on its proper specification. Theorists have tried to fill in the blanks by noting some typical features of lucky events. In many cases involving lucky events, subjects ascribe significance to those events. In other such cases, subjects' interests are impacted negatively or positively. Philosophers have thus defended accounts where what matters for significance is *ascriptions of significance* or *impacted interests*.

Two key questions divide competing accounts:

Q1: For an event to be significant for someone, must she ascribe significance to the event?

Q2: For an event to be significant for someone, must the event impact her subjective interests?

Philosophers who discuss significance disagree over the answers. In response to Q1, some say "yes" and others say "no." Call the former *constructivists* and the latter *realists*. Constructivists say that in order for an event to be significant for someone, she must take the event to be significant, either in the actual world or in a nearby possible world (Pritchard 2005: 132–3). According to constructivism, a meltdown at the chocolate factory is significant for Charlie only if Charlie *actually* ascribes significance to the event or *would* ascribe significance were he to know relevant facts about the incident (that it was highly unlikely to occur, that the meltdown rendered Charlie's Golden Ticket null and void, etc.). Realists, on the other hand, insist that whether an event is significant for someone does not depend on whether she ascribes significance to it (Coffman 2007: 386–8; Ballantyne 2012: 327). According to realism, a meltdown at the chocolate factory can be significant for Charlie even if Charlie doesn't ascribe significance to the event and wouldn't ascribe significance to the event were he privy to the relevant facts about the meltdown. Though realism may seem counterintuitive, there are strong arguments in its favor (see sections 4–5).

In response to Q2, some philosophers say "yes" and others say "no." Call the former *subjectivists* and the latter *objectivists*. According to subjectivism, an event is significant for someone only if she has a subjective interest in the event's obtaining, where a subjective interest is a personal desire or preference (Rescher 1995: 7–8; Pritchard 2005: 132; Coffman 2007: 386–8; Borges 2016: 467). For example, winning the Florida State Lottery is significant for Abraham Shakespeare only if he wants to win the lottery, in which case winning is good luck, or wants to lose the lottery, in which case winning is bad luck. Whether an event is significant for Shakespeare, and whether it's good or bad luck for him, is a matter of Shakespeare's subjective desires or preferences. Objectivism is the negation of subjectivism. We can distinguish between two types of objectivism: *weak objectivism* and *strong objectivism*. According to weak

objectivism, an event is significant for someone if she has a subjective *or* objective interest in the event, where an objective interest “[depends] on particular natural and biological facts, which concern health or goal-directed activity” (Ballantyne 2012: 322–3). For weak objectivists, the question of whether winning the lottery is significant for Shakespeare is settled by facts about his subjective interests (his preference for wealth and comfort) or his objective interests (his biological needs, his well-being) or both. Strong objectivism, on the other hand, says that an event is significant for someone *only if* she has an objective interest in the event. For strong objectivists, winning the lottery is significant for Shakespeare only if the event in some way satisfies his objective interests.<sup>1</sup> The authors of this paper are of different minds about the best way to understand objectivism. For our purposes, we’ll use weak objectivism as the default view, with one exception (see section 3). For further discussion of strong objectivism, see endnote 1.

To recapitulate, debates over how best to specify Significance-general turn on two ancillary debates. One concerns whether significance depends on ascriptions of significance; this is the debate between constructivists and realists. The other concerns which sorts of interests determine significance; this debate is between subjectivists and objectivists. Note that while constructivism is incompatible with realism and subjectivism is incompatible with objectivism, these views can be held in any other combination. Thus, one can be a constructivist subjectivist, a constructivist objectivist, a realist subjectivist, or a realist objectivist. In the literature on significance, three of the four combinations enjoy support (see figure 1). Though we don’t know of any defenses of constructivist objectivism, we consider what might motivate someone to defend it. In sections 2 through 5, we critically examine each view.

## 2. Constructivist subjectivism

In his initial account of luck, Duncan Pritchard (2005) identified two necessary conditions for an event’s being lucky for someone: a modal condition and a significance condition. On the modal condition, an event is lucky only if it does not occur “in a wide class of the nearest possible worlds where the relevant initial conditions for that event are the same as the actual world” (2005: 128). Pritchard notes that for an event to be lucky, it is insufficient that the modal condition is satisfied. A chance landslide that affects no one may fail to occur in a wide class of nearby possible worlds, but it does not thereby count as lucky. An additional condition is needed—namely, a significance condition.

Pritchard proposes one such condition: “If an event is lucky, then it is an event that is significant to the agent concerned (or would be significant, were the agent to be availed of the relevant facts)” (2005: 132). Furthermore, Pritchard suggests that an event’s being significant for someone depends not only on whether it frustrates or satisfies her subjective interests, but also on “the significance that the agent *attaches* to the event in question” (2005: 133, emphasis added). Drawing these points together, Pritchard advocates the following thesis:

*Constructivist subjectivism:* event E is lucky for subject S only if the following conditions hold: (CON) S actually or counterfactually ascribes significance to E and (SUBJ) E satisfies or frustrates a subjective interest of S.

Constructivist subjectivism reaches the correct verdict about the landslide case. Since a chance landslide that affects no one can have no impact on anyone’s subjective interests, and since no

one would ascribe significance to a landslide that affects no one, the landslide satisfies neither (CON) nor (SUBJ). Constructivist subjectivism also reaches the correct verdict in cases where someone fails to ascribe significance to an event simply out of ignorance. For example, if someone narrowly sidesteps a thunderbolt without noticing, she is clearly lucky to have escaped unscathed, even if she didn't in fact ascribe significance to the event (2005: 133). Indeed, (CON) is satisfied so long as the agent ascribes significance to the event in nearby possible worlds where she knows the event occurred. And plausibly, this is true: had she known that she sidestepped the thunderbolt, she would have ascribed significance to the event. Finally, constructivist subjectivism reflects the received wisdom that, in general, people ascribe significance (or would ascribe significance) to events that are genuinely lucky.

Nonetheless, constructivist subjectivism has difficulty accommodating at least two types of cases. The first challenges (CON) while the second challenges (SUBJ):

**WOLF GIRL:** A pack of wolves comes upon an abandoned one-year-old girl and take her into their care. One day, the child crawls from the wolves' den and accidentally crosses the path of a stampeding herd of bison. Just before the bison trample the child, a lone wolf who happens to be hunting in the area appears on the scene, redirecting the stampeding bison.<sup>2</sup>

**REX:** Rex suffers from anorexia nervosa. 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 (Ballantyne 2012: 322).

Plausibly, the baby girl and anorexic man are beneficiaries of good luck. But if constructivist subjectivism is true, neither WOLF GIRL nor REX are cases of good luck. Owing to her limited cognitive abilities, wolf girl is unable to ascribe significance to the bison incident in the actual world and in nearby possible worlds. WOLF GIRL thus fails to satisfy (CON). Rex is subjectively interested in losing weight, and so the accident that allows him to maintain a healthy body weight is *bad luck* on constructivist subjectivism. But plausibly, Rex enjoys good luck, not bad luck. So if REX satisfies (SUBJ), it is for the wrong reasons.

There are other cases that suggest constructivist subjectivism is false (see Ballantyne 2012 for discussion). Suffice it to say that cases such as WOLF GIRL and REX present a significant *prima facie* challenge to the view.

### 3. Constructivist objectivism

To our knowledge, no philosopher has defended constructivist objectivism.<sup>3</sup> It is nonetheless a conceivable (and perhaps viable) view:

*Constructivist objectivism:* event E is lucky for subject S only if (CON) S actually or counterfactually ascribes significance to E and (STRONG-OBJ) E satisfies or frustrates an objective interest of S.<sup>4</sup>

Someone who subscribes to the view will think that whether an event is lucky depends on whether the subject ascribes significance to it and whether it satisfies or frustrates an objective interest of hers. At first, this may seem curious. When a subject ascribes significance to an event, this presupposes that the event has some effect on her subjective interests. For if the event had no bearing on her subjective interests, why would she ascribe significance to it? Thus, it appears there is some tension between (CON) and (OBJ): if we affirm that luck requires ascribing significance to an event and that ascriptions of significance turn on subjective interests, we seemingly lack space for objective interests in our account.

It is, however, possible to motivate constructivist objectivism by collapsing the distinction between subjective and objective interests:

*Interest Linkage:* if event E is objectively significant for subject S, then in the nearest possible worlds where S knows all the relevant facts about E, E satisfies or frustrates a subjective interest of S.

Interest Linkage may appeal to those who think akrasia is impossible. Suppose we think it's impossible for someone to simultaneously (i) know all of the relevant normative and non-normative facts about an event E, (ii) know that E is objectively more desirable for her than any other event, and yet (iii) not want E to occur (see Stroud 2014; cf. Milburn 2014: 582–3). We then have reason to accept Interest Linkage. For if (i) through (iii) are in fact incompatible, someone is objectively interested in E just in case she *would be* subjectively interested in E were she to know all the relevant facts about E. In other words, objectively interesting events are subjectively interesting under conditions of full transparency.

One worry about constructive objectivism begins with the observation that if an event is in a subject's objective interest, that's *independent* of the subject's standpoint. But since the effects of the event on the subject are an objective matter, it's not obvious what the subject's actual or counterfactual ascription of significance would add in addition to the event's objective effects on the subject. There's a kind of redundancy here. Suppose we assume that the event has some objective effect on a subject. If we also assume that the subject actually or counterfactually ascribes significance to the event, we should wonder what the subject's ascription adds to the event's significance that the event's objective effects didn't already accomplish (see Ballantyne 2012: 330–331).

We'll leave aside further discussion of constructive objectivism. For now, suffice it to say that a constructivist who denies the possibility of akrasia might have reason to accept constructivist objectivism. But such a constructivist should also explain what the subject's ascription of significance really adds to an event's significance over and above the event's objective effects.

#### 4. Realist subjectivism

Nicholas Rescher (1995) and E.J. Coffman (2007) defend realist subjectivism. Both concur with Pritchard that *subjective* interests are what count in determining significance. But unlike Pritchard, Rescher and Coffman deny that an event's significance for someone ultimately depends on whether she ascribes significance to it. We can state their view as follows:

*Realist subjectivism:* event E is lucky for subject S only if (REAL) E is in fact significant for S, independently of whether S actually or counterfactually ascribes significance to E and (SUBJ) E satisfies or frustrates a subjective interest of S.

Coffman's argument for (REAL) and against (CON) features cases where subjects are unable to ascribe significance to an event but nonetheless seem to experience good or bad luck:

A toddler who crawls safely across several lanes of freeway traffic during rush hour without being noticed is lucky to have made it through the traffic uninjured. The LaGrange County (Indiana) horse that was fatally struck by lightning on May 11, 2004, suffered bad luck on the indicated occasion (2007: 387).

This toddler is a beneficiary of good luck even though she's unable to ascribe significance to her perilous journey. The horse is a victim of bad luck even though he's unable to ascribe significance to the lightning strike. Constructivism conflicts with these apparent facts, for it says that an event is significant for someone only if she actually or counterfactually ascribes significance to it. But neither the toddler nor the horse actually or counterfactually ascribes significance to their respective incidents. Coffman's cases thus put pressure on constructivism.

Although Rescher and Coffman deny (CON), they are not thereby committed to denying (SUBJ). That's because whether an individual has subjective interests does not depend on whether she is able to ascribe significance. It is commonplace to treat young children and animals as having subjective interests. A toddler wants to be safe even if she is unable to ascribe significance to fortunate events. A horse wants to live and continue consuming oats even if he is unable to ascribe significance to unfortunate events. This is just to say that subjective interests and ascriptions of significance can come apart.

While it's natural to think subjective interests can help to underwrite significance, realist subjectivism is not without challenges. Sometimes subjects appear to be lucky even though their subjective interests aren't impacted:

**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 (Ballantyne 2012: 321; cf. Nozick 1974: 42–45).

We judge that Wilson suffers bad luck on account of the negative effects of the event. For one, his relationships and plans in the real world come to an end. For another, he loses his body. Notice how WILSON'S BRAIN challenges realist subjectivism in two ways. First, realist subjectivism presumes that the good or bad effects that make an event lucky must have some effect on a subject's interior, experienced life. But WILSON'S BRAIN shows this is false: the event is unlucky for Wilson even though it "leaves no trace" on his interior life.

Second, since Wilson's experiences in the laboratory are indistinguishable from his real-world experiences, WILSON'S BRAIN shows that unlucky events need not bring about pain and lucky events need not bring about pleasure (see Ballantyne 2012: 322).

## 5. Realist objectivism

We have rehearsed some challenges for constructivism and subjectivism. These challenges help motivate an account of significance advanced by Ballantyne (2012) and perhaps David Blancha (2015: 88–115) and Lee John Whittington (2016):

*Realist objectivism:* event E is lucky for subject S only if (REAL) E is in fact significant for S, independently of whether S actually or counterfactually ascribes significance to E and (OBJ) E satisfies or frustrates an interest of S.

(REAL) avoids the difficulties that WOLF GIRL and Coffman's cases pose for constructivism (see sections 2 and 4). And (OBJ) avoids the trouble that WILSON'S BRAIN presents for subjectivism (see section 4). Plausibly, Wilson is objectively interested in not being a brain in a vat, even if his envatment has no impact on his subjective interests. So (OBJ), but not (SUBJ), arrives at the correct verdict in WILSON'S BRAIN—namely, that Wilson is a victim of bad luck.

What allows (OBJ) to deliver the intuitively correct verdict is its appeal to natural and biological facts concerning health or goal-directed activity (Ballantyne 2012: 322–3), which Ballantyne identifies with objective interests. Becoming a brain in a vat is a stroke of bad luck for Wilson not because it affects his subjective interests, but because it interferes with his proper biological functioning and frustrates his goal-directed activity. Objective interests are not a matter of subjective desires and preferences, but of well-being and proper functioning.

According to (OBJ), anything that has interests can be lucky. Luck isn't just for sentient beings, for every living thing engages in activities and processes that can be described teleologically, and any living thing that can be described teleologically has objective interests. Thus, a worker ant can be described as fulfilling her proper biological function if she successfully forages, defends her colony from rival critters, and so on. Moreover, we can think of success in foraging, defending one's colony, and so forth, as objective interests of the ant. The ant *has* these interests even if she cannot *take them on* as interests.

We suspect that not everyone will be on board with (OBJ). Here are a couple of cases that might spell trouble for the account:

SPACE WORMS: The space shuttle *Columbia* tragically burned up on reentry on 1 February 2003, strewing debris from east Texas to Louisiana and into southwestern Arkansas. Months later, five canisters containing hundreds of living *C. elegans* worms, which had been part of an experiment onboard the shuttle, were recovered from crash sites in Texas. The canisters housing the creatures exited the shuttle at a height of more than 30 km above the Earth, at velocities of 660–1,050 km/h. (A sixth canister was never recovered.) These tiny, pinhead-sized worms survived the extreme heat and velocity of reentry and the subsequent crash.<sup>5</sup>

LUNA THE REDWOOD: In the late 1990s, when an old-growth forest in northern California was threatened by logging, a young woman named Julia Butterfly Hill set out to protest. Ms. Hill conducted a “sit in”: for 738 consecutive days, she lived on a small platform fastened to a giant redwood that she named Luna. The logging interests eventually backed down and Luna, along with a small area of nearby forest, was spared from the chainsaws. If Ms. Hill had chosen to dwell elsewhere in the forest (or had failed in her protest), it is unlikely that Luna or the adjacent trees would have been left standing.

If (OBJ) is true, Luna and the space worms are lucky. In conversation, we’ve found that some philosophers resist the notion that trees and worms can be lucky. In our small, unscientific sampling of non-philosophers’ opinions, we observed mixed verdicts on the question of whether worms and trees can be lucky.<sup>6</sup> While this is hardly a resounding “yes” in support of our view, mixed intuitions do not a refutation make.

In the end, we suspect that at least some disagreements about significance will bottom out in rather general questions concerning value and well-being. Since there are long-standing disputes about the nature of value as well as controversies concerning whether organisms such as worms and trees can have interests, we anticipate disputes over significance will continue.

We have up to this point explored four ways to specify Significance-generic. Each of these accounts faces challenges. But Pritchard insists that any account of significance is bound to fail. He thus rejects Significance-general and with it the search for a significance condition. Let us now turn to Pritchard’s provocative proposal.

## 6. Eliminating Significance

Recall Pritchard’s suggestion that “the very idea of adding a significance condition to the modal account of luck is wrongheaded” (2014: 604; see Duncan Pritchard’s chapter in this volume for more on the modal account). In earlier work, Pritchard defended constructivist subjectivism, according to which an event is lucky for someone only if she (actually or counterfactually) ascribes significance to the event and only if the event satisfies or frustrates a subjective interest of hers. In response to objections (see section 1.1 and Pritchard 2014: 603–6, especially footnote 20), Pritchard abandoned constructivist subjectivism. But instead of endorsing a rival account of significance, Pritchard rejected Significance-generic altogether. Pritchard now embraces what we’ll call *eliminativism* about significance conditions for luck. (Milburn 2014: 579–86 also defends eliminativism, but we focus on Pritchard’s argument in what follows.)

How does Pritchard motivate eliminativism? First, he notes one positive upshot of eliminativism: luck theorists no longer need to address “various challenges” regarding specifications of Significance-generic. Writes Pritchard:

Does it suffice to meet the significance condition that a subject (*any* subject?) merely regards the target event as significant (whether rightly or wrongly), or should we opt for a more objective treatment of significance whereby we focus on those events that the subject ought to find significant? Do we allow for subject-relative luck, such that an event can be lucky for subject A and yet not for subject B? Do we allow purely pragmatic factors—such as what kinds of things are being



discussed in a given conversational context—to determine whether an event is significant? And so on (2014: 603–604).

Pritchard seems to be developing the following idea. Theorists who try to specify Significance-generic have to answer difficult questions about the nature of significance and the extent to which facts about significance determine facts about luck. (Some of these questions have been explored in some detail in Ballantyne 2011, 2012, and 2014 and Whittington 2015: chapter 4 and 2016.) But by rejecting Significance-generic altogether, eliminativists short-circuit all of these *prima facie* problems. In other words, eliminativists have an easier path to success than non-eliminativists do. If luck theorists can be eliminativists without making undue sacrifices, they should accept the view. All things being equal, you're better off endorsing eliminativism than hitching your wagon to any particular significance condition for luck.

What else can be said in favor of eliminativism? Pritchard appears to think that significance conditions for luck lead to problematic consequences because they prevent theorists from understanding luck “as an objective phenomenon” (2014: 605). He considers a familiar example—that of a small avalanche on the South Pole. Pritchard observes that “no one will regard [the avalanche] as lucky since no one cares about it, and it makes no difference to anyone” (2014: 604). But Pritchard no longer sees why this fact precludes the avalanche from being a genuinely lucky event. He writes: “we shouldn't expect an account of the metaphysics of lucky events to be responsive to such subjective factors as whether an event is the kind of thing that people care about enough to regard as lucky. That's just not part of the load that a metaphysical account of luck should be expected to carry” (ibid.).

The thrust of Pritchard's suggestion here may just be that there are lucky events, such as that small avalanche, to which no one (actually or counterfactually) ascribes significance. But if there are such lucky events—as defenders of realist subjectivism and realist objectivism will allow—then all constructivist accounts of significance are false. So one might think Pritchard is simply disputing constructivism. For a couple reasons, however, we doubt this is the best interpretation of his thinking. First, there are other viable accounts of significance left on the table, so this line of argument doesn't by itself vindicate eliminativism. Second, we doubt that many people will have a strong intuition that the small avalanche on the South Pole *is* lucky.

We think a more plausible reading of Pritchard's argument will acknowledge a more fundamental shift in Pritchard's thinking about luck. Pritchard now insists that the subject matter of a theory of luck is strictly “metaphysical.” In theorizing about luck, he says, “our interest ought to be in luck as an objective feature of events” (2014: 604) and “our interest is ultimately...in luck as an objective phenomenon” (2014: 605). The upshot of such observations is that facts about our “subjective” judgments or feelings concerning luck are not the proper data for theories of luck. Once again he writes: “we shouldn't expect an account of the metaphysics of lucky events to be responsive to such subjective factors as whether an event is the kind of thing that people care about enough to regard as lucky. That's just not part of the load that a metaphysical account of luck should be expected to carry” (2014: 604).<sup>7</sup>

Let us call *Pritchard's Truism* the claim that the fundamental facts about luck are “metaphysical” facts that do not depend on what subjects judge or feel. Add to Pritchard's Truism the further claim that on any viable significance condition, whether an event is lucky depends on what a subject judges or feels. It follows that Pritchard's Truism conflicts with significance conditions. We believe that argument plausibly captures Pritchard's reasoning.

But is Pritchard's Truism even true? For starters, it isn't obvious to us (*i*) in what sense a robustly "metaphysical" account of luck rules out partial determination of luck facts by subjects' judgments or feelings, or (*ii*) what it means to say that luck is an "objective feature of events," or (*iii*) why we "ought" to be interested in luck as an objective feature of events. Moreover, it seems to us that philosophical interest in luck arises not from theoretical insight into the nature of risk or modal reality, but rather from everyday discourse about luck—that is to say, from our *folk conception* of luck. And here's a recurring theme in our pre-theoretical luck talk: we tend to ascribe luck only to significant events. So our folk conceptions of luck, far from being mere psycho-social phenomena, should guide theorizing about luck. Any attempt to intuit the nature of luck independently of our folk understanding simply grasps at air.

Let's leave this complaint aside and turn to Pritchard's minor premise—that significance is simply a matter of what subjects think or feel. Perhaps some accounts of significance satisfy Pritchard's minor premise; at any rate, constructivist subjectivism looks to be the main target. But realist objectivism clearly does not satisfy it. After all, according to realist objectivism, whether an event is significant needn't depend on subjects ascribing significance to it or having a subjective interest in it. For realist objectivists, facts about significance can turn on mind-independent facts about what constitutes proper biological functioning for a subject, what contributes to a subject's well-being, what it means for a subject to be healthy, and so on. Realist objectivists can thus accommodate Pritchard's demand for an "objective" metaphysical account of luck that doesn't wholly depend on mere "subjective factors." At least one specification of Significance-generic—realist objectivism—is immune to Pritchard's criticism.<sup>8</sup>

Because Pritchard fails to show that all specifications of Significance-generic are implausible, his direct argument against Significance-generic is inadequate. Even so, Pritchard still might be right to suggest that the litany of *prima facie* difficulties for accounts of significance favor eliminativism. We agree with Pritchard that these difficulties require philosophical effort to overcome and that eliminativism neatly sidesteps them. The path of least resistance, eliminativism wins out, all else being equal.

But are all things equal? We doubt it. Consider eliminativism's implications. If eliminativism is true, every chance event is a lucky event (given certain plausible assumptions about the nature of luck). An unlikely avalanche that affects no one is lucky. An unlikely quantum event that impacts no one's interests is lucky. Surely this strains credulity (cf. Borges 2016: 467). If eliminativism indeed suggests that chance events and lucky events are one and the same, eliminativism doesn't simply regiment or refine our conception of luck. It obliterates it.

Pritchard may be untroubled by this. He insists, after all, that "we are interested in our subjective judgements about luck only because of what they reveal about our folk concept of luck" and that our subjective judgments should be "evaluated relative to an objective standard for lucky events" (2014: 605). He appears willing to dispense with how we ordinarily think about luck. It's a bold move that raises important questions about the very enterprise of theorizing about luck. What should constrain our theories of luck? What do we have left to guide theorizing if we bracket out our folk conception of luck? Is the quest for an "objective standard," untainted by folk wisdom, simply quixotic?

Speaking for ourselves, we expect theorizing about luck to begin with our folk conception of it. It appears to be our primary source of insights or "data." What else could be our starting point? If we dispense with this data at the outset, we risk losing the motivations that spurred theorizing about luck in the first place. Eliminativism may reduce the philosophical burden, but at an intolerably high cost.

In sum, we do not think Pritchard provides sufficient reason to accept eliminativism. While each of the significance conditions currently on offer is no doubt controversial, we deny that the search for a plausible significance condition is misguided. In theorizing about luck, as in life in general, we're at our best not when we avoid pressing problems, but when we meet them head-on.<sup>9</sup>

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**Figure 1**

|                       | <b>Subjectivism</b>   | <b>Objectivism</b>  |
|-----------------------|---|---|
| <b>Constructivist</b> | E is lucky for S only if (CON) S actually or counterfactually ascribes significance to E, and (SUBJ) E satisfies or frustrates a subjective interest of S.<br><br>Pritchard (2005), Borges (2016), possibly Riggs (2007)  | E is lucky for S only if (CON) S actually or counterfactually ascribes significance to E, and (STRONG-OBJ) E satisfies or frustrates an objective interest of S.<br><br>No known proponents   |
| <b>Realist</b>        | E is lucky for S only if (REAL) E is in fact significant for S, independently of whether S actually or counterfactually ascribes significance to E, and (SUBJ) E satisfies or frustrates a subjective interest of S.<br><br>Coffman (2007), possibly Rescher (1995) | E is lucky for S only if (REAL) E is in fact significant for S, independently of whether S actually or counterfactually ascribes significance to E, and (OBJ) E satisfies or frustrates an interest of S.<br><br>Ballantyne (2012), possibly Blanca (2015) and Whittington (2016) |
| <b>Eliminativism</b>  | Whether E is lucky does not depend on whether E is significant for any agent S.<br><br>Pritchard (2014), Milburn (2014)   |   |

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> NB weakly favors weak objectivism; SK strongly favors strong objectivism. According to weak objectivism, an event is significant for someone just in case it satisfies or frustrates an objective *or* subjective interest of hers (Ballantyne 2012: 322–4; cf. Blancha 2005: 96–115). According to strong objectivism, an event is significant for someone just in case it satisfies or frustrates an objective interest of hers, full stop.

Here’s why one might doubt strong objectivism. Say that I (SK) am playing video games instead of doing what I ought: grading my students’ papers. Suddenly, my game console suffers an unlikely mechanical failure, forcing me to stop procrastinating and start grading. It might seem that weak objectivism neatly describes the situation. Weak objectivism implies that the mechanical failure is bad luck in one respect and good luck in another. It’s bad luck insofar as I’m subjectively interested in playing video games and good luck insofar as I’m objectively interested in grading students’ papers. And it’s *ultima facie* good luck insofar as my objective interest outweighs my subjective interest. Weak subjectivism thus provides a tidy way to analyze cases of so-called mixed luck (cf. Ballantyne 2012: 331). Strong objectivism, on the other hand, seemingly cannot make sense of this phenomenon, since it says that what determines facts about significance are objective interests alone. Gaming neither conduces to health nor fulfills biological needs nor garners my partner’s approval, so I appear to lack any objective interest in gaming. Strong objectivism thus has an implausible implication: the mechanical failure is in no way bad luck for me.

But strong objectivists have a line of defense. They can retort that I have an indirect objective interest in playing video games. If playing video games has any redeeming quality (a big “if,” one might think), it’s that it conduces to well-being in some way—by producing pleasure, reducing stress, and so on. Clearly, personal well-being is something I’m objective interested in. So given some plausible background assumptions, I have an indirect objective interest in playing video games. Of course, I also have an objective interest in grading students’ papers, and this interest conflicts with my interest in

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gaming. But that's no problem. Interests can conflict. According to strong objectivism, the mechanical failure is bad luck insofar as it frustrates one objective interest but good luck insofar as it satisfies another. And the event is *ultima facie* good luck insofar as grading students' papers conduces to well-being better than playing video games. For the strong objectivist, this is a perfectly natural way to treat episodes of good luck. Moreover, it avoids comparing apples to oranges (i.e., subjective to objective interests) in determining facts about *ultima facie* luck, and it accommodates the plausible view that we're always objectively interested to some extent in satisfying our subjective interests.

<sup>2</sup> Compare WOLF GIRL with NEWBORN in Ballantyne (2012: 324). A key difference between these cases is that in NEWBORN, but not in WOLF GIRL, there is an observer who can ascribe significance to the event.

<sup>3</sup> But Ballantyne (2012: 330–331) and Milburn (2014: 582–3) discuss this sort of position.

<sup>4</sup> The only interesting version of constructivist objectivism entails strong objectivism (STRONG-OBJ). We discuss strong objectivism in endnote 1.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the story of the extraordinary worms, see Conley (2005).

<sup>6</sup> Empirical work on folk ascriptions of luck has not, to our knowledge, measured intuitions about the possibility of lucky non-sentient beings such as trees (though such a study is ripe for the picking). See Pritchard and Smith (2004: 6–15) for a survey of extant psychological work on luck ascriptions.

<sup>7</sup> Joe Milburn (2014) develops a similar line of thought. He suggests that our interest should be in luck as a “subject-involving” phenomenon rather than a “subject-relative” phenomenon. Subject-involving luck, we are told, has no room for a significance condition. See Milburn (2014: 582–3).

<sup>8</sup> Does strong objectivism satisfy Pritchard's demand for an “objective” account of luck better than weak objectivism? Possibly, given that strong objectivism says that facts about significance *always* depend on mind-independent facts about well-being. For now, we leave the matter aside.

<sup>9</sup> We are grateful to Ian Church and Joseph Vukov for helpful comments on an earlier version of this chapter.