



On a whim

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Abstract

Whims are philosophically interesting and play a role in debates concerning free will, luck, and responsibility. However, philosophers have had little to say about what whims are. One exception is Lackey (Australas J Philos 86(2): 255–267, 2008) who argues that some whimsical events are counterexamples to the modal account of luck and that whimsical decisions can be modally robust. I argue that these claims are false. I also give an account of whims. In my view, whimsical decisions are definable in terms of two necessary and jointly sufficient conditions: spontaneity and modal fragility. Whimsical outcomes are the successful results of whimsical decisions.

Keywords Whims · Luck · The modal account of luck · Control · Responsibility · Spontaneity

1 Introduction

The protagonist of Johnny Cash’s “Folsom Prison Blues” claims to have “shot a man in Reno, just to watch him die.” In addition to being one of the worst reasons a person could have for killing someone, such an act—if the protagonist is being truthful—is likely an example of a decision made on a whim, henceforth, a whimsical decision. Other examples of whimsical decisions might include randomly selecting a particular chocolate from a heart-shaped box of assorted options, a spontaneous decision to go parasailing, an out-of-character choice to go to a rave, and an unlikely decision

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to fly to Paris for the weekend.¹ Such whimsical decisions often lead to whimsical outcomes (for example, skipping work to go parasailing), but note that whimsical decisions and whimsical outcomes are examples of distinct whimsical events.

What constitutes a whim is an interesting puzzle, but philosophers haven't given a sufficiently clear account of what whims are. However, Lackey (2008) argues that whimsical events can be counterexamples to the modal account of luck (henceforth, I'll use the phrase 'the modal account' instead). There are many different versions of the modal account, but the basic idea is that an event is a matter of luck if and only if it's significant and suitably modally fragile. But Lackey claims that there are some whimsical events that are significant and modally fragile (for example, deciding to go to Paris on a whim) that are, nonetheless, non-lucky since whimsical decisions are consciously chosen. On similar grounds Broncano-Berrocal (2015) argues that we shouldn't be modal theorists but, instead, define luck in terms of significance and the absence of control.

I disagree with Lackey's claims about whims. Whimsical decisions are neither modally robust nor are they counterexamples to the modal account. First, I explain in more detail what the modal account is and recapitulate Lackey's whim-based argument against the account. I then argue that significant whimsical decisions aren't counterexamples to the modal account. Next, I develop a positive account of whimsical decisions and their relation to whimsical outcomes. Lastly, I consider some objections to my view. Along the way, I uncover some interesting relations between whimsy, luck, and responsibility.

2 The modal account

Luck is typically defined in terms of two necessary and jointly sufficient conditions: significance and chance. One influential account of luck is the modal account, which defines luck's chanciness condition in terms of modal fragility. The basic idea is that a significant event² is lucky if and only if it occurs in the actual world but fails to occur in some combination of relevant possible worlds. As Pritchard puts it, "what makes an event lucky is that while it obtains in the actual world, there are—keeping the initial conditions for that event fixed—close possible worlds in which this event does not obtain" (Pritchard, 2014, p. 599). For example, consider a fair lottery win. Assuming that winning the lottery is significant for a subject, S, then this event is lucky for S, on the modal account, because there's a close possible world or worlds in which S doesn't win the lottery. All it takes for S to no longer win the lottery is for a few lottery balls to land differently, and this is a small change.

Let me say a few additional things here about how the modal account is supposed to work. First, to use the modal account, we need a description of the event that we are concerned with in the actual world. This description allows us to see if the relevant targeted event occurs in various worlds. In the above example, the relevant

¹ Some of these examples are from Lackey (2008) and will be analyzed later.

² Pritchard (2014, pp. 604–605) denies that luck involves a significance condition. But for our purposes this issue isn't relevant. This will become apparent in Sect. 3, particularly in footnote 4.

event is that *S wins the lottery*. But we also want to hold certain features of the case fixed and only consider possible worlds with these features. These fixed features are the relevant initial conditions of the event. For example, a relevant initial condition in the lottery example would be that *S exists*. Initial conditions are necessary because a world in which *S* doesn't exist and so could never play the lottery is irrelevant to assessing whether *S*'s lottery win in the actual world is a matter of luck. For similar reasons, we will only want to consider nearby worlds as relevant, although what counts as nearby is somewhat vague and could change on a case-by-case basis. For instance, a distant world in which lottery balls are sentient and probability works differently doesn't have any bearing on *S*'s lottery win in the actual world.

But how should initial conditions be set? This issue is underdiscussed in the literature. However, Pritchard gives us a few useful rules of thumb for selecting initial conditions:

[Initial conditions] need to be specific enough to pick out a particular kind of event that we want to assess for luckiness, but not so specific as to guarantee that this event obtains (e.g., we don't want the purchase of a winning lottery ticket to be part of the initial conditions for the lottery win). [This is vague but...] For our purposes it is enough that we can pick out such initial conditions on a case-by-case basis (which I believe we usually can). (Pritchard, 2014, p. 599)

The thought is that by describing the event that we wish to assess and considering context we can generally pick out the relevant conditions. For example, another relevant initial condition in the lottery example is that *the lottery is fair*. Note that the event that we wish to assess in the actual world involves a fair lottery win. So, worlds in which *S* wins the lottery because it was rigged in her favor aren't relevant to the targeted event.

While modal theorists agree that luck's chanciness condition should be defined in modal terms, they differ in how they spell out the exact relationship between the actual world, possible worlds, and luck. Because of this there are three extant versions of the modal account, that is, proportional, distance, and depth-based views.

Proportional theorists (for example Levy, 2011; Pritchard, 2005) hold that we should view the luckiness of an event in terms "of the proportion of close possible worlds in which it would fail to occur—the larger the proportion of such close possible worlds is, the luckier the event" (Broncano-Berrocal, 2016). As Levy puts it:

Event *E* is chancy if it occurs in the actual world at t^* , but fails to occur in a *large enough* proportion of possible worlds obtainable by making no more than a small change to the actual world at t , where t is a temporal interval just prior to t^* (Levy, 2011, p. 17, emphasis in original)

But proportional views run into the problem that there are often an infinite number of nearby worlds in which the same event occurs and fails to occur. For example, suppose *S* wins a game of Russian roulette in which there's one bullet in the revolver. While the proportional theorist wants to say that *S* is lucky because in 1/6 nearby

worlds S loses at Russian roulette, there are an infinite number of nearby worlds—neither one nor a finite number—in which S loses and an infinite number of nearby worlds—neither five nor a finite number—in which S wins. The problem is that proportions require finite numbers but there are an infinite number of nearby worlds. Thus, the proportional view isn't the best way to cash out the relationship between possible worlds, the actual world, and luck.

Pritchard (2014) advocates for a distance-based modal account:

the degree of luck involved varies in line with the modal closeness [that is, distance] of the [nearest] world in which the target event doesn't obtain (but where the initial conditions for that event are kept fixed). We would thus have a *continuum* picture of the luckiness of an event, from very lucky to not (or hardly) lucky at all (p. 600, emphasis in original).

Modal theorists generally agree that if a significant event occurs in the actual world but fails to occur in a nearby world, then the event is a matter of luck. However, distance alone isn't a good way to understand degrees of luck (Hill, 2022a). Consider that there's a nearby world in which one wins the lottery. Once you purchase a ticket, all it takes for you to win is for a few balls to fall in the right way. However, this doesn't make the loser of a fair lottery in the actual world incredibly unlucky. Although playing the lottery is a matter of luck, what the distance view can't account for is that there are millions of combinations of numbers that entail that you lose the lottery but only one specific set of numbers that must hit for you to win the jackpot.

While distance matters, what this case shows is that the depth of worlds in which an event fails to occur is also important. But how can we spell out this idea of modal depth without falling into the same kind of problem as the proportional view? One way is in terms of the density/scarcity of worlds in which the targeted event occurs (Carter & Peterson, 2017).³ Consider that there are infinitely many even numbers and infinitely many prime numbers. Thus, there aren't countably more even than prime numbers. Nevertheless, the even numbers are dense, and the prime numbers are scarce. Suppose you were to try and write down every natural number starting from zero. Furthermore, suppose you kept two additional lists. One for each even number and one for each prime number you encountered. The even numbers are dense. Every other number you write down ends up in the even list. The prime numbers, although infinite, are quite scarce. One must write down more and more numbers on the main list to eventually reach the next prime number. The same kind of point holds for our lottery case. Both winning and losing the lottery are modally fragile. But the worlds in which one loses are dense, and the worlds in which one wins are incredibly scarce. This is why one is very lucky to win the lottery but only a little unlucky to lose.

To summarize, the modal account holds that a significant event is lucky if and only if it's modally fragile. An event is modally fragile if and only if it occurs in the actual world but—when holding the relevant initial conditions for the event fixed—it fails to occur in one or more nearby possible worlds. In contrast, an event is mod-

³One could also use the modal weighted likelihood of the event's occurrence (Church, 2013) or measure theory (Clarke, 2024) to try and spell out the idea of modal depth.

ally robust and non-lucky if and only if it obtains in the actual world and all nearby worlds. Furthermore, both the distance and depth of worlds in which the targeted event fails to occur are relevant for assessing degrees of luck.

I've gone into some detail about the modal account for several reasons. First, my own account of whims, see Sect. 6, involves a modal fragility condition. It also makes use of terms such as modal density and initial conditions. Second, the modal account seems to offer a plausible and interesting account of luck that has been used by some philosophers (for example Peels, 2015; Pritchard, 2005) to resolve puzzles in epistemology and ethics. But Lackey has offered a whim-based counterexample to the modal account. After recapitulating Lackey's view, I'll argue that her counterexample fails. This is important as Lackey's whim-based counterexample is underdiscussed, and the modal account is worth saving.

3 Lackey's whim-based argument against the modal account

Lackey claims that some whimsical events are counterexamples to the modal account. Her argument for this view relies on the following example—let's call it *Paris with Whimsy*:

[S]uppose that, though it is completely out of character for me, I decide on a whim to take advantage of a low airfare and fly to Paris for the weekend. Given my otherwise cautious character combined with the whimsical nature of my decision, I could have easily chosen to do something entirely different for the weekend, such as join my family at the nearby art museum, or catch up on the pile of grading at work. Accordingly, my going to Paris for the weekend is an event that occurs in the actual world but not in a wide class of the nearest relevant possible worlds. (p. 264)

Paris with Whimsy seems whimsical. Lackey's argument from this case is as follows:

- (1) Some whimsical events—such as Lackey's decision to go to Paris and her subsequent trip—are significant (suppose that it's a lifelong dream of Lackey's to see the Eiffel Tower) and modally fragile.
- (2) The modal account holds that if an event is significant and modally fragile, then it's lucky.
- (3) However, Lackey's decision to go to Paris and her subsequent trip to Paris aren't matters of luck.
- (4) Therefore, the modal account is false. Significance and modal fragility aren't jointly sufficient conditions for an event's being lucky.

Let's examine premises (1), (2), and (3).

I agree with Lackey that her decision to fly to Paris and her subsequent trip are significant, modally fragile, and whimsical. Lackey only considers one objection to her argument, that is, that the whimsical events that occur in *Paris with Whimsy* (as

well as all other non-lucky but whimsical events) are modally robust. I agree with her that this is implausible.

Premise (2) is true.⁴ Regardless of which version of the modal account one favors, it seems that Lackey's decision to fly to Paris and subsequent trip are suitably modally fragile. Given the details of the case, the possible worlds in which Lackey decides to, say, catch up on her grading instead of flying to Paris are dense, numerous, close, etc., and because of her decision to grade, she doesn't make it to Paris in these worlds.

The problem with Lackey's argument is that premise (3) is false. Lackey argues that premise (3) is true on the following grounds:

But surely whimsical events are not always a matter of luck. For even if my choosing to go to Paris for the weekend is based on a whim, I am still consciously *choosing* to perform this action and am, therefore, responsible for whatever consequences—either positive or negative—result from it... to regard whimsical events as always being a matter of luck is to confuse what is spontaneous or unpredictable with what is fortuitous or lucky. (p. 264, emphasis in original)

Based on this passage, Lackey seems to accept the following principle:

Conscious Choice Principle: If a person makes a conscious decision, then that decision is non-lucky and that person is responsible for whatever consequences result from his or her actions.

But part of this principle can't be right, that is, the claim that if a person consciously chooses to perform an action, then he or she is responsible for whatever consequences result. Consider the following case, that is, *A Meal to Die For*:

Lackey and two of her friends are dining at a new restaurant. Each of them has narrowed down their options to the same three dishes: the ratatouille, pesto penne, and falafel. On a whim, they each make a different choice of what to order, and this choice is conscious, spontaneous, and modally fragile. In the actual world, Lackey chooses the ratatouille, while her friends choose the other two options. It turns out that the ratatouille is the most delicious dish in the

⁴It's worth noting that Pritchard (2014) denies that luck involves a significance condition. However, Lackey would still claim that *Paris with Whimsy* is a counterexample to Pritchard's modal account since, according to her, her decision to fly to Paris and subsequent trip are modally fragile but non-lucky. Assuming luck does involve a significance condition, some whimsical events may fail to be lucky because they aren't significant. For example, my decision to select the can of soup on my left instead of the otherwise identical can of soup on my right may be whimsical, but it's likely not significant. However, such cases aren't counterexamples to an account of luck that contains a significance condition. This is because such accounts will hold that non-significant, whimsical events are non-lucky. So, if one holds that my whimsical decision in the above soup case is non-lucky because it isn't significant, then some whimsical events are non-lucky. But this is because significance is a necessary condition for luck but not for whimsy. Our concern then will be with cases that involve whimsical events that are significant but putatively non-lucky. For more on luck's significance condition, see Ballantyne (2012) and Hill (2022b).

world, whereas the pesto penne and the falafel aren't only not good eats but are laced with a difficult to detect and deadly poison.

Lackey and her friends each make a conscious choice regarding their orders. But they are not responsible for all outcomes of their decisions or actions. For example, it would be preposterous to hold Lackey's friends responsible for their deaths. Thus, the *Conscious Choice Principle* should be revised to focus only on decisions. Perhaps Lackey should say something like the following:

Revised Conscious Choice Principle: If a person makes a conscious decision to ϕ , then that decision is non-lucky and that person is responsible for deciding in the way he or she has.

Is the *Revised Conscious Choice Principle* true? Perhaps not. Consider *A Meal to Die For*. In ordinary discourse, it seems correct to say that Lackey's decision is a matter of good luck (that is, it's lucky for Lackey that she chose the ratatouille), whereas her friends' decisions are a matter of bad luck (that is, it's unlucky for Lackey's friends that they chose the pesto penne and falafel). We could even imagine Lackey saying something like, "I sure am lucky that I decided to have the ratatouille! After all, I easily could've picked otherwise." However, Lackey could reply that we've misidentified where the luck is in this example. She could say that it's the *result* of her and her friends' decisions that's a matter of luck, that is, that the food they ate was delicious or poisoned. It's not lucky that they made the decisions that they did.

Is it true that significant, whimsical, and modally fragile *decisions* (such as Lackey's decisions in *Paris with Whimsy* and *A Meal to Die For*) are non-lucky? I don't share Lackey's intuition about these kinds of cases. Remember that luck is typically defined in terms of significance and chance. But how Lackey decides in these cases seems to be a matter of chance. Although Lackey decided to go to Paris and order the ratatouille, she—given the whimsical nature of these cases—very easily could have decided otherwise and gone to the art museum with her family and ordered the pesto penne. Thus, since these decisions are significant and chancy, they are lucky.⁵

But suppose one is unconvinced by this argument or still has the lurking suspicion that Lackey is correct and that conscious choices are non-lucky. A fair question to ask such a person is why he or she views such cases as non-lucky? As we've seen in our discussion of the *Conscious Choice Principle*, Lackey seems to give two reasons in

⁵A worry here is that I'm begging the question. I can't argue that Lackey's decision is chancy because it's modally fragile as the point of Lackey's example is that the fact that an event is significant and modally fragile isn't sufficient for its being lucky. But I don't mean to assume that the relevant sense of chance in these cases is modal fragility. From a probabilistic perspective these cases are chancy too, that is, they have a probability of less than 1. Furthermore, as I'll argue in Sect. 5, these decisions are also chancy in the sense that they involve some absence of control. Of course, it's possible that modal, probability, and control-based accounts of luck are all wrong! In fact, Lackey argues against control and modal accounts. However, Lackey isn't an error theorist about luck. For example, she believes that accidentally discovering buried treasure is lucky. But then what is different about paradigmatic lucky cases (for example, accidentally discovering buried treasure) and whimsical, chancy decisions? Perhaps the relevant difference is that whimsical decisions are consciously chosen and that you can be responsible for such decisions. But I'll argue in the next two sections that these differences don't necessarily eliminate luck.

support of her view, that is, because she makes a conscious choice and because she's responsible for her decision. I'll argue in the next two sections that these factors don't make modally fragile, significant, and whimsical decisions non-lucky.

4 Luck, whims, and responsibility

It's often thought that there's a tight connection between claims about luck and responsibility. Perhaps then the reason why Lackey's decision in *Paris with Whimsy* is non-lucky is because it's a decision that she's responsible for. This reasoning could be spelled out as follows:

- (1) We can clearly be responsible for some of our whimsical decisions such as Lackey's choice in *Paris with Whimsy*.
- (2) But one can't be responsible for lucky decisions.
- (3) Thus, Lackey's decision in *Paris with Whimsy* is non-lucky.
- (4) But according to the modal account, Lackey's decision is lucky.
- (5) Therefore, we should reject the modal account.

I agree that Lackey is responsible for her choice in *Paris with Whimsy*. However, premise (2) is suspect. The idea behind premise (2) can be recapitulated via the following principle:

Responsibility Luck Principle: S can be responsible for deciding to ϕ , and for the consequences of ϕ -ing, only if it's not a matter of luck that S decided to ϕ .⁶

But the *Responsibility Luck Principle* is false. The plausibility of this principle relies on an imprecision regarding the word 'luck'. It's true that if it's *just a matter of luck* whether an agent ϕ s, then the agent isn't responsible for ϕ -ing. Such an event is completely outside of the agent's control. However, a decision could involve some luck, and I see no reason why any amount of luck whatsoever eliminates responsibility. Luck and responsibility come in degrees.

For example, suppose that a person decides to give a sizeable donation to a worthwhile charity and does, in fact, do so. But suppose that this agent's decision is modally fragile. There are some relevant nearby worlds in which she doesn't decide to donate; however, she decides to donate and does so in a dense selection of the relevant, nearby worlds. In such a case, this person seems praiseworthy for donating in the actual world even though there's some luck involved concerning her decision and donation. She may not be as praiseworthy as someone who—when placed in her position—always donates. After all, she has a worse character. But she's responsible for her decision and an apt candidate for praise. Her decision involves an element of chance but isn't random in a way that undermines responsibility. Conversely, suppose a person is in a situation such that she's morally required to give some of her time or money to a cause. Moreover, this person doesn't help in the actual world but

⁶I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this formulation of the *Responsibility Luck Principle*.

does help in a scarce selection of the relevant, nearby worlds. Such a person seems blameworthy but perhaps not as blameworthy as someone who doesn't help in any relevant, nearby worlds. After all, such a person has a slightly better character than someone who never donates.⁷

What these cases show is that *perhaps* luck can *mitigate* or *show the extent to which* an agent is responsible for his or her decisions; however, unless it's just a matter of luck that an agent ϕ s, the agent can still be responsible for ϕ -ing. The mere presence of any amount of luck doesn't negate responsibility. If this is right, then the *Responsibility Luck Principle* is false. Moreover, we can rightfully claim that Lackey is responsible for her decision in *Paris with Whimsy* even though her decision involves an element of luck.

But perhaps this argument isn't fair to Lackey. After all, she doesn't explicitly endorse the *Responsibility Luck Principle*. Maybe her point could be better put as follows. The notion of luck that relates to responsibility is an important or perhaps the most important notion of luck. But the modal account doesn't capture that notion. This is because one can be responsible for modally fragile, whimsical decisions. Hence, while the modal account might capture some notion of luck, it doesn't capture the notion that bears on philosophically interesting questions about responsibility. Thus, the modal account is unsatisfactory.⁸

I agree that modal fragility alone doesn't settle issues about responsibility. But I don't think that this makes the modal account unsatisfactory. What the modal theorist is trying to do is to give a general account of what luck is. Such an account should be able to distinguish between lucky and non-lucky events. It should also be able to explain why some events are luckier than others. But the modal theorist isn't trying to give an account that's solely concerned with capturing the kind of luck that eliminates responsibility. There are many kinds of luck, not all of which have this property.

As an analogous case, consider the role that luck plays in epistemology. Some kinds of luck undermine one's ability to know, for example, the kind of luck found in Gettier's (1963) original cases.⁹ But other kinds of luck don't have this property. As Riggs (2007) writes:

Luck varies both in degree and in kind. If I narrowly avoid being crushed by a falling safe because of a freakishly strong gust of wind, everything I believe truly afterward is a matter of luck, simply because it is a matter of luck that I am alive to have any beliefs at all! But it is uncontroversial that luck of this sort does not undermine one's ability to know things. (p. 330)

Some may think that this is an overstatement. Perhaps this lucky incident wouldn't go on to infect all an agent's future beliefs as lucky. But there are other examples

⁷For a more in-depth analysis of such cases and luck-based arguments against responsibility, see Hill (2022c).

⁸I'd like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this argument.

⁹This kind of knowledge-undermining luck is often called veritic luck, whereas evidential luck is often thought not to undermine knowledge. For accounts of veritic and evidential luck, see Engel (1992) and Pritchard (2005).

of more confined instances of luck that don't undermine knowledge. For example, suppose by chance I happen to look under my desk while taking a math test. Written under the desk are the formulas I need to solve a problem that I was struggling with, and I recognize that these formulas are correct. In such a case, it's a matter of luck that I have the formulas that I need to solve the problem. It's an open question whether it's also a matter of luck that I can solve the problem, that is, whether luck transfers. But regardless of where we identify the luck, nearly all epistemologists agree that after correctly solving the problem I know what the answer is. Thus, the kind of luck in this case is different than the kind of luck found in traditional Gettier cases in that it doesn't have the property of undermining knowledge. But the modal theorist still holds that the kind of luck found in both cases is modally fragile. There's just some additional feature that differentiates between knowledge-undermining and non-knowledge-undermining luck.

Thus, I see no reason why the modal theorist shouldn't hold his or her ground and say that all lucky events are significant and modally fragile. Some instances of luck negate responsibility, whereas others don't. But these instances of responsibility eliminating luck have some additional feature—perhaps the complete absence of agential control.¹⁰

5 Luck, control, and whimsical decisions

Perhaps the reason why Lackey's decision in *Paris with Whimsy* is non-lucky is because it's a conscious choice that she makes and, as such, is suitably under her control. Control theorists about luck hold that a significant event is lucky if and only if it involves a significant lack of agential control. Events that are under an agent's total control or that are suitably under an agent's control are non-lucky. For example, in most circumstances, it's not a matter of luck—or if it is the amount of luck present is negligible—that I'm able to raise my right hand. Granted control admits of degrees, but some might argue that Lackey's decision in *Paris with Whimsy* is suitably under her control such that it's non-lucky. After all, it's her decision.

Is Lackey's decision to fly to Paris under her control to the extent that we should no longer view her decision as involving an element of luck? It's true that this is a decision that she makes. But does the fact that Lackey chooses to fly to Paris instead of her other options mean that there's no luck involved with her decision?

While many of our conscious choices are non-lucky, Lackey's decision does involve luck. This is because of the chancy nature of the case. Now, if someone had been carefully planning a trip to Paris such that she was going to purchase a ticket once they went on sale at a certain low price, then I would admit that there would be little to no luck involved with such a person's decision. But Lackey doesn't have any kind of initial plan or aim to go to Paris. Instead, she spontaneously decides to go to Paris, and her reasons for doing so don't entail or even make it very likely that she will make such a decision. This is shown by the fact that in a dense selection of

¹⁰ Given Nagel's (1979) original discussion of moral luck this seems quite plausible, that is, that the absence of a certain kind of control is what the moral luck debate is really about.

nearby worlds she doesn't decide to go to Paris. The point being that just because one decided to ϕ , it doesn't follow that one's decision to ϕ was under one's control such that it doesn't involve luck. Lackey's choice can't be non-lucky merely because it was consciously chosen.

To drive home this point, imagine a scenario in which you had no aim or plan to ϕ , but you just suddenly decide to ϕ , and this decision, itself, is unlikely to occur. It would be incorrect to claim that in this scenario there wasn't a significant lack of control regarding your decision to ϕ and whether you did, in fact, ϕ . You easily could have decided not to ϕ . Thus, there's an element of chance regarding one's decision, hence one's decision involves a significant lack of control. However, as we've already seen, this doesn't mean that one isn't to some degree responsible for ϕ -ing.

To summarize the debate so far, decisions that are significant, modally fragile, and whimsical seem lucky, and Lackey's reasons for thinking otherwise are lacking. However, someone might argue that there are some whimsical events that are modally robust and lucky. In the next section, I provide my own account of what whims are. If this account is correct, then all whimsical decisions are modally fragile.

6 An account of whims

Whimsical decisions are definable in terms of two necessary and jointly sufficient conditions: spontaneity and modal fragility. I'll say a few things about what I mean by these conditions and give an account of whimsical outcomes.

Whimsical decisions involve an element of spontaneity. However, whimsical decisions are decisions. They occur in part because of how an agent weighs her reasons. Thus, whimsical decisions are spontaneous not because they are random or arbitrary but because they involve a sudden choice or a curtailed ending to one's decision-making process. Of course, all decision-making processes that result in a decision have an endpoint in which a decision is made. But for whimsical decisions, this endpoint is sudden or curtailed. For example, I might suddenly decide to try a new coffee shop or restaurant that catches my eye without carrying out extensive research regarding my options. In this way, whimsical decisions can be sudden or rash. Or suppose I'm presented with a box of assorted chocolates and there are other people around who also desire chocolate, so I need to make a choice. I have certain preferences, for example, dark chocolate, caramel, and coconut are all delicious; but cherry cream is gross, and marshmallow is mediocre. White chocolate is a no go. I also have certain beliefs about the situation, for example, that cherry cream chocolates tend to be circular and that these three chocolates are made of dark chocolate because of their color. But due to time restraints and social pressures, I can't be certain which filling is in the chocolate I choose. I end up picking one out of several options that seems to fit what I'm looking for. Here my choice is spontaneous because it involves a curtailed decision-making process. I had several viable options and ended up making an abrupt and decisive selection of a particular chocolate.

It's worth noting four common ways in which a decision can fail to be spontaneous. First, decisions that are the result of carefully laid plans aren't spontaneous. Suppose the government desires to improve local infrastructure and spends years

gathering research on how to best achieve this goal. It would be wrong to think of a decision that was years in the making and carefully researched as spontaneous or whimsical. Second, when an agent already has a strong aim or desire for some end and that end becomes easily achievable, then it's not a matter of spontaneity or whimsy that the agent decides to pursue that end. When one decides to ϕ on a whim, one is, in a sense, realizing that one desires to ϕ or, at the least, making a choice such that this is the case. Third, coercion can vitiate whimsy. The pressure of a waiter coming back to my table isn't enough to subvert a whimsical decision. However, if one's choice of what to order was made at gun point, then this decision, although it may be chancy, is no longer spontaneous or whimsical but is forced. Fourth, manipulation can eliminate whimsy.¹¹ I may think that my decision to go parasailing is whimsical, but this is false if my decision is the result of brainwashing or some other agent's subtle but controlling influence. Thus, planning, the presence of easily achievable aims or desires, coercion, and manipulation are inimical to whimsy.

However, there's more to whimsy than spontaneity; whimsical decisions are also modally fragile. This is because whimsical decisions are carefree or flippant. Such choices aren't bound by convincing reasons. Nor are they the product of circumstances that all but guarantee that one acts in a certain way. For example, suppose that one decides to try a new coffee shop on a whim. It seems that if this decision really is whimsical, then one could have easily decided to do something else. Perhaps one could have gone home or to one's usual coffee shop instead. A modal fragility condition is thus a useful way to capture the idea that whimsical decisions could have easily been different.

My view then is that for a decision to be whimsical it must be modally fragile. Here we can make use of our previous discussion regarding the modal account of luck and modal fragility, initial conditions, and density/scarcity. First to assess whether a decision is whimsical we will need a description of the relevant event. This description needs to pick out the kind of decision that we are concerned with in the actual world. We may also need to pick out a few initial conditions to hold constant across worlds, for example, that the agent exists and isn't being manipulated. With these factors in place, we can then see if the agent's decision is modally fragile. If a spontaneous decision in the actual world fails to occur in one or more nearby relevant possible worlds, then it's whimsical. But modal fragility admits of degrees. If a spontaneous decision occurs in the actual world and all but a scarce selection of nearby worlds, then it's, technically speaking, whimsical. However, because one's decision occurs in a dense selection of nearby worlds, it may sound odd to describe it as whimsical. This is similar to how one is unlucky to lose the lottery (lotteries are matters of luck) even though one is nearly certain to lose a lottery, and, as such, we wouldn't countenance someone who bemoaned his or her awful luck regarding a lottery loss. In contrast, more paradigmatic cases of whimsy will involve spontaneous decisions that fail to occur in a dense selection of nearby worlds. Lastly, if a decision occurs in the actual world and all nearby worlds (that is, it's modally robust), then it's non-whimsical.

Now that we have an account of whimsical decisions, we can also give an account of whimsical outcomes. A whimsical outcome is an event that's the successful result

¹¹ For more on spontaneity and manipulation, see Gingerich (2022).

of a whimsical decision, and such outcomes are whimsical because of this fact. For example, suppose Lackey decides to fly to Paris and visit the Eiffel Tower on a whim. If she does, in fact, fly to Paris and visit the Eiffel Tower, then this would be a whimsical outcome. Now the degree of modal fragility for whimsical outcomes can vary. But if a whimsical outcome occurs in the actual world, there will usually—but not necessarily—be at least one nearby possible world in which this outcome doesn't occur as the agent in this possible world doesn't make the same whimsical decision as in the actual world. This is the case because whimsical decisions are modally fragile. Furthermore, whimsical outcomes may fail to occur for other reasons. For example, Lackey may decide to fly to Paris but not do so because of airplane troubles. I may also decide on a whim that I'm going to prove Goldbach's Conjecture but be utterly incapable of doing so due to my limited mathematical acumen or because Goldbach's Conjecture is false.

7 Objections to my account of whims

I'm now going to consider six objections to my account of whims.

Objection 1: *Isn't your account terribly vague? For example, suppose someone had a pre-existing desire to go parasailing but no real plan of how to do so. But one day this person decides to go parasailing, and this decision only fails to occur in a scarce selection of worlds, and it's debatable whether these worlds are close to the actual world. Under your account, it's unclear if this person's decision is whimsical. But shouldn't an account of whims be able to give us an exact verdict on whether an event is whimsical?*

My account of whims is vague. However, this is a strength and not a weakness because our notion of whims is, itself, vague. First, my account gets the paradigmatic cases right. A spontaneous decision to go parasailing that fails to occur in a dense selection of relevant, nearby worlds is clearly whimsical, whereas a decision that's modally robust and the result of a well-researched plan is clearly non-whimsical. Second, although aspects of my account (for example, spontaneity and what counts as a nearby world) can be vague, this helps explain why there are borderline cases in which our intuitions regarding whimsy vary. But my theory predicts this and can explain why we think that the above example is a borderline case.

Objection 2: *Aren't there counterexamples to your view? Consider the following case—let's call it Modally Robust Parasailer:*

Perhaps some spontaneous people act on whims that are stable across relevant nearby possible worlds. For instance, suppose that Craig's particular spontaneity makes it very likely that he will call into work [sick], and a recent documentary on parasailing that he saw renders it probable that he will attempt this activity in the near future. In such a case, Craig's whimsical act [that is,

skipping work to go parasailing] may nonetheless be counterfactually robust. (Lackey, 2008, p. 265)

In this example, Craig performs a whimsical act (that is, skipping work to go parasailing) that's—contrary to your account—modally robust.

I don't think that *Modally Robust Parasailer* is a counterexample to my account. First, is it really the case that Craig's decision to skip work and go parasailing is modally robust? It seems that there are nearby worlds in which this event doesn't occur. For example, aren't there nearby worlds in which Craig skips work but does some other fun but non-parasailing activity instead, or nearby worlds in which he goes to work and parasails some other time, or nearby worlds in which he receives a call from his boss telling him that he must show up to work today? Given the details of the case, it's implausible that this event occurs in all nearby possible worlds.

But suppose that Lackey gives another example in which it really does seem that Craig will decide to go parasailing (or whatever the event may be) in all nearby possible worlds. The problem with this response is that if it really is the case that Craig decides to go parasailing in all nearby worlds, then I no longer have the intuition that his decision is whimsical. Instead, it seems that Craig has a compulsion regarding parasailing that's antithetical to whimsy. Imagine that in all nearby worlds you decide to ϕ . Even if this decision is spontaneous, it's strange to view it as whimsical. Rather, such events are certain to occur and might be more accurately described as either being under an agent's total control or as matters of fate.

Perhaps some readers may object that my above response comes too close to saying that Craig's decision doesn't count as a whim because it contradicts my own view of whims. In response, let me try and motivate my view in another way. Suppose you are Craig's friend, and you know that he will skip work and go parasailing. In this scenario, would you really say that Craig will go parasailing on a whim? Craig's decision might seem whimsical *from his perspective*, because *he* didn't know ahead of time that he would choose to do this, but if you're his friend and you do know this, then it's a bit weird *for you* to describe his decision as whimsical. The point being that from an objective viewpoint in which it's known that Craig will decide to go parasailing in all nearby worlds, it seems correct to hold that his decision isn't whimsical.¹²

Objection 3: *I find your response to the Craig case unpersuasive. As a normal person (as opposed to a demon or something) I only know what other people are going to do if those things aren't whims, since their decisions would have to be quite predictable. But if we imagine a case where an oracle simply informs me that Craig is going to skip work and go parasailing—something I otherwise wouldn't have predicted they'd do—then I think I'd say *precisely* that it's something he's going to do on a whim.*¹³

First, I'm skeptical that one knows that p if one's evidence is that an oracle told you that p. However, let's deal with the case on its own terms. Note that for Craig's spon-

¹² I would like to thank Daniel Pallies for this point.

¹³ I'd like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this objection.

taneous decision to be non-whimsical—on my view—it must be modally robust. So, for the objection to work, one must not only know that Craig will decide to go parasailing in the actual world but that there are no nearby worlds in which this event fails to occur. In other words, one must know that it's not an easy possibility that Craig could do anything other than decide to go parasailing. But whimsy seems to involve a carefree and flippant component. Contrary to this notion, Craig is so compelled to decide to go parasailing that he couldn't have easily done otherwise. Maybe intuitions vary, but I see such resoluteness in one's decision making as antithetical to whimsy.

Objection 4: *Your analysis of whimsical decisions entails that there's no such thing as whimsy. This is because the actual world is deterministic, so all nearby possible worlds are deterministic too. But in deterministic worlds, when an agent is presented with the same set of reasons, they will always make the same choice. Thus, under your account, so-called whimsical decisions are modally robust and not whimsical at all.*

I think this objection confuses necessitarianism with determinism, but it's an open possibility that whimsy doesn't exist. If it's really the case that all our decisions are matters of fate, then I think that our positive ascriptions of whimsy in the actual world are false. But what I'm attempting to do in this paper is give a metaphysical account of what a whimsical event would look like were such a thing to exist. The fact that my account can explain under what circumstances whimsical decisions are possible is an advantage of my analysis. Moreover, nothing I've said entails that we have to be concretists about possible worlds. Modal talk is just a useful way to think about these issues.

Objection 5: *What about Frankfurtian demon cases? Suppose we modify Paris with Whimsy such that if Lackey doesn't decide to go to Paris, then a demon will interfere and make it the case that she will decide to go to Paris. Moreover, this demon will, if necessary, intervene such that Lackey's decision results in her visiting Paris in all nearby worlds.*

First, if the demon does interfere, then Lackey's "decision" isn't whimsical. This is because her "choice" is manipulated/controlled/coerced by outside forces in a way that's inimical to whimsy. Furthermore, the outcome of her going to Paris can't be whimsical since it's not the result of a whimsical decision. However, one might object that if the demon doesn't interfere, then Lackey's decision is still whimsical but—contrary to my account of whimsy—there will be no nearby worlds in which she doesn't decide to go to Paris.

I agree that Lackey's decision in the non-interference case is whimsical and that her going to Paris will be a whimsical event so long as her trip is still the result of her decision (note that if Lackey ended up in Paris because she was kidnapped, things would be different). However, I disagree that there are no nearby worlds in which the targeted event fails to occur. The relevant targeted event is that *Lackey, herself, decides to go to Paris without any interference from the demon*. Just as there's a relevant difference between a fair lottery win and a rigged or manipulated lottery win,

there's a difference between a non-interfered with Lackey deciding to go to Paris and a manipulated Lackey deciding to go to Paris. These are different events. But once the relevant event is properly described, we can see that Lackey's decision in the actual world is whimsical. This is because there are nearby worlds in which the demon interferes, and in these worlds the targeted event fails to obtain.

Objection 6: *Within the moral responsibility literature, many people have written about out-of-character actions, which whims are often claimed to be. But you don't deeply engage with this literature.*¹⁴

I don't think whims involve the concept of character. I'll now consider several counterexamples/problems with this view.

The following example from Lackey aims to show that the fact that a decision is out-of-character isn't sufficient for its being whimsical:

[W]e can imagine that my decision to fly to Paris for the weekend wildly deviates from my otherwise cautious character, but that it is neither whimsical nor lacking in counterfactual robustness. Perhaps, for instance, I have recently suffered the tragic loss of a loved one, and a weekend trip to Paris, though uncharacteristic, is a way of dealing with this tragedy that I am quite likely to pursue under the circumstances, thereby being such that it occurs in both the actual world and in a wide class of the nearest relevant possible worlds. (pp. 264-265)

Perhaps a character apologist would respond that while it would be *uncharacteristic* of Lackey to fly to Paris, it wouldn't be *out-of-character* for her to do so. 'Uncharacteristic' and 'out-of-character' aren't synonyms. But a worry here is that 'out-of-character' hasn't been sufficiently well-characterized for us to know what to think about Lackey's case and the relation between out-of-character actions and whims.¹⁵

But even if Lackey's example fails, there are many other cases of clearly out-of-character actions that aren't whimsical. Suppose Alison is almost always late. Being on time is out-of-character for her. Does this mean that every time Alison is on time that this event is whimsical? This strikes me as odd and allows for too many instances of whimsical action. Furthermore, consider the case of the prodigal son who returns or the moral reprobate who does the right thing. Acting out of a strong moral reason is out-of-character for such a person, but if that reason carries the day, then his or her behavior may well be modally robust and non-whimsical. Lastly, consider the case of a person with a brain tumor. A brain tumor may lead a person to make many out-of-character actions. But these decisions and outcomes aren't whimsical. They are attributable to the brain tumor, not a whimsical decision.

¹⁴For work on out-of-character actions and the "whim problem", see Arpaly and Schroeder (1999) and Lippert-Rasmussen (2003). For a discussion of whims and moral responsibility, see Faraci and Shoemaker (2010) and Shoemaker (2015a, b).

¹⁵I would like to thank David Shoemaker for these points.

An even stronger case can be made that an event can be whimsical but not out-of-character. This is because spontaneous or tempestuous people frequently act on whims. Lackey gives the following example:

Craig's waking up one day, calling in sick to work, and going parasailing—an activity he has never before thought about attempting—is whimsical, though quite consistent with his spontaneous character. (p. 265)

The point here is that some people habitually act on whims, and, for them, such a choice isn't out-of-character. However, this doesn't necessarily make such a person's decision (for example, to go parasailing) non-whimsical. Moreover, Lackey notes that people may be prone to act on a whim within specific contexts. For example, when—after narrowing down one's options—one chooses on a whim what to order at a restaurant or watch on Netflix. Such events aren't out-of-character but can still be whimsical, and my account gets these cases right. When one decides on a whim what to watch on Netflix, one's choice is spontaneous and modally fragile.

This isn't to say that discussions of character and out-of-character actions aren't important within the moral responsibility literature. However, character doesn't seem to be a concept that we should invoke in our analysis of whims.

8 Conclusion

I've argued that whimsical decisions aren't counterexamples to the modal account. I've also given an account of what whims are. Whimsical decisions are definable in terms of two necessary and jointly sufficient conditions: spontaneity and modal fragility. Whimsical outcomes are the successful results of whimsical decisions. Lastly, I've made a few points about luck, responsibility, and whims. The fact that a decision is made on a whim isn't exculpatory, although there may be many other reasons why an agent isn't responsible for a whimsical event. Furthermore, a person can be responsible for an event that involves some amount of luck.

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