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The Myth of Luck: Philosophy, Fate, and Fortune. By STEVEN HALES. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. Pp. xii + 222. Price £22.46.)

Steven Hales' book is a work of popular philosophy that covers a wide range of topics from the Myth of Er to the Pixar film *Finding Nemo*. A merit of the book is that it is easy to read. My review will focus on the main philosophical thesis of the book, that is, that "luck is no more than a persistent and troubling illusion. There is no such thing as luck" (p. 1). Luck is typically defined in terms of two necessary and jointly sufficient conditions: significance and chance. But this definition is incomplete, as these conditions are, themselves, obscure, for example, there are many ways of thinking about chance. Philosophers have defined luck's chanciness condition in terms of improbability, modal fragility, and the absence of control or skill. Hales argues that all these ways of thinking about luck are wrong and that we ought to be error theorists about luck. However, Hales' counterexamples against current theories of luck fail and are uncharitable.

In chapter 2, Hales reviews probability-based accounts of luck. According to Hales, probability theorists hold that an event is lucky if and only if it is improbable and matters in some way (p. 34). Hales claims that, according to the probability account, you are not lucky to survive playing a round of Russian Roulette when there is one bullet in the revolver as "The chance of winning is $5/6$ —it is very likely that you will win Russian Roulette, and so not a matter of luck at all" (p. 67). This is incorrect; Hales is attacking a straw person. Probability theorists hold that an event fails to be a matter of luck if and only if it is either non-chancy (that is, has a probability of 1) or non-significant. Degrees of luck can then vary depending on the extent to which the event in question is improbable and significant. Thus, according to the probability theorist, winning at Russian Roulette is incredibly lucky because there was a $1/6$

chance that you could have shot yourself and whether you shoot yourself could be a matter of life or death (that is, is highly significant).

The main problem for probability theorists is in cashing out what they mean by ‘probability’. There are many different interpretations of probability each with their own set of problems. The only version of the probability account that Hales critiques is frequentism (pp. 48-49). It would have been interesting to read why Hales rejects views that define chance in terms of epistemic probabilities.

In chapter 3, Hales gives two criticisms of the modal account, which defines the chanciness element in lucky cases in terms of modal fragility. First, he holds that “the notion of a metric of close and distant worlds may not make a lot of sense” (p. 68-69). Hales goes as far as to say that “even worlds with alternate laws of nature are not distant ones; one iota of change in the facts and we are there” (p. 72).

Hales’ second objection is that modal accounts cannot handle lucky necessities. Here is one of Hales’ putative counterexamples:

The logical bandit points a gun at you and tells you that unless you correctly answer a logic puzzle, he’s going to steal your wallet. He gives you this poser [the details of the puzzle aren’t relevant ...] You are horrible at this sort of thing, and ... make a wild guess and say “it’s 2/3.” The logic bandit, who could tell you were just guessing, smiles ruefully and replies, “you’re lucky the correct answer is indeed 2/3,” and vanishes into the night. (pp. 73-74)

According to Hales, the modal account “cannot accommodate lucky necessities, since necessary truths are modally robust, then they can’t be lucky, and yet” there are cases in which they are (p. 75). But Hales has misidentified where the luck is in his examples. It is not a matter of luck that the correct answer is 2/3 anymore than it is a matter of luck that $1 + 1 = 2$. The truth of logical necessities is not a matter of luck. What is lucky is that your wild guess happened to be correct,

and this is modally fragile. There are nearby worlds in which you guess 1/2 and lose your wallet. This is what makes your escape from the bandit in the actual world lucky.

In chapter 3, Hales also criticizes control-based accounts of luck, which define luck in terms of significance and the absence of control or skill. Hales talks as if control is an all or nothing concept, “If we lower the benchmark for control to merely probable success, it gives the result that the best baseball hitter in history was *just lucky* every time he made contact with the ball” (p. 84, emphasis added). But control admits of degrees. Ty Cobb is one of the most skilled hitters in history. This is reflected by his high batting average. But Cobb’s successes and failures are not *just lucky*. They involve a mixture of control and luck.

Hales also objects that control-based theories risk “collapsing into one of the rival theories”, that is, the modal or probability account (p. 84). The word ‘collapse’ is hyperbolic. What is wrong with hybrid accounts of luck that involve multiple necessary conditions, for example, significance, the absence of control, and an improbability condition? Moreover, many control theorists are not concerned with giving an account of luck that handles everything we mean by the concept. Instead, they are using the term in a stipulative way to try and understand puzzles about moral luck. But according to Hales, “If there is anything to luck, it is something univocal. There’s not one kind of luck for moral luck and a different sort of luck for epistemic luck. There’s, at most, just one kind” (p. 161). Perhaps all lucky events are significant and chancy, but I see no reason why Hales’ univocal claim must be true. Although both moral and epistemic luck (topics which Hales covers in chapters 4 and 5) are significant and chancy, they might be significant or chancy for subjects in different ways.

Hales argues in the last chapter of his book that we should be error theorists about luck in part because our judgments about luck are subject to framing effects and influenced by one’s

level of optimism. Our subjective judgments about lucky cases can sometimes be influenced by such factors. But this does not mean that luck, itself, is. Consider that whether a doctor recommends treatment A or B can be influenced by framing effects. But this does not mean that there is not a fact of the matter about which treatment is preferable. Similarly, there may also be a meaningful distinction between subjective versus objective luck.

One last problem is that Hales' own conceptual commitments entail a belief in luck. According to Hales, recognizing that luck does not exist "will help us focus our energies on related phenomena that *are* real, like fortune and chance" (p. 1). Later, he reaffirms that "Fortune and chance may be real, but luck is not. Luck is a cognitive illusion" (p. 195). But philosophers define luck in terms of significance and chance, and, as the above quotes show, Hales admits that chance is real. He also holds that fortune is real. But fortune or misfortune entail significance. An event is fortunate for you only if it is in some way good for you, and an event is unfortunate for you only if it is in some way bad for you. Therefore, unless all chancy events also happen to be non-significant, Hales must admit that luck is real. Hales will likely object that he just spent an entire book arguing that luck is not defined in terms of anything and that there are many ordinary luck attributions that have nothing to do with chanciness. But the fact that some folk attributions about luck have nothing to do with some conceptions of chance, is not much of a reason to give up analyzing one of our most important concepts.

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