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3 GRECO ON RELIABILISM AND EPISTEMIC LUCK

5
 6 ABSTRACT. I outline Greco's response to the Pyrrhonian challenge to
 7 epistemic externalist theories of knowledge and offer two points of criticism.
 8 I also argue, however, that there is an account of epistemic luck available
 9 which can cast some light on the dispute that Greco is concerned with, and
 10 which could, in principle at least, be regarded as being in the spirit of the
 11 proposal that Greco sets out.

12 1.

13 Consider again Ernest Sosa's (1997) commentary on the
 14 Pyrrhonian challenge to epistemic externalist theories like
 15 reliabilism which John Greco (200X) cites:

16 Most would not disdain the good fortune of those who strike it rich in
 17 the dark, but it is no doubt a lesser state than that of finding gold guided
 18 by good eyesight in clear light. Enlightened discovery is more admirable
 19 than is any comparable luck that may reward groping in the dark. For
 20 one thing, enlightened discovery is success attributable to the agent; luck
 21 in the dark is not. (p. 231)

22 What favours reflective over unreflective knowledge? Recall that reflective
 23 acquisition of knowledge is like acquisition of gold in the light, whereas
 24 unreflective acquisition of knowledge is like acquisition of gold in the
 25 dark. In each case the former is distinguished from the latter in being a
 26 more admirable occurrence, and one that so far might be ascribed admir-
 27 ingly to the protagonist, as his doing. (p. 241)

28 The Pyrrhonists reject . . . externalism because it dignifies mere "groping
 29 in the dark" with the title of knowledge. The Pyrrhonists highlight
 30 *enlightened* knowledge, acquired and sustained in awareness of one's epi-
 31 stemic doings. Only this is "knowledge" worthy of the title. (p. 242)

32 Sosa's claim is thus that the Pyrrhonists are right to claim
 33 that mere reliable true belief – however such reliability is to

34 be understood – is insufficient for *bona fide* knowledge, since
 35 *bona fide* knowledge is of its nature cognitive success, which
 36 is not due to luck, whereas reliabilist ‘knowledge’ does not ex-
 37 clude the possibility of lucky cognitive success. What is
 38 required is, instead, what Sosa calls a “perspective” on one’s
 39 reliability, an “awareness of one’s epistemic doings” as Sosa
 40 terms it, which will turn mere unreflective reliable true belief,
 41 which can be lucky, into something reflective, and thus
 42 “enlightened”, which excludes the possibility of luck.

43 It is this claim that Greco takes issue with, arguing that
 44 there is a way of understanding the reliabilist thesis so that it
 45 can avoid the problem of epistemic luck described here in
 46 such a way that there is no need to appeal to a perspective.
 47 Knowledge can therefore be, on Greco’s view, unenlightened.

48 The reliabilist view that Greco has in mind here is agent
 49 reliabilism. In essence, this is a form of process reliabilism
 50 where the class of reliable cognitive processes that can be
 51 knowledge-supporting is restricted to those processes that
 52 make up an agent’s cognitive character – that is, the agent’s
 53 *epistemic virtues*, where this is understood rather broadly as
 54 including the agent’s cognitive faculties. One can get a feel for
 55 what agent reliabilism involves by considering Greco’s
 56 response to Keith Lehrer’s ‘Truetemp’ example, which con-
 57 cerns an agent who unreflectively and reliably forms true
 58 beliefs about the temperature as a result of having a tempu-
 59 comp inserted into his brain. Lehrer’s claim is that the reli-
 60 able true beliefs that result intuitively do not count as
 61 knowledge, and that this decisively counts against the reliabi-
 62 list thesis. Here is Greco’s response:

63 [...] Truetemp does not know, even though his beliefs about the tempera-
 64 ture are reliably produced. [*This is because ..*] Truetemp does not believe
 65 through an ability. On the contrary, it is the computemp that is responsi-
 66 ble for Truetemp’s success, and in a way that makes the success not cred-
 67 itable to him. This also explains why a perspective on his belief would [...] give
 68 Truetemp knowledge [...]. Such a perspective is just what is needed to
 69 make the reliable mechanism and its working internal to agency, and
 70 therefore just what is needed to make Truetemp’s success creditable to
 71 him. It would be a mistake, however, to think that a perspective is always
 72 needed to make reliability and success internal to agency. In general, one’s

73 abilities or powers are appropriately one's own, independently of any per-
74 spective on those abilities or powers. (p. XXX)

75 The key claim here is that all Lehrer has shown is that a
76 bare process reliabilism which places no restriction on the
77 kind of cognitive processes that are knowledge-supporting is
78 unsustainable, not that a more sophisticated version of reliabilism, such as agent reliabilism, is unsustainable. After all, by
79 an agent reliabilist's lights the processes in question, while
80 reliable, would not be knowledge-supporting because they are
81 not processes that make up the agent's cognitive character –
82 it is due to the computemp that Truetemp has reliable true
83 beliefs, not due to him.
84

85 One can also detect in this quotation the general contours
86 of Greco's response to Sosa. The claim is that provided
87 reliabilism is properly understood, then one does not need a
88 perspective in order to gain knowledge. Instead, all that is
89 important is that one forms one's reliable beliefs as a result of
90 one's cognitive character, regardless of whether the beliefs so
91 formed involve a perspective on one's reliability, and are thus
92 enlightened. Greco hammers this point home in the following
93 passage:

94 Consider now a person who grasps gold in the dark, but reliably, and
95 through an ability to do so. Perhaps he can smell gold, or can feel its special weight. Should that be considered "mere lucky success"? Not at all,
96 and precisely because it is success through an ability. Suppose the person
97 cannot explain how he reliably finds gold in the dark. Or suppose he has
98 no beliefs about his reliability (perhaps he is too modest, or confused, or
99 just unreflective about such things). That does not count against his having
100 the ability in the first place, or against credit for success through that
101 ability. No more than it counts against credit for the virtuous athlete,
102 when she is modest, or confused, or unreflective about her abilities. Likewise, success through intellectual virtue is creditable to the believer, and
103 independently of the believer's perspective on those virtues. (p. XXX)
104
105

106 2.

107 Although I'm generally sympathetic to the line that Greco
108 takes here – I think he's right, for example, that reliabilism

109 has far more resources available to it than many of its detractors
 110 recognize – there are a number of points on which one
 111 could take issue. I note two here.

112 To begin with, it is far from clear how one is to go about
 113 determining whether a particular reliable process forms part
 114 of an agent’s cognitive character. The Truetemp case is relatively
 115 uncontroversial in this regard in that it is explicitly part
 116 of the story that the computemp has been *inserted* into the
 117 agent’s brain, and implicitly part of the story that this inser-
 118 tion was relatively recent. Compare this case, however, with
 119 the kind of brain lesion case envisaged by Alvin Plantinga
 120 (1993, p. 199) in which an agent has a brain lesion which, as
 121 it happens, leads him to reliably form a true belief about the
 122 fact that he has a brain lesion. Although one might count
 123 this as a cognitive malfunction in the first instance, and thus
 124 not part of the agent’s cognitive character – which is how
 125 Greco (e.g., 1999) initially responds to the example – it is far
 126 from clear, as Greco (2003, p. 261) later admits, that if such
 127 a brain lesion were to remain in the long-term that it should
 128 not be treated as part of one’s cognitive character. Or, to put
 129 the point another way, if we don’t treat the brain lesion, so
 130 described, as part of the agent’s cognitive character, then why
 131 do we treat other cognitive traits, like our perceptual facul-
 132 ties, as part of an agent’s cognitive character?¹

133 A second problem one might raise for Greco’s proposal
 134 concerns the fact that, even by Greco’s own lights, appealing
 135 to the agent’s cognitive character won’t suffice to provide one
 136 with a fully-fledged theory of knowledge. This is because one
 137 cannot in this way deal with Gettier-style cases, since one can
 138 imagine cases in which the agent’s true belief is ‘Gettiered’
 139 even though it is nevertheless a product of the agent’s cog-
 140 nitive character. Linda Zagzebski (1996, pp. 285–7), for **I**
 141 instance, describes a case in which an agent forms a true belief
 142 that her husband is in the room by employing her reliable
 143 cognitive faculties, but where the belief is Gettiered because,
 144 unbeknownst to our protagonist, the person she is looking at
 145 is his brother (who looks just like him), with her husband in
 146 fact sitting just behind him. What is odd about the fact that

147 agent reliabilism cannot deal with the Gettier problem is that
 148 if the key issue here is whether agent reliabilism can accom-
 149 modate the sense in which our knowledge is not lucky, and
 150 thus *bona fide*, then it is puzzling that agent reliabilism cannot
 151 deal with a class of cases which are *defined* in terms of how
 152 they involve a true belief that is only luckily true, and thus not
 153 knowledge. If the way to deal with the problem of luck high-
 154 lighted by Sosa – in the guise of the Pyrrhonist – is to go
 155 agent reliabilist, then why isn't the way to deal with the prob-
 156 lem of luck highlighted by Gettier just the same?

157 Elsewhere, in Pritchard (2003), I have made use of worries
 158 of like these in order to advance a very critical response to
 159 Greco's agent reliabilism, one that queries the very necessity
 160 of appealing to epistemic virtues at all in one's account of
 161 knowledge. My aim here, however, is much more modest and
 162 irenic. What I want to suggest is that there is an account of
 163 epistemic luck which can be of use to Greco, both as regards
 164 casting some light on the debate that he is engaged with and
 165 as accounting for some of the contrary intuitions cited by his
 166 opponents in this debate.

167 3.

168 It is interesting to note that, in common with many commen-
 169 tators who discuss the issues raised by epistemic and moral
 170 luck, Greco says very little about what luck is, leaving it
 171 instead as largely an undefined primitive. Indeed, all that he
 172 says of substance about this notion is the following:

173 [S]omething is a matter of luck in relation to some agent just in case it is
 174 not the agent's doing. Put differently, something is a matter of luck just in
 175 case it is external to the agent's own thinking, choosing and acting. (p.
 176 XXX)

177 This is clearly not right, however, since all manner of
 178 events would count as lucky by these lights. Consider, for
 179 example, the rising of the sun this morning. This event is
 180 clearly external to my own thinking, choosing and acting, but
 181 it is obviously not thereby lucky.

182 I think we can do better by looking at paradigm cases of
 183 luck, like lottery wins. What is it about holding a winning
 184 ticket to a free and fair lottery with long odds that makes it
 185 lucky? Well, I think we can get very close to what is at
 186 issue here by giving a modal specification of the event in
 187 question – *viz.*, that it is an event which, although it obtains
 188 in the actual world, does not obtain in most worlds like the
 189 actual world where the relevant initial conditions for that
 190 event are the same as in the actual world (e.g., the lottery
 191 is still free and fair, the agent continues to buy a ticket, and
 192 so on). Of course, there are problems with such an account
 193 of luck, such as that it makes use of a phrase like ‘relevant’
 194 for example, which is terribly vague. Moreover, we also
 195 need to say something about the significance of the events
 196 in question, since it is only events that are significant to
 197 agents in some way that are counted as lucky, regardless of
 198 their other modal properties. Nevertheless, this rough ac-
 199 count of luck should suffice for our purposes here, since it
 200 certainly gives us an *approximate* account of the notion.²

201 With this characterisation of luck in mind, consider again
 202 the issue posed by epistemic luck. What we want is some
 203 specification of knowledge which excludes luck, such that it
 204 isn’t possible to have knowledge while also having a belief
 205 which is only luckily true. Given our characterisation of luck,
 206 this means that what we are after is an account of knowledge
 207 which demands that one’s belief is not only true in the actual
 208 world, but also that it is true in most near-by possible worlds
 209 in which the relevant initial conditions for the formation of
 210 that belief are the same as in the actual world (e.g., that one
 211 forms one’s belief in the same way as in the actual world).

212 Such an account can clearly deal with the cases at issue in
 213 Greco’s article. Why would forming one’s true belief that the
 214 object before one is gold be lucky if it were formed in the
 215 dark (and one had no other special abilities to compensate)?
 216 Well, because although the belief is true in the actual world,
 217 there is a large class of relevant near-by possible worlds in
 218 which one continues to believe that one is looking at gold
 219 and yet one is looking at something entirely different, like a

220 simple worthless stone. Moreover, we can also accommodate
 221 the intuition lying behind Gettier-style cases with this account
 222 of epistemic luck. Consider the case of the agent who forms
 223 her true belief about what the time is by looking at a stopped
 224 clock. Here, the belief is only luckily true – and thus not
 225 knowledge – because while the belief is true in the actual
 226 world, there is a wide class of relevant near-by possible
 227 worlds in which the belief so formed is false (where, for
 228 example, the time is slightly different, but the clock is still
 229 ‘telling’ the same time).

230 If knowledge is fundamentally about having non-lucky true
 231 belief – which is what the Pyrrhonian challenge raised by
 232 Sosa above suggests – then the issue in hand is whether one
 233 needs a perspective on the reliability of one’s belief in order
 234 to eliminate such luck. On this issue, Greco seems to be clearly
 235 in the right. This is because we can envisage agents who
 236 lack a perspective on the reliability of their beliefs and yet
 237 who are forming true beliefs which are non-lucky nonetheless.
 238 The example that Greco cites here is that of an agent who
 239 can unreflectively discover gold in the dark by using a special
 240 sense of smell. Here, the luck would be absent – since the
 241 possession of such an ability would enable the agent to form
 242 a true belief in the target propositions not just in the actual
 243 world, but also in most relevant near-by possible worlds as
 244 well – and yet the possession of such a cognitive ability in no
 245 way depends upon the agent having a perspective on her
 246 reliability.

247 To this extent, then, the account of luck offered here is entirely
 248 consistent with Greco’s approach. Of course, Greco will
 249 need to argue that the only way to eliminate such luck is via
 250 appeal to the cognitive character of the agent, since otherwise
 251 he’ll lose the core thesis that he argues for that agent reliabilism
 252 is essential to resolving the problem of epistemic luck.
 253 Nevertheless, since this account of luck, and thus epistemic
 254 luck, is explicitly incomplete, it is entirely possible that the
 255 final story should be framed in these terms.³

256 That said, however, I think Greco is a little too quick to
 257 dismiss entirely the claim that Sosa is making about how

258 there is something lucky about mere reliable true belief.
 259 Moreover, I think that one can accommodate the intuition in
 260 play here without having to concede to Sosa the major thesis
 261 that he argues for – i.e., that a perspective on one’s reliability
 262 is essential to knowledge. The way to do this is to distinguish
 263 between epistemic luck *simpliciter* – let’s call this *objective*
 264 epistemic luck – and epistemic luck *from the agent’s* point of
 265 vie – let’s call this *subjective* epistemic luck. In the characteri-
 266 sation of objective epistemic luck just given, we ordered the
 267 possible worlds in the usual way in terms of the facts in the
 268 actual world. We can delineate the second kind of epistemic
 269 luck by ordering the possible worlds in a different way such
 270 that it reflects the agent’s point of view. The most obvious
 271 way to do this is to simply order the worlds in line not with
 272 the facts in the actual world, but in terms of what the agent
 273 has *good reason for thinking* the facts to be in the actual
 274 world.

275 In order to see this distinction in action, consider again the
 276 case of finding gold in the dark. As we saw above, if an agent
 277 is merely guessing that she has found gold, then her belief
 278 will be objectively epistemically lucky and thus not a case of
 279 knowledge. In contrast, if she acquires this belief through a
 280 reliable cognitive faculty, like a sense of smell, then this belief
 281 won’t be objectively epistemically lucky, and thus can be a
 282 case of knowledge, even if the agent concerned has no per-
 283 spective upon the reliability of her belief-forming process.
 284 The interesting contrast now is whether there is any differ-
 285 ence, in terms of subjective epistemic luck, between those reli-
 286 able true beliefs formed by one who has a perspective on the
 287 reliability of her belief-forming process and those reliable true
 288 beliefs formed by one who lacks this perspective. Sosa, in a
 289 Pyrrhonian spirit, wants to say that there is a difference, and
 290 so deny that the unenlightened agent has knowledge, while
 291 Greco wants to argue that there is no difference, and so
 292 maintain that both agents have knowledge. I want to argue
 293 for a middle-way here, and claim, *contra* Greco, that there is
 294 a difference in terms of (subjective) epistemic luck in the two
 295 cases, while also contending, *contra* Sosa, that this difference,

296 properly understood, need not entail that the unenlightened
297 agent lacks knowledge.

298 So consider afresh the agent who simply forms her true be-
299 lief about the gold via her reliable sense of smell, and her
300 counterpart who not only forms her belief in the same way,
301 but also has a perspective on the reliability of this belief-
302 forming process. In terms of the characterisation of objective
303 epistemic luck outlined above, neither agent is forming a
304 lucky true belief, and so both can count as knowers. But con-
305 sider now how matters change if we employ the ordering of
306 possible worlds at issue in subjective epistemic luck, where
307 one orders the worlds in terms of what the agent has good
308 reason to believe is true about the actual world. The enlight-
309 ened agent who has a perspective on the reliability of her be-
310 lief-forming process will continue to be forming a non-lucky
311 true belief even by the lights of this ordering, since she has
312 good reason for thinking that she is reliable in this regard,
313 and thus the near-by possible worlds will tend to be worlds
314 where she retains this ability and so forms a true belief in the
315 target proposition using this ability as a result. Compare this
316 with the unenlightened agent, however, who lacks this per-
317 spective. Since she lacks any good reason to think that she is
318 reliable in this regard, it follows that on the subjective order-
319 ing there will be possible worlds in which she lacks the target
320 ability which count as near-by, and this will mean that there
321 will be a wide class of near-by possible worlds in which she
322 forms a false belief about the presence of gold. Her true be-
323 lief is thus subjectively lucky, even while not being objectively
324 lucky.

325 The advantage of this distinction is that we can accommo-
326 date the intuitions behind both Sosa's Pyrrhonian criticisms
327 of reliabilism and Greco's spirited defence of the view. In
328 a way, they are both right, since this distinction gives us
329 grounds to concede to Sosa that there is something lucky
330 about unenlightened reliability without thereby conceding
331 that true beliefs so formed are thereby lucky *simpliciter*, and
332 hence not plausible candidates to be counted as cases of
333 knowledge. Of course, it is open to the Pyrrhonian to stick to

334 her guns at this point and insist that *real* knowledge is
 335 knowledge which is not lucky in *either* sense, which is what I
 336 expect they will do, but notice that this move shifts the dia-
 337 lectical burden since it is now the Pyrrhonian who is making
 338 the robust claim. Rather than simply demanding that genuine
 339 knowledge must not be objectively lucky, which is a wide-
 340 spread intuition, they are also claiming that even reliable true
 341 beliefs which are not objectively lucky may still not count as
 342 knowledge because they are subjectively lucky, and this claim
 343 is far from obvious or intuitive. I thus suggest that Greco can
 344 make use of this distinction to accommodate the counter-
 345 intuitions of his detractors in such a way as to effectively neu-
 346 tralise them.^{4,5}

347 NOTES

348 ¹ This points feeds back-in to the Truetemp scenario, since it raises the
 349 natural question as to why a process that results from the insertion of a
 350 computemp could not be part of an agent's cognitive character in the long
 351 term. After all, it would be odd to stipulate in advance that the processes
 352 that make up one's cognitive character should be wholly natural, and yet
 353 this seems to be the only disanalogy between this case, so described, and
 354 the brain lesion example just outlined.

355 ² I develop this account of luck in more detail in a number of places.
 356 See, especially, Pritchard and Smith (2004) and Pritchard (2005a, chapter
 357 5).

358 ³ Though note that this again raises the problem discussed earlier as to
 359 the oddity of Greco's inability to answer the Gettier problem in agent reli-
 360 abilist terms. If agent reliabilism is not needed here, then why is it essen-
 361 tial to resolving the problem of epistemic luck at all? I think this is why it
 362 is crucial to Greco's account that he finds a way of extending his position
 363 so that it deals with Gettier-style cases. Moreover, since I am suspicious
 364 of his ability to do this, I am also suspicious of the proposal as a whole.
 365 This, however, is a matter for another occasion. For more on this issue,
 366 see Pritchard (2003), to which Greco (2003) responds.

367 ⁴ I actually think that the sceptical import of subjective epistemic luck
 368 is quite subtle, but I have not the space to go into this here. For further
 369 discussion of this point, see Pritchard (2005a, 2005b).

370 ⁵ Thanks to Michael Brady and John Greco for comments on previous
 371 versions of this material.

372

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