

Dreier Is a Great Dad in All Possible Worlds: A Challenge to Moral Contingentism

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In this paper, I raise a challenge to Gideon Rosen's defence of moral contingentism against Jamie Dreier's moral luck argument. Dreier argues that if moral contingentism is true, acting in a morally permissible way always depends on a form of moral luck, because we could be in a descriptively identical possible world where the moral laws are different. Rosen's response is that such a world is too remote from ours for us to count it as lucky that we are not in it. I argue that, given Rosen's method of assessing the remoteness of possible worlds, worlds like the one Dreier describes are close enough to ours to justify his worry, and consequently that Rosen's counterargument fails. I take this strongly counterintuitive conclusion as a reason to be optimistic that Rosen's argument for moral contingentism can be resisted.

Keywords: moral contingentism, moral luck, moral realism, moral non-naturalism, counterfactual modality, metaethics

1. Introduction

In recent years, metaethics has seen a growing interest in moral contingentism. Contingentism is a moral realist view according to which pure normative principles might vary across possible worlds independently of descriptive properties. This view entails that two worlds could be descriptively identical while having different pure normative principles. For instance, act-utilitarianism might be true in one world while Kantian deontology might be true in the other. The most famous contemporary

proponent of moral contingentism is Gideon Rosen (2017, 2020, 2021). He has shown that this view avoids certain alleged problems with non-naturalist moral realism, most notably the supervenience problem. However, Jamie Dreier (2019: 1406) has argued against this view by pointing out that if moral contingentism is true, acting in a morally permissible way depends on a form of moral luck. In *The Modal Status of Moral Principles*, Rosen (2021: 275) responds that Dreier's argument fails because the possible worlds where our luck would turn bad are very remote from ours. He holds that the objection would only be threatening if it concerned neighbouring possible worlds. Rosen's defence partly relies on a counterfactual account of the distance between possible worlds developed by Boris Kment (2006a, 2006b, 2014).

In this paper, I raise a challenge to Rosen's answer by denying that the model he uses to assess the distance between worlds allows him to discard Dreier's argument. While this paper does not amount to a direct defence of the metaphysical necessity of pure normative principles, it shows that Rosen's moral contingentism creates an implausible new form of moral luck. Since this constitutes a strong theoretical cost, it gives us reason to suspect that something goes wrong with his argument.

In **Section 2**, I explain Rosen's moral contingentism and Dreier's moral luck argument. In **Section 3**, I present Boris Kment's *Explanation Criterion of Relevance* (ECR) principle, which is central to his general account of the closeness between possible worlds. This requires explaining how ECR differs from the classical similarity model developed by David Lewis (1973, 1979). In **Section 4**, I explain how Rosen mobilizes Kment's argument to dismiss Dreier's worry. In **Section 5**, I raise a challenge to Rosen's moral contingentism by evaluating the relative proximity of two possible worlds and showing that ECR should lead us to conclude that a world of the kind Dreier describes is close to ours. Finally, in **Section 6**, I assess three potential objections to my use of the counterfactual examples and expand on why my argument entails significant theoretical costs for Rosen's position.

2. Rosen's account of nearby and remote possible worlds

Gideon Rosen (2021: 274) holds that pure normative principles are metaphysically contingent. This contingentist view opposes the more standard non-naturalist one, which is moral necessitarianism. Crudely put, if Rosen's moral contingentism is true,

there is a possible world w that is descriptively identical to our actual world @, meaning that both worlds share all the same descriptive properties. However, while helping an elderly person crossing the street is morally permissible in @, it is morally impermissible in w . This is because different pure normative principles hold in these two worlds. By contrast, moral necessitarianism holds that the same pure normative principles are true in all possible worlds and that normative properties necessarily supervene on descriptive properties. This means that if the pure normative principles of our world @ make it permissible to help an elderly person cross the street, it cannot be otherwise in world w unless there are relevant variations of some descriptive properties. Since necessitarians maintain that pure normative principles are metaphysically necessary, they would deny that w is a possible world.

Rosen's argument is that the supervenience of normative properties on descriptive properties is not obviously metaphysically necessary for non-naturalists, because they argue that normative properties are distinct from descriptive properties. In contrast, naturalists hold that normative properties are not distinct from descriptive properties. Therefore, they do not face the same supervenience problem (Crisp 1996). According to Rosen, something is metaphysically necessary if its essence prevents it from being otherwise. For instance, even though competent users of the word *water* such as ancient Greeks did not know that water is H₂O, the essence of water prevents it from being anything else. We will never come across water that corresponds to the chemical formula H₃O. It is therefore metaphysically necessary that water is H₂O (Rosen 2021: 261).

The problem for non-naturalists, according to Rosen, is that normative properties could not be tied to descriptive properties by their respective essences. Otherwise, it would be very hard to explain why they are a distinct kind of properties, which would amount to conceding the point to naturalists. This means that nothing we know about the essence of pure normative principles allows us to conclude that normative properties supervene on descriptive properties in all possible worlds. It is conceivable, for instance, that pure normative principles might vary in such a way as to affect normative properties like permissibility. While Rosen deems it possible that the essence of permissibility rules out w 's being a possible world, a reasonable doubt remains. It may be that permissibility and other normative properties that depend on pure normative principles have a

thicker essence by virtue of which supervenience always holds. However, it may be instead that such properties have a *thin* essence that only weakly constraint their extension (in this case, which actions count as being permissible) (Rosen 2021: 263). In the latter case, scenarios like @ and *w* are live possibilities. Nevertheless, it is important to note that moral contingentists do not need to hold that *every* normative property is contingent, just that *some* of them are (Rosen 2021: n. 15).

One challenge to Rosen's theory is the moral luck argument advanced by Jamie Dreier (2019). If moral contingentism is true, then there is moral luck involved whenever I act morally. Indeed, when I help an elderly person cross the street, it is morally permissible because I am in @. However, I could just as well have been in *w*, where my action would have been immoral. As Dreier puts it:

I am indeed fortunate not to have a much worse character than I have— certainly I can claim no credit for the constitution of my character (or at least *very* little credit, if I can claim any at all), and I may be fortunate that my character isn't tested too stringently in my daily life. But it is very hard to believe that I am also lucky that the care and love with which I have raised my sons is morally creditable rather than morally criminal. And yet it is, if Moral Contingency is true. (Dreier 2019: 1407)

Dreier allows that even if moral contingentism were false, luck sometimes make it harder or easier to act in a morally permissible way. For instance, it is lucky to be naturally inclined to act morally. However, it strikes him as implausible that we also are always morally lucky to live in one of two descriptively identical worlds instead of the other.

Part of Rosen's answer to Dreier's argument is that *w* is a very remote possible world and that being concerned about such a possibility is akin to entertaining radical Cartesian skepticism.

So far as the contingentist is concerned, these remote worlds are mere skeptical possibilities. They are like evil demon worlds (in which perception is undetectably unreliable) or van Fraassen worlds (in which Inference to the Best Explanation is undetectably unreliable). We have ways of arriving at moral beliefs just as we have ways of arriving at empirical beliefs. In nearby worlds they are reliable (or so we suppose);

in remote worlds they are not. But the mere existence of these remote worlds can't be enough to undermine our knowledge here in the actual world. (Rosen 2021: 275)

Just as a possible world where a dragon might kill you is very remote from ours in terms of the laws of nature that prevail, so a world like w is also very remote in terms of the moral laws that prevail. According to Rosen, therefore, it is not problematic to postulate that worlds like w exist even though our ways of arriving at moral beliefs in $@$ would clearly lead us astray in w . He assumes that we can reliably arrive at moral beliefs at list in our *neighbouring* worlds, and so that Dreier's worry does not hold.

Rosen seems to treat Dreier's argument as an *epistemological* worry, namely that if moral contingentism is true, then we do not know whether we act in conformity with moral laws. However, Dreier's worry is not about knowledge but about luck.¹ His argument is that if moral contingentism is true, then whether we act in conformity to moral laws is always a matter of luck. There might be a descriptively identical world where these laws are different, and we count as lucky not to be in that world. It is this dubious form of moral luck that makes moral contingentism implausible according to Dreier, not its epistemological consequences. Of course, Rosen is aware of this. He distinguishes between two kinds of cases: first, being lucky when one acts in conformity with a normative principle despite ignorance of that principle (which is clearly epistemological), and second, being lucky when one act in conformity with a normative principle despite not being sensitive it (which Rosen takes not to be epistemological) (Rosen 2021: 275). In the second case, one is lucky because one would have behaved identically even if the normative principle had been different. Here, I must admit that it is unclear to me why the second case is not epistemological, despite Rosen's reassurance.

In the following, I will not contest what I take to be Rosen's epistemological reframing of the question. Instead, I will focus on a different aspect of his response, namely, the role he attributes to the relative proximity of possible worlds in determining what counts as lucky. Rosen holds that '[i]n general a person is lucky to avoid a mishap only when the

¹ I am grateful for an anonymous reviewer pointing this out to me.

mishap was a serious possibility—that is, when there are ‘nearby’ worlds in which it happens’ (Rosen 2021: 276).² This argument relies on an account of luck based on counterfactuals. To understand Rosen’s move here, it will therefore be helpful to consider the theory of counterfactuals on which it relies. This is what I turn to in the following section.

3. Rosen’s underlying position on counterfactuals

Rosen’s (2020: 225–26) application of counterfactual thinking to normativity builds explicitly on Boris Kment’s theory of counterfactuals (Kment 2006a, 2006b, 2014). Kment’s counterfactual theory is part of a more general approach that can be traced back to David Lewis (1973, 1979) and that seeks to assess the relative closeness of possible worlds based on their similarities. While comparing the modal distance between worlds based on their similarities might appear straightforward, there is still a debate about what should count as similarities between worlds.³ To better understand the problem of assessing what counts as a similarity, let us look at a classical counterfactual example:

- (1) If Nixon had pressed the nuclear button, there would have been a nuclear holocaust.

Counterfactual thinking requires us to assess whether the consequent ‘there would have been a nuclear holocaust’ describes the closest possible world to ours given the antecedent ‘If Nixon had pressed the button.’ If we understand world proximity purely in terms of intuitive similarity, it seems that (1) is not true of the closest world to ours. As Kit Fine (1975: 452) argues, the nuclear holocaust would presumably have changed

² Of course, some might disagree with Rosen that being lucky to avoid a mishap entails that there is a nearby world where it happens. While it seems intuitive for Rosen’s examples, an anonymous reviewer points out that we might also be lucky regarding facts that only turn out different in remote worlds. If we sometimes are lucky to avoid mishaps that only happen in remote possible worlds, it would constitute a further challenge to Rosen’s position.

³ Or whether similarity is the best metric to assess modal distance between worlds (Khoo 2016).

many important facts of our current world. Instead, the closest worlds to ours in terms of matching facts would be the one where nothing happens when Nixon presses the button (due to a mechanical malfunction, for instance).

By that metric, we should regard the following counterfactual as the closest possible world to ours:

- (2) If Nixon had pressed the nuclear button, a malfunction would have prevented a nuclear holocaust.

However, it seems counterintuitive to Lewis that (2), in which a *small miracle* prevents the nuclear holocaust, is closer to our world than (1), where Nixon's button works as intended. After all, under normal circumstances, Nixon's button should have triggered a nuclear holocaust. For this reason, Lewis (1979: 472) suggests that correctly assessing the closeness of other worlds requires us to rank different kinds of similarities. In Lewis' work, this leads to a 4-step lexically ordered weighting system to assess the proximity of possible worlds (Lewis 1979: 472). For instance, according to Lewis, conformity to the laws of nature is a more important factor to the proximity of possible worlds than the particular facts that differ from one world to the other. This explains why (1) is a closer possible world to ours than (2), where a small miracle prevents Nixon's button from working.

In *Counterfactuals and Explanation*, Boris Kment works on making this account as unified as possible and makes a case for the *Causal Criterion of Relevance* (CCR) principle:⁴

CCR If a matter of particular fact f obtains in two worlds, then this contributes to the closeness between the two worlds if and only if f has the same causal history in the two worlds. (Kment 2006a: 276)

To make this point, Kment asks us to consider a lottery system involving two different machines that randomly determine the winning number. In this system, a lottery button is connected to the two different machines (A and B), and they are both designed identically to give equal chances to every number available for the lottery. The lottery

⁴ In Kment (2006a: 276), he uses (C) instead of CCR and he only refers to this principle by CCR in a more recent paper (Kment 2014: 206). However, this will not affect our current discussion.

system is designed to randomly assign the decision process to machine A or B.

Suppose that in our world @, when the lottery host presses the button, the signal is randomly assigned to machine A, and the winning number is 17.

Kment asks us to consider which of the following two counterfactuals is closest to our world @. The first assumes that in @, you buy lottery ticket 17 and so win the grand prize:

- (3) If the signal had been assigned to machine B instead of machine A, the number 17 would still have been selected. Since you bought ticket 17, you would still have won the lottery.

In the second counterfactual, machine A is, once again, randomly assigned, and the winning lottery ticket is still 17. However, you do not buy the winning ticket 17 in @. Instead, you are offered to buy it a few days before and decline to do so. In this scenario, we take for granted that your declining to buy the ticket has no impact on the winning ticket number:

- (4) If you had bought the lottery ticket instead of declining to do so, you would have won the lottery.

Intuitively, it seems that (4) describes the closest possible world to our world @.

According to Kment, this is because your not buying the winning ticket had no *causal* impact on 17's being the selected number. In contrast, if we look at (3), it is not obvious that 17 would have been the winning number even if machine B had been assigned the task instead of machine A. Indeed, it seems odd to assume that it would have been, since it involves changing something that plays a crucial causal role in the process. In our world @, machine A was a causally determinant element in making 17 the winning number. But in counterfactual (3), machine B play this causally determinant role. That (3) appears false to us while (4) appears true leads Kment to hold that the closeness of possible worlds relies on the relevant facts sharing the same causal history.

Going back to our classical counterfactual example, we can now see why (1), in which Nixon's pressing the button leads to a nuclear holocaust, is closer to (2), in which the holocaust is prevented by a miraculous malfunction even though (2) is descriptively more similar to our world. The similarity is caused by a *further fact*, the small miracle that prevented Nixon's button from working. Consequently, the various descriptively identical facts in (2) lack the causal history required for closeness to our world.

While Kment believes that shared causal history is a crucial factor in assessing whether an identical fact contributes to the closeness of two worlds, he also believes that this principle is too restrictive. He therefore moves away from shared causal history to provide a broader account of similarities between possible worlds that relies on the *shared explanation* of facts. The reason he believes this to be necessary is that he wants to capture explanatory factors of particular facts that do not have a causal influence on them. The two explanatory factors he wishes to cover are (i) the relationship between laws of nature and particular facts and (ii) the grounding relationship.

Beginning with the laws of nature, Kment holds that ‘the fact that [the Law of Gravitation] is a law explains why events conform to this law (but it would be odd to say that the lawhood of the law causes events to conform to the law)’ (Kment 2006b: 276). Here is a concrete example of what I think he has in mind. Suppose that I accidentally bump into an antique vase, causing it to fall off the table and smash into pieces. My bumping into it is what causes it to fall. However, part of the explanation of why it falls (as opposed to floating to the ceiling) is the law of gravitation. However, it would be counterintuitive to hold that the law of gravitation *causes* the vase to fall. Something similar is true of the grounding relationship. For instance, a substance is hydrogen in virtue of its having the atomic number 1. In other words, the atomic number is a more fundamental fact that grounds the other, less essential, fact. However, it would be a mistake to say that the property of having the atomic number 1 *causes* the substance in question to be hydrogen.

To capture these two non-causal explanations, Kment introduces a wider version of CCR called the *Explanation Criterion of Relevance* principle (ECR):

ECR If some fact f obtains in both of two worlds, then this similarity contributes to the closeness between the two worlds if and only if f has the same explanation in the two worlds. (Kment 2006a: 282)

As we will see in the following section, Rosen uses ECR to argue that pure normative principles matter to the closeness of possible worlds because they are part of the explanation of contingent normative facts.

4. Back to Rosen and his use of ECR

Now that we have a better grasp of Kment's ECR principle, we can give a more detailed presentation of Rosen's use of ECR to support moral contingentism. Essentially, his argument is that the distance between possible worlds depends on how many identical facts with the same explanation they share. However, he holds that we should not limit our account of such similarities to descriptive facts. We should also take into consideration relevant similarities of normative facts. According to Rosen, any contingent normative fact is partially grounded in two things: (i) pure normative principles and (ii) relevant descriptive facts (Rosen 2020: 227). For instance, let us imagine that Jimmy saved a puppy from certain death in a possible world w_1 where act utilitarianism is true. According to Rosen, the contingent normative fact that 'Jimmy acted in a good way' is partially grounded in two things:

- Act utilitarianism being true in w_1 .
- Jimmy's particular puppy-saving action.⁵

Rosen then uses ECR to make a case for moral contingentism while deflecting Dreier's moral luck argument. More precisely, he uses ECR to show that diverging pure normative principles in worlds where descriptive facts remain the same makes them very remote worlds. This is because it changes the explanation of many contingent normative facts. If Rosen is right, it allows him to argue that there is no luck involved in Dreier's case. Claiming otherwise would be like arguing we are lucky that Montreal wasn't set ablaze by dragons.

To convince us, Rosen uses the following example. Let us say that in our world @, act utilitarianism is false. Moreover, in @, it is only morally permissible for a plastic surgeon to operate on Sam to make him more beautiful if he agrees to have the surgery. We can then imagine two distinct possible worlds:

W₂ In w_2 , all the normative principles are identical to @'s. Additionally, all the descriptive facts are the same, except that Sam does not agree to have the surgery.

⁵ In w_1 , I assume that the puppy-saving action maximized utility.

W₃ In w_3 , act utilitarianism is true. Additionally, all the descriptive facts are identical to @, except that Sam does not agree to have the surgery.

Suppose that performing the surgery on Sam would maximize utility. In that case, then just as in our world @, it would be morally permissible (and indeed required) to perform the surgery in w_3 . This remains true even if, unlike in @, Sam does not agree to the surgery. In contrast, it would not be permissible to perform the surgery in w_2 , which shares @'s normative principles, because Sam does not agree to it. As we can see, the contingent normative fact 'it is permissible to proceed with Sam's surgery' obtains in @ as well as in w_3 . However, this contingent normative fact is grounded in different pure normative principles and in different descriptive facts than in @. Rosen holds that even if the contingent normative fact 'it is morally permissible to proceed with Sam's surgery' does not obtain in w_2 , this possible world is still much closer to @ than w_3 . Just as Kment argues, identical facts only matter for worlds' proximity if they share the same *explanation*, which is clearly not the case here (Rosen 2020: 226–27).

5. A challenge to Rosen's use of ECR

In the following, I want to challenge to Rosen's use of ECR by going back to Dreier's initial argument. Recall Dreier's argument that if moral contingentism is true, then he is morally lucky that caring for his sons is morally permissible, because he could just as easily have been in a descriptively identical world where the way he cares for them is morally repugnant. Rosen's counterargument in the last section aimed to show that possible worlds that vary in terms of pure normative principles are remote possible worlds and that we therefore aren't lucky not to be in them. This counterargument assumes that @ and w_3 are significantly different because of the respective pure normative principles that hold in each of them. However, I argue that we could imagine a situation where the pure normative principles of a possible world vary much less drastically.⁶ My contention is that there are plausible examples of a such possible

⁶ Rosen briefly discusses a different version of this argument. While he acknowledges that Dreier's moral luck argument could exploit the possibility of nearby possible worlds where the moral laws are slightly different, he believes that their existence would 'not entail that we are in general lucky to be good, but only that we are lucky in this way in a narrow range of cases' (Rosen

worlds that would be close enough to ours, by ECR standards, for Dreier's argument to hold. For instance:

The Stricter-Parenting w_4 . In w_4 , all descriptive properties are identical to our world @. Pure normative principles there are also almost identical, except that, as a consequence of these pure normative principles, parents are morally required to be stricter with their children in w_4 than in @.

Based on ECR, how close is w_4 to @? All of the descriptive facts are identical and have the same explanations. They would therefore contribute to the closeness of the two worlds. However, pure normative principles regarding caring for children differ, and this would lead to many divergent contingent normative facts when it comes to parenting. Of course, this would not affect the situation of parents who already aren't strict enough with their children in @, since w_4 is more demanding on the topic. However, it would tip the scale in many other cases. Some parents who currently parent their children in morally permissible (and perhaps even morally impermissible) ways in @ would still care for their children in morally permissible ways in w_4 . However, if w_4 is a close enough possible world, many parents currently in @ are lucky not to be in it, since it would make their parenting techniques morally impermissible.

To convince the reader that w_4 is close enough a possible world to our world @ if moral contingentism is true, I will show that it is closer to @ than another world (w_5) that would strike us as close enough to count ourselves lucky not to be in it:

The Diverging-Children-Psychology w_5 . In w_5 , all pure normative properties are identical to those of world @. Descriptive properties are also almost identical, except for some descriptive facts about child psychology. As a consequence of these differences, children have much better opportunities to flourish and to contribute to society in w_5 if they are raised communally and avoid forming strong bonds with their biological parents.

If we were in w_5 , caring for our children in traditional nuclear families would not be morally permissible since it would lead to individual and social harms. In the

2021: n. 22). However, I believe that he underestimates how damaging the possibility of such nearby worlds is for moral contingentism, as will become apparent in the next section.

Diverging-Children-Psychology w_5 , it would presumably not be morally permissible for parents to act on attitudes that contribute to the formation of strong bonds with their children (such as caring deeply for them).

Is w_5 close enough a world for us to be lucky not to be in it? I argue that it is. A quick look at history yields multiple examples of parents behaving towards their children in ways that were deemed morally acceptable (and even required) at the time but that seem appalling by contemporary Western standards. This includes the use of corporal punishment and psychological violence as well as the enforcement of certain behaviours on the basis of narrowly conceived gender norms. The important point here is that these parenting techniques were partly based on certain beliefs about child psychology that turned out to be incorrect. For instance, it is only fairly recently that we discovered, as the American Psychological Association reports, that corporal punishment is wholly ineffective and can cause lasting harms to children (Glicksman 2019). Given this fact, it seems plausible that we might still misunderstand certain crucial aspects of child psychology. To believe otherwise is to believe we are the historical exception to a long pattern of lackluster practices of parenting. In this sense, we are at least somewhat lucky if it turns out that child psychology is more or less as we take it to be.

However, just because it is plausible that we are wrong about *some* aspects of parenting does not mean that we are in w_5 . Indeed, being in that world entails that we are wrong in a very specific way: by raising children in a family setting instead of by the community. Nevertheless, the idea that children should be raised communally is not as extravagant as it might seem. On the contrary, it has important historical and contemporary defenders. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates maintains that in an ideal city, the parents of the guardians would be prohibited from knowing who their children are. According to Socrates, this would serve a social goal, namely, that of encouraging the guardians to care for all the children as their own (Plato 2004: 460c–d). More recently, certain feminist theorists have also called for more communal child-rearing practices on the grounds that nuclear family ties foster inequality (see Barrett and McIntosh 2015). This suggests that the Diverging-Children-Psychology w_5 is not so remote from ours. Given that previous generations of parents have been seriously wrong, at least by contemporary standards, about child-rearing, who is to say that future psychological

research will not confirm that we would be better off without the nuclear family altogether?

If the reader agrees that the Diverging-Children-Psychology w_5 is close enough a world for us (and Dreier) to count as lucky not to be in it, then we must assess whether ECR entails that it is closer or further away from our world @ than the Stricter-Parenting w_4 is. Doing so requires us to establish which of the two worlds shares more contingent normative and descriptive facts with @. The first thing to note here is that @ and the Stricter-Parenting w_4 share all descriptive facts and their explanation, whereas some descriptive facts about child psychology diverge between @ and w_5 . This leads us to a second point, namely that the explanation of many contingent normative facts is different in w_5 . Indeed, unlike in @, in w_5 , the overwhelming majority of humans have been raising children in morally impermissible ways for thousands of years and continue to do so nowadays by virtue of the family setting in which they do so. The third and last point is that the explanation of many contingent normative facts also varies in w_4 because parents are morally required to be stricter in that world, and many parents would act in a morally impermissible way in w_4 by being too lenient.

In the end, it is hard to assess which of w_4 and w_5 share more contingent normative facts with @. However, as previously established, w_4 is clearly closer to @ when it comes to shared contingent descriptive facts because they share all such facts *and their explanation*. By contrast, w_5 does not share certain descriptive facts about children psychology with @. It therefore seems that, according to ECR, the Stricter-Parenting w_4 is closer⁷ to @ than the Divergent-Children-Psychology w_5 is. This means that w_4 is close enough to our world for us to count as lucky not to be in it.

6. Three potential objections

I now turn my attention to three potential objections to my argument. The first is about whether the moral principle involved in w_4 really is a pure normative principle as opposed to an impure normative principle. The second regards the conceptual and metaphysical possibility of the Stricter-Parenting w_4 . Finally, the third asks whether the

⁷ Or at least as close. Both claims work for my argument.

fact that Rosen's moral contingentism leads to the possibility of w_4 really is a strong theoretical cost for his view.

6.1 The different normative principle in w_4 is not pure but impure.

To assess the merit of the first objection, we need to distinguish pure and impure normative principles. According to Rosen, impure normative principles are ones that 'depend for their truth on the contingent "descriptive" facts' (Rosen 2021: 258). For instance, if it is wrong to kick dogs, it likely depends in part on the contingent fact that dogs are the kinds of beings that can feel pain. Therefore, according to Rosen, it cannot be a pure normative principle that it is wrong to kick dogs because it relies explicitly on contingent facts. It must accordingly be classified as an impure normative principle. The relevance of this distinction is that not even a moral necessitarian would deny that an impure normative principle might be contingent. It makes sense even for moral necessitarians to hold that, in a world where descriptive properties are such that nothing can suffer, it is not *prima facie* morally reprehensible to act in a way that would cause suffering in our world.

If moral laws required parents to be stricter in w_4 because of different descriptive facts (such as differences in child psychology), the possibility of the Stricter-Parenting w_4 would not constitute an argument against moral contingentism, since the contingentist claim is specifically that *pure* normative principles are contingent. However, I hold that what determines the moral acceptability or unacceptability of parenting techniques in w_4 differs from what determines the moral acceptability of kicking the dog in the present example. In a possible world where dogs do not feel pain, the diverging normative principle regarding the permissibility of kicking them is partly explained by a difference in descriptive properties pertaining to dog physiology. In contrast, all descriptive properties remain the same across @ and w_4 . The counterargument therefore cannot be that the normative principles are impure in w_4 because they depend on particular descriptive properties.

The counterargument might, however, be that the normative principles in w_4 seem to pick out a particular contingent fact about animal behaviour and biology: that humans (as animals) reproduce by having children and that they have to raise them. We could imagine plenty of worlds where there are no such animals at all or where animals reproduce in different ways. According to this counterargument, the normative

principles would therefore be impure because they depend on the existence of this contingent fact. However, I was purposely vague about *why* the pure normative principles in w_4 entail stricter rules governing parenting. I merely said that it was a consequence of the pure normative principles. This leaves me with no need to describe the pure normative principles in question precisely. I only need to show that a world governed by such normative principles does not appear conceptually or metaphysically impossible. Indeed, if moral contingentism is true, there are an infinite number of different pure normative principles that prevail across an infinite number of possible worlds, and one of them could very well lead to the kind of scenario we find in w_4 . Of course, the distinction between pure and impure normative principles is hard to draw and even some of Rosen's examples make it difficult to navigate. Nonetheless, assuming that such a distinction can be drawn, there is a strong case for understanding w_4 as featuring different pure normative principles and not impure ones.

6.2 The Stricter-Parenting w_4 is not a genuine possible world.

A second way to challenge my view would be to deny the mere possibility of the Stricter-Parenting w_4 . To deny w_4 's possibility, one could argue that this world is (i) conceptually or (ii) metaphysically impossible. I will briefly address both worries. Regarding conceptual possibility, the worry would be something like this: is it even conceptually possible that there might be a world like w_4 governed by pure normative principles that demand stricter parenting practices? I believe that it is. In debates about parenting, there are always those who believe that parents ought to be stricter than they are. Some of these critics appear to believe that we live in w_4 . That is, they believe that the normative principles governing our world demands stricter parenting practices. Whether they are right to believe so is, of course, an open question, but it certainly does not seem like they are conceptually confused about normativity.

Regarding the metaphysical possibility of the Stricter-Parenting w_4 , proponents of moral contingentism are poorly placed to argue that w_4 is metaphysically impossible. Indeed, their position depends on the possibility of certain normative principles not supervening on descriptive facts, which clearly entails that normative properties are arbitrary to a certain extent (Väyrynen 2017: 181–82). Furthermore, Rosen specifically acknowledges that the essence of permissibility might be thin enough for its extension to vary between two descriptively identical possible worlds (Rosen 2021: 263). This is

exactly what happens between @ and w_4 . Rosen even allows that moral contingentism entails the possibility of worlds that seem normatively far more arbitrary than w_4 . For instance, he acknowledges that moral contingentism entails that there might be a world that is descriptively identical to ours, but in which the pure moral principles shifted imperceptibly at the turn of the last millennium (Rosen 2020: 229). It therefore seems like Rosen must engage with w_4 and show that he can still deflect Dreier's moral luck argument.

One way to do this would be to argue that normative necessity is a genuine species of necessity that entails that there is, around our actual world, a sphere of possible worlds governed by the same pure normative principles. This sphere would ensure that worlds such as w_4 are very remote from ours because they would be outside our normative necessity sphere, unlike worlds like w_5 , which only differ in some of their contingent descriptive and normative facts. At first glance, some of Rosen's arguments against Dreier seem to rely on such an idea. For instance, he claims that:

The nearest worlds in which (Dreier's) good luck turns bad are more remote than worlds in which I win the lottery a thousand times in a row, more remote than worlds in which a replica of the Taj Mahal spontaneously materializes in central park, maybe even more remote than worlds in which I build a working perpetual motion machine in my garage. (Rosen 2021: 276)

Of course, this is not a direct endorsement of the idea of a normative necessity sphere, but it seems to suggest that worlds where different pure normative principles hold are vastly more remote from ours than worlds where there are very different contingent descriptive facts. However, in the same paper, Rosen argues directly against Lange's (2018) idea that genuine species of necessity form a sphere around actuality. His argument, briefly stated, is that for any genuine species of necessity to act as a sphere around our actual world, it would need to constitute a completely stable set. He then rejects this criterion because it is too demanding even for metaphysical necessity

(Rosen 2021: 273).⁸ Given my argument on the relative proximity of w_4 (in §5) and Rosen's rejection of normative necessity acting like a sphere around our actual world, he owes us a different explanation as to why we aren't lucky not to be in w_4 .

6.3 The possibility of w_4 is not a pressing worry for moral contingentists.

A third challenge to my view might be that the moral luck introduced by the Stricter-Parenting w_4 is not really a problem for moral contingentists. The argument would be that being lucky not to be in Dreier's descriptively identical world where raising children with love and care is morally impermissible seems absurd. By contrast, it is not so absurd to think that people who behave in a barely permissible way in @ are lucky in a metaphysical sense not to be in w_4 . After all, they most likely are lucky in an epistemic sense that their behaviour is permissible. Indeed, unbeknownst to them, their behaviour might very well be morally impermissible in @.⁹ In borderline cases, most people rightly end up worrying that they might have crossed the line and that their behaviour is morally impermissible. However, I believe that being lucky in the metaphysical sense is fundamentally different from being lucky in the epistemological sense. In the former case, the cause of an impermissible action is not attributable to fallible human moral reasoning, but instead to being in the wrong place at the wrong time, for which one bears no responsibility. If moral contingentism is true, whether or not a parenting technique is morally permissible would sometimes really just depend on whether you are in @ or w_4 , making it wholly indexical (Väyrynen 2021: 213).

Nevertheless, this might not be so worrisome for contingentists if my argument only applied to a very limited set of cases. Why does it matter that parents are morally lucky when they are barely strict enough with their children? Indeed, this seems much narrower than Dreier's initial argument that raising his children with love and care could be morally impermissible. The proximity of w_4 might only be another bullet that moral contingentists following Rosen have to bite, just like non-naturalist necessitarians

⁸ See Rosen (2021: 272–73) for his argument against Lange regarding the set stability requirement.

⁹ I am grateful for an anonymous referee pointing this out to me.

struggle to explain the metaphysical necessity of supervenience. However, I argue that if Rosen's contingentism is true, the moral luck argument would generalize to most human actions. Indeed, if the Stricter-Parenting w_4 is a nearby enough world, there are potentially many other descriptively identical possible worlds lurking at a similar distance from our actual world that we would also be lucky not to be in. For instance, w_6 , where morality requires that time spent with children be above a higher threshold, and w_7 , where the conditions under which it is morally permissible to have children are stricter, etc.¹⁰ For virtually any of a parent's actions, there would be a nearby possible world that requiring a slightly different action, hence making them morally lucky not to be in it.

Furthermore, this worry would generalize to other kinds of human behaviours and relationships. Since various parameters of our everyday actions might count as being barely permissible, acting morally would very often involve moral luck. Nor does it make it any less worrisome that there is no single nearby possible world in which we are unlucky about *all* moral aspects of parenting.¹¹ If the Stricter-Parenting w_4 is a close enough possible world, then as Dreier puts it, we should be 'counting [our] lucky stars that the thoughts and actions [we are] every day responsible for are not (as [we] would incorrectly be thinking) profoundly immoral' (Dreier 2019: 1406). Like Dreier, I find

¹⁰ I assume here that one could make a proof of w_6 and w_7 's relative proximity to our actual world as I did for w_4 . The exact nature the different moral requirement in those worlds is not particularly important for my argument to hold.

¹¹ Another interesting argument that is beyond the scope of this paper is whether the creeping in of many close possible worlds such as w_4 would be fatal to Rosen's (2020: 220) claim that normative necessity is a genuine kind of necessity. While Rosen argues against Lange that a species of necessity does not have to form a perfectly stable set, Rosen's conclusion isn't that deeply unstable sets are genuine kinds of necessity. He only argued that 'some *almost-stable* sets characterize perfectly good forms of necessity' (Rosen 2021: 273). It appears dubious to me that normative necessity would remain an almost-stable set if many worlds with different pure normative principles (such as w_4 , w_6 , and w_7) turn out to be closer to ours than worlds where contingent descriptive facts differ while pure normative principles remain identical. I am grateful for an anonymous referee pointing this out to me.

this conclusion highly implausible. I take the fact that Rosen's view entails this to indicate that there is most likely a fundamental error in his argument for moral contingentism, warranting further examination and analysis. I remain neutral, however, as to where his argument goes wrong.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Gideon Rosen's response to Jamie Dreier's moral luck argument fails. I have claimed, against Rosen, that ECR should lead us to conclude that there is a possible world (w_4) that is descriptively identical to ours but in which parents are morally required to be stricter with their children, and that this possible world is close enough for us to count as lucky not to be in it.¹² Furthermore, I have argued that there are many descriptively identical possible worlds at a similar distance where morality has slightly more stringent requirements and that we also count as lucky not to be in them. I take the fact that Rosen's moral contingentism leads to such an implausible and generalized form of moral luck to be a strong reason to suspect that his argument can be resisted.

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¹² Alternatively, some critics believe that ECR has enough problems of its own to justify moving away from it, independently of the current challenge that I raise. See Lange (2015) and Sullivan (2015) for more details.

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