

# BEING RESPONSIBLE AND HOLDING RESPONSIBLE

*ON THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY IN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY*

## Abstract

This paper explores the role individual responsibility plays in contemporary political theory. It argues that the standard luck egalitarian view—the view according to which distributive justice is ensured by holding people accountable for their exercise of responsibility in the distribution of benefits and burdens—obscures the more fundamental value of *being* responsible. The paper, then, introduces an account of ‘self-creative responsibility’ as an alternative to the standard view and shows how central elements on which this account is founded has been prominently defended in the history of western political thought but are comparatively neglected in contemporary political theory. Relying on this account, the paper argues that society should hold persons responsible when, and only when, doing so enables them to lead responsible lives, and only on the condition that doing so does not infringe other persons’ equivalently valuable ability to lead responsible lives. The account of self-creative responsibility, the paper concludes, plausibly captures the intuitive attraction of *holding* responsible while respecting the value of *being* responsible.

## Key Words

Responsibility; Justice; Accountability; Self-Creation; Moral Agency.

## Introduction

In this paper, we outline and defend a fundamentally important reason to care about individual responsibility; that *being* responsible is a constitutive element of moral agency. We argue that a widely shared view of the importance of responsibility in political philosophy—the view that we should hold people accountable for their

exercise of responsibility in the distribution of benefits—obscures this central reason. We identify three separate theoretical aspects on which the fundamental value of individual responsibility is grounded. First, individual responsibility is linked to the value of ‘choosing’ which is emphasised in J. S. Mill’s liberalism. Second, being effectively responsible involves ‘(re-) inventing oneself’ as an agent through acts of individual choice which is a particularly human way of constructing moral value. Third, and finally, leaning on Aristotle’s idea of moral perception, individual responsibility involves a valuable form of moral deliberation, taking careful stock of value aspects realized and value aspects not realized through particular choices. These elements come together in a theoretically thick account of what we call *self-creative responsibility*.

Our central claim in this paper is that self-creative responsibility is greatly undervalued in contemporary theories that centre on holding people accountable in the name of justice—so-called luck egalitarian theories. Luck egalitarians claim that holding people accountable is necessary to ensure properly equal opportunities for moral agents. We argue that, if we have an interest in *when* to hold people responsible for their choices, we need a plausible account of *why* responsibility is valuable. We deliver such an account by extracting the value of self-creative responsibility from sources in the history of Western political thought. Based on this account, we conclude that we should hold people accountable only when this serves the purpose of facilitating self-creative responsibility.

In the following section, we account for the widely held view of responsibility as accountability in the contemporary political-philosophical literature and show how

these writings (more or less explicitly) ignore the value of personal responsibility. The next section turns to the history of political thought and grounds the value of individual responsibility on a broader account of self-creative responsibility. Finally, we show how this account of self-creative responsibility can inform contemporary accountability-based views of responsibility and infuse them with insights that ground them more firmly in moral agency.

### **Responsibility as Accountability**

In the last couple of decades, theories of societal justice that centre on responsibility have enjoyed a preeminent position in the political-theoretical hierarchy. Most such theories start from the Rawlsian idea that the natural and social lotteries, which so greatly shape our lives, are morally arbitrary and that justice requires that the effects of these lotteries on our opportunities and well-being are mitigated (Rawls 1971, §3). A just society, in other words, is one in which differences in people's prospects and resources are (as far as possible) not determined by luck and circumstance but by their choices—their exercises of responsibility.

Theories of this kind share the view that justice requires distributions which are relevantly sensitive to individual exercises of responsibility. They are often referred to as *luck egalitarian* (Anderson 1999; Knight 2009; Lippert-Rasmussen 2016). In Ronald Dworkin's well-known formulation, this means that for a (societal) distribution of resources to be just, it must be *endowment-insensitive* but *ambition-sensitive* (Dworkin 1982). The most widely shared interpretation of this understanding of responsibility-sensitivity states that it is bad, or unjust, if people

are worse off than others through no fault or choice of their own (Arneson 1989; Cohen 1989; Knight 2009; Lippert-Rasmussen 2016; Roemer 1996; Temkin 2003).

While such theories vary in their specific content, they share the general premise that justice requires a certain distributive state of affairs and that the key to unlocking this distribution is forged in the juxtaposition of responsibility and luck. What matters here is whether a person can legitimately complain about a certain distributive state of affairs – i.e. how much they have. And the legitimacy of such a complaint, for luck egalitarians, depends on whether their holdings are a product of *luck* or responsible choice. Note here that luck egalitarians need not (and very often deliberately avoid to) commit to any empirical claims about when and the degree to which people *are* actually responsible for their actions (see, for example, Albertsen & Midtgaard 2014, fn. 5; Knight 2006; 2015, 132-134; Lippert-Rasmussen 2016, 2-6).

Luck egalitarianism, in its general form, says nothing about whether exercising responsibility carries any value. This does not imply that luck egalitarians necessarily *deny* that personal responsibility holds value. Pluralist luck egalitarians, in particular, can embrace that acting responsibly is better than not doing so. This value, however, is separate from and independent of their concern with (luck egalitarian) justice. For luck egalitarians, it is the patterned relationship between an agent's "exercise of responsibility" and how the agent fares relative to others (in terms of some relevant distributive unit, e.g. welfare or resources) that is important (Ripstein 1994).

To put it starkly, we could imagine two societies: one in which everyone's situation is entirely a product of their exercises of responsibility or one in which it is entirely a product of luck. There would be no difference between the two, for luck egalitarians, in terms of justice—as long as the distribution reflects these exercises of responsibility *to an equal extent*. Responsible choices (or the lack thereof), in other words, are instrumental to determining the justice of a distribution—like sailors in ancient times used stars to determine and navigate the appropriate course—but carry no importance for justice beyond this function. On this view, justice is determined by holding people responsible. This is why we refer to it as responsibility as accountability.<sup>1</sup> It should be clear already, then, that accountability views differ fundamentally from what we term self-creative responsibility.<sup>2</sup>

Shlomi Segall, to take a specific example, is explicit that, on his view of luck egalitarianism, “responsibility has no value in and of itself” (Segall 2012: 328).<sup>3</sup> Segall justifies this rejection of the value of responsibility with the claim that, if the exercise of responsibility was in itself a value, luck egalitarianism would collapse

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<sup>1</sup> Scanlon calls what could in many ways be considered the parallel view for moral responsibility, *responsibility as attributability* (Scanlon 1998, 248)

<sup>2</sup> Our account of self-creative responsibility holds a critique against the luck egalitarian version of responsibility that is structurally similar to the one raised by Angela Smith against normativist accounts of moral responsibility (Smith 2007, 466).

<sup>3</sup> See also Cohen (2006), 441, in his reply to Susan Hurley, where he says that it does not constitute an “argument for egalitarianism that it extinguishes the effect of luck on distribution.”

into a theory of desert, which it is not. Rather, it is a theory of distributive justice about *when* inequalities are unjust (Segall 2012; 2010). This again emphasizes the core assumption of the accountability view that value comes from *equalizing*—or something closely related (Arneson 2000)—not responsibility. What matters, in other words, is that deviations from equality in the social distribution are just only if they reflect people’s voluntary acts.<sup>4</sup> Equality matters and measuring responsibility is a means to uncovering what equality, properly understood, *is*.<sup>5</sup>

We call the luck egalitarian understanding of responsibility *accountability*, then, because it focuses on determining when people can justifiably be held accountable for being worse off than others and, if so, asking them to (partly) internalize this relative disadvantage. While the specifics differ, all the theories falling within our categorization of distributive responsibility-sensitivity theories are based on this accountability-based view of responsibility, on which no independent value is ascribed to responsibility.

In the following section, we outline another prominent understanding of responsibility—self-creative responsibility—according to which responsibility has

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<sup>4</sup> As Lippert-Rasmussen (2016, 74) puts it, responsibility (and luck), on this understanding, “serve[s] not to justify equality, but to select the appropriate egalitarian view from among the large family of views that ascribe intrinsic significance to equality”.

<sup>5</sup> Although we take equality here as the standard distributive value, responsibility as accountability could as well be applied to prioritarianism (Arneson 2000) or sufficientarianism (Lippert-Rasmussen 2016, 28).

significant value in and of itself. We believe this outline can cast new light on the luck egalitarian use of responsibility. Self-creative responsibility, we believe, plausibly captures what responsibility-sensitive theorists should consider valuable about being responsible. We shall argue that luck egalitarians can and ought to accommodate the value of self-creative responsibility—something which a few luck egalitarian theorists already seem to do implicitly—but that this would imply a decreased focus and insistence on holding people accountable for the purpose of distributive equality.

### **Self-creative Responsibility**

The core of self-creative responsibility can be found in people's ability to and opportunities for exercising responsible choice. Whereas responsibility as accountability considers such exercises a *means* to determining the just distribution, advocates for self-creative responsibility see exercises of responsibility as the central value *itself*. Self-creative responsibility is our own label, but the concept is built on elements with deep roots in the history of Western political thought, growing around the values of choice, freedom, deliberation, and the human ability to develop, revise, and pursue a conception of the good life.

The value of self-creative responsibility flows from, at least, three different sources. Although these are distinct sources of value, the three are often intertwined in the exercise of responsible personal choice. In this section, we shall disentangle them in order to establish the broad foundation of self-creative responsibility and what makes it valuable. First, responsibility has independent value because personal exercises of responsibility through exercising individual choice is valuable both for

the chooser and because it is a constitutive part of living a *human* life. Respecting the value of one's own life entails assuming responsibility for one's choices and the way in which they can shape reality. Second, responsibility has value due to the self-inventive element it involves. Through the individual's exercise of personal responsibility, she creates herself as she wishes to be and as an image of what others could be. Third and finally, responsible choice—based on sufficient deliberation and critical reflection—has value because it respects the plurality of valuable lifestyles and the various valuable outcomes one singular act of choice may have. As such, not being responsible in one's choosing, by failing to deliberate between and reflect upon these different options, is a sign of disrespecting the many valuable ends which humans can pursue. These three sources together underpin the value of self-creative responsibility, which we will outline below.

### *Choosing*

One way in which self-creative responsibility is valuable is by channelling the value inherent in *choice*. Choice can be valuable in many ways. Most obviously, choosing has value for *the chooser*. This value manifests itself through increasing the likelihood that a future state of affairs will be in accordance with the chooser's personal aims—as Scanlon (1986, 178; 1998, 251) puts it: “To take a banal example, when I go to a restaurant, it is generally a good thing from my point of view to have what appears on my plate depend on the way in which I respond when presented with the menu.”

But choice also has value *independently* of its outcome. There is value, one might say, in the *agency* involved in choosing—in the fact that someone *acted* and brought



about changes in the world in accordance with her reasons and beliefs (Sen 1999, 19). It is *more valuable*, then, when morally good consequences come about as a result of choice, rather than through coercion or chance. This does not entail that choice is *unconditionally* valuable—i.e. even when it is guided by malicious intentions and/or followed by foreseeable bad consequences (we will assume in this paper that it is not).<sup>6</sup> Choice, then, has value separately from what it brings about, simply as an expression and constitutive element of human agency in realizing one of several alternatives (and, simultaneously, ensuring the non-realization of the others).

As Carter notes, “one can have freedom without choosing” (Carter 1995, 828), and this value, which Carter calls the independent value of freedom, is located not in the outcome of any particular choice, but in the exercise of one’s freedom involved in the act of choosing itself. Infertility, to illustrate this idea with a concrete example, is problematic both because it inhibits the infertile person’s specific opportunity to procreate, but also because it removes the opportunity to deliberately *choose* whether or not to procreate. Choice, in this deliberate sense, can be understood as an attempt at bringing the world in closer alignment with one’s aims (Hurka 1987, 6-11). Thomas Hurka claims that the objective value of choice is grounded, more fundamentally, in (and is one manifestation of) a deep ideal in human life of having a “connection to reality” (Hurka 1987, 12). Facilitating and

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<sup>6</sup> See Carter (1995), §2, for considerations on the unconditional value of choice.

exercising choice, on this view, entails facilitating and exercising something that is deeply and fundamentally *human*.

Another way of putting this is to say that the exercise of responsible choice is *in itself* an activity that carries objective personal value<sup>7</sup> and is an essential part of human flourishing. For human beings to flourish or succeed, they must take authorship over and responsibility for their lives. This connection is also noted by John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty*. As Mill emphasises, “[t]he human faculties of perception, judgement, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference, are exercised only in making a choice” (1859, 65). For Mill, the element of personal freedom over one’s life captured in the action of individual choice is not only valuable, and valuable in a way that carries personal entitlements and enforceable duties to protect, but is moreover constitutive of the human form of life.

Mill’s appreciation of individual choice captures the first source of value of self-creative responsibility. Choosing is valuable because it is constitutive of agency, because it is a way of connecting to reality, and because it is a key element in human flourishing and how well one’s life goes. To protect the value of self-creative

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<sup>7</sup> We refer to objective personal value here but one could also refer to the impersonal value of choice. The claim about objective personal value implies that choice is valuable in an objective sense for the chooser personally, regardless of whether the actual choice has the best *subjective* outcome for the particular chooser—e.g. that it is good *for you* to choose for yourself despite the fact that if someone else chose for you, it would produce a better outcome.

responsibility, then, people's capabilities for choice must be secured. This makes self-creative responsibility fundamentally different from accountability, where such choices are not seen as sources of value in themselves, but as indicators of whether people are eligible for making claims of justice when they are worse off than others.

As Ryan Long (2011) argues, the value of choice is "ecumenical" in the sense that it can be defended from a broad set of philosophical and ideological views. However, luck egalitarian responsibility as accountability does not adequately respect the essential value in choosing. While luck egalitarianism may be responsibility-sensitive, then, it is not sufficiently *choice*-sensitive.

#### *(Re-)Inventing Oneself*

The second source from which the value of self-creative responsibility flows is the possibility of inventing and reinventing oneself as an agent through the exercise of personal responsibility. Setting aside the value of choosing, as we discussed above, taking control over one's actions as expressions of moral agency is itself a valuable aspect of responsibility. Regardless of the actual choices I make and the outcome they produce, the fact that I, the chooser, deliberately understand the narrative connection between my choosing and the way of life this choice enables and embodies is part of the value of being responsible. The special feature of human moral agency is, as noted by Velleman, "our perceived capacity to interpose ourselves into the course of events in such a way that the behavioural outcome is traceable directly to us" (Velleman 1992, 466). Echoing Velleman, John Martin Fischer emphasises "self-expression" as a particularly valuable, and often neglected, alternative to the outcome-driven understanding of personal

responsibility. On his account, by exercise of responsibility, we, the agents, can be perceived as “writing a sentence in the book of our lives” (Fischer 1998, 290). Fischer’s account of self-expressive responsibility has remarkable similarities with key tenets of existentialism and can be rediscovered in the work of, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre.

Sartre begins from the observation that carving a path of life is inevitable in human lives. He reaches this existentialist conclusion from his rejection of pre-existing metaphysical entities (God, most particularly) and, thus, he argues; “the existentialist [...], thinks that every man, without any support or help whatever, is condemned at every instant to invent man” (Sartre 1948: 34). But this lack of guidance should not lead humans to despair or meaninglessness. It is through personal choice, on this background, that we “invent ourselves”. To Sartre, inventing and re-inventing one’s own existence is all-important to the creation and unfolding of an *individual* human life. Sartre believes that we only exist, essentially, through the paths that we create by choosing what to do and how to live. This perception implies the famous existentialist mantra—that existence precedes essence. Existentialists, thus, point to a stronger and more fundamental version of the importance of re-inventing oneself in the acts of choosing; because it is through choosing that humans (re)make themselves who they are.

As hinted above, and as Sartre makes explicit elsewhere, he believes that by the act of choosing, the human agent does not merely invent herself but brings about an ideal for all of humanity. “For in effect,” he writes, “of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative,

at the same time, of an image of man as he ought to be” (1948, 29). In choosing, we determine both who we are as individuals and what humans can, and should, do and be. The value, then, does not reside simply in the fact that a choice is made—that the world is brought to match the conception of the good life of a human being more closely—but in that human individuality is manifested in every instance of choosing, and that in this manifestation a normative standard is constructed for how an individual human life *can* (and ought to) be.

This existentialist strand, then, reveals a second source of the value of self-creative responsibility: not the freedom to choose (the first source of value we identified), but the actual choosing of one specific way to unfold a human life. Through the act of choosing, the agent commits herself to a specific path of life (or, one specification of the human life form), for which she is, thus, also bound to assume responsibility of the ensuing consequences. Importantly, for Sartre, personal responsibility occurs as a necessary, but only secondary, consequence of authentic moral agency. Here is an agent, standing up for herself in choosing her path in life, and appreciating her as responsible is the appropriate response as showing respect for her moral agency. Responsibility, thus, comes in only upon the recognition of moral agency as fundamentally valuable.

Angela Smith, similarly, observes regarding moral agency that the response of holding people responsible in the sense of *blame* or *forgiveness* for some cause of events is only appropriate on the assumption of responsible agency. Without recognition of the agent as being responsible, holding them responsible makes no sense (Smith 2007, 474). For both Smith and Sartre, and in contrast to responsibility

as accountability, respect for moral agency takes precedence over holding people responsible. According to Sartre, then, there is an allocation of moral value in the mere construction of human ideals that is manifested in the exercise of personal responsibility through moral agency. This value is immanent in the ideal of self-creative responsibility while it plays no similar explicit and central role in views which equate responsibility with accountability.

### *Deliberating*

The value of self-creative responsibility also flows from a third source. Self-creative responsibility is not only about choosing but about choosing in a *responsible way*. This, in turn, entails considering and evaluating the different options one has and making choices that are in line with one's values and beliefs. It entails paying heed to the various paths one may take and evaluating them with appropriate respect and attention. It entails deliberation. Choosing is more valuable if it follows careful reflection about a number of alternatives.

According to Aristotle, deliberate choice represents a prime source of value for human persons. To Aristotle, only choices based on careful deliberation and reflection are valuable in and of themselves. Choices, Aristotle believes, are valuable only if enlightened by the right kind of human "perception". That is, a sort of perception which is characteristically informed both by emotional and rational knowledge; and designed to capture the complexity of valuable aspects in the particularity of real-life scenarios (NE 1102b28; 1142a23). John McDowell describes such moral deliberation astutely in his depiction of the development of a "second nature"—our moral or virtuous character. "We can let the question arise",

McDowell writes, “whether the space of reasons really is laid out as it seems to be from the viewpoint of a particular shaping of the practical logos” (McDowell 1995, 171). McDowell is here appealing to Aristotelian deliberation and perception as a way of using practical wisdom and moral imagination to question whether the choices we are inclined to make are also morally defensible.

Put in more familiar terms, what we learn from the Aristotelian account of moral perception is that the responsible agent takes into account not only the value of what is chosen, but also the (dis)value of what is not chosen. Take the example of someone who must choose between looking after their sick mother or fighting to undo a serious political injustice (to use a slightly modified version of a famous example by Sartre (1948)). It may well be the right choice for an individual—and in that sense a responsible moral choice—to opt for either of the two, but it cannot be so if one has not carefully considered the value of what one has given up in choosing political progress over their mother or vice versa.

Consider similarly Hurka’s example of two teachers. One chooses to become a teacher having had ten available careers to choose from, “including lawyer, politician, and accountant, while the second becomes a teacher because that is her only option” (Hurka 1987, 366). If we ask why they became teachers, their answers might be similar. “But if we ask why they are not lawyers, politicians, or accountants, the answer will be different” (ibid). As Hurka notes, the act of choice

itself distinguishes the two cases, but so does the fact that the first person has the opportunity to *deliberate*, consider, and choose *not* to pursue certain options.<sup>8</sup>

Mill's, but also Sartre's, views lean on inspirations from Aristotle's writings (see Qizilbash 1998, Nussbaum 2011: 141). But especially Mill's argument for the essential value of free choice reintroduces the classical Aristotelian idea of the non-commensurability of value—that some values are not comparable or commensurable on a single dimension at a fundamental level. The Aristotelian value aspect of responsibility lies in the acknowledgement of plural and often competing values, and the realisation that a deliberate choice must take proper stock and careful evaluation of the values involved in this given situation in order to respect them appropriately.

In other words, on an Aristotelian account, it is morally regrettable to choose for oneself (or let life choose) without deliberation, as this is both disrespectful towards, as well as a misunderstanding of, the values offered by and accessible through human life. Instead, an individual should exercise responsibility by properly evaluating the different available valuable options. Deliberated autonomy, the “free choice from a wide range of options that follows correct reasoning about them, and expresses its results” (Hurka 1987, 369), expresses a more fundamental value than the autonomy of choice as it reflects both a more genuine choice and a measured choice *not* to exercise certain options (ibid, 366). This identifies the third

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<sup>8</sup> Along similar lines, Scanlon argues that the significance of human choice stems partly from people's “critically reflective, rational self-governance” (1986, 174)



value element of self-creative responsibility, which a just society should seek to foster.

### *The Value of Self-Creative Responsibility*

Responsibility, on the present understanding, is valuable because it is importantly connected to the flourishing or success of human beings. This is because human flourishing is intimately linked to reflecting on and pursuing a conception of the good life. Responsibility, on this second view, entails taking authorship of this self-creative process. Unlike with responsibility as accountability, then, responsibility is not without value—it is not merely a means by which justified deviations from equality are determined. It is valuable when people choose by expressing their freedom of choice, and, thus, make the world more closely aligned with their aims; it is valuable when people take responsibility for the possibilities for human existence these choices entail; and it is valuable when they do so through careful deliberation, respecting the diverse and incommensurably valuable ways in which human life may be lived.

It should be clear, then, that self-creative responsibility involves seeing responsibility as valuable for its own sake and, because it is a constitutive part of human flourishing, as something that a good society should seek to foster and sustain. This, as we saw, is importantly different from the role of responsibility in luck egalitarian theories of justice, as well as in many political discourses centring on holding people responsible for imprudent choices—in which responsibility is understood as accountability.

### **Expanding Individual Responsibility**

The accountability view of responsibility, which is so influential in contemporary politics and political philosophy, then, fails to capture an important element in a long tradition of valuing personal responsibility in and of itself. Defenders of luck egalitarianism have expressed agnosticism about the value of individual responsibility, relegating it to a secondary, instrumental role in theories of social justice. By doing so, they have bypassed a long tradition of seeing personal responsibility as a fundamental human value, integral and intrinsic to the basis upon which justice is built and the reasons for why we should value and strive towards it. To better understand this problem, we can consider some of the key criticisms with which luck egalitarian responsibility as accountability has been met.

Importantly, although perhaps unintentionally, many critiques of luck egalitarianism have adopted the basic premise of the accountability view. That is, instead of attacking the main assumptions of responsibility as accountability, critics have targeted the *fit* between choice and justice. For example, luck egalitarianism has been criticised for being *too harsh* in its implications, as epitomized in Anderson's abandonment objection (Anderson 1999). Imagine, Anderson says, a reckless driver who has a major accident due to her reckless driving. An accident, in other words, for which she is herself responsible. According to a luck egalitarian view of justice, we could be fully justified in denying this reckless driver assistance, since this would constitute holding her accountable for her (reckless) choices and letting the ensuing distribution of resources reflect these choices. But this, Anderson and many others argue, is certainly too harsh (Fleurbaey 1995; Anderson 1999). Luck egalitarians have developed multiple replies to this sort of criticism, and the

dispute is ongoing.<sup>9</sup> But the dispute, in an important sense, takes place within the framework of responsibility as accountability. Because of this, it does not engage with the deeper question of the value of responsibility and the proper emphasis on the value of self-creative responsibility. When appropriately informed by the notion of self-creative responsibility, cases like this become much clearer.<sup>10</sup>

Surely, no victim of a bad outcome of imprudent personal choice should be left to face grave consequences such as death or impairment if such consequences could be prevented. Choice, as we saw, is valuable because it allows people to shape reality. Removing people's very ability to choose by abandoning them to terrible outcomes constitutes a clear failure to appreciate this value. As we put it elsewhere: "we should avoid harsh outcomes because these constitute clear and immediate threats to people's plans and intentions and, thus, their ability to act as a moral agent" (Axelsen & Nielsen 2020, 668). This does not mean, on the other hand, that it is not a matter of moral importance whether people choose responsibly or not. But such exercises do not matter because we need to establish fair shares of society's benefits, but because it is important *for them* that they live responsible lives and choose accordingly. Our focus should not be on holding people

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<sup>9</sup> See Albertsen 2016; Albertsen & Nielsen 2020; Knight 2015; Stemplowska 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere, we elaborate how the standard critiques of luck egalitarianism (and the luck egalitarian responses) neglect this more fundamental question (Axelsen and Nielsen 2020).

accountable, then, but on ensuring, upholding, and securing their possibilities for responsible choice.

This may not worry pluralist luck egalitarians too much. Pluralist luck egalitarians are open to values other than equality, and could therefore, in principle, acknowledge both the value of accountability and self-creative responsibility separately (Temkin 2003; Cohen 1989; 2008), and, indeed, they often invoke some kind of sufficiency threshold to protect minimal agency (Segall 2010; Long 2011). In other words, they could say that what justice requires is a responsibility-sensitive equal distribution—i.e. because equality is valuable—but that this value should be weighed against other values when considering how to set up society, and that the value of self-creative responsibility could be one such value against which distributive equality should be weighed. Hence, many would be ready to accept Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen’s description of luck egalitarianism as an “*incomplete* view of justice, which states a sufficient condition for it to be unjust for some to be worse off than others” (2016, 6, our italics).

For most luck egalitarians, this way out is not available, however. This is because the value of self-creative responsibility is already present in both horns of the dilemma. Luck egalitarians might conceive of the trade-off above as being between self-creative responsibility and egalitarian justice. Such a portrayal, however, misestimates that what makes equality valuable in the first place *is* (at least partly) self-creative responsibility.

Equality, in luck egalitarian theories, refers to not simply equal holdings of outcome (goods or welfare), but to some minimally liberal *value theory*—e.g. equality of

opportunities, access to advantage, capabilities or choice-options under the cap of Dworkinian equality of resources. But then the value of self-creative responsibility is already shaping our valuing of equality because what gives opportunities, access to advantage, capabilities, and Dworkinian resources value is *that* they can be used to create, revise, and pursue autonomous, self-creative lives. That is, the value theory underlying most luck-egalitarian writings is—explicitly or implicitly—based on the value of self-creative responsibility. In other words, the *equalisandum* in terms of which we are supposed to be equal is, in some form or another, intimately connected to this self-creative value.

A similar relationship between basic equality and elements of self-creative responsibility has recently been emphasized by George Sher. According to Sher, basic moral equality implies that any just society must protect its members' freedom to exercise their responsibility because, "choosing among options in light of their consequences is just what living a life *is*" (Sher 2017, 90). For Sher, as he explains elsewhere, this pertains to a sufficientarian distributive standard construed around the importance of personal autonomy—that is, that everyone is secured enough and good enough opportunities (Sher 2014).

One might object that caring about the distribution of resources (or opportunities) does not commit a luck egalitarian to a specific view about how these resources are to be used (i.e. in a responsible way). But one powerful reason for which one ought to care about how resources are distributed *is* that one cares about the moral status of the agents to whom this distribution occurs: as choosers, as self-inventors, as deliberators, as pursuers of a conception of the good life, as individuals creating

and recreating themselves. In order to substantiate this connection, it is worth delving deeper into the ethical underpinnings of luck egalitarianism. The value of self-creative responsibility, we argue, is present and foundational in their writings as well. Dworkin, in particular, bases much of his broader theoretical work on a small set of fundamental moral principles.

The first of these is *the principle of self-respect*, stating that persons must take the success of their own life seriously (Dworkin 2011, 203). The second is *the principle of authenticity*; “[e]ach person has a special, personal responsibility for identifying what counts as success in his own life: he has a personal responsibility to create that life through a coherent narrative or style that he himself endorses” (ibid, 204). These two principles bear a striking similarity to the fundamental values identified above as underpinning self-creative responsibility, invoking reasons with clear connections to human flourishing, ethical responsibility, and integrity.<sup>11</sup>

Dworkin, thus, recognizes the value of self-creative responsibility (or a value of a closely related nature). This seems to be the case for some pluralist luck egalitarian writers as well. Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, for example, acknowledges values very similar to those underlying self-creative responsibility arguing that what distributive justice should focus on equalizing among persons is “that which they care about non-instrumentally about and not unreasonably so” (Lippert-Rasmussen 2016, 135), basing this on “their capacity to be non-instrumentally concerned with things in a distinctive way, say, one that involves long-term planning” (ibid, 61).

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<sup>11</sup> See also Clayton 2016, 419-420.

Distributive justice, thus, aims at enabling people to live and choose in accordance with what they care about, their plans, and their capacity for non-instrumental concern for everyone.<sup>12</sup>

Importantly, then, proponents of responsibility of accountability are not blind to the value of self-creative responsibility, which, in fact, plays an essential role in many accounts of luck egalitarianism.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, with the notion of self-creative responsibility in mind, it becomes clear that the luck egalitarian focus on responsibility as accountability can be recast as a worry about people imposing costs on others and, in doing so, constraining the opportunities for these others for pursuing life in accordance with *their* plans and concerns. Dworkin, for example, uses his two ethical principles described above to ground an account in which holding people responsible is central to justice in order to ensure that the consequences of their choices and opportunity costs of their holdings do not impede the equal opportunities of *others* (Dworkin 2011, chap. 11).

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<sup>12</sup> See also Meijers & Vandamme (2019) who convincingly spell out this grounding in Lippert-Rasmussen's account.

<sup>13</sup> Here, we use these observations to show that the foundations upon which luck egalitarianism is built are compatible with a different notion of responsibility. Elsewhere, we have employed similar observations to show why luck egalitarianism should embrace a broader vision of egalitarianism, which we refer to as moral agency egalitarianism. See Axelsen & Nielsen (2020).

For some theorists often labelled luck egalitarian, such as Dworkin, the two understandings of responsibility are intimately intertwined and form part of the same system of value. On this view, self-creative responsibility and *being* responsible entails ensuring that one does not impose costs on others that would see them enjoy less than their (equal) share of resources. In other words, it entails holding oneself responsible and, politically, *being held* responsible to ensure that one does not encroach on the equal opportunities for self-creative responsibility of others. This, for Dworkin, is part of taking responsibility for one's life and living well.

On this value-holist version of luck egalitarianism, then, holding people accountable is a means to ensuring the *equal* self-creative responsibility of everyone. By invoking value-holism, Dworkin escapes the problems that come with embracing a conception of responsibility that holds no value. Recast in this way, the disagreement is not about whether people should be held accountable for the costs they impose on others, but about *how much* normative weight should be given to the avoidance of cost-imposition.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, it is about weighing the value of preventing people from imposing costs on the fair shares of others versus against the value of ensuring that they are able to act and be self-creative going forward.

However, this route also leaves Dworkin wide open to a version of the harshness objection mentioned above; sometimes, people will be left with too little to pursue their life plans as a consequence of their own responsible choices and restoring their adequate opportunities will encroach on the equal shares of others. As Anderson

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<sup>14</sup> See Stemplowska (2009) and (2019) for considerations on this issue.



notes, it seems politically and interpersonally harsh to reply that we should abandon reckless drivers and other bad choosers to their terrible fate.

Returning to our reckless driver from before, then, what creates an apparent dilemma is that restoring the driver's opportunities for self-creative responsibility (by providing medical aid) imposes costs on others which means letting her have a greater than equal share of society's resources and (more importantly) prevents others from enjoying *their* equal and legitimate share. And, in an important sense, it does not seem to rescue Dworkin from the harshness objection to link his political conclusion to his idea of living well. In fact, it seems to open Dworkin to an even harsher version of the objection. Thus, Dworkin seems to imply that we have reason to both abandon the reckless driver *and* tell them that they are to be abandoned *because this is what it means to live well*—because they have failed in their ethical requirements not to impose costs that would infringe on the equal shares of others.

Taking the value of self-creative responsibility seriously must imply that forward-looking considerations should play a greater role.<sup>15</sup> Our reckless driver's opportunities for exercising self-creative responsibility should be restored, even at the cost of imposing on the formerly equal, but now much greater, shares of others. A true reconciliation of the two views of responsibility must provide a better response to such cases.

Other luck egalitarians, such as Cohen and Lippert-Rasmussen, are value pluralists. In an attempt to reconcile the two understandings of responsibility, pluralist luck egalitarians can maintain that it may, indeed, be unjust to compensate bad choosers

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<sup>15</sup> See Axelsen & Nielsen (2020), 667-669.

due to the cost-imposition this entails (as, for example, in the case of the reckless driver). But restoring the capabilities of the reckless driver may nonetheless be the right thing to do *all things considered*. They might, thus, acknowledge the importance of self-creative responsibility and hold that questions about whether or not to aid bad choosers entails a trade-off between this value and that of egalitarian justice. And it may well be that some bad choices should be compensated for the sake of ensuring capabilities for choice at the cost of attaining accountability-sensitive equality, all things considered.<sup>16</sup> But for pluralist luck egalitarians, such compensation may be justified on balance—when considering and weighing the different, plural values at stake. To pluralist luck egalitarians, then, another strategy for reconciliation than Dworkin’s holist vision is possible.<sup>17</sup>

But pluralist luck egalitarians say very little about why accountability should be given any weight at all—as mentioned, it has no value in and of itself. The value of

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<sup>16</sup> We say “may well be” because luck egalitarians seldom engage in all things considered judgments.

<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, and uncharacteristically, Dworkin (2002) makes use of something akin to the pluralist reply to the harshness objection arguing that his hypothetical insurance market would ensure a basic minimum for everyone, regardless of imprudent choices. But, as Kristin Voigt (2007), fn. 16, argues, the provision of a minimum standard of living for everyone through the hypothetical insurance market “has to be regarded as a deviation from the basic luck egalitarian approach and not, as Dworkin suggests, as part of a theory of equality”. This route is vulnerable to the same objections as the pluralist responses discussed here. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for emphasizing this point.

self-creative responsibility, on the other hand, is significant—as we have sought to show here. The burden of proof of why we should give any weight to accountability when it clashes with self-creative responsibility, then, must be on pluralist luck egalitarians.

But their strategy also leaves us with a more general problem (noted above): that the value of distributing according to responsibility as accountability seems to be parasitic upon that of self-creative responsibility. Attempts to flesh out *why* we should care about people's equal opportunities often return to the ability to make use of these opportunities in a self-creative, agential, or autonomous fashion. But if we care about distributing according to responsibility as accountability only because we care about self-creative responsibility, weighing the two values seems to lead to an inevitable outcome. Namely, that we should always prioritize self-creative responsibility (and, frankly, this does not entail much of a weighing) when the two are in conflict—since responsibility as accountability has no value in itself. This, we think, provides us with a more promising way of expanding the notion of individual responsibility in line with the values underpinning self-creative responsibility in a way that we think is available to, and indeed would strengthen, luck egalitarian theory.

The above considerations give rise to the following set of normative principles:

#### **I. The value of being self-creatively responsible**

*It is in itself good that persons make responsible and well-reflected choices in regard to their own lives. This is so, because (a) responsible personal choices are valuable human activities, (b) that create valuable potential lifepaths and bring*

*personal identities into existence, (c) which are respectfully aware of the mutually exclusive value-plurality that the human life-form entails.*

## **II. The value of moral equality**

*Ensuring the opportunities for being responsible, for reasons stemming from (I), is equally important with regards to every person.*

## **III. The value of holding people responsible**

*It is valuable to hold persons responsible for their choices, only when this facilitates persons (either themselves or others) making responsible and well-reflected choices about their own lives.*

## **IV. The policy of holding people responsible**

*We should accept responsibility-sensitive distributive policies when they enable persons to lead responsible lives, and only on the condition that they do not substantially infringe other persons' equivalently valuable ability to lead responsible lives.*

Responsibility, then, has value when it is an expression of people taking responsibility for shaping their own lives or helping others shape theirs (I). It is equally important to provide this value for every human being (II). And while holding people accountable has no value in itself, it is valuable in so far as it furthers self-creative responsibility of either those that are held accountable or others (III).

These principles feed into the discussion about which role responsibility should play in theories of justice and political discourse. Should bad choosers such as imprudent victims of reckless driving bear the cost of their recklessness? The correct answer to this question, we argue, depends on whether this policy enhances self-creative responsibility. We should not, then, let reckless drivers bear these costly outcomes if holding them accountable undermines their chance of leading a self-creative human life—which, given that they are *ex hypothesi* on the verge of dying, seems likely to be the case.

As the second principle states, people are *owed* the opportunities for exercising self-creative responsibility to an equal degree. But this is very different from the claim of accountability theorists that egalitarian justice should track people's (past) exercises of responsibility. Luck egalitarians worry about bad or imprudent choosers imposing costs on others. More specifically, they worry about the imposition of costs that will encroach on the *equal* shares of others. But, following the principles stated above, imposing costs on others is *only* a problem if this undermines their opportunities for self-creative responsibility. Luck egalitarians need to say more about what value is lost if we redistribute resources from the prudent citizen who, through a string of responsible choices, is faced with excellent opportunities for self-creatively pursuing her conception of the good life to the imprudent one who, through a string of irresponsible choices, is faced with little to no opportunities for doing so. If self-creative responsibility is one of the main reasons for valuing an equal distribution in the first place, it is not clear what role accountability is thought to play *besides this*.

When, then, should we hold people accountable and reject their imposition of costs on others? We should do so *when and only when* it improves their forward-looking opportunities for self-creative living—that is, when it makes them reconsider and learn from their actions and behaviour—or when doing so is necessary to protect the decent opportunities of others. Clearly, leaving the reckless driver from before to die by the roadside would *not* improve her opportunities for self-creative responsibility. It would, rather, remove them. In such cases, again, there is no good reason to refuse her imposing costs on others. Rather, the reckless driver should be helped to secure enough opportunities for self-creative responsibility, both because this value dominates the value of achieving responsibility-sensitive egalitarian justice—which most pluralist luck egalitarians are ready to admit—and because (as we have argued above) it is this value that explains our interest in responsibility-sensitive distribution in the first place. What should be emphasized is that everyone is ensured the opportunities to exercise responsible choices—to choose, to reinvent themselves, and to deliberate among different valuable paths—and that these opportunities are ensured equally for everyone.

The implication of our analysis is that any auspicious responsibility-sensitive distributive theory should enshrine the protection self-creative responsibility and do so through ensuring that everyone is sufficiently well-positioned to choose, reinvent themselves, and deliberate. This is an ecumenical conclusion in the sense that it is compatible with a wide range of sufficientarian ideals and does not commit its

proponents to any particular threshold view.<sup>18</sup> It does, however, provide immediate responses to some of the most central problems for contemporary luck egalitarian theory—such as the harshness objection—and it demands that luck egalitarianism be revised accordingly so as to cope with such objections in recognition of the pre-eminence of the value of self-creative responsibility. Ensuring sufficiency—conceived in the light of the value of self-creative responsibility—is not a handy theoretical add-on that pluralist luck egalitarians can use for coping with harshness cases; it is the moral foundation upon which any responsibility-sensitive distributive theory should be constructed. Contemporary luck egalitarians often get this the wrong way around. Starting from the notion of self-creative responsibility, we have sought to reorient them towards a more stable foundation, on which responsibility-sensitive distributive theories can and should be constructed.

## **Conclusion**

In many theories of distributive justice, self-creative responsibility plays a fundamental role in their justification. But this role is not appropriately appreciated, nor are the implications of its inclusion considered carefully enough. Here, we have attempted to expand the notion of responsibility with self-creative insights, arguing that we should not hold people accountable when doing so threatens their prospective exercises of self-creative responsibility. And while everyone is equally

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<sup>18</sup> Promising candidates are Joseph Raz (1986); George Sher (2014); Axelsen & Nielsen (2015).

entitled to such opportunities, what matters is that they have enough in absolute terms to live self-creatively, *not* that they retain an equal share, *nor* that they avoid encroaching on the equal shares of others. People *should*, however, be held accountable when this enhances their future opportunities for exercising self-creative responsibility. And we should ensure that costs are spread through collective schemes so that no one can impose costs on others that threaten *their* self-creative responsibility.

Responsibility is valuable and has a foundational place in a good and just society. It is not, however, as some theorists and politicians will have us think, best understood as a mere means for deciding entitlements. Tracking people's exercises of responsibility might provide a clear formula as to how societal distributions ought to look. But if theorists lose sight of *why* exercises of responsibility are important, a responsibility-sensitive distribution will leave some without enough to exercise self-creative responsibility while others will retain much more than they need; society will be structured in a way where valuable agency is lost. Worse, value will be lost for the sake of something that has no inherent value—holding people responsible.



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