# How to be a Responsibility-Sensitive Egalitarian: From Metaphysics to Social Practice

Emily McTernan

There is something attractive about combining the values of equality and responsibility. As suggested by G. A. Cohen's oft-cited comment, doing so would incorporate within egalitarianism, 'the most powerful idea in the arsenal of the anti-egalitarian right: the idea of choice and responsibility' (1989, p. 933). Certainly, ideas of choice and responsibility exert a powerful pull within contemporary thinking about distributive justice: consider debates over whether unhealthy lifestyle choices should diminish entitlement to healthcare resources or whether unemployment benefits should be paid to those at fault for failing to find work.[1] Further, as this article explores, egalitarians have principled reasons to find incorporating responsibility desirable aside from the political advantages of doing so, ranging from concerns about fairness to valuing choice, respect, or autonomy.

Yet the view most commonly associated with combining equality and responsibility, of luck egalitarianism, is beset with objections. On one standard formulation, luck egalitarians hold that it is unjust if some do worse than others through no fault or choice of their own but, insofar as inequalities are the result of choice, they are not unjust.[2] Challenges facing this position range from the accusation that its implications are too harsh in leaving people to bear the costs of their choices; to claims that no choice is free from the influence of luck and that, as such, the distinction between luck and responsibility cuts 'too deep'; to arguments from social egalitarians that proponents of luck egalitarianism fail to be true egalitarians.[3]

This article, however, proposes an alternative approach to understanding responsibility and incorporating it into egalitarianism to that prevalent among luck egalitarians. To do so, I will not rehearse the many existing criticisms of luck egalitarianism. Instead, I offer an

approach to catering to responsibility that is grounded on our responsibility practices and which egalitarians should find more palatable and better motivated than standard forms of luck egalitarianism. Indeed, my approach is one that should appeal even to the social egalitarians who are amongst luck egalitarianism's critics. In contrast, the prevalent approach to responsibility among luck egalitarians will be shown to miss out on the very reasons to find catering to responsibility significant for justice.

One might argue that, nonetheless, this paper offers but one more variant of luck egalitarianism. Yet, while on one characterisation luck egalitarianism's central claim is that justice demands that we eliminate or mitigate the effects of brute luck on people's prospects, my approach instead defends our responsibility practices and their potentially egalitarian character. By 'responsibility practices', I refer to the ways in which we hold each other responsible across a variety of situations, including, for example, editorials condemning those who claim benefits without desiring to reciprocate in any way; holding someone responsible for the healthcare costs of their expensive lifestyle choices; resenting companies who avoid tax or praising those who contribute to the social good. A responsibility practice consists of a set of conditions for holding people responsible in a certain context, along with associated reactive attitudes such as resentment, pride or shame, and consequences such as praise or blame, benefits or burdens.[4] Whether my approach remains a form of luck egalitarianism I take to be a terminological debate of little importance, but I describe my position as a form of responsibility-sensitive egalitarianism to emphasise its focus on responsibility practices, and so on relations among citizens rather than on factors of luck.[5]

To begin, section 1 outlines two approaches to understanding responsibility and incorporating it into egalitarianism: one based on our responsibility practices, the other that prevalent among luck egalitarians. I then defend adopting the practice-based approach to responsibility when incorporating considerations of responsibility within egalitarianism.

Section 2 argues that adopting a practice-based approach better captures the reasons responsibility is significant for justice than does the prevalent approach among luck egalitarians: the values of fairness, choice and respect, along with instrumental benefits. Finally, section 3 addresses the one remaining motivation of the approach prevalent among luck egalitarians, that it accommodates the force of the claim that people's prospects should be free of luck. I argue that this anti-luck motivation is both impoverished and especially prone to a sceptical problem.

## 1.    Two approaches

Luck egalitarians, for the most part, assume that who is responsible is a question to be settled externally to their normative commitments.[6] Some do so explicitly, deferring to moral philosophers or metaphysicians to answer when inequalities are chosen and so something for which people are responsible. To illustrate, consider Cohen's argument that implementing luck egalitarianism requires an account of 'genuine choice', which 'subordinates political philosophy to metaphysical questions', such as the outcome of the free will debate (1989, p. 934). Alternatively, consider Carl Knight's suggestion that a just society will use committees including metaphysicians to determine when people are responsible (2006, pp.185-188). I term this the 'metaphysical approach' largely because its most obvious proponents appeal to metaphysics, but what unites those luck egalitarians who share this approach is the assumption that there is some underlying fact about whether someone is responsible to be settled independently from their values, then inserted into their egalitarian theory. The metaphysics of being responsible is thus prior to one's values.[7]

This metaphysical approach is also found among those less explicit about their reliance on metaphysics or moral philosophy. In particular, it is demonstrated in the use of examples to provoke intuitions about when people genuinely choose or when they do not.

Consider, to illustrate, examples of those who are taken to be obviously responsible, in a way that provides reason for them to bear the consequences of their decision, such as reckless gamblers, foolish hikers, and full-time surfers. Other examples are designed to bring to our attention factors of luck that seemingly undermine control over choices: a predisposition to gamble, say, or an uncontrollable craving for some expensive good.[8] The way these examples are designed and used reveals a metaphysics first approach: metaphysical in that what matters is whether a person has 'real' responsibility and so the absence of salient factors of control undermining luck, and which factors of luck count as salient for judgements of responsibility does not depend on values.

It might be objected, however, that amongst the wide variety of luck egalitarian theories, a few do give some role to value in setting the conditions for holding people responsible. In particular, as I discuss shortly, Zofia Stemplowska argues that holding people responsible can ensure that all are treated as moral equals, and so sometimes we should perhaps hold people responsible for what they do not control (2008). So too, Ronald Dworkin's distinction between ambitions and endowments might stem from a normative conception of how to divide luck from responsibility to reflect equal concern and respect for all (e.g. 2002b, esp. p. 106).[9] Yet, this article's purpose is not to demonstrate in turn that each variant of luck egalitarianism is equally prone to the arguments to follow. Instead, I claim that the metaphysical approach described above is both prevalent among luck egalitarians and, in the following sections, argue that it is especially vulnerable to the challenge that it fails to reflect what is valuable. Furthermore, those luck egalitarians who permit some role for value still face a form of this challenge: I will suggest that there are a wide range of reasons to find responsibility significant for justice and Dworkin's approach in particular may be too inflexible to accommodate that range.[10]

Before presenting this challenge, I first outline the alternative approach. When considering whether and how to incorporate considerations of responsibility into an egalitarian theory, I propose that in each instance one should ask is this particular responsibility practice one that egalitarians should find valuable? Responsibility practices are valuable and potentially of significance for justice when they promote just social relations or, perhaps, produce certain instrumental benefits. Thus, considering our values is the way to answer which responsibility practices should be adopted, and which have significance for distributive justice such that distributions should be sensitive to the resulting responsibility judgements. I term this a 'practice-based' approach since it is concerned with valuable social practices and not 'real' or metaphysical responsibility: with the value of a particular set of conditions for holding responsible, with associated reactive attitudes and other consequences. On this view, what factors of luck count as salient, in acting as excusing conditions for responsibility, depends on why and how the practice is valuable: on which standards of assessment best promote, express, or create the value of that practice.

So, to illustrate, consider a disagreement over whether to hold people responsible for their degree of effort at work: one liberal egalitarian thinks yes, the other, no. To resolve this disagreement, they should defend their particular responsibility practice - of holding people responsible for effort in work or not - as the best at promoting or expressing values salient given their conception of justice. They should ask, which practice creates better social relations of the kind with which liberal egalitarians should be concerned, or has the most instrumental benefit of a kind defensible within the liberal egalitarian framework? This contrasts to the question to be asked on a metaphysical approach, of whether factors of luck undermine people's responsibility for their effort, given the correct conception of responsibility.

Here, for the sake of illustration, I briefly suggest a non-exhaustive list of values likely to be relevant for liberal egalitarians; section 2 then examines further reasons to find responsibility practices valuable.[11] So, first, the instrumental benefits of a practice provides one reason liberal egalitarians may value it. For instance, treating people as responsible for their degree of effort within work might lead to more goods being produced. Evidently the relevant benefits - and the relevance of instrumental benefits - will vary across different spheres, say, between health, work, and education.

Responsibility practices also influence or even constitute relations among citizens, and these social relations give responsibility practices their expressive value. Holding someone responsible, or not responsible, for some action she performs or choice she makes is to adopt a particular way to treat or regard that person.[12] Various different values might be expressed through doing so, including the values of choice, autonomy and fairness, as the following section examines. The influence of responsibility practices on social relations should also be of concern to liberal egalitarians given the value of respect. To hold someone responsible is to treat them as an agent and this provides what T. M. Scanlon calls the symbolic value of choice: being treated by others as an agent able to choose is valuable (1998, p. 253). Conversely, failing to hold a person responsible for the costs of her choices can be a form of disrespect for her agency in a way that should concern liberal egalitarians. Some think paternalism is objectionable precisely because it is a form of disrespect for someone's agency, expressed through not letting her bear the costs of her choice.[13] So too, Stemplowska examines the opposite side of the relation between responsibility and respect. Holding the reckless responsible for the costs of their actions, rather than society having to bear the costs, helps to ensure that all respect their co-citizens as moral equals: imposing burdens on others through one's 'unreasonably wasteful or reckless' choices can be a form of disrespect (2011, p. 130).[14]

Thus, there are two competing approaches to responsibility within egalitarianism, distinguished by the differing role they give to values. On the practice-based approach, political philosophers must get their hands dirty and determine which responsibility practices are valuable given their normative commitments and, given that, when people are to be held responsible. On the metaphysical approach, determining when to hold people responsible is either a task to be left to others, or a question to be answered aside from their normative commitments.

As such, there is also one further difference between the two approaches. As Arneson notes, prevalent forms of luck egalitarianism are best characterised as 'asocial': holding that the demands of justice do not depend on pre-existing social relations nor social interactions (2011, p. 49). Further, on the metaphysical approach, determining who is responsible concerns individuals: one must ask, is this particular individual responsible for her choice? In contrast, the responsibility-sensitive egalitarianism I propose is best characterised as fundamentally 'social': determining who is responsible and for what requires that we address which forms of responsibility practice have value and, further, one of the central ways in which a responsibility practice can have value is in shaping our social relations. Hence, this approach to responsibility-sensitive egalitarianism is one that places the central concern of social egalitarianism - the nature of relations among citizens - at its heart. The rest of this article defends the attractiveness of the practice-based approach for those liberal egalitarians who find catering to responsibility appealing.

## 2.      Capturing the significance of responsibility

Against the practice-based approach, one might object that how responsibility is practised, and which responsibility practices most neatly fit with one's moral and political values, is not what should be of concern when considering questions of justice. Instead, one should be

concerned with when people are *really* responsible: a fact of the matter independent of one's theory of justice. This is just what those who hold a metaphysical approach to responsibility suppose. I now offer two defences of a practice-based approach against this challenge.

First, one can doubt that analysing our practices of responsibility fails to tell us how responsibility really is: how responsibility really is - our metaphysical account - is derived from our practices. Once we engage in responsibility practices, there can be a sense in which I am 'really' responsible and so a fact as to whether I am responsible. However, that sense is derivative of our practices.[15] Furthermore, to see the metaphysical account as derived from practice like this fits with the most common way in which metaphysical conceptions of responsibility are designed: of offering a series of often bizarre examples such as a man with a chip in his brain, then taking the intuitions provoked by these examples to be evidence for one conception of responsibility over another (e.g. Fischer, 1999). Where but from our practices of responsibility are our intuitions about responsibility supposed to come from?

Second, as the rest of this section argues, regardless of whether there is some more fundamental project of determining how responsibility 'really' is beyond analysing our practices, that is not something with which responsibility-sensitive egalitarians should concern themselves. By virtue of deviating from how responsibility is practiced, an approach that focuses on how responsibility 'really' is undermines the very reasons one might be a responsibility-sensitive egalitarian in the first place. In contrast, these motivations are accommodated within a practice-based approach. In so doing, I also suggest that there are a plurality of ways in which responsibility practices can be valuable. To make this argument, I will consider the core motivations of the most prevalent kind of responsibility-sensitive egalitarian: luck egalitarians.

Before I begin, however, I make two comments on the motivations of responsibility-sensitive egalitarianism considered. First, I do not address reasons why equality should be the

default such that, absent of justification otherwise, all should get equal shares. Instead, I address reasons why being responsible for some inequality justifies that inequality: reasons to be a responsibility-sensitive egalitarian rather than another form of egalitarian. Second, luck egalitarians do not regard responsibility as an external constraint on an egalitarian conception of justice, but rather a fundamental component of that conception. Thus, the reasons addressed below are reasons for responsibility to be one such fundamental component: reasons grounded on core liberal egalitarian values.

## 2. 1.  On the value of choice

First, I consider those who motivate a responsibility-sensitive egalitarianism through appeal to the value of choice. As Stemplowska comments, some luck egalitarians are 'pro-choicist' as well as 'anti-luck'(2012, p. 389). With its distinction between what people are responsible for and what is the result of brute luck, luck egalitarianism's distributive scheme is sensitive to the choices people make. However, I argue that in so far as one deviates from how responsibility is practised - as luck egalitarians do by adopting a metaphysical approach - one loses track of what is valuable about choice.

Consider the following example, of a kind familiar to luck egalitarians, which I use merely as illustration when addressing what makes choice valuable and, further, whether an approach deviating from practice can capture that value. Note that versions of this example can be run using whatever currency of equality one holds, such as welfare, advantage, or resources. Suppose that Joe chooses to work half as many hours as other citizens, to have a greater number of leisure hours to devote to his unprofitable artistic projects. Joe feels this choice expresses his deep commitment to his art and represents that commitment to others. Joe knows, however, that he would have a better life were he to work longer hours, so he could afford to buy a house rather than live in a string of mouldy rented flats.[16] I assume that

Joe is correct that he would be better off working longer hours, since the cost to him of no longer pursuing his art would not outweigh the benefit of having satisfactory and secure housing.

However, suppose Joe is a member of a luck egalitarian society that holds a metaphysical approach to responsibility. Suppose that, on the 'correct' metaphysical account of responsibility, whatever that turns out to be, Joe is not 'really' responsible for his choice. Instead, his apparent choice is really the consequence of his overly hippy upbringing failing to instil any work ethic in Joe to the extent that he could not have done otherwise; or that he was rendered insufficiently responsive to the relevant reasons when it comes to choice of profession; or fill out the example using your preferred account of 'real' responsibility. Such metaphysical luck egalitarians would conclude that there is a reason of justice to hold that costs associated with Joe's choice, of having insufficient income to secure satisfactory housing, should be mitigated or even removed altogether. The outcome of having insufficient income to obtain satisfactory housing would be regarded as reflecting brute luck of upbringing, not any real choice. Observe that an assumption of the example is that whatever Joe's upbringing needs to be like to mitigate his responsibility for his work choices, obtains.

However, the example of Joe illustrates that through deviating from practice the metaphysical approach to responsibility is liable to fail to capture why catering to choice is valuable. If Joe's distributive shares fail to reflect his choice, since the state corrects for any difference in income or welfare between Joe and his co-citizens, then Joe is no longer the self-sacrificing artist he considers himself to be. Nor does Joe succeed in representing himself as such to his co-citizens, who will know that the state makes good the difference. As such, I suggest that Joe's choice has lost its value to him.[17]

To elaborate on how Joe's choice has lost its value, I employ Scanlon's analysis of the value of choice. First, if the luck egalitarian state corrects for the negative consequences of

Joe's choice, Joe's choice loses its representative value, of 'wanting to see features of ourselves manifested in actions and their results' (1998, p. 252). Joe's choice does not express his self-sacrifice if the state corrects for any accompanying disadvantage, nor would it represent that self-sacrifice to others. Second, Joe's choice loses its symbolic value, which is found where 'individuals have reason to value the opportunity to make these choices because not having or not exercising this opportunity would be seen as reflecting a judgement (their own or someone else's) that they are not competent or do not have the standing normally accorded an adult member of the society' (1998, p. 253). If the luck egalitarian state steps in on the grounds that Joe is not responsible for this choice, given his hippy upbringing, then it treats Joe as incapable of making choices about how to live his life.[18]

Thus, the value of choice is grounded in, and specific to, practice, and not whether someone is 'really' responsible, in accordance with some metaphysical account. The practice of 'choosing' - even if not consisting of metaphysically-speaking 'genuine' choice - can have representative and symbolic value through expressing something about one's character and standing in a community. So too, for the third of the values of choice Scanlon presents, of the instrumental value of choosing for myself, which does not arise in Joe's case. Even if I lack genuine choice over my preferences, I am still likely to be best placed to pick in accordance with my preferences and, hence, the instrumental reasons to prefer to choose for myself remain.[19]

Further, note that the argument here is not that the metaphysical approach is incorrect about the 'real' nature of responsibility or choice. Instead, I claim that the metaphysical approach is liable to be too detached from our actual practices of choice to be able to capture why we value choice. The value of respecting choice inheres in the practice and does not depend on, nor stem from, any underlying metaphysical truth concerning whether people are 'really' responsible. So, even if one rejects the example of Joe or mitigates the unattractive

consequences of correcting for Joe's choice, the problem will persist that it is practice and not metaphysics that captures the value of choice. To some extent, the example of Joe echoes Scanlon's case of the religious believer being compensated for feeling religion-inspired guilt (1986, pp. 116-7). However, while one's response to that case might be that religious choices are somehow different to other kinds of choices, here I make a more general claim that the reasons to value choice, or to make distributions choice-sensitive, tracks our practices and not our metaphysics. As such, taking a metaphysical approach to responsibility clashes with one rationale for being a luck egalitarian.

I now consider three objections to the above: the first objecting that luck egalitarians can accommodate the value of choice as characterised above; the second two objecting to that characterisation. First, then, one might object that the value Joe attaches to bearing the costs of his choice and the desire not to disrespect one's citizens can be accommodated within a metaphysically-inclined luck egalitarianism. In particular, the value of choice or of equal respect provides reason not to distribute in a way that tracks responsibility, such that one would not correct for Joe's disadvantage, despite the fact that he is not responsible for that disadvantage.[20]

However, to reply, the above would not enable the proponent of a metaphysical approach to capture the value of choice in the required sense. The value of choice was meant to justify the significance of responsibility and its role within egalitarian theory, not to constrain that distributive scheme which would otherwise track responsibility. The example of Joe, however, suggests that luck egalitarians that follow a metaphysical approach to responsibility cannot so ground their theories in the value of choice.

I now turn to address two further objections that a metaphysically-inclined luck egalitarian may pose, doubting the Scanlonian analysis of the value of choice. The first objection is that a choice can only be valuable, and catering to choice only desirable, if

someone is 'really' responsible in the metaphysical sense. To defend this, one might offer cases where catering to choice seemingly loses value when it turns out a person is not really responsible; suppose, for example, that Joe had been brainwashed into liking art. However, echoing Strawson, I concede that choice loses its value where it is far removed from anything ordinarily called choice; for instance, and especially, where there is a total break in normal patterns of causation, as in brainwashing (2008, pp. 8-10). Yet, as already suggested, for the most part the value of choice does not track the 'right' metaphysical approach to responsibility. Indeed, even if determinism is true and compatibalism fails, choice would remain valuable.[21] So while there may be exception cases where some strange causal story undermines responsibility and the value of some choice, it does not follow that only 'real' responsibility grounds valuable choice.

Second, a luck egalitarian could outright reject the Scanlonian analysis of choice and its instrumental, representative, and symbolic value. However, why is choice then valuable for luck egalitarians, if not for such reasons? The most likely response is an appeal to the value of autonomy. However, the ways in which making distributions sensitive to choices promotes autonomy again tracks our responsibility practices, not a metaphysical notion of 'real' responsibility. First, consider the claim that making justice sensitive to choices encourages the development of autonomy. If what contributes to developing one's autonomy is the experience of choosing and having those choices reflected in one's resulting situation, then it appears irrelevant whether the choices are 'genuine' according to one's metaphysical account of real choice. Instead, what matters is that the situation we end up in reflects what we experience as choice. Second, one might suggest that making justice sensitive to choice expresses a state's respect for its citizens' autonomy. This, however, again appeals to the symbolic value of choice which, as I argued earlier, tracks our responsibility practices and not metaphysical 'real' responsibility.

To conclude this part of the argument, luck egalitarians who adopt a metaphysical approach to responsibility would struggle to ground their theories on the value of choice, at least as characterised by Scanlon. Instead, the value of choosing is inherent in the practice. It does not depend on whether that practice tracks how responsibility 'really' is and whether one 'really' chooses. A luck egalitarian may respond, however, that the value of choice is not the most central justification of being a luck egalitarian. I now address that more prevalent justification. Section 3 then considers whether there is any further motivation for luck egalitarianism on the grounds that it is 'anti-luck'.

## 2. 2. On fairness

Cohen regards one of the distinguishing features of luck egalitarianism to be that 'its prescriptions are inspired by certain intuitions about fairness' (2006, p. 443). He states that the very reasons that lead one to value equality should motivate one to become a luck egalitarian. Egalitarianism, Cohen suggests, is motivated by outrage over the unfairness that sheer luck of inheritance and circumstance results in massive social inequality. However, egalitarians then face a challenge based on the very same conception of fairness according to Cohen, since implementing equality would unfairly give the 'idle grasshopper' the same benefits as the 'industrious ant'. Hence, 'in the name of fairness', one should be a luck egalitarian, making justice responsibility-sensitive. According to luck egalitarianism, a lazy grasshopper should not get the same benefits as the hardworking ant: since the inequality between what the two produce is not unchosen, the grasshopper does not have a claim of justice that the inequality be corrected (2006, pp. 443-4).

Such comparative examples of feckless and hardworking individuals are a common way for luck egalitarians to introduce and motivate their theories.[22] Another set of popular examples that are taken to suggest that luck egalitarianism is underpinned by intuitions of

fairness are cases where we are asked whether the prudent should have to pay for the repeated imprudence of others.[23] However, I now cast doubt on whether fairness can motivate responsibility-sensitive egalitarianism if one holds a metaphysical approach to responsibility.

To begin, I outline the purported relation between fairness and responsibility. Examples that take the form of counterposing a hardworking individual to a feckless one, or a prudent individual to an imprudent one, are designed to make it appear that what motivates our intuitions about fairness is whether someone is really responsible. We are supposed to assume that the individuals described are responsible for the salient features: being hardworking or prudent, or failing to be so. Crucially, that assumption supposedly does the work in making us think it unfair if the hardworking and lazy do equally well, or the prudent person has to pay for the imprudent. In particular, if whether an individual is responsible changes, through adding detail to the case or correcting our conception of responsibility, then so too must our intuitions of fairness. Otherwise, the metaphysically-inclined luck egalitarian fails to offer an account inspired by fairness.

However, there is an alternative explanation of the intuitions about fairness surrounding the hardworking and the prudent: it is fair for the hardworking to do better than the lazy precisely because one is hardworking and the other lazy, and it is fair for the prudent to do better than the imprudent precisely because of their differing degrees of prudence. Furthermore, such judgements are largely insensitive to whether people are 'really' responsible for these features. To illustrate, consider that we tend to praise those who work hard, without asking if they are 'really' responsible. So too, knowing that one's degree of financial prudence is heavily influenced by parental behaviour does not undermine the intuition that it is unfair if savers are penalised and imprudent borrowers rewarded, as when interest rates are kept down.

Likewise, consider the debate over families where every generation is on benefits, who are the subjects of a great deal of discussion, although in reality rare. It seems likely that members of such families are, on average, less responsible than other benefits claimants, metaphysically-speaking. Many luck egalitarians accept the relevance of upbringing or family norms as excusing factors when attributing responsibility (e.g. Arneson, 1997; Roemer, 1993, e.g. p. 152). Yet this group of families where all generations are unemployed has been regarded as among the least deserving, and the benefits paid to these families, the most unfair (e.g. Mail Online 2008).

As such, intuitions of fairness can be interpreted as reflecting value judgements about how citizens should behave and what burdens each can reasonably place on their co-citizens. Such judgements do not depend on, nor vary with, whether someone has 'real' metaphysical responsibility: determining whether someone is prudent or hardworking or not does not depend on whether they are 'really' responsible for being so. Thus, insofar as the intuitions of fairness supposedly motivating luck egalitarianism in fact rely on valuing prudence or hard work, and our desire to reward those with these features or penalise those without, 'real' metaphysical responsibility will not track what is valuable. In contrast, on a practice-based approach one could design responsibility practices that reflected the value of prudence or hard work, rewarding those who manifest such traits. For example, interest rates could be increased to reward prudent savers and not imprudent borrowers.

To object, one could just deny that intuitions of fairness track the value of hard work or prudence; instead insisting that ideas of fairness do track 'real' responsibility, metaphysically-speaking. At the least, however, the above casts doubt on the conclusions about fairness reached by metaphysically-minded luck egalitarians: there is a plausible alternative explanation of our intuitions of fairness that does not depend on whether people are really responsible. Further, the values of prudence and hard work explain why many

ordinarily think that people should be held responsible, especially considering issues like state benefits. Yet insofar as luck egalitarians adopt a metaphysical approach, they cannot accommodate these values. To claim that really people care about factors of luck and this motivates their intuitions of fairness appears doubtful, at least as a characterisation of contemporary right-wing politics. The rejection of the relevance of sociological explanations of welfare, for example, is not born of ignorance of these potentially excusing factors. Consider, for instance, Laurence Mead's attacks on sociological explanations of behaviour being used to excuse the poor and the *Daily Mail*'s comment that, 'the Left views the poor as imbeciles', in response to similar appeals to socio-economic factors as undermining responsibility (Mead, 2008; Mail Online, 2012b).

So too, there is reason to conduct the debate at the level of these values rather than appeal to 'real' responsibility. To take the traditional metaphysically-minded luck egalitarian approach, or even Dworkin's ordinary metaphysics approach, may be to talk past those who claim that it is important to hold people responsible for failing to find work or for their imprudent decisions, and likewise to reward the prudent or hardworking. Insofar as the latter claims are made on the grounds of values expressed and reflected through responsibility practices, to appeal to genuine choice or to invoke factors of luck is to miss the point of these attributions of responsibility. Obviously, this is not to claim that egalitarians should adopt the judgements of those on the right about benefits claimants but, instead, to claim that a better response from egalitarians would be to engage in debate at the level of these values: to defend a particular conception of how to live together in society.

One might, however, continue to object that underpinning the pull of appeals to fairness is, in fact, the thought that luck shouldn't make a difference. I return to address this in section 3. First, though, I consider the plurality of values that might motivate responsibility-sensitive egalitarianism beyond its core motivations of choice and fairness.

## 2. 3.   On the plurality of values and practices

One might hold that many different values motivate responsibility-sensitive egalitarianism: not only being 'pro-choice' or valuing fairness, but also values like those Alexander Brown suggests such as utility, self-respect, autonomy, human flourishing, or a duty to be self-sufficient (2009). Here, I consider two values thus far overlooked, so as to illustrate the generality of my arguments. Again, however, I suggest that a metaphysical approach does not capture these values and, instead, the values adhere to particular responsibility practices.

Regarding utility, the argument is obvious: what people are 'really' responsible for and what it might be beneficial to hold them responsible for need not coincide. A responsibility practice might have instrumental benefits even when it covers instances where the individual lacks 'real' metaphysical responsibility. For example, a practice could still influence others, or could prevent that individual from behaving similarly in future. Hence, if one values holding people responsible because of the instrumental benefits, that justifies responsibility practices that reflect when it is beneficial to hold people responsible, not ones that reflect 'real' responsibility.

Regarding the value of respect, again our responsibility practices capture what is valuable. As described earlier, the value of respect is closely related to the symbolic value of choice and I have argued this best tracks certain important kinds of decisions people make irrespective of any underlying metaphysics. One might object that to hold someone responsible for something they are not really responsible for, metaphysically-speaking, fails to respect them. However, that is not how our practices of respect function: even if no one is responsible in the metaphysical sense of responsibility, to fail to treat someone as a responsible agent would be to disrespect her regardless. As Nagel comments, to deny agency altogether treats a person like an object or thing (1991, pp. 24-38).

One can run parallel arguments to the above for Brown's other values; in particular, subsuming notions of human flourishing into the earlier discussion of the value of choice, and the natural duty of self-sufficiency into the discussion of fairness. Furthermore, adopting a pluralist approach to motivating luck egalitarianism provides additional reason to prefer a practice-based approach. If one draws the distinction between luck and responsibility in accordance with when people are 'really' responsible, it will fail to produce practices of responsibility that track the various values underpinning the importance of responsibility. As I have argued, many of these values adhere to our particular practices, not any metaphysical account.

Further, we have no reason to think that these responsibility practices that express or promote different values would all have the same conditions for responsibility, let alone ones matching what counts as 'real' responsibility or 'genuine' choice. Not all responsibility practices will be valuable for the same reasons. One responsibility practice might reflect the value of hard work in rewarding people for their effort in work. Another practice might reflect the value of respect and yet another, prudence. To be valuable in these various ways might require practices to have differing standards of assessment for responsibility, as the practice-based approach allows. What would secure respect in some context, for instance, may not secure fairness in another. In contrast, a metaphysical approach with its fixed conditions for when people are really responsible, cannot track values by varying standards of assessment.

As an aside, Dworkin's account also fails to accommodate the plurality of reasons that responsibility practices may be valuable. For example, while his distinction between ambitions and endowments might accommodate intuitions of fairness in cases like the career choice between beach-combing and being a lawyer (Dworkin, 2003, p. 193), it may not accommodate those regarding prudence; for instance, the person who takes a risky gamble and wins would, on his account, get to keep her winnings (e.g. Dworkin, 2002a). So too, his

distinction might not produce responsibility practices that have instrumental benefits or that secure respect. For example, for members of the deaf community who reject the characterisation of deafness as a disability, it appears disrespectful to regard deafness as a condition that we would have insured against and so should be compensated for, as Dworkin's account suggests. Alternatively, holding people responsible for what they produce given their endowments, and not only given their ambitions, might lead to increased productivity.

Hence, the metaphysical approach is likely to be worse at accommodating the very reasons to be a responsibility-sensitive egalitarian than a practice-based approach. However, one possible response from luck egalitarians has thus far been overlooked. Some argue that our values can alter the costs we impose, once we have judged whether someone is responsible for her choice (e.g. Olsaretti, 2009). On this approach, attributions of responsibility remain value-neutral, but the consequences of being responsible can be influenced by values. One may argue that this role for values means luck egalitarians can avoid the full force of the argument above: they can produce responsibility practices that track important values. For instance, even if people are not responsible for being prudent, in order to reflect the value of prudence one might leave them with some of the rewards that stem from their prudence.

To reply, first, the inclusion of values to modify the consequences of choice fails to produce valuable responsibility practices. Instead, one intervenes to mitigate the otherwise unappealing responsibility practice one proposes: one that undermines respect, or fails to value prudence, and so on. Hence, luck egalitarians making the move above still do not give a reason to find the divide between luck and responsibility as *itself* significant, given that it fails to track the many reasons to find responsibility practices valuable. Nonetheless, it might be further objected that I here assume away the metaphysical alternative, where a judgement of

responsibility, or its lack, in itself has significance. The final section of this article addresses one such argument: the claim that the presence of luck itself has significance.

### 3.      Anti-luck or valuable practices?

A metaphysically-minded luck egalitarian might argue that the arguments above are misguided. Luck egalitarians, she might continue, need not accommodate the reasons to find responsibility practices normatively significant given the values of choice, autonomy, fairness, prudence, hard work and so on. Instead, something more basic underpins luck egalitarianism than these various values promoted by responsibility practices: the simple claim that luck should not affect how a person's life goes. For instance, Arneson comments that the task of distributive justice is to alter the 'jumble of lotteries that constitutes human life as we know it' (2008, p. 80).[24] Further, adopting this luck neutralising motivation of luck egalitarianism makes the metaphysical approach seem attractive: if we care about neutralising luck, shouldn't we care about who is 'really' lucky or unlucky?

However, this anti-luck approach threatens to mire luck egalitarians in the very depths of a sceptical problem: aiming to eliminate luck means one ends up immersed in the free will or moral luck problem. For any action or choice for which a person might appear responsible, there is always another factor of luck that threatens to undermine her responsibility. Hence, finding some features or actions for which individuals are 'really' responsible is perhaps an impossible task, given the multitude of factors of luck.[25]

Further, one advantage of a practice-based approach is that it may save us from the sceptical problem, since it denies that 'real' responsibility of the kind immune from luck is what should concern us. Instead, we consider what responsibility practices are valuable. Along Strawsonian lines, one can claim that our practices remain valuable regardless of conclusions about 'real' responsibility, metaphysically-speaking.

Here, it might be objected that my approach is here inconsistent: our responsibility practices are precisely what leads to the problem of free will. There is a tension in our practices between valuing holding one another responsible and thinking that factors of luck undermine responsibility for outcomes or actions (e.g. Matravers, 2007). So, if I want to hold onto the value of our social practices, how can I deny that these very practices also drive us to care about whether there are factors of luck present in the choices people make and in the outcome of those choices? In response, first, our responsibility practices never seek to eliminate all factors of luck: we lack responsibility practices that take the threat of luck undermining any possible attributions of responsibility so seriously, at least, aside from philosophy classrooms. Second, the arguments of this article suggest that the very reasons that these practices have value comes apart from the questions of who is 'really' responsible. The social relations we value produced by holding one another responsible do not require that there are no factors of luck present. Hence, I suggest that the part of our practices that should be revised is the thought that factors of luck should make a difference to our responsibility judgements by themselves, abstract from our purposes in holding responsible, and not the claim that our responsibility practices have value.

Some luck egalitarians might respond, however, that they are untroubled by this sceptical problem, accepting the possibility that everything is a matter of luck. For instance, Arneson proposes that if everything is a matter of luck, we should just be straightforward egalitarians (2004). Yet, this threat of sceptical collapse should trouble us. Those accepting it fail to accommodate any of our practices of holding responsible within their theories yet, as this article has argued, we have many reasons to find these practices valuable. Further, anti-luck metaphysically-minded luck egalitarianism has nothing going for it, except that it seeks to neutralise luck. On a metaphysical approach, one's distinction between responsibility and luck will most likely not create a responsibility practice tracking the value of choice or our

intuitions of fairness, nor one that reflects respect for co-citizens, and so on. As such, such metaphysically-minded, luck-neutralising egalitarians offer an impoverished account of combining equality and responsibility, missing out on the many reasons why catering to responsibility is so important.

Hence, in conclusion, this article proposes that we adopt an alternative approach to understanding responsibility and incorporating it into egalitarianism, one where responsibility is understood as a cluster of differently valuable social practices. The debate within egalitarianism, then, should shift from a focus on genuine choice and eliminating the influence of luck on how life goes, to a discussion of which responsibility practices have value and when. Adopting this approach promises to produce a responsibility-sensitive conception of justice that should also appeal to social egalitarians, given that the significance of responsibility practices largely derives from their effects on social relations.

However, the arguments of this article do not as a result make the significance of considerations of responsibility somehow parasitic or trivial. The position defended is that responsibility practices are valuable and, indeed, worthy of greater consideration by egalitarians: such practices may express or promote central liberal egalitarian values. To focus on our responsibility practices is not to deny the significance of considerations of responsibility, it is instead to reinterpret that significance as grounded in a broader account of how citizens should relate to one another.

---

[1] For examples, see Mail Online, 2012a, 2013, for discussions, see, for instance, Matravers 2007, ch.1, Young 2011, ch. 1.

[2] E.g. Cohen 1989, p. 931; 2006, p. 440; Temkin 2003, p.767; Knight 2009, pp. 1-2; Scheffer 2005, p. 6.

[3] E. g. Anderson 1999; Matravers 2007 esp. pp. 79-80; Scheffer 2003, 2005.

[4] I employ a broader notion of responsibility than has become fashionable, encompassing 'attributive' and 'substantive' responsibility, see Scanlon 1998, ch. 6. When taking of 'responsibility', I refer to Hurley's 'full-

blooded' moral responsibility, which 'licences praise, blame, and reactive attitudes and that implies accountability in principle', Hurley 2005, p. 4.

[5] As such, my account does not meet Kok-Chor Tan's criteria for being a luck egalitarian theory, 2008, esp. pp. 688-9.

[6] Luck egalitarianism is a cluster of diverse theories, and the following account is intended to cover most but by no means all versions. I shortly return to some outlier variants.

[7] Here I include both compatibalist and incompatibalist approaches. For a discussion these approaches within luck egalitarianism, see Scheffler, 2005, pp. 12-13.

[8] Those who employ such examples include Richard Arneson, Cohen, Dworkin, Knight, Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, Temkin, and Peter Vallentyne, among many others. For most of these, ample examples can be found in their contributions to Knight and Stemplowska, 2011.

[9] But, on another interpretation, Dworkin takes a metaphysical approach; for instance, he appeals to everyday metaphysics, e.g. 2002b, p. 107.

[10] Roemer's 1993 approach is the exception here, since he suggests conditions for responsibility may vary. However, there are two ways to interpret his approach. Either facts determine responsibility aside from normative commitments, and his polling approach relies on the public knowing the facts, such as the degree to which factors like socio-economic background affects decisions; or Roemer proposes a differing practice-based approach to that I propose, one that perhaps is more conservative given it rests on what people think undermines responsibility, compared to my consideration of what fits with liberal egalitarian values. However, it is beyond this paper's scope to defend one practice-based approach over the other.

[11] While this discussion is limited to liberal egalitarians, the values discussed here may not be ones only liberal egalitarians think important.

[12] For a similar suggestion making social relations central for attributive responsibility, see Scanlon, 1998, ch. 6.

[13] For a discussion, see DeMarneffe, 2006.

[14] One might also consider Rawls' comments on burdens and primary goods, 1982, p.170.

[15] This is akin to Strawson's observation on metaphysics leaving our practices untouched, 2008. For parallel claims about practice being more fundamental when analysing a concept see, on knowledge, Craig, 1999.

[16] This notion of a 'better life' can be elaborated in terms of higher welfare, greater advantage, or more resources or other metrics.

[17] Dworkin may escape this challenge: his approach would respect Joe's ambitions. However, I shortly return to show that Dworkin faces a challenge owing to the plurality of possible values.

[18] This echoes respect-based challenges to luck egalitarianism, e.g. Anderson, 1999.

[19] Here 'genuine choice' includes both compatibalist and incompatibalist approaches.

[20] Here one might consider Cohen's amendment in response to Scanlon, that we compensate for disadvantage that is not traceable to choice *and* that the individual would not choose to suffer from, 1989, p. 937.

[21] If you adopt a metaphysical view of responsibility, this should read 'the experience of choice'.

[22] For example, the tennis player and gardener in Kymlicka, 2002, p. 73; or the diligent untalented and the talented but lazy in Segall, 2009, p. 18.

[23] For examples, see the imprudent hikers in Arneson, 2000, p.348; those who move into tornado paths in Rakowski, 1991, p.79; or Segall's characterisation of Vallentyne's case of 'Prudent' and 'Lazy', 2009, pp. 17-18. See too the discussion of prudent and imprudent choices (with a comment that this is potentially misleading), in Stemplowska, 2011, p. 123; and Knight's comment that alternatives to luck egalitarianism 'move resources from the prudent and hardworking to the negligent and lazy', 2005, p. 65.

[24] See too the way Tan motivates luck egalitarianism in the introduction to his 2008. Matravers describes this kind of motivation as belonging to 'an important Kantian tradition in liberalism, which focuses on autonomy and agency', 2007, p.72. For further evidence of reliance on something like this motivation, consider the claim that luck egalitarianism forms a natural extension of Rawls, e.g. Kymlicka, 2002; Kaufman, 2004, p. 819. For a criticism of this view, see Scheffler 2003.

[25] E.g. Arneson, 2001, pp. 87-88; Cohen, 1989, p. 934; Matravers, 2007, p .79; Nagel, 1991, pp. 24-38.

# References

Anderson, E.S. (1999) 'What is the Point of Equality?', *Ethics*, 109(2), 287–337.

Arneson, R. J. (1997) 'Egalitarianism and the Undeserving Poor', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 5(4), 327-350.

Arneson, R.J. (2000) 'Luck Egalitarianism and Prioritarianism', *Ethics*, 110(2), 339–349.

Arneson, R.J. (2001) 'Luck and Equality', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume,* 75(1), 73–90.

Arneson, R.J. (2004), 'Luck Egalitarianism Interpreted and Defended', *Philosophical Topics*, 32(1), 1–20.

Arneson, R.J. (2008) 'Rawls, Responsibility, and Distributive Justice', in: Fleurbaey, M., Salles, M., Weymark, J.A. (eds) *Justice, Political Liberalism, and Utilitarianism: Themes from Harsanyi and Rawls*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 80–107.

Arneson, R.J. (2011) 'Luck Egalitarianism—A Primer', in: Knight, C. & Stemplowska, Z. (eds.) *Responsibility and distributive justice*, Oxford University Press, pp. 24–50.

Brown, A. (2009) *Personal Responsibility: Why it Matters*, London: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Cohen, G.A. (1989) 'On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice', *Ethics*, 99(4), 906–944.

Cohen, G.A. (2006) 'Luck and Equality: A Reply to Hurley', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 72(2), 439–446.

Craig, E. (1999) *Knowledge and the State of Nature: An Essay in Conceptual Synthesis*, Oxford University Press.

DeMarneffe, P. (2006) 'Avoiding Paternalism', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 34(1), 68–94.

Dworkin, R. (2002a) *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality*. Harvard University Press.

Dworkin, R. (2002b) 'Sovereign Virtue Revisited', *Ethics*, 113(1),106–143.

Dworkin , R. (2003) 'Equality, Luck and Hierarchy', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 31(2), 190-198.

Fischer, J. M. (1999 'Recent Work on Moral Responsibility', *Ethics*, 110(1), 93-139.

Hurley, S.L. (2005), *Justice, Luck, and Knowledge*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Kaufman, A. (2004) 'Choice, Responsibility and Equality', *Political Studies*, 52(4), 819–836.

Knight, C. (2005) 'In Defence of Luck Egalitarianism', *Res Publica*, 11(1), 55–73.

Knight, C. (2006) 'The Metaphysical Case for Luck Egalitarianism', *Social Theory & Practice*, 32(2), 173–189.

Knight, C. (2009) *Luck Egalitarianism: Equality, Responsibility, and Justice*, Edinburgh University Press.

Knight, C. & Stemplowska, Z. (2011) (eds) *Responsibility and Distributive Justice*, Oxford University Press.

Kymlicka, W. (2002) *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press.

Matravers, M. (2007) *Responsibility and Justice*, Oxford: Polity Press.

Mead, L. M. (2008) *Beyond entitlement*. Simon and Schuster (reprint).

Mail Online (2008) 'Meet the Family Where No One's Worked for Three Generations - and They Don't Care'. Available at http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-541598/Meet-families-ones-worked-THREE-generations--dont-care.html.

Mail Online (2012a). 'Doctors Back Demands to Deny NHS Treatment to Smokers and the Obese'. Available at http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-2136999/No-treatment-smokers-obese-Doctors-measures-deny-procedures-unhealthier-lifestyles.html.

Mail Online (2012b). 'Stop this Hysteria! Why Should the State Pay for Women on Benefits to Have More than Two Children'. Available at http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2224570/Stop-hysteria-Why-state-pay-women-benefits-children.html.

Mail Online (2013) 'They're the Family with the Mercedes in the Drive Getting £42,000 a Year in Benefits. Scroungers? Amanda Platell Meets Them'. Available at http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1266649/Theyre-family-Mercedes-drive-getting-42-000-year-benefits-Scroungers-AMANDA-PLATELL-meets-them.html.

Nagel, T. (1991) *Mortal Questions*, Canto Classics (reprint).

Olsaretti, S. (2009) 'IX—Responsibility and the Consequences of Choice', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* 109, 165–188.

Rakowski, E. (1991) *Equal Justice*, Oxford University Press.

Rawls, J.R. (1982) Social Unity and Primary Goods. In: Sen, A. & Williams, B. (eds..) *Utilitarianism and beyond*, Cambridge University Press, 159 –185.

Roemer, J. (1993) 'A Pragmatic Theory of Responsibility for the Egalitarian Planner', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 22(2), 146–166.

Scanlon, T.M. (1998) *What We Owe to Each Other*, Harvard University Press.

Scanlon, T. M. (1986) 'Equality of Resources and Equality of Welfare: A Forced Marriage?', *Ethics* 97 (1), 111-118.

Scheffler, S. (2003) 'What is Egalitarianism?', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 31(1), 5–39.

Scheffler, S. (2005) 'Choice, Circumstance, and the Value of Equality', *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, 4(1), 5–28.

Segall S. (2009) *Health, Luck, and Justice*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Stemplowska, Z. (2008) 'Holding People Responsible for What They Do Not Control', *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, 7(4), 355–377.

Stemplowska, Z. (2011) 'Responsibility and Respect: Reconciling Two Egalitarian Visions', in: Knight, C. & Stemplowska, Z. (eds.) *Responsibility and Distributive Justice*, Oxford University Press, pp. 115-135.

Stemplowska, Z. (2012) 'Luck Egalitarianism', in: Gaus, G.F. & D'Agostino, F. (eds) *The Routledge companion to social and political philosophy*, Routledge, pp. 389–400.

Strawson, P.F., (2008) *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*, Taylor & Francis US.

Tan, K. (2008) 'A Defense of Luck Egalitarianism', *Journal of Philosophy,* CV (11), 665-690.

Temkin, L.S. (2003) 'Egalitarianism Defended', *Ethics*, 113(4),.764–782.

Young, I. M. (2011) *Responsibility for Justice,* Oxford University Press.