

Rescuing responsibility for the left¹

‘Where is the fairness, we ask, for the shift-worker, leaving home in the dark hours of the early morning, who looks up at the closed blinds of their next door neighbour sleeping off a life on benefits?’²

One prominent idea in contemporary politics is that the welfare system must be made fairer, so that hardworking taxpayers do not have to pay for those who choose to live off benefits. With appeals to that justification, a series of changes have been made to the UK’s welfare system, including capping benefits at less than the average wage, tightening tests for disability benefits, and introducing schemes that encourage returning to work and penalise those who fail to comply.

How should those who disagree with these policies respond? One popular approach amongst egalitarians is to appeal to luck. Ending up on benefits is merely bad luck: a product of circumstances beyond a person’s control, including factors such as unemployment rate, local conditions, or socioeconomic background. Regarding any residual individual responsibility remaining for being on benefits despite these circumstances, two arguments are offered. One claims that our character too - being hardworking or lazy, prudent or imprudent, - is just matter of luck, resulting from our circumstances, upbringing and genetics (e.g. Rawls 1971). The second suggests that at any rate coarse-grained welfare policies would be unable to track whatever minor differences in individual responsibility among welfare claimants could re-

¹ This article benefited from participation in a series of workshops on social equality funded by a British Academy / Leverhulme Trust Small Research Grant (Ref-No: SG132668). For a more detailed criticism of standard forms of luck egalitarianism, see McTernan (2015).

² George Osborne, Conservative Party Conference 2012. For the full text, <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/politics/2012/10/george-osbornes-speech-conservative-conference-full-text>.

main (Arneson 1997). Thus, we should reject punitive welfare systems that seek to distinguish the deserving from the undeserving.

Indeed, many luck egalitarians - those most associated with combining the values of equality and responsibility - think that through such appeals to luck, they can include right wing ideas of choice and responsibility within egalitarianism, yet subvert them.³ Indeed, Cohen claims that a distinguishing feature of luck egalitarianism is that it is inspired by intuitions of fairness (Cohen 2006, p. 443). On the luck egalitarian view, roughly stated, inequalities between individuals are unjust, unless they are the result of the choices that each has made. That looks like it captures the thought that the hardworking should not have to pay for those who choose to live on benefits, but adds the caveat that it only applies if that is a genuine choice rather than the result of luck.

Do those on the left have an answer to the right in debates over welfare, then, in this appeal to luck? No. Any adequate response must meet two criteria. First, it must capture the value of our practices of responsibility and the force of our intuitions about fairness. It weakens the attractiveness of egalitarianism if it cannot accommodate such values. Second, it must succeed in subvert the right's talk of choice and responsibility, unless one wants to end up with uncritical acceptance of the kinds of policies proposed by those on the right when it comes to welfare provision. This article argues that the luck approach sketched above fails to meet either criteria. By itself, luck little to do with either the role of responsibility in right wing politics, or with the construction of an egalitarianism sensitive to considerations of responsibility. In concluding, however, I sketch an alternative approach that might succeed in capturing the value of our responsibility practices for egalitarians.

1. Making welfare fair

³ As the oft cited G. A. Cohen quote claims, (1989), at p.933.

It looks like there is more to the idea of ‘making welfare fair’, than simply the claim that it should reflect what people bear responsibility for, absent the presence of luck. Instead, a series of values are invoked in discussions in welfare.⁴ To illustrate, first, take the claim that it is unfair for the hardworking to have to pay for lazy ‘scroungers’. Valuing fairness for the hardworking motivates policies that make benefits conditional on efforts to find work or performing work-related activities, along with those that seek to ‘make work pay’, such as capping benefits. Consider an illustrative quote from an article in the *Telegraph*: ‘It is demonstrably unfair that unemployed people should receive more money than the average taxpayer earns through hard work’.⁵

Another dimension in welfare discussions is the thought that it is unfair to ‘reward’ people for their imprudence, especially where those who make more prudent decisions lose out comparatively. To illustrate, some think it unfair if the ‘imprudent poor’ have more children than they can support, for whom the state then provides. In contrast, some complain, others are constrained by their incomes in decisions about family size. Take this comment from the *Daily Mail*: ‘And if they can’t afford more children, many working families reluctantly decide not to have them. This is the prudent and responsible way to behave’.⁶

Sometimes, a more general distinction between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor is invoked: that some deserve help from society but others do not. Often, these judgments are based on a person’s degree of prudence and conscientiousness, with the imprudent

⁴ I focus on the UK, although similar values are found elsewhere. For a more detailed analysis for the USA, see Young (2011), ch.1.

⁵ “Fairer Benefits.” *Telegraph.co.uk*, July 16, 2013. At <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/telegraph-view/10182965/Fairer-benefits.html>.

⁶ See “Stop This Hysteria! Why Should the State Pay for Women on Benefits to Have More Than Two Children?” 2013. *Mail Online*, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2224570/Stop-hysteria-Why-state-pay-women-benefits-children.html>. See also the *Telegraph*’s “Fairer benefits” cited above.

and lazy being deemed underserving. This is exemplified in comments like George Osborne's: 'For too long, we've had a system where people who did the right thing – who get up in the morning and work hard – felt penalised for it, while people who did the wrong thing got rewarded for it'.⁷ More general, judgements are also made about the character of welfare recipients. The most extreme example is Michael Philpott, convicted of the manslaughter of his children. Certain right-wing papers and some politicians, responding to the case, blamed the welfare system. The *Daily Mail*, for instance, entitled an article: 'Michael Philpott is the perfect parable for our age: His story shows the pervasiveness of evil born out of welfare dependency'.⁸

The above is purely illustrative and it is beyond the scope of this article to offer a proper analysis of welfare discussions. However, since these values should sound familiar, I propose the following interpretation of arguments about making welfare fairer. These discussions rely on ideals of what it takes to be a citizen in good standing: a prudent hardworking individual who does not become a burden on others. Further, appeals to fairness are used to endorse a particular allocation of duties and burdens among citizens. In blaming those who fulfil their duties, for instance failing to be prudent, citizens, newspapers, or politicians express their support for a particular set of expectations on citizens. For example, people are expected to consider how many children they can afford, rather than place the financial burden of having children on others, expected to seek work rather than depend on benefits, and so forth.

⁷ 2013. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chancellor-speech-on-changes-to-the-tax-and-benefit-system>

⁸ *Mail Online*, 2 April 2013. At <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2303071/Mick-Philpotts-story-shows-pervasiveness-evil-born-welfare-dependency.html>.

2. The inadequacy of appeals to luck

Why isn't the standard appeal to luck a good response to the kinds of responsibility judgments sketched above, that invoke values like prudence, hard work, and notions of good character? The proponent of the luck approach might say that those who attribute responsibility to the imprudent or to those who 'sleep off a life on benefits' fail realise the extent of the influence of upbringing and circumstances on our behaviour. If we were to genuinely accept the extent to which our control over our behaviour is undermined by luck, our judgments of who is responsible and what is fair would change.

However, for this luck response to succeed, we must assume that those wanting to make a welfare system more responsive to values like hard work and fairness are ignorant of these factors of luck. That seems implausible. Do we have reason to think that those arguing we must make welfare fairer are unaware of how upbringing and socioeconomic factors can influence behaviour? At the least, evidence would be required to demonstrate that there is such ignorance.

Instead, it seems more plausible to deny that ignorance of such sociological explanations motivates those on the right to attribute individual responsibility to the typical targets of welfare reform or demand that welfare be made 'fairer'. Often such explanations are explicitly rejected. Laurence Mead, for instance, attacks the use of sociological explanations of behaviour to excuse the poor. One grounds that he offers is the claim that providing such excuses has pervasively undermined individual responsibility (2008). Further, the same rejection is found in the press. For example, the *Daily Mail* discussing the UK riots labels appeals to excusing factors of socioeconomic circumstances of the rioters as 'making excuses' and as disrespectful of the rioters' communities.⁹ So too, the *Daily Mail* offers the following attack on

⁹ "London Riots: No Excuses for This Wanton Criminality." 2012. Mail Online, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2023967/London-riots-No-excuses-wanton-criminality.html>.

those on the left who deny individual responsibility in the context of welfare claimants:

‘They don’t believe poor people should be expected to behave responsibly... In effect, therefore, the Left views the poor as imbeciles — and indeed, since personal responsibility is part of our make-up, even as less than fully human’.¹⁰

Perhaps, then, what motivates the rejection of sociological explanation is a political or moral view: a conception of both how to divide up obligations between individuals and the state and how we should regard others as agents. Then, judgements of individual responsibility, when deciding who to blame or who must pay, are made in line with what is regarded as fair. For instance, those who have more children than they can afford to support are blamed and made to bear the costs of doing so. These judgements are made without considering the fine-grained features of their situations and circumstances that might block attributions of responsibility on the luck egalitarian conception, described earlier. More problematically, appeals to luck do not seem to be a particularly promising response to such a rich, value-laden picture of how to hold people responsible.

Someone might still insist that, even though some are inclined to dismiss sociological explanations of behaviour and factors of luck when attributing responsibility and determining fair outcomes, they shouldn’t. Instead, their judgements on these matters should be revised to depend on whether someone is *really* responsible for the situation they are in. Then, once we have in view all the ways in which luck shapes our situations, a welfare system that distinguishes the deserving and undeserving along anything like the current or proposed lines will seem unappealing. Whatever sensitivity to individual choices might remain, once luck in genes, circumstances and family was considered, would not track distinctions made in the debate over welfare between the prudent and imprudent, hardworking and lazy.

¹⁰ See <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2224570/Stop-hysteria-Why-state-pay-women-benefits-children.html#ixzz2cLmHbbE1>

Yet there are costs to this revisionary approach, precisely because it fails to respond to whether people are prudent or feckless, hardworking or lazy. After all, these kinds of descriptions of behaviour and character are not sensitive to luck. Even if someone's laziness results from her factors of luck in her upbringing, we would still describe them as lazy. So, a luck egalitarian approach would not track degrees of being hard working or prudent but, rather, what people are responsible for, when it came to determining fair distributions.¹¹

One cost is being unable to either accommodate or subvert the ideas of responsibility prevalent in right wing thinking. Insofar as that thinking is value-laden, relying on appealing to intuitions about rewarding hard work and prudence and the like rather than responsibility alone, to insist on tracking real responsibility instead seems to talk past those on the right. Given the failure to engage with the underlying political values, it is unclear that luck egalitarians succeed in subverting the ideas of the right in incorporating the language of choice and responsibility. Where the right discusses the values of prudence and hard work and how to uphold and inculcate them, the luck egalitarian seeks to eliminate the effects of luck on how people's lives go. The latter does not seem a genuine answer to the former.

Alongside its weakness as a move to make in the debate with the right, a luck approach also brings with it a deeper cost. Our practices of holding one another responsible have value. They serve to reinforce and express expectations we have of one another in our lives together as members of society. When we hold people responsible for being prudent or hardworking, we express our support for these norms of behaviour. A luck approach, and the hope of luck egalitarians to subvert the language of choice and responsibility, seems to miss out on this social function of attributions of individual responsibility within contemporary politics. These attributions reflect and support a normative ideal of the allocation of duties among members of society. So, can egalitarians do better?

¹¹ For an extended version of this argument, see McTernan (2015), esp. pp. 9-11.

3. How to rescue responsibility

There is another way for egalitarians to respond to appeals to fairness and individual responsibility prevalent in discussions of welfare. That is to offer a competing vision of the kind of society we want to live in, as one characterised by relations of equality. Rather than seeking to excuse the typical targets of right-wing reforms to welfare policy through appeals to luck, egalitarians could offer a competing conception of what social relations should be like. Below, I briefly sketch the route by which to provide such a response.

The first step would be to attack the ideals behind a right wing approach to welfare provision. For instance, egalitarians can attack an ideal of a self-sufficient citizen who does not rely on other members of society on the grounds that it is both unrealistic and undesirable. All of us, after all, are in some stage of our lives dependent on others to care for us. So too, egalitarians could contest what counts as contributing to society, by denying that employment (traditionally conceived) is, by itself, what matters. Consider, for example, those who provide care or raise children. We may take such individuals as obviously contributing to society, given they create future citizens or look after others. In comparison, the net contribution to society of some jobs may be, at best, unclear.¹²

The result of such attacks would be a more egalitarian picture of what counts as contributing. With that in mind, egalitarians could turn to subverting the language of choice and responsibility of those on the right and accommodating its value. Egalitarians too would have a set of expectations for citizens - just a different set to those on the right. Egalitarians too can capture the social value of holding one another responsible, as a way to reflect and support the resulting allocation of duties amongst citizens. Indeed, some might argue that there are

¹² One version of this attack notes that the ideal of a self-sustaining citizen wrongly overlooks the domestic or private sphere, where caring relations take place. On the tendency of political philosophers to ignore that sphere, see Okin (1998).

even distinctively egalitarian reasons to hold one another responsible in this way. Stem-plowska, for instance, regards holding citizens responsible to be a way of securing respect among citizens as moral equals (2011). If we excessively burden others, we do not treat them as our equals.

Finally, one crucial but overlooked component of this response will be to address the values of prudence and hard work. These values have received little direct attention from egalitarians, despite their central role in debates over welfare provision, but one can subvert them by tying what counts as being prudent or hard working to the expectations that a more equal society would have of its citizens. With a more egalitarian account of what counts as contributing in the background, denying that being self sufficient is a value and attending to the value of care, one could have expectations that citizens be prudent and hardworking that avoided penalising the traditional targets of attempts to make the welfare system fair. To illustrate, it would be unclear having only have the number of children one can afford given one's salary counts as being prudent, given that producing and caring for children counts as contributing.

To conclude, then, with this brief sketch I hope to show a route by which egalitarians could do better than to appeal to luck. Insofar as the argument on the right that welfare should be made fairer rests on values, the response from egalitarians should be based on contesting these values. To do so, egalitarians should outline what it is to live together as equals, with its competing account of what we should expect of one another as co-citizens. This, I suggest, is the way to successfully subvert the language of choice and responsibility of the right as it in fact appears in debates over welfare.

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