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Mounk, Yasha. *The Age of Responsibility: Luck, Choice, and the Welfare State*.\*

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017.

The notion of responsibility has come to play a leading role in both political discourse and political philosophy. Yasha Mounk's *The Age of Responsibility* provides a wide-ranging exploration of this zeitgeist. As the author notes, '[t]his book stands at an unusual methodological intersection. It contains elements of intellectual history, social theory, comparative politics, and normative political philosophy' (26). Philosophical theories of free will and moral luck battle for space with analyses of welfare conditionality and Obama's speeches. The author navigates this diverse terrain with skill, providing an authoritative survey of the recent history of an idea.

The book has five substantive chapters. Chapter 1 provides the historical backbone of the work, tracing the role of responsibility from the post-war era to the present across political rhetoric, philosophy and social science. Mounk particularly emphasizes the shift over this period from 'responsibility-as-duty' to 'responsibility-as-accountability' (30). The welfare state, the real locus of the age of responsibility, is brought to the fore in chapter 2. Throughout the western world unemployment benefits, pensions, and social housing have increasingly moved from responsibility buffering to responsibility tracking. Chapter 3 provides a sustained exploration of the 'denial of responsibility' or 'no responsibility view', which has come to be the left's primary response to the age of responsibility. Rather than challenging the claim that where the disadvantaged are responsible for their plight, they lose their claim to social assistance, the most common political and philosophical response has been to argue that the poor are not in fact responsible. Maintaining that this has been an ineffectual tactic, Mounk goes on to develop, in chapters 4 and 5, a 'positive conception of responsibility', which emphasizes the value that responsibility has for people (chapter 4), and aims to decrease the extent to which institutions track responsibility (chapter 5).

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The book's great merit is in how it maps out the intellectual trajectory of responsibility, especially in drawing out the 'hidden consensus' (18) across quite different fields that may otherwise go unnoticed by disciplinary specialists. Yet there is a lacuna at its heart. The rise of individual responsibility within political philosophy over the last three decades is most associated with the rise of responsibility-sensitive egalitarianism or (as it's more commonly known) luck egalitarianism. This is reflected in the many discussions of luck egalitarianism throughout the book – for instance, as the culmination of Nozickian concerns about historical aspects of distributive (50-53), as an approach to thinking about responsibility tracking in the welfare state (89-92), and as a vehicle for the denial of responsibility (108-110). In these passages Mounk shows subtlety in the treatment of the view, for instance demonstrating luck egalitarians' wide rejection of the crude ideas of individual responsibility that are rampant in politics. But for all this attention paid to luck egalitarianism, the author never really gets to grips with the core of the theory. The rationale for this is given in the introduction:

while I do not wish to challenge these philosophers' view about ideal theory, I do want to point out that even philosophers who have been key players in the push to make questions about choice and responsibility central to ideal theory can, and indeed should, recognize that their theory is of limited relevance to the non-ideal world that we actually inhabit. In societies as they exist today, any hopes of determining the extent of people's responsibility for their material well-being in the kind of fine-grained detail required by authors like Dworkin or Lippert-Rasmussen would be illusory (12).

Mounk's position appears to be that he does not need to challenge luck egalitarianism, because it is inapplicable to non-ideal theory, the level at which he is operating. There are several problems with this stance. First, it does not seem to be consistently maintained throughout the book, as in several places Mounk draws practical conclusions by combining luck egalitarianism

with empirical observations. For instance, given the inability of welfare state bureaucracies to distinguish choice from chance, he says that ‘even card-carrying luck egalitarians should be very skeptical about attempts to justify a move toward a more responsibility-tracking welfare state in the name of equality’ (92). Second, luck egalitarians do not usually conceptualize their theory as (only) a fine-grained ideal theory, and have readily applied it to practical cases, for instance in relation to discrimination (e.g. Lippert-Rasmussen), climate change (Gosseries) and health care (Segall). One finding here is a stronger version of Mounk’s comment above: a responsibility-sensitive theory may in fact give good reasons not to use overtly responsibility-tracking policies, as they tend to inadvertently penalize those who are badly off through no fault of their own. Finally, and unbeknownst to most political philosophers, luck egalitarianism is now a widely used real world measure of equality of opportunity, building on work by John Roemer and Marc Fleurbaey. If it is an impossible theory to apply in practice, no one seems to have told the economists.

The refusal to engage with the central debates about individual responsibility within political philosophy reduces the clarity with which Mounk’s own position on responsibility is presented. One of two main components of that position centres on a call for reduced responsibility tracking in the welfare state. As discussed above, that is something with which many luck egalitarians are likely to be able to agree. But Mounk is not content with this (or any) version of the ‘denial of responsibility’ approach to reducing responsibility tracking. He instead proposes to challenge the inference ‘from the fact that [people] are responsible for a particular action or outcome to the fact that we should change how we treat them’ (184). In other words, Mounk helpfully distinguishes between responsibility tracking, which is a public policy, and two different reasons we might have for rejecting that public policy: first, a denial of responsibility, which is a position within ‘empirical-conceptual debates’ (15); and second, a denial that responsibility has implications for how we should treat people, which is a normative position, specifically one opposed to responsibility sensitivity. But put like this, it becomes clear that much of the book

addresses exactly the same issues that luck egalitarianism addresses, at exactly the same level of abstraction. Notwithstanding his coy methodological stance, Mounk is not just rejecting responsibility-tracking policy as a matter of non-ideal theory – he is rejecting luck egalitarianism at the level of principle.

The problem, of course, is that the book's arguments are not directed to support this. The contrast with luck egalitarianism's main rival, relational egalitarianism, is here rather marked. Elizabeth Anderson's classic statement of relational egalitarianism expressly presents it as a response to luck egalitarianism's apparently myriad failings. Surprisingly, relational egalitarianism is mentioned only in passing, without endorsement, and as with luck egalitarianism, this is apparently due to its high level of abstraction. In a footnote, Mounk comments that 'whether Wolff's, Anderson's and Scheffler's criticisms have real bite in ideal theory is, in any case, of secondary importance for the purpose of evaluating actual welfare reforms' (n.75, 245). Yet here too we see the book operating at the same level, and this time even with much of the same substantive content. The rejection of responsibility-sensitivity, which Mounk styles as an 'intellectual move [that] has rarely been made' (184), is a commitment central to relational egalitarianism. Mounk's positive view also seems to be a form of relational egalitarianism. As he puts it, 'the primary purpose of welfare state institutions is to reduce needless suffering, and to allow citizens to relate to each other as equals' (24), or near-equivalently, 'to ensure the equal standing of all citizens, to give people assurance that they will continue to have access to the material goods they need to live a life of simple dignity, and to promote positive externalities like public health and economic growth' (188). These appear to be clear statements of the twin relational egalitarian commitments of relational equality and material sufficiency.

This relational egalitarian flavour is present in the second main component of Mounk's view of responsibility, which is the promotion of responsibility. In other writings one occasionally finds luck egalitarianism misinterpreted as a view advocating the promotion of individual responsibility, so it is useful to have this laid out expressly as an alternative view. Given the overall

shape of Mounk's theory it is perhaps best understood as an extension of the promotion of agency or autonomy found in the capabilities-orientated relational egalitarianism of Anderson. The idea is in part to resuscitate the 'responsibility-as-duty' idea that Mounk finds in post-war politics as an alternative to the now-dominant responsibility-as-accountability. Nevertheless, one may wonder whether there is not a sleight of hand here, playing on ambiguity in the word 'responsibility'. To his credit, Mounk acknowledges that the shift to responsibility-as-duty 'may seem like a change of topic', but the response that 'the pitfalls of the age of responsibility... requires us to think anew what the term should entail' (146) is not wholly convincing. If responsibility-as-accountability has really acquired the dominant status Mounk claims, entrenched across academia as well as politics, is it not simply a form of 'persuasive definition', as C. L. Stevenson called it, to redefine responsibility as a matter of duty rather than accountability? If duty is more important than accountability, why not try to show that directly by arguing about duty and accountability?

This is an ambitious book that largely succeeds in what it sets out to do. The comments above have focused on the one respect in which it is curiously unambitious – its refusal to overtly enter the debate about luck egalitarianism and relational egalitarianism, despite the position in that debate that it implicitly takes. But this is not to downplay the book's significant value as a study of the intellectual history of the age of responsibility. It also provides a thorough critical review of recent attempts to make the welfare state track individual responsibility. Even in strictly conceptual terms significant moves are made. The taxonomy of views within the age of responsibility, and especially the distinction between denial of responsibility and denial of the relevance of responsibility, is likely to have great value when considering application of theories of distributive justice. Readers across the social sciences and philosophy with an interest in individual responsibility will find the book repays close reading.

CARL KNIGHT

University of Glasgow