

## David V. Axelsen, Juliana Bidadanure and Tim Meijers Equality, responsibility, and justice

Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)

**Original citation:**

Axelsen, David V. and Bidadanure, Juliana and Meijers, Tim (2018) Equality, responsibility, and justice. [Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy](#). ISSN 1369-8230  
DOI: [10.1080/13698230.2018.1438774](https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2018.1438774)

© 2018 Taylor & Francis

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/87616/>

Available in LSE Research Online: April 2018

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

# Introduction: Equality, Responsibility and Justice

David V. Axelsen,<sup>a</sup> Juliana Bidadanure<sup>b</sup> & Tim Meijers<sup>c</sup> <sup>1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Government, London School of Economics, United Kingdom*

<sup>b</sup> *Philosophy, Stanford University, USA*

<sup>c</sup> *Leiden University Institute for Philosophy & Utrecht University Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, The Netherlands*

In this introduction, we underline the theoretical connection between responsibility, luck, and equality upon which luck egalitarianism rests, and we consider the social and political relevance of the approach. We then situate Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen's version of the view as proposed in his book, *Luck Egalitarianism*, in the egalitarian landscape. Lastly, we introduce the six papers that make up this symposium: some are critiques from *within* or *outside* luck egalitarianism, while others engage with the theory by expanding the scope of luck egalitarianism.

**Keywords:** equality, individual responsibility, distributive justice, luck egalitarianism, Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen

## **Inequalities and Individual Responsibility**

Imagine two people, Abel and Beth. Abel's health is deteriorating, he has few friends, and he is struggling financially. Beth, on the other hand, is in excellent shape - health wise, socially, and financially. Abel's life, in other words, is pretty miserable whereas Beth leads a fully flourishing life. It is not hard for any of us to imagine people like Abel or Beth. Some of us seem to be living safe and fulfilling lives while others struggle in one or more important respects. Now imagine that all we knew about our two hypothetical persons – and about the people they represent and remind us of – is that they are living lives of unequal quality. Would we be in a position to describe this situation as *unjust*?

Some would say that we already know enough to make this judgment: the mere fact that Abel's life is miserable when Beth is thriving makes this state of affairs unjust – full stop. One

reason for this could be egalitarian: Abel and Beth are faced with very unequal health, financial and wellbeing outcomes. Many others would hesitate. Perhaps we simply do not have enough information to assess this situation as unjust? Perhaps we need to know more about the ways in which this situation came about. What, for example, if we learned that Abel was a heavy smoker, despite being fully informed about the risks associated with smoking, and that this had caused his bad health? (Albertsen 2016) What if we knew that he was a lousy friend and spent his money imprudently? What if, in other words, we found out that Abel was in large part *responsible* for his relative disadvantage? Would we then still have to consider the inequality between the two unjust?

Individual responsibility is a recurring theme in modern politics. It would be difficult to find a political discussion on how resources such as income support and health care should be distributed that does not invoke some notion of individual responsibility. For example, it is often thought that the question of whether unemployed citizens are entitled to social benefits depends on how responsible they are for their joblessness. There is also the widespread view that those who indulge in risky behaviours such as smoking, drinking or eating junk food should be made to bear the costs of their bad choices. Since most societies believe that individuals are in part responsible for the choices they make, they also think that it makes sense to expect them to bear the burdens of those choices. The reverse is also true: we judge those who make virtuous, wise and prudent choices as being entitled to the gains that their conduct brings; or at least we often contend that they should not have to pay for the imprudence of others.

These kinds of considerations lead to concrete policy proposals like differential health insurance for those severely overweight or for smokers, or making welfare benefits for the unemployed conditional on their willingness to prove that they are actively looking for a job. But the implications of this attention to individual responsibility are even wider: the political focus on responsibility invites a constant conversation about whether those that are worst-off are themselves to blame. The focus on the individual contributions the worse off have made to their own disadvantage often serves to limit the permissibility of redistribution from the wealthy to the worse-off. On this view, those who have less are often seen as underserving of assistance; they should just have made better choices. Of course, there is also the possibility for undeserving rich and deserving poor within this paradigm. But in political discourse, the distrust of the poor is far more widespread than that of the wealthy. And once we are trained to see individual

responsibility as being of primary importance, we develop a tendency to design the provision of social benefits in a way that filters out those who are undeserving. In other words, we become used to greeting poverty with suspicion.

The value of individual responsibility, therefore, sometimes conflicts with another important political value: equality of outcome. We commonly hold people individually responsible to justify denying them the resources and benefits that they would need to be better off. Denying unemployment benefits or income support to an applicant because she has refused a job, for instance, is likely to leave her much worse off than her (employed) co-citizens. Similarly, appealing to individual responsibility to deny someone an expensive cancer treatment will leave that person much worse-off than they would be with access to treatment or than someone without cancer.

Because of this, insofar as we take equality to be of great value, we might be tempted to take individual responsibility with a pinch of salt, or perhaps even to disregard it entirely. We may object that the scrutinizing processes needed for finding out who is responsible are impermissible (Anderson 1999, Wolff 1998), or epistemically challenging, or that people are barely ever individually responsible for their social position anyway.

In turn, many are likely to worry that displacing the individual responsibility paradigm entirely is unrealistic and unappealing. It is unrealistic because we live in a society where individual responsibility is so pervasive. It is unappealing because individual responsibility has intuitive moral traction. After all, insofar as individual responsibility is tied to our agency as free and autonomous beings, it does deserve to play a prominent role in any plausible conception of social justice. Rather than throwing the baby out with the bathwater, therefore, a more promising strategy may be to provide an egalitarian account of responsibility – a theory that articulates the two notions and provides a frame, as well as limits, for a just tracking of responsibility in an egalitarian society. Elaborating on the interconnections between these values and on how to resolve the potential tensions thus holds great potential for informing political debates.

### **Luck Egalitarianism**

Luck egalitarianism is one of the most prominent theoretical answers to how these values can be reconciled. It aims to re-appropriate responsibility for political progressives. For luck egalitarian theorists, it is unfair if people are worse-off than others through no fault of their own (through

bad luck). They believe that responsibility is central to justice, but that the circumstances under which people can be held responsible for their choices are restricted. For example, if we modify the background facts of our introductory example so that the reason Abel is doing much less well than Beth is that he faced much greater obstacles and had fewer opportunities to flourish, a luck egalitarian would be able to complain that the inequality is unjust.

An important condition for holding people responsible is whether there is a fair background distribution. If people's starting shares are unfairly small - if they face greater obstacles than others - it is not *their* fault (or at least not fully) if they should end up with less than those who are comparatively advantaged. So, holding people from disadvantaged backgrounds responsible for the fact that they do not - unlike those from privileged groups - have a university education, do not follow healthy diets, or do not have a savings account are examples of *inappropriately* holding people responsible: the fact that they are worse off than others is to a very large extent due to brute bad luck. Many of the things for which people are being held responsible in political discourses today - unemployment, poverty, smoking, etc. - are therefore not in line with luck egalitarian ideas: only when people are worse off through their own fault can they claim fewer of society's benefits.

This symposium offers a critical discussion of luck egalitarian justice, taking Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen's *Luck Egalitarianism* (2015) as a starting point. Lippert-Rasmussen's influential book offers a new, stimulating and innovative account that builds on four decades of egalitarian political philosophy (especially in the writings of Arneson, Cohen, Dworkin, and Rawls), and develops his own view of what we owe each other as a matter of justice.

Responsibility-sensitiveness and, in particular, the luck egalitarian idea that it is unjust when people's chances in life are determined by factors outside of their control, have been a central part of contemporary political philosophy for more than three decades. Theorists that give this idea a central place in their views include John Rawls (1971), Ronald Dworkin (2000), Richard Arneson (1989), John Roemer (1996), and G.A. Cohen (2008). Yet, a theory that takes the luck egalitarian claim as central to justice had so far not been coherently brought together in an explicitly luck-egalitarian, theoretical framework. With the publication of Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen's book, this has changed. Lippert-Rasmussen's is a major figure in the contemporary debate on distributive justice and his book is in many ways the intellectual heir to the theories of the philosopher who most staunchly defended the luck egalitarian framework, G.A. Cohen

(2008).<sup>2</sup> The book is a reference point both for its role as one of the first major books specifically dedicated to this topic and as a novel and thought-provoking account of responsibility-sensitive justice.

Starting from the basic luck egalitarian premise that it is unjust if someone is worse off than others through their bad luck, Lippert-Rasmussen elaborates on the central concepts underlying this key statement; what does it mean to be equal and why does it matter? What is luck and when is someone responsible? When may someone be said to be worse off than others? In doing so, Lippert-Rasmussen distinguishes carefully between different values and reasons underlying luck egalitarian justice and elaborates on how existing accounts rely on these values. He also pays special attention to how those values differ and proposes a version of luck egalitarianism he believes captures better what is at stake than competing versions of the view. In this special issue, we collect a number of comments and critiques of this important and politically salient project.

The contributions to this volume approach Lippert-Rasmussen's luck egalitarianism from a variety of theoretical perspectives, but they each engage more generally with the Luck Egalitarian view in roughly three different ways: from within, from without and, from the inside-out by expanding the scope of luck egalitarianism.

### ***Luck Egalitarianism from Within***

Some of the contributors of this collection are sympathetic to Luck Egalitarianism, and see their disagreements with Lippert-Rasmussen as a family dispute within responsibility-sensitive egalitarian theories. These contributors identify and discuss the building blocks of luck-egalitarianism as well as its theoretical origins. One question concerns the theoretical authorities by which luck egalitarianism claims to be able to justify its foundational ideas concerning fairness and neutralizing the impact of (bad) luck. In "Justice as Fairness and Bad Luck," Robert van der Veen asks whether we can count Rawls' account of justice, properly understood, as offering support for the kind of luck egalitarianism Lippert-Rasmussen defends. He denies this, and claims that Rawls (1971) offers a different – more rich and compelling – view of the place of responsibility in distributive justice. On this view, inequalities that result from differences in luck can be justified if they are to the advantage of the worst off.

In “How generous should egalitarians be?” Zofia Stemplowska examines the merits and limitations of Lippert-Rasmussen’s focus on equality of concern, comparing it to other plausible *currencies* of equality: resources and welfare. Her interest, in other words, is with *what* we should aim to equalize in order to attain an ideally just society. She welcomes Lippert-Rasmussen’s currency, claiming that including a broader array of concerns compared to Dworkin’s (2000) equality of resources does better in capturing what we can reasonably demand of each other. Lippert-Rasmussen’s view, however, is too generous when it comes to the level of redistribution; that is, the compensation people should receive for shortfalls due to bad luck. In this case, Dworkin’s hypothetical insurance market provides a more appealing reply. Stemplowska shows how the two accounts can be combined to form a stronger answer to the question of what a just society should seek to equalize.

### ***Luck Egalitarianism from the Inside-out***

The contributions in this section each highlight an important set of implications of Lippert-Rasmussen’s version of luck egalitarianism when expanding its scope. Axel Gosseries identifies and problematizes challenges that arise when applying this framework to political questions that go beyond currently living individuals. In “Are inequalities between us and the dead intergenerationally unjust?”, he discusses some implications of the view for intergenerational justice, and in particular for what - if anything - we owe to past generations. More specifically, Gosseries considers the question of whether inequalities between current generations and those that are already dead may be unjust - and, if so, what (if anything) we ought to do about it. Gosseries expands on Lippert-Rasmussen’s account and adds complexities to how inequalities between current and past generations may be unjust and what to do about it.

In “On Who Matters: Extending the scope of Luck Egalitarianism to Groups,” Sara Amighetti and Siba Harb take issue with Lippert-Rasmussen’s exclusive focus on individuals at the expense of groups. More specifically, they think that Lippert-Rasmussen fails to recognize the significance of collective goods, and that including this notion in one’s distributive view provides good reasons to think that groups should be included in its scope. Further, Amighetti and Harb seek to nuance Lippert-Rasmussen’s view of how individuals may become responsible for group choices via the notion of corporate choice. They argue that luck egalitarianism is best formulated in a way that includes a concern with groups and not individuals exclusively.

### *Luck Egalitarianism from the Outside*

The contributors in this last section take a wider perspective on luck egalitarianism by taking issue with its core elements from an external perspective. Broadly speaking, they discuss whether it is the right kind of theory for our world. In “Equality, Value Pluralism and Relevance: Is Luck Egalitarianism in One Way Good, But Not All Things Considered?,” Tim Meijers and Pierre-Etienne Vandamme criticize the indeterminacy of Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen’s pluralist account, arguing that its inability to offer the appropriate form of action-guiding advice to political agents makes it practically inadequate. They suggest that Lippert-Rasmussen outlines some “rules of regulation” to help political agents resolve clashes between different important values such as justice, freedom, and community. Alternatively, they propose, one might elaborate on Lippert-Rasmussen’s own basis for moral equality - people’s capacity to be non-instrumentally concerned with things - and use this as the fundamental value by which to adjudicate between other values when they conflict.

In “Unequally Egalitarian: Defending the Egalitarian Credentials of Social Egalitarianism,” David V. Axelsen and Juliana Bidadanure take issue with Luck Egalitarianism’s (over)emphasis on individual responsibility. They argue that Lippert-Rasmussen’s attempt to capture and subsume the content of the primary egalitarian rival, social egalitarianism, within his version of luck egalitarianism ultimately fails. While Lippert-Rasmussen does offer a version of luck egalitarianism that seems to avoid some of the main lines of criticism, the authors argue that he mischaracterizes parts of both the form and the content of the disagreement, and thus ultimately misses the mark. The authors provide a substantive, a methodological and a political defence of social egalitarianism by elaborating on this mischaracterization.

The value of responsibility is crucial to questions of distributive justice. This is true theoretically, when thinking about what form the right kind of theory of justice should take; and, as the contributions to this volume show, it also matters for political practice. We need to think about the proper place of responsibility – if there is a place for it – when thinking about the right way to design public policies. Luck Egalitarianism offers a powerful view on this, hence the question of whether and to what extent we should endorse it (and in what form) is crucial for theories of social justice.



## Acknowledgements

This collection is the result of a book symposium on Lippert-Rasmussen's book in May 2015 held at the Hoover Chair of Economics and Social Ethics at the University of Louvain. All the papers in this volume went through peer review. We want to thank the anonymous reviewers for their critical and constructive comments. We also want to thank Helder de Schutter, Axel Gosseries, Martin O'Neill, Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, and Richard Bellamy for advice and support in preparing this volume.

## Funding

The editors acknowledge the support of the Hoover Chair, the FIA Aarhus-Louvain project on Ethics and Public Policy, and the Danish Research Foundation (MOBILEX grant DFF – 4089-00313) for this project.

## References

- Albertsen, Andreas (2016). "Fresh Starts for Poor Health Choices: Should We Provide Them and Who Should Pay?", *Public Health Ethics* 9 (1): 55-64.
- Anderson, Elizabeth (1999). "What is the Point of Equality?", *Ethics* 109 (2): 287-337.
- Arneson, Richard J. (1989), 'Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare', *Philosophical Studies*, 56: 77–93.
- Cohen, G. A. (2008), *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Cohen, G.A. (2004) "Expensive Taste Rides Again" in Burley, J. (ed) *Dworkin and his Critics*. London: Blackwell, pp. 3-29.
- Dworkin, Ronald (2000), *Sovereign Virtue*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Lippert-Rasmussen, Kasper (2015). *Luck Egalitarianism*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Roemer, J. E. (1996), *Theories of Distributive Justice*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Wolff, J. (1998), 'Fairness, Respect, and the Egalitarian Ethos', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 27: 97–122.

---

CONTACT: David V. Axelsen, [d.axelsen@lse.ac.uk](mailto:d.axelsen@lse.ac.uk)

<sup>1</sup> All authors of this introduction and editors of this special issue have contributed equally to the process, and are listed in alphabetical order here and on the cover.

<sup>2</sup> However, as is clear in the expensive tastes debate (Cohen 2004), Cohen believed that far fewer actions and preferences are of the kind people could be held responsible for than other Luck Egalitarians like Dworkin (2000); responsibility, it seems, plays a bigger role in the distribution of goods in Dworkin's theory.