

is a “permissible” one (290). Since courts are typically far less qualified than administrative agencies to assess competing interests, and are also far less accountable to the people themselves, it would seem more in keeping with constitutional representative government for judges to follow Scalia’s recommendation and leave it to the joint action of Congress and the president to remedy bureaucratic distortions of their intended policies. It is true (as Theodore Lowi argued in *The End of Liberalism* [New York: Norton, 1969]) that twentieth-century Congresses have too often fallen into the lazy trap of writing extremely broad statutes, leaving excessive discretion to bureaucrats (guided by ideological preferences and/or interest groups) to fill in the blanks. The proper remedy, however, lies with Congress and the president (prodded by an informed electorate)—not an imperial judiciary.

Despite this reservation, I would strongly recommend this book for its illuminating account of the development and competing historical views of the American administrative state, many interesting details of which I have had to pass over. Along with works like those of Rohr, Rabkin, and Hamburger, it deserves serious consideration in any future debate on this important subject.

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Yascha Mounk. *The Age of Responsibility: Luck, Choice, and the Welfare State*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. Pp. 280. \$29.95.

This book advances two central claims: first, that popular, and sometimes also academic, commentators—whether on the American left or the right—tend to assume a rather narrow, impoverished conception of personal responsibility, particularly in relation to welfare policy, focused almost exclusively on taking charge of one’s own life and living within one’s own means; and second, that reframing responsibility in a way that connects it to the broader values served by welfare institutions could help inspire more enlightened welfare policies.

According to Mounk, there has been a gradual but decisive shift, already underway in the Reagan era, from viewing poverty and other social ills as collective ills for which society must find structural answers to viewing poverty and other social ills as personal problems that are a function of the responsible or irresponsible decisions of affected individuals. At first sight, it might appear that the rhetoric of “personal responsibility” is the preserve of the Right, but Mounk convincingly demonstrates that mainstream left-wing parties and lead-

ers have effectively bought into the rhetoric of personal responsibility in the post-Reagan era.

This can be seen clearly from Bill Clinton's and Tony Blair's advocacy of workfare and Barack Obama's rhetorical emphasis on the rights of honest people "playing by the rules." It can also be seen in the Left's denial that welfare recipients are responsible for their own poverty, an implicit concession to the Right that welfare rights must be extended to victims of bad luck, not those responsible for their own fate. In addition, important strains of "luck egalitarianism," analyzed in some detail by Mounk, insist that people should be compensated for the effects of "bad luck" but not for the effects of their own free choices.

What, then, is so problematic about the concept of personal responsibility-as-accountability that, according to Mounk, now dominates our political discourse? The problem, on Mounk's assessment, is that even if there is some merit to the notion of responsibility-as-accountability, a single-minded focus on this concept, in particular as a guiding principle for welfare policy, yields a distorted and one-sided approach to welfare policy and distributive justice. Three of these distortions are (1) a highly "punitive" approach to welfare provision, according to which people are monitored and penalized for bad behavior, which can be humiliating and fail to get to the roots of poverty and social disadvantage; (2) a tendency to treat welfare recipients as either sponges or helpless victims of their circumstances, since the concept of personal responsibility-as-accountability tends to categorize welfare recipients either as "undeserving poor" or as helpless "victims" of poverty traps; and (3) a tendency to turn people off going on welfare, given how humiliating and demeaning the process of receiving welfare can be.

According to Mounk, the alternative to a narrow focus on "responsibility-as-accountability," with all of its counterproductive consequences, is a broader view of the ends that welfare institutions, and political institutions more generally, are designed to achieve: put simply, welfare discourse dominated by responsibility-as-accountability tends to paint the provider-recipient relationship in a rather reductive and adversarial fashion, failing to factor in the wider political purposes of the welfare state, such as the provision of more equal opportunities for participating in the economy, culture, and the life of society; and the fostering of conditions under which citizens can exercise personal and political agency effectively.

The payoff from adopting the wider approach to welfare policy is that it can help welfare institutions begin to operate in a more constructive, less adversarial fashion, guided by broader ethical and political principles such as the need to support people's standing as active and responsible citizens, rather than simply monitoring their compliance with welfare rules. By getting beyond an ex-

cessively narrow focus on personal responsibility-as-accountability, we can begin to integrate personal and structural aspects of the problems of poverty and social disadvantage in a more nuanced manner. Sound welfare policy ought to acknowledge that there is a lot more at stake in welfare provision than doling out paychecks to victims of bad luck: an ongoing set of relationships is established between welfare officials and welfare recipients, which may either undermine or foment civic spirit and personal responsibility, not only through material incentives and penalties but also through the manner in which those relationships are conducted and managed on a day-to-day basis.

There is much to recommend about this book: first, its courageous engagement with actual trends in political discourse and policy making, which takes it out of the ethereal sphere of excessively abstract theorizing about distributive justice; second, its recognition that welfare provision can only be properly understood, assessed, and guided in light of a broad and rich understanding of the values of the political institutions within which it is inscribed; and third, the values that it highlights as relevant to a well-structured welfare state, in particular, the need to afford citizens with opportunities for living a flourishing life, including meaningful opportunities for exercising rational agency over their lives.

In spite of these important merits, there are two aspects of the book that I found less than satisfying, both connected with the author's tendency to silently assume, at crucial junctures in the argument, that the "state" or the "nation" is interchangeable with the community whose members owe each other duties of solidarity and care. This unacknowledged and undefended bias—shared, I might add, by a slew of contemporary political theorists, including Jürgen Habermas and the late John Rawls—frames the author's approach to the problem of welfare provision in a way that needs to be, but is not, defended in the book.

The first place this bias is evident is in Mounk's assessment of the claim by numerous commentators, of different racial and political backgrounds, that people should take responsibility for their own lives, be responsible parents, and be responsible role models in their communities. Mounk seems to conflate these sorts of arguments with the narrow, individualistic, responsibility-as-accountability approach. But that move seems highly questionable to me. If responsibility can be discharged by communities large and small, starting at the level of the family and working upward to the neighborhood, borough, district, and city, then urging people to be responsible parents and responsible community role models cannot plausibly be collapsed into an individualistic, "pre-institutional," or "punitive" approach. Surely the practices of substate communities of holding each other accountable and serving their own common

interests go far beyond individual accountability. But Mounk's statist bias tends to paint out of the picture the vital role of intermediate associations in supporting human flourishing. This may explain why he can dismiss exhortations to responsible parenting as flowing from a narrow, "punitive" or individualistic model of responsibility rather than a broader, community-based approach.

Finally, Mounk's statist bias leads him to take for granted that the proliferation of problems associated with the modern welfare state, from dependency traps to demeaning treatment by public officials, can be solved within the frame of the welfare state, through more enlightened welfare policies. The possibility he barely considers, but which seems to me to be equally if not more plausible, is that many of these problems are inherent in the structures of state-based welfare programs, owing to their insertion into giant bureaucratic machines and their detachment from the nuanced texture of community life.

For example, the existence of adversarial monitoring policies is very difficult to dispense with if the institution delivering the good or service is not rooted in the community and is not in a strong relation of mutual trust and reciprocity with welfare recipients. Similarly, the need for citizens to be treated with dignity and not just as numbers is extremely difficult to achieve in the context of large-scale bureaucratic service providers. Perhaps Mounk is skeptical about outsourcing welfare services or empowering local organizations to play a more active role in helping citizens in need. But his statist bias seems to prevent him from entertaining any serious competitor to the bureaucratic welfare state.

In fairness to the author, the main purpose of this book is not to offer a new model of welfare provision, but to open up the discourse surrounding welfare policy, so it may be that Mounk would, after all, be open to less state-centric methods of welfare provision, such as those advocated by Paul Hirst. Nonetheless, given the general spirit of the argument, which seems to push us in the direction of a less individualistic and more communitarian approach to responsibility and welfare provision, it is surprising that there is so little discussion of communities beyond the state within which robust practices of responsibility, solidarity, and accountability might potentially be developed. This remains, for me, the major blind spot in an otherwise thoughtful and important treatise on discourse surrounding welfare policy in the United States.

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