Abstract

Contemporary egalitarianism has been defined by its attempt to render the distribution of resources 'responsibility-sensitive'. The core intuition is that if someone is responsible for the fact that he is worse off than others then the inequality ought not to raise the concerns of justice. Perhaps the central challenge facing this approach is to establish the 'cut' between what people can rightly be held responsible for, and what not. The basic principle adopted has been that ascriptions of responsibility ought to track the distinction between chance and choice. People ought not to be held responsible if they are worse off than others on account of bad luck, but should bear responsibility for their situation if it results from their choices.

What is surprising, though, is how little work has been done to establish where luck ends, and responsibility begins – whether the preferences that someone has instilled in him through upbringing, for example, are his responsibility, or simply a matter of luck. Philosophers have posited that the cut should be based on metaphysics – on whether a preference has been 'genuinely', freely, chosen; or that because as a matter of course in our everyday ethical lives we hold people responsible for their personality as a whole, we should do so at the level of distributional justice, too. But they have not examined in any depth whether these controversial bases are coherent or fully justify the distribution sought.

This thesis remedies that shortfall. It examines in detail the distinction between responsibility and luck, and the reason it might be desirable as the basis for the distribution of resources. My conclusion is that whilst responsibility for the costs of one's life requires a more stable basis than is offered by everyday ethical practice, it cannot plausibly be provided by 'genuine', free, choice. Instead, ascriptions of responsibility ought to be guided by an agent's identification with a preference, understood in terms of the broadly metaphysical matter of the role and place of the preference in the structure of the person. Where an agent identifies with a preference, I argue, there ought to be a presumption that he is not responsible for its cost. This presumption is justified by two key claims: people standardly do not choose the preferences with which they identify, rendering it a matter of luck whether the preferences they identify with happen to be expensive or cheap; and identification with a preference gives that preference a significance to its bearer that makes it appealing to provide him with an equal opportunity to fulfil it. To protect people from having to unduly subsidise the life plans of others, though, the cost of those preferences that are not identified with ought, standardly, to be the responsibility of their bearer. I call this novel position, which arms people with an equal opportunity to fulfil the preferences that are most integral to their person, equal opportunity for integrity.