Preface

It is an incredible privilege to be able to devote yourself to the subject that you love, and even more so to make a contribution to an issue you care wholeheartedly about.

I have always been troubled by the degree to which the success of a person’s life is a matter of chance, and never convinced by the argument that luck is so pervasive in its influence that attempting to equalise its impact is futile. The sheer extent to which luck affects our lives is beyond dispute. The notion that we, as a society, cannot and ought not to devote our energies to counterbalancing these effects is not one I can accept.

Nor do I believe that it is sufficient to protect the population as a whole from the worst effects of bad luck via a safety net that protects them from ill health, hunger or homelessness, whilst allowing huge undeserved inequalities. The impact that these inequalities have on the chance of prospering are so profound that a fair society must, I have always felt, do more to equalise people’s chances to succeed in life. And do so right down to the individual level – so that those who are unfortunate enough to lack the natural talents to earn even a small wage do not have a substantially more miserable life than those whose talents are well rewarded – for example.

Running hand-in-hand with the belief that good or bad luck shouldn’t be the factors that determine how well one’s life goes is the powerful intuition that it should be the things for which we’re responsible that do make the difference – whether the choices we make are good or bad, for example, or whether we are effortful or idle.

It doesn’t take long to realise, though, that the concepts that underlie this vision are fraught with difficulties. If I’m a hard worker, is it my responsibility or is it luck? Maybe I was brought up with a strong protestant work ethic, or have an innate capacity for concentration or physical endurance. Neither nurture or nature are in my control, so both could be considered luck – and therefore not a basis for me to be better off than someone else.

Equally problematically, how can we tell which is the case – whether something is the outcome of luck or responsibility? If someone is working hard, how do we judge whether they deserve credit because it’s their own endeavour or whether it’s automatic for them on account of the way they were brought up, so that no real credit is due?

It is difficulties such as these that have turned many political philosophers – and possibly Joe public - away from a society that attempts to combat the influence of luck and tie well-being to responsibility. It is my starting conviction that a fair society must link reward to responsibility that has led me to explore in depth whether the objections can be overcome.
The link between reward and responsibility seems ever more difficult to trace in today's rapidly globalising economy – whether for the global elite accruing huge shares of the world's capital for their 'efforts', or the long-term welfare-benefit claimant for whom it is not clear whether worklessness is a choice or an unavoidability. For me this only serves to increase the importance of the question of whether a just society should – and could – establish the connection between how well a person does in life with what they do – their choices and efforts – rather than the global or local economic and social circumstances they find themselves in.

It is perhaps surprising that what starts off looking like an economic issue – whether resources should be redistributed to those who suffer bad luck – ends up being a question of the flexibilities and limits of an individual's personality, and a claim that society ought to protect a person's opportunity to live in accordance with their deepest commitments – to protect their opportunity for integrity. However, as soon as you start exploring how luck affects people's lives, this is precisely the territory you are drawn into. To know which parts of our situation are our responsibility we need to think not just about what we have and don't have, resource-wise, but also why we make the choices we do make, or devote our lives to some things and not others. And to answer these questions, we need to address deep questions about whether we're free to self-create, whether we are able to choose who we are and what we care about. It is only by digging into these fascinating questions that we can assess what a society that wants differences in people's well-being to be their responsibility - and not the haphazard result of luck - should look like.

For enabling me to explore these questions, which I consider so important, I am extremely grateful for the support of Darwin College, Cambridge, whose philosophy studentship provided invaluable financial support in my MPhil year, and whose students, fellows and staff provided an environment that was both incredibly intellectually enlivening and also brilliant fun.

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Wolfson College, Cambridge, where I was fortunate enough to be the first Roger Needham Scholar. The alacrity of thought and willingness to apply it across a range of fields that defined Roger and motivated the scholarship set up in his name following his death are qualities that have inspired me throughout my PhD – and I know will continue to do so as I seek to transfer the insights of political philosophy to the spheres of Government and Politics.

Writing a PhD is an unbelievably fraught journey through what can feel like endless intellectual obstacles and frustrations. In a subject like philosophy in which thinkers have been chiselling out solutions to similar problems for millennia it can feel like every promising path has been explored and either developed or abandoned. Making an original contribution can, as a result, feel impossible. For their extraordinary help in guiding me along this journey, I am extremely grateful to Serena Olsaretti and Jane Heal. Serena's attention to detail, her refusal to allow lazy or clichéd thinking and to divert me away from using arguments that have traction in the Tavern, as Hume would call it, and towards those that have genuine intellectual rigour have been absolutely crucial in the development of this thesis. A conversation with Jane can be a wonderful
reminder of why philosophy can be so fascinating and exciting – even if also often accompanied by such philosophical questions as ‘How can we get you to do some work, Rupert?’ She’s been a source of much inspiration. I would also like to thank Fabian Freyenhagen for stepping in as shadow supervisor during Serena’s maternity leave and providing emotional understanding and helpful interrogation, and to Samuel Scheffler, for facilitating a fantastically happy and rewarding period of study at the University of California, Berkeley.

Studying philosophy can be a lonely endeavour, and one that can be so intense as to do funny things to one’s mind. To those who provided diversion and perspective, and kept me sane and cheerful, I can only say a huge thank you - especially to Drs Steinberger, Cohen & Franko who have been great friends to me; to my parents and sisters who were tolerant and supportive and continually forgiving of the many important occasions I missed in order to hit (or more commonly, narrowly miss) (well, fairly narrowly) academic deadlines; and most of all to my wonderful fiancée Lizzy Evison. I met her on the day I arrived in Cambridge and I shall marry her as I graduate. She’s responsible for making the years in between incredibly happy. I dedicate this thesis to you, Dr Evison.