Individual responsibility plays a prominent role in both the practice and theory of politics. Consider, for example, political debates about individual responsibility for smoking-related illnesses or policies aimed at unemployed citizens to incentivize them to take responsibility for their joblessness. Or, consider theoretical debates about the role of responsible choice in determining how much individuals are entitled to as a matter of distributive justice (i.e. Dworkin 2000; Cohen 2008). As a concept, thus, responsibility has significant both political and philosophical traction. The specific value and content of this notion, however, is seldom clear.

Especially, an important conceptual distinction can be made between two such understandings. One emphasizes holding people responsible – that is, attributing an outcome or a certain state of affairs to an agent in a way that elicits a certain moral response (for example, blame or praise). Following T. M. Scanlon, we shall refer to this as responsibility as attributability (attributability, for short) (Scanlon 1998, 248). Another emphasizes the importance of being responsible and policies that seek to make people responsible. This second understanding centres on the value inherent in the choice itself and of taking responsibility for one’s life and choices. Responsibility, on this view, is valuable – and, indeed, has central and constitutive importance in making a human life valuable – because it enables people to have authorship of their own life. We shall refer to this as self-creative responsibility.

In this article, we argue that responsibility is valuable in this second sense and in this second sense only. Further, we argue that many contemporary disputes about societal justice can be illuminated by reinterpreting them as clashes between these two ways of understanding and responding to (ir)responsibility. Finally, we show
that the value of self-creative responsibility can be rediscovered in and elaborated upon by theoretical insights at the core of the capability approach. Our aim, then, is to argue for the distinct value of self-creative responsibility and to show how this understanding can shed new light on both theoretical and political debates, as well as help point us in the direction of societal policies that encourage responsibility of the valuable kind.

CLASHES OF RESPONSIBILITY

In the last couple of decades, theories of societal justice that centre on the value of responsibility have held a prominent position in the political-philosophical hierarchy. Most such theories start from the Rawlsian idea that the natural and social lotteries, which so greatly shape our lives, are morally arbitrary and that justice requires that their effects on our opportunities and well-being are mitigated. A just society, in other words, is one, in which differences in people's prospects and resources are (as far as possible) not determined by luck and circumstance but by their choices – their exercises of responsibility.

Theories of this kind that revolve around the importance of distributive responsibility—falling within the broad framework of luck egalitarianism—share the view that justice requires that distributions are relevantly sensitive to individual exercise of responsibility. In Ronald Dworkin's well-known formulation, this means that for a (societal) distribution of resources to be just, it must be ambition-sensitive but endowment-insensitive (Dworkin 1982). The most widely shared interpretation of this responsibility-sensitivity states that it is bad, or unjust, if people, through no fault or choice of theirs, are worse off than others (Arneson 1989; Cohen 1989; Knight 2009; Lippert-Rasmussen 2016; Parfit 1984; 1998; Roemer 1996; Temkin 1993).

While different such theories vary in their specific content, they share the general premise that justice concerns a certain distributive state of affairs and that the key to unlocking this ideal distribution is forged from the juxtaposition of responsibility and luck. For responsibility-sensitive theories of (distributive) justice, then, responsibility is understood as attributability; to achieve justice, it is necessary to attribute responsibility (or lack thereof) to agents and, thus, establish who is entitled to what. Theories that centre on responsibility as attributability have, however, been met with a number of points of criticism. For our purposes, we will focus on three of them, which, as we shall see, can be reconstructed as clashes of different views on responsibility.

First, attributability theories have been accused of being unreasonably harsh. Thus, they are charged with suggesting that we should leave irresponsible choosers to their unhappy fate, even when their basic needs are threatened – exemplified by
the helmetless motorcyclist left to die by the roadside (Anderson 1999, Fleurbaey 1995). If justice requires that the distribution of benefits and burdens reflects people’s exercise of responsibility, it seems that it is just to let people suffer the consequences of their choices – even when these leave them very badly off. This critique is importantly connected to the distinction between the two different understandings of responsibility. The harshness (or abandonment) objection, thus, targets attributability but can simultaneously be understood as a complaint that such practices undermine self-creative responsibility. Thus, leaving irresponsible choosers in dire straits, while clearly an instance of holding them responsible, is a clear threat to their future prospects of being responsible. It jeopardizes (or even ends) their ability to exercise self-creative responsibility. The problem of harshness, on this view, arises not because responsibility-sensitive theorists focus too much on responsibility, but because they focus on responsibility of the wrong kind. In this way, the harshness objection can be reconstructed as a disagreement about what type of responsibility should win out as a matter of justice.

Second, focusing on responsibility has been criticized for entailing disrespectful intrusiveness in people’s personal choices in order to evaluate the degree to which they are actually responsible for their situation, leading to so-called “shameful revelations” (Wolff 1998, 2010). To determine whether or not people are actually responsible for their predicament, then, they will need to reveal whether the bad outcome has come about due to irresponsible behaviour or mere incompetence – either of which would be shameful to reveal. Again, however, the problem of intrusive policies which require people to reveal shameful personal shortcomings or irresponsibility stems from a need to evaluate whether people were in fact responsible – it is a problem of attributability. It is a concern with the stigmatization and the threats to people’s self-respect involved in having them reveal their causal role (or lack thereof) in bringing about their hardship. And this concern is not least about how such measures undermine peoples’ abilities to choose and act autonomously and responsibly – it is a threat, in other words, to their self-creative responsibility. The intrusiveness objection, then, can also be reconstructed as a worry about attributability coming in the way of self-creative responsibility.

Finally, it has been argued that responsibility is a problematic value around which to build one’s theory for strategic and political reasons. This is because the value of responsibility as attributability is already highly overemphasized in the current political context and is widely employed to discursively uphold an unjust distribution of resources. Theories which centre on this value risk upholding and strengthening this distortion (Anderson 1999, 2015; Wolff 2015a, 2015b). There is a widespread tendency in political discourses to blame, for example, immigrants, the unemployed, and the poor for ending up in their inferior societal position due to irresponsible behaviour – due to a lack of willingness to integrate, find a job, or apply oneself. Mirroring this is a prevalence among the well-off to feel entitled to
their superior position, feeling that they have earned their position through good choices, hard work, and comparatively responsible behaviour. The worry is that responsibility-centred theories are liable to be distorted by and, thus, play into these injustice-engendering discourses (Bidadanure & Axelsen (forthcoming)). Importantly, though, this issue arises in connection with theories, which centre on attributability only, rather than on the notion of responsibility more generally. And again, the problem concerns a clash between the two ways of conceiving of responsibility. More specifically, the overemphasis objection holds that disseminating theories which centre on attributability on a background, in which this view is already overemphasized, is highly liable to be distorted and undermine people’s self-creative responsibility. Attributability theories, focusing on holding people responsible, feed into political discourses that preclude immigrants, the unemployed, and the poor from having authorship over their own lives.

These three discussions in contemporary political philosophy, then, can all be reconceived as clashes between the two different notions of responsibility described here. Below, we will flesh out their content and the values they claim to embody. We try to show that the value of responsibility is better understood as flowing from the importance of people actually taking and being responsible for their own lives and, thus, a just society should seek to make people responsible – that is, self-creatively responsible.

**Responsibility as Attributability**

As we saw above, responsibility can be understood in two different senses, the first of which is responsibility as attributability. Scanlon, whose classificatory work we draw on here, describes this as follows: “To say that a person is responsible, in this sense, for a given action is only to say that it is appropriate to take it as a basis of moral appraisal” (Scanlon 1998, 248). Attributability, then, entails that a certain outcome or state of affairs can be morally attributed to the action(s) of an agent – they are rightly responsible for this outcome. Note that the agent must be morally attributable; this entails that mere causal responsibility is not enough, but takes into account whether (and the degree to which) an agent is adequately informed about potential consequences, has had sufficient opportunities to obtain such information, acts free from coercion and duress, etc.

Now, the way, in which we discussed responsibility as attributability above, concerned a certain type of “moral appraisal” – namely, the type that affects distributive shares. On this broadly luck egalitarian view, attributability concerns questions of whether a state of affairs can be attributed to the action(s) of an agent in a way that ought to impact their level of benefits and burdens vis-à-vis others. Luck egalitarian catering distributive responsibility–sensitivity builds on a simple
hypothetical assumption about people being responsible. That is, they assume, either people are R, responsible for the outcome of their actions, or they are non-R, not responsible for the outcome of their actions. If someone is worse off than others through no fault of their own, this constitutes an injustice and warrants redistribution. If someone is worse off than others through an exercise of responsibility, on the other hand, this is not unjust. Note that luck egalitarians need not (and very often deliberately avoid) commit to any empirical claims about the degree to which people are actually responsible for their actions (see, for example, Albertsen & Midtgaard 2013, fn. 5; Knight 2006; Knight 2015, 132-134, Lippert-Rasmussen 2015, 2-6). Similarly, luck egalitarianism is not, for example, dependent on the acceptance of agential causal responsibility and is, in principle, fully compatible with hard determinism (Knight 2006; Nagel 1979; Stemplowska 2008).

Moreover, and more importantly for our present purpose, luck egalitarianism is not a view about the value of responsibility. The view, as such, is agnostic about whether exercising responsibility carries any value. It is the patterned relationship between an agent’s “exercise of responsibility” and the agent’s position compared to others (in terms of some currency) that is important (Ripstein 1994). Responsible choices (or the lack thereof), in other words, are central to determining the justice of a distribution but carry no value beyond this function – like explorers used stars to determine and navigate the right course. It should be clear already, then, that attributability differs fundamentally from self-creative responsibility.

Shlomi Segall, for instance, is explicit that, on his view of luck egalitarianism, “responsibility has no value in and of itself” (Segall 2012a: 328). Segall justifies this rejection of the value of responsibility on the claim that, if the exercise of responsibility was in itself a value, luck egalitarianism would collapse into a theory of desert, which it is not. Rather, it is a theory of distributive justice about when inequalities are unjust (Segall 2012a; 2012b). While the specifics differ, all of the theories falling within our categorization of distributive responsibility-sensitivity theories (including, that is, desert theories) are based on an attributability view of responsibility. Responsibility, on these accounts, is related to justice only through its relation to a society's distribution not its independent value.

It may now be clearer how the clashes described above arise. Thus, when responsibility is conceived as attributability and employed merely functionally to determine the just distributive pattern, the processes of measurement and implementation itself may sometimes undermine the exercise of responsibility. The three objections target this process at three different stages. First, the overemphasis objection aims at the dissemination stage. Here, the mere public dissemination of attributability theories, which are thought to feed into an already existing overemphasis and distorted view of individual responsibility. In this way, the spread of, for example, luck egalitarianism is believed to strengthen and uphold already existing discourses and practices that function as important obstacles to the self-
creative responsibility of the worst-off. Emphasizing the attribution of individual responsibility in a context of overemphasis, then, may undermine the possibilities for being responsible – especially, for those whose possibilities are already lacking.

Second, the intrusiveness objection targets the measurement stage. Thus, the objection goes, finding out whether people are, in fact, responsible for their current place in the distributive hierarchy sometimes risks worsening people’s possibilities for exercising responsibility. This is because the revelation of such variables may impact people’s self-respect and public image. Again, this is particularly the case for the worst-off whose revelations are likely to be particularly shameful. Similarly to the well-known observer effect in the natural sciences, which reminds us that the process of observing a phenomenon will often change what is being observed, the process of determining whether people are responsible will change their abilities for being so in the future.

And finally, the abandonment objection aims at the implementation stage, in which people’s distributive shares are determined by reference to their display of responsibility, arguing that this redistribution may erode the opportunities for further responsible living. On attributability views, people’s behaviour may, thus, sometimes warrant leaving them in situations, in which the obstacles for future responsible choice are enormous. Holding people distributively responsible, in other words, thwarts the possibilities for them to be responsible.

Many luck egalitarians and other theorists that build their accounts around responsibility as attributability have considered these issues (although, they are not considered as clashes of different views of responsibility) and attempted to reply. These replies usually consist in either externalizing the concerns raised, saying that they may well be important all things considered but are not matters of justice (Albertsen & Midtgaard 2013; Cohen 2008; Lippert-Rasmussen 2015, chap. 6) or in downplaying their significance in practice (Knight 2005).

When externalizing the concerns, for example, attributability theorists might say that the abandonment objection does, indeed, target an important issue but that this is not to do with justice, but rather with other values such as sufficiency, basic need fulfilment, humanity, etc. (Lippert-Rasmussen 2015, Segall 2008). Similarly, they may say that the intrusiveness objection raises issues of privacy, community, etc. which are important but, again, not a matter of justice (Lippert-Rasmussen 2015, 2016). Finally, the overemphasis objection may be thought to be about strategic concerns, rather than about what justice (and moral truth) is (Lippert-Rasmussen 2015, chap. 7). It may well be, then, that a society ought not to pursue policies which bring about problems of abandonment, intrusiveness, or overemphasis all things considered – just not for reasons of justice.

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1 See Bidadanure & Axelsen (forthcoming) for thoughts on the externalizing strategy
The other strategy often employed by luck egalitarians involves downplaying the practical significance of the objections. This is especially directed towards the abandonment objection, to which attributability theorists respond that the scenario it depicts would almost never occur in a world governed by responsibility-sensitive fairness. In almost all conceivable situations, in which people end up in very bad circumstances, they cannot be said to be responsible in the relevant sense – or, at least, they cannot be said to be fully responsible for their situation and, thus, not fully deserving of their being badly off either (Knight 2005; Lippert-Rasmussen 2015; Voigt 2006 – see also, Lippert-Rasmussen 2001).

Among other things, this is because their choices will be importantly determined and influenced by social circumstances of their past and present and other external factors or because they lacked relevant information or opportunities, which means that the choice cannot be considered as an exercise of responsibility in the relevant sense (Knight 2005, 130-132; Voigt 2006, 393-399). In practice, then, it is not clear that people are actually (almost ever) responsible for their choices and, thus, luck egalitarians claim, the objection has no or only very little practical significance as actual abandonment would not be an issue.

Note, however, that while these two responses do, indeed, seem to lessen the sting of the three objections – or, in our terms, soften the degree to which attributability clashes with self-creative responsibility – this comes at a price. Both strategies, thus, narrow the applicability and action-guidance that attributability theories are able to provide considerably. In the first instance, because when attributability theories respond that justice is just one value among many we should seek to realize (such as sufficiency, basic needs, community, respect, etc.) means saying very little about what we should actually do – what kind of societies and policies we should aim for (Meijers & Vandamme (forthcoming)).

In the second instance, similarly, the response that the objections have very little practical significance invites the worry that this is because attributability theories more generally have very little practical applicability. Because people are actually almost never relevantly responsible, such theories easily become concerned with mere hypotheticals, which have no bearing on actual institutions and practices. Luck egalitarians and other attributability theorists, then, might find theoretical avenues to dodge the objections but they do so at the cost of political relevance and applicability. Some will reply that philosophy is not a practical endeavour. And while we disagree with this, we will, instead, elaborate on the value that is overlooked by attributability theorists; self-creative responsibility. We argue that, rather than merely avoiding clashes with it, this notion should play a guiding role in theories of justice.
THE VALUE OF SELF-CREATIVE RESPONSIBILITY

In this section, we unfold the second notion of responsibility which we term self-creative responsibility. This account is laid out within a generic view of human well-being which may be called an existentialist flourishing view of wellbeing. This view is built on two general premises. First, (i) the flourishing premise states that there are some essential aspects of human life that are necessary for any human life to flourish and, hence, these aspects should be considered valuable, regardless of whether any particular individual human being assigns value to them.

Second, (ii) the existentialist premise states that the effective freedom to make individual choices is, at least, one such essential aspect. This view, we take, is most plausibly grounded within the scope of the capability approach. But importantly, it is an ecumenical view, and in fact we take it to be compatible with the most broadly shared interpretations of Aristotle’s ethics and with John Stuart Mill’s view on liberty, and moreover endorsed by contemporary philosophers such as Scanlon and Joseph Raz. Below, we will sketch this broad foundation before outlining its compatibility with the capability approach.

On the existentialist flourishing view of well-being, responsibility matters because being responsible for the creation of one’s own life is a central precondition for human flourishing. Some forms of life can flourish without any exercise of responsibility. However, the human form of life cannot. Being responsible and taking responsibility for what happens in one’s life is central to how good one’s life goes. The exercise of responsibility, in other words, is in itself an activity that carries objective personal value in a way that makes it an essential part of the human flourishing life. Unlike in attributability theories, then, responsibility is a goal in itself.

This second notion of responsibility takes off from a rather unlikely cue, namely Mill’s voice in On Liberty. Here, Mill describes human conduct as similar to other natural living things, but distinct in regards to the importance of personal choice.

"Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing" (Mill 2011[1859]: 66).

However surprising that might seem to some—due to Mill’s status as a pioneering liberal and utilitarian, thus seemingly inconsistent with both existentialism and
Aristotelian human flourishing—Mill’s quote sets the scene for our view perfectly. The quote concludes a section in On Liberty with the purpose of defending a liberal based objective account of human well-being set out as a form of human flourishing.

Mill begins the paragraph by distinguishing human beings from animal beings on the point of personal choice. “He who lets the world [...]”, he writes, “choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation. He who chooses his plan for himself, employs all the faculties” (ibid, 65). The claim that Mill is defending here, and that is so central to his work in On Liberty, is that the element of personal freedom over one’s life captured in the action of individual choice is not only valuable, and valuable in a way that carries personal entitlements and enforceable duties to protect, but is moreover constitutive of the human form of life.

The point is that the characteristics of a human form of life—such as critical observation, practical reasoning and evaluative judgment—all come into play in the freedom to choose. Whatever form of life it might be without this freedom it would not be any human form. Or as Mill put it, we could imagine man being guided well without his own conduct of choice, “but what will be his comparative worth as a human being?” (ibid, 65).

Mill’s classic work contrast existentialism in several ways, but on the constitutive role played by personal choice, the tone in On Liberty rings well with the works of, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre. To Sartre, the role of the personal choice is all-important to the unfolding of a human life—or to humanity as such for that matter. It is through the personal choice that we “define ourselves” not only in a graphic analogues but also very literal sense. Sartre believes that we only exist, essentially, through the choices that we make. This perception of choice implies the famous existentialist mantra—that existence precedes essence.

Sartre reaches this existentialist conclusion from his rejection of pre-existing metaphysical entities (and God, most particularly) and, thus, he argues; “the existentialist [...] , thinks that every man, without any support or help whatever, is condemned at every instant to invent man” (Sartre 1948: 34). As is hinted at in this quote, and as Sartre elsewhere makes explicit, he believes that by the act of choice, the human agent does not merely invent herself but brings an ideal for all of humanity into existence. “For in effect,” he writes, “of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man as he ought to be” (29).

Sartre’s existentialism and Mill’s liberalism place the same constitutive importance of the action of personal choice. Their views of what human lives consists of differ, but the emphasis of the freedom to choose as a prerequisite for there being a
human life at all is similar. For Mill, this can be read in the form that any value of human life is dependent on the constitutive importance of personal choice. For Sartre, the view is even stronger, that if there is any value in a human life that value is the personal choice. This core commitment to the essential value of the sheer activity of exercising personal responsibility through choice is what we capture in the term of the value of self-creative responsibility.

The value of self-creative responsibility

There is an essential and distinctively human value in the activity of exercising personal responsibility over relevant matters.

As we shall see, coupling this notion with insights from the capability approach helps clarify the moral value that is overlooked by attributability views and how alternative political philosophical views are able to incorporate it more convincingly. Thus, what justice is primarily concerned with is to empower people to be able to act responsibly in this sense by removing obstacles to doing so.

THE CAPABILITY APPROACH AND RESPONSIBILITY

Capability theorists hold an alternative view on responsibility. It is not necessarily inconsistent with the distributive responsibility-sensitivity, but it is not committed to it either. And their view on the normative importance of responsibility is often implicit and subtle, and in any case rarely spelled out in a clear manner. Therefore, capability theorists have often been criticized for being indeterminate on the issue of responsibility. Anderson, most notably, takes issue with the distributive responsibility-sensitivity in her rejection of luck egalitarianism (1999), but even she remains unclear about what role, more specifically, responsibility plays for justice on her own capability-based relational egalitarian view. But the capability theory need not say anything more specific about distributive responsibility-sensitivity, since what is implied by the capability approach is that this is essentially beyond their view on justice. We will try to couple the approach with the view of responsibility outlined above – self-creative responsibility. This, we claim, makes for both an attractive theoretical marriage, builds on a stronger foundational notion of responsibility, and can provide stronger replies to the objections above.
The capability approach, broadly conceived, is concerned with empowering people through social arrangements that will protect and enhance the effective freedom to relevant valuable functionings. In other words, it is about securing for people a state of life, where they are capable of exercising responsibility for their life. Consequently, the capability view on distributive justice commits to the normative claim that justice is concerned with securing enough resources and opportunities in all relevant aspects of human life for everyone so as to be relevantly capable of making relevantly free choices over one's own life plans. The approach, in other words and unlike attributability theories, gives responsibility centre stage and is specifically geared towards appreciating its inherent value. To translate this value to the political realm, however, more must be said about how it is to be fleshed out in distributive terms. This latches on to a vaguely defined sufficiency principle of distributive justice, fleshed out in terms of relevant capabilities such as the one proposed by Martha Nussbaum.

Through her many highly esteemed and comprehensive writings, Martha Nussbaum has provided and defended, almost unchangeably, the same list of central human capabilities as an index of universal human entitlements. The list contains ten items: (1) Life; (2) Bodily Health; (3) Bodily Integrity; (4) Senses, Imagination and Thought; (5) Emotions; (6) Practical Reason; (7) Affiliation (A: other-regarding; B: self-regarding); (8) Other Species; (9) Play; and (10) Control over One's Environment (A: political; B: material) (Nussbaum 1992: 202-246; 2000: 78-80; 2001: 416-418; 2006: 76-78; 2007: 21-24; 2011: 33-34). The listed items are in the form of functionings—thus, achievements of well-being function—but importantly, the entitlements in regard to the elements are in terms of capabilities understood as the effective freedom or real opportunity to achieve these functionings.

This distinction is fundamental in the writings of any capability theorist and is of central moral and political importance because it implies that we need to seriously consider people's individual freedom, agency and personal choice; not only the enhancement of their well-being. For example, the functioning of my bodily health might very well be worsened through my choice not to take my daily doses of medicine or my choice to enjoy a fatty high-carb breakfast instead of my regular oatmeal with fresh fruit. But importantly, my capability to achieve bodily health is the same, assuming that the choice is effectively mine. Building a theory of entitlements on capabilities rather than functioning achievements is crucial in order to take proper stock of individual choice and responsibility.

The foundation of Nussbaum's list is grounded in the normative belief that the listed items are constitutive of the good or dignified human life. That is, any state of being is essentially not to be counted as a human life in dignity without these central capabilities. This is, no doubt, a controversial claim. And Nussbaum is carefully explicit about the list not being a conclusive, full-fledged account of human nature and also not a complete theory of justice. Rather, the list is meant as a minimal
account of justice and a deliberative point of reference from which theoretical, public and practical elaboration may take off.

There are a number of issues one could raise against having such a list, but many of them become much less worrisome if we take seriously one central aspect of Nussbaum’s list. Importantly, the list is evaluative because it states value-judgments about the human life—i.e. what a human person needs, constitutively, in order to lead a dignified human life. This does not mean that having all these capabilities necessarily makes your life good or dignified, since it is a list of necessary, not sufficient, conditions for a dignified human life. Nor does it imply that a person should not have the freedom to choose not the make use of the listed capabilities, because it is a list of capabilities, not functionings. Thus, to elaborate on this latter point, Nussbaum’s capability theory of minimal justice carries an implicit but important message about individual choice and responsibility.

Since the list is essentially designed so as to facilitate a life of human dignified freedom, we have strong pro tanto reasons to respect people’s choices at this point, at least when they do not pose a threat to the maintenance of this essential human freedom. But the much more pressing implication of the theory, and the one that is explicit in Nussbaum’s writings, is that justice should at all times set aside this concern for the purpose of eliminating existing obstacles standing in the way of people reaching a level at which they possess this effective freedom—in other words, justice’s main concern is to secure people’s overall capability to exercise personal responsibility. What the list states, evaluatively, is that a human life cannot be dignified if any of the central human capabilities are absent. Or, in relation to responsibility, that a person incapable of effectively exercising responsibility over the relevant dimensions of human life is not in possession of dignified human personhood – is not in possession of self-creative responsibility.

Recently, we have attempted to elaborate on the distributive dimensions of the capability in a more full-fledged manner by making the commitment to a sufficiency constrain—that justice is fulfilled when everyone has enough—more explicit and determinate (Axelsen & Nielsen 2015; Nielsen & Axelsen 2016). Building upon Nussbaum’s list of central human capabilities, we argue that distributive justice should pay attention only to central (as opposed to non-central) capabilities; that these central capabilities include both biological and social capability aspects; and that the requirement of justice is to eliminate significant pressure against people’s effective opportunity to succeed on each capability aspect area.

We call this sufficiency view on justice, the ideal of freedom from duress. Following Nussbaum’s cue, this more detailed distributive account of justice emphasizes the aim of justice in enabling people to exercise responsibility. Rendering people free from duress is a way of capturing the importance of people not being under pressure against pursuing their valuable and necessary life plan.
Nussbaum’s list, importantly, is a minimal account of justice—that is, it says nothing about what justice requires above the threshold, or in situations where everyone enjoy all the listed capabilities. Our account is, in comparison, a more full-fledged theory of distributive justice in that it explicitly believes justice to hold no further requirements, once everyone is made free from duress. Nonetheless, it leaves out the question of what role responsibility-sensitivity should play in the principle for distribution. This emphasizes the above mentioned limitation in that the capability approach is often silent about what role distributive responsibility-sensitivity should play. That is, when should we in the name of justice hold people responsible for their choices?

But the capability-catering justice theorists’ reluctance to answer that question, and the capability approach’s tendency to by-pass that question, is no theoretical weakness. It is a result of the core inherent belief that this question is irrelevant if we have not yet met the first requirement of justice in enabling people to lead lives in which they can effectively make free choices and thus where people in the relevant sense have the effective freedom to exercise responsibility over their lives. The role of responsibility should not, then, be the one envisioned by attributability theorists, which emphasizes holding people responsible but one that embodies the value inherent in responsible choice on central human capabilities – self-creative responsibility.

To see how this reconstruction of the capability approach in the light of self-creative responsibility meets the objections mentioned above, we will emphasize three capabilitarian elements, which are especially prominent in the version developed by Martha Nussbaum, but which permeate the approach more generally.

First, capabilitarians employ the notion of a set of threshold levels of capability below which no one is allowed to fall – regardless of their exercise of responsibility – which are fundamentally distinct and incommensurable (Anderson 1999; Axelsen & Nielsen 2015; Nielsen & Axelsen 2016; Nussbaum 2000, 2006; Sen 1992). This, as described above, is the case both for Nussbaum’s list of central capabilities and the ideal of freedom from duress. Responsibility, on this view, is inapplicable to situations in which people are below the central capability thresholds. This reply can be illuminated by connecting it to the notion of self-creative responsibility. Thus, if a constitutive element of justice is to enable people’s exercise of responsibility through choice over a variety of valuable life plans, justice cannot entail that people are abandoned in situations where such possibilities are lost. Justice cannot, in other words, demand that people who have fallen below certain thresholds are left to their unhappy fate – even if their situation is caused by irresponsible choice. By not holding people responsible when they are insufficiently capable because the goal is to help them meet the threshold, at which they can exercise responsible choice in central dimensions of human life, the capabilitarian notion of responsibility is able to avoid the abandonment objection (see Anderson 1999).
Second, the claim that evaluating people’s exercise of responsibility necessitates overly intrusive judgments and state policies can be re-examined in the light of important elements of virtue ethics - something that is clearly present in Nussbaum’s work which is explicitly grounded in Aristotelean ethics (Nussbaum 2000). Attributability theories emphasize holding people responsible for choices (rather than luck) which leave them better or worse off than others in order to achieve a just distribution – in Ronald Dworkin’s words; they must be “ambition-sensitive” (Dworkin 2000 – see also, Arneson 1999, Cohen 2008, Lippert-Rasmussen 2015).

Importantly, however, the problem of intrusive policies which require people to reveal shameful personal shortcomings or irresponsibility stems from a need to evaluate whether people were in fact responsible. By emphasizing virtues – and, for our purposes, the virtue embodying the value self-creative responsibility – instead, capability theorists can avoid this objection. Responsibility, on this view, is a virtue which society should seek to cultivate for the sake of its citizens – because it is good for them to take responsibility for their own lives – not to reach a certain distributive state of affairs. Rather than seeking to evaluate people’s level of responsibility to determine their just share of society’s advantages, we should seek to cultivate the virtue of responsibility, thereby enhancing autonomy and control over people’s own lives (Claassen & Düwell 2013; Nielsen 2016).

Third and finally, theories of distributive justice that centre on responsibility as attributability have been accused of upholding a discourse, in which responsibility is already over-emphasized and used to vindicate unjust distributions (Anderson 1999; Wolff 1998, 2015a, 2015b). There is a widespread tendency in political discourses to blame, for example, immigrants, the unemployed, and the poor for ending up in their inferior societal position due to irresponsible behaviour – due to a lack of willingness to integrate, find a job, or apply oneself. Mirroring this, is a prevalence among the well-off to feel entitled to their superior position, feeling that they have earned their position through good choices, hard work, and comparatively responsible behaviour. The worry is that responsibility-centred theories are liable to be distorted by and, thus, play into these injustice-engendering discourses (Bidadanure & Axelsen (forthcoming)).

Importantly, though, this issue arises in connection with theories, which centre on the question of whether or not people are responsible only, rather than on the notion of responsibility more generally. Instructively, the currency of capabilities is inherently responsibility-sensitive in a way that is unique compared to most other currencies of distributive justice (e.g. utility, Rawls’ primary goods, or Dworkin’s resources) and in a way that avoids this problem. This is because capabilities are freedoms to do and be certain things; to achieve certain functionings rather than these functionings themselves (Sen 1992, Nussbaum 2000). This entails that the capability approach leaves it open to people themselves how and the degree to which they achieve these functionings.
Capabilitarians, then, focus on creating opportunities for and removing obstacles to people's functioning and, in this way, opening up spaces for people to exercise responsible agency. This understanding of responsibility, we claim, which is less narrowly centred on states of affairs and more open-ended than the one found in many other distributive theories, can avoid the strategic and political critique mentioned above since it seeks to create opportunities for being responsible, rather than evaluating the degree to which people are so. Responsibility, then, when reconstructed as emphasizing the value of self-creative responsible – along capabilitarian lines – can both avoid important lines of criticism and help illuminate what is valuable about responsibility in both theory and practice.