Book explores shifting meaning of responsibility

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BOOK REVIEW


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“It is time to restore the American precept that each individual is accountable for his actions,” President Ronald Reagan declared in the 1980s.

In his inaugural address, President Bill Clinton agreed that America “must offer more opportunity to all and demand responsibility from all.” And, as he demanded an economy “in which everyone gets a fair shot.”

President Barack Obama maintained that “an America built to last insists on responsibility from everybody.”

According to Yascha Mounk, a lecturer in political theory in the Government Department of Harvard University, this presidential rhetoric marked a significant shift in the United States, from an emphasis on responsibility as a duty to help others, by for example, making sacrifices for our country, to a conception in which each of us is responsible to take care of ourselves – and suffer the consequences if we do not do so.

‘Lot of damage’

In “The Age of Responsibility,” Mounk claims that when this new conception has been translated into “the cold, bureaucratic logic of the welfare state,” it has done a lot of damage, to individuals and to American society.

By focusing on a blame game, he indicates, this doctrine of personal responsibility distracts us from the role of social and economic forces. And Mounk proposes an alternative way of looking at personal responsibility that seeks to empower rather than punish.

Mounk may well have exaggerated the nature and magnitude of the shift. Americans have always embraced responsibility as individual accountability and as a duty to others (delivered through private charity and taxpayer-funded social welfare programs).

Important insights

Americans have distinguished between poor people, sick people, the unemployed, and criminals who they deem not fully responsible for their plight and who therefore deserve assistance, and those who should be left to their own devices or disciplined.

Americans have been – and remain – uncertain about limits on our free will and the implications of these limits for policies grounded in an assessment of personal responsibility.

Although his history is flawed, Mounk’s exercise in moral philosophy yields important insights into the concept of personal responsibility and on our approach to health care, unemployment, disability, welfare, and mass incarceration.

U.S. appeal

Mounk acknowledges that the notion of personal accountability has considerable appeal throughout the United States. All of us, whatever our view of free will, he agrees, seek a substantial degree of control over our lives, feel we are taking responsibility for ourselves, and want to be seen as doing so.

He demonstrates, however, the arbitrariness and “sheer impracticality” of applying the doctrine of personal
responsibility, or, for that matter, a doctrine of “no responsibility” (based on an individual’s background, prior experiences, including racism and child abuse, and good or bad luck) in a consistent manner. Doing so, he writes, would involve abolishing virtually all forms of rewards and punishments.

Work in progress
Mounk’s alternative, his “positive conception of responsibility,” is predicated on the assumption that it is more important to affect future behavior than to track the moral status of past behavior.

To that end, Mounk places the actions of individuals in the context of institutional and structural realities (failing schools, automation, globalization) that affected the individual’s options. The aim, of course, is to change those realities.

This new conception is a work in progress, involving difficult balancing acts and the danger of removing incentives for people to act in socially responsible ways. But it’s a start. And Mounk is surely right to conclude that “The spread of responsibility is a worthy goal of public policy — but only if we interpret responsibility as a constructive ideal, designing institutions with the aim of empowering citizens to take on the responsibility they seek.”

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