Individually, responsibility plays a prominent role in both the practice and theory of politics. Consider, for example, policies aimed at unemployed citizens to incentivize them to take responsibility for their joblessness or to encourage smokers to take responsibility for their health (and quit). 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). We shall refer to this as responsibility as accountability (accountability, for short) (Shoemaker 2011; Scanlon 1998, chap. 6). 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 involves people taking authorship of their own life. We shall refer to this as self-creative responsibility.

In this article, we argue that several contemporary questions about societal justice can be illuminated by reinterpreting them as clashes between these two ways of understanding and responding to (ir)responsibility. Thus, the practice of holding people responsible can sometimes undermine the prospects of making them
responsible. This can occur in three distinct ways. First, holding people accountable for irresponsible behaviour can sometimes entail leaving them with less than enough to continue the pursuit of autonomous life plans – as in the case of holding a smoker responsible for her terminal or deteriorating lung diseases by prioritizing her claims differently to those of non-smokers in terms of access to compensation or transplants (See Albertsen 2016, 2017).

Second, evaluating whether or not people are, in fact, responsible (and eligible to be held accountable) for their bad circumstances may, in some instances, undermine their capacities and social bases for self-creative responsibility – as in the case of unemployed citizens undergoing heavy scrutiny in order to assess whether or not they have made a reasonable effort to get a job. This, in turn, forces them to either shamefully reveal their inadequacies or give up welfare benefits – both of which, arguably, constitutes a significant obstacle to self-creative responsibility (See Wolff 1998, 2015).

Third, classifications of responsibility might be considered contextually inappropriate moral distinctions because one of the key obstacles to autonomous living for worst-off of society is exactly that political discourses and social practices are so heavily infused with the distinction between responsible and irresponsible citizens. Upholding this social context as theorists (or, indeed, politicians) by centring on this distinction is liable to engendering this unjust set of attitudes and adverse cognitive biases inherent in current political and social practices (See Anderson 2015; Haslanger 2012, 2015; Wolff 2015).

These clashes, we claim, tell us that the value of responsibility as autonomy or self-creation can be reconciled with the intuition behind holding people responsible (or accountable) as a matter of justice. But this will entail incorporating its value into one’s distributive account, which, in effect, will mean constraining responsibility as accountability with self-creative responsibility – in other words, holding people responsible is valuable if and only if it serves the goal of making them more responsible. Finally, we show how these insights 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.