

each other. Family members help each other in difficult situations and look after each other when they are old or sick. This is mainly true of people who, for various reasons, are not or no longer in a position to be fully responsible for themselves. Whether the people living together are married or not, is of no consequence.

People can be responsible for others even outside the family in any number of ways. What matters is that both sides are willing. Own responsibility should not be destroyed by wellmeaning efforts to decide for others.

Responsibility and risk

In modern societies, people are exposed to all kinds of risks. They may, for example, fall ill and require very expensive medical treatment, or they may lose their jobs or their wealth.

There is a wide range of instruments, e.g. insurance schemes that offer protection against such risks but we do not need the protection of state institutions. We need to be responsible and farsighted in our actions.

Supplementary Reading

- **F. A. v. Hayek: *The Constitution of Liberty*, Chapter 5: *Responsibility and Freedom*, The University of Chicago Press 1960**

An accurate account of how individual responsibility and freedom belong together.

- **F. Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment* Various editions**

The literary masterpiece on the problem of individual responsibility.

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Responsibility

People are responsible for their actions. They bear the consequences and measure their actions by yardsticks, the most important ones being their own conscience and own standards, which can be explained in a number of ways.

Living together in a society introduces yet another standard, namely the set of rules and laws that society has laid down for itself. In modern states these laws have been codified in a legal system and apply equally to all citizens. If you violate the law, you will be penalised. If you damage somebody else's property, then you will pay damages, as specified in the civil code.

A court of law can penalise unlawful behaviour on the basis of the penal code.

Responsibility and the individual

Strictly speaking, only an individual can take on responsibility, as only the individual can be held liable for his or her actions. Own or self responsibility is therefore really the same thing.

A society that does not recognize that each individual has values of his own which he is entitled to follow, can have no respect for the dignity of the individual, and cannot really know freedom.

Friedrich August von Hayek

All forms of so-called collective responsibility can be traced back to individual responsibility. Talk of joint responsibility is usually intended to conceal real responsibility.

In terms of political responsibility, the delegation of responsibility is an obvious problem. The so-called 'bearers' of responsibility do not bear the full consequences of their decisions. Their greatest risk is being voted out and facing early retirement, and so the taxpayer must bear liability.

Therefore liberals advocate subsidiarity and believe that, as far as possible, decisions should be taken by the citizens themselves, as they have to bear the consequences.

Responsibility and freedom

Freedom and responsibility are inseparable.

Only those who are free to decide and act can be responsible or held responsible for their actions. Liberalism strives to create a society in which people can decide for themselves and individual responsibility is a fundamental requirement in a liberal society. In contrast to socialist concepts, minimal responsibility is delegated to the society or state only if absolutely necessary.

Liberty means responsibility. That is why most men dread it.

George Bernard Shaw

Only individual responsibility can give rise to competition, the constituent element in a free society. Only if persons are held accountable for both the good and harm resulting from their actions, will they concentrate their energy on constructive action.

Planned economies and socialist societies collapsed precisely for this reason: while officially everybody was responsible for everything, in reality, nobody was responsible for anything. The catastrophic consequences are still being felt today. Only reforms towards market economies and open societies made the economic improvements of the last decade possible.

Social responsibility

Political discourse often refers to social responsibility and confers on it a special status. Contrary to the contemporary usage of the

term, social responsibility and solidarity are born of individual responsibility and require a high level of freedom and competition.

In order to do justice to its 'social responsibility' the state has a number of systems in place, ranging from unemployment benefits to old-age pension schemes financed by taxes or mandatory contributions.

As membership to the institutions concerned is obligatory, they lack the moral quality of voluntary organisations, which comprise individuals who shoulder the responsibility for themselves and others.

Covering up instead of owning up, is the unspoken motto of all bureaucrats.

*Carl Horber (1882-1931;
Swiss political thinker)*

In modern welfare states nobody is ultimately responsible for the impact of political decisions on social security. The consequences are borne by taxpayers and recipients of welfare as well.

Responsibility for others

Each individual can assume responsibility for others and there are many situations when he or she has the moral or legal duty to actually do so. Traditionally, family members vouch for each other. Parents assume responsibility for their children, while other members are mutually responsible for