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ARTICLE

Responsibility to Recover: Addiction and Self-Care

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Abstract

Addicts, an already vulnerable population, can be made worse off by certain kinds of popular and well-intentioned research programs and beliefs about addiction, agency, and responsibility. Perspectives of backwards-facing responsibility that focus on blameworthiness and liability highlight the injustices that addicts have faced. Likewise, the disease model of addiction, pursued as an alternative to the stigmatization and moralization of the choice model, takes responsibility away from the addict. However, each of these fails to help the addict to recover or to care for herself. If anything, embracing these perspectives and models can rob addicts of agency and lead them to further suffering. Drawing on feminist philosophy, this paper shows there is good evidence for us to reconsider those models and perspectives, and instead ask what kind of understandings about addiction aid in fostering agency and recovery.

> Through our inability to accept personal responsibilities we were actually creating our own problems. (Narcotics Anonymous 2008, 13)

1. Introduction

Addiction is not a problem that usually arises in a vacuum. A high percentage of people who experience addiction are members of marginalized groups.[1] These individuals often come from violent homes (Degenhardt et al. 2022), are disproportionately likely to be

[1]In this paper, I am specifically working with patterns of addiction and recovery in the United States. Given the social components of addiction, prevalence and co-morbidity may show up differently under different social conditions. As such, these insights may or may not translate to other contexts.

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people of color,[2] and more than half of addicts have a co-occurring psychiatric disorder.[3] In addition, LGBTQ+ individuals are more than twice as likely to abuse substances and become addicted (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 2023). When we leave people who suffer from addiction out of conversations about responsibility and self-care, we leave out some of our most vulnerable people.

To this end, I focus on the way that our theories, when adopted, help or hinder people. As Claudia Card proposed, this project will "consider what emerges when we look forward and up, towards the future and from the standpoints of those struggling to put their lives together" (Card 1996, 23). When vulnerable people form beliefs and act in ways that are coherent with our theories, does this help them live better lives? I show first how some theories explicitly undermine prudential action when vulnerable people believe them. Then, I show that our theorizing has room for beliefs that enable vulnerable people to behave prudentially rationally—acting with regard to their own well-being. These beliefs are not just pragmatically useful; they are consistent with and built upon the way that feminists theorize about responsibility. Finally, I show how adopting a belief in responsibility to recover allows vulnerable people, specifically those who suffer from addiction, to behave epistemically and prudentially rationally.

I propose that, to be a responsible caretaker of oneself, someone with an addition has strong reasons to accept a view of herself as responsible for her welfare and future. I will distinguish *corrupted self-care* from *being a responsible caretaker of oneself* to show how easy it is for addicts to make epistemic mistakes that contribute to their own suffering. By putting feminist conceptions of responsibility-taking alongside modern addiction science and the literature that comes from recovery communities, we can see that they emerge in agreement: to be a responsible caretaker of herself, the addict should take on a responsibility to recover. After discussing what this means for people struggling with addiction, I examine other cases in which the responsibility to recover can be used.

There are understandable reasons why well-meaning people (non-addicts) resist the claim that people suffering from addiction can be responsible. They want to distance themselves from the harmful stigmatization and moralization of addiction and they want to avoid giving reason to penalize addicts for their addiction. To be clear, I also want to avoid these things, and I think we can. Luckily, we already have some resources to think about how one can be *responsible* without being worthy of punitive blame.

Hanna Pickard offers us a way to understand the conceptual distance between *responsibility* and *blameworthiness*. As is robustly understood in the clinical context, treating addicts like they are *not responsible* is not effective for treatment. "The clinical task," according to Pickard, "is not to deny their agency and rescue them from blame by pathologizing their behavior, but to work with them and help them to develop their sense of agency and responsibility—to support and empower people to make different choices" (2017, 175). Clinicians also understand, however, how important it is to do so while not engaging in any of the affective patterns of expressing blame. Blaming under

[2]"In 2021, the percentage of people who needed substance use treatment in the past year was higher among American Indian or Alaska Native (28.7%) or Multiracial people (25.5%) compared with Black or African American (16.4%), White (15.9%), Hispanic or Latino (15.0%), or Asian people (7.7%). The percentage of people who needed substance use treatment in the past year among Asian people was lower than the percentage among people in all other racial or ethnic groups" (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 2021).

[3]"The prevalence of psychiatric comorbidity varies between classes of substances, with 37% of people with an alcohol use disorder and 53% of people with an illicit SUD also meeting the criteria for a comorbid psychiatric disorder" (Davis et al. 2023, 3786).

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this stance is constituted by the expression of certain emotions, judgments, and actions toward someone who is responsible for harm or wrongdoing. Blaming, as constituted by expressions of anger, contempt, or disgust, is a choice, and it is something that we can withhold when appropriate. Instead, clinicians can and should take the stance of r*esponsibility without blame* and hold their patients to account without blaming them for their behavior (Pickard 2014).

Responsibility without blame is a stance that non-clinicians can adopt toward addicts as well. Pickard (2014) advises that it is also the philosophical and legal stance that we should adopt. This allows us to both avoid the harmful moralizing of addicts and to avoid the conclusion that retribution or punishment is owed for their actions.

Throughout, I will sometimes use the term "addicts" intentionally rather than relying solely on the newly popular term "people with addiction" because this is, by and large, the way that addicts refer to themselves—especially, but not limited to, addicts in recovery communities. "Once we identify ourselves as addicts, help becomes possible. We can see a little of ourselves in every addict and see a little of them in us. This insight lets us help one another" (Narcotics Anonymous 2008, 8).

Since denial is one of the characteristic cognitive defects of addiction, the addict identifying themselves as an addict is often immensely helpful in recovering from addiction. This identification is integral, as recovery communities see it, to being able to take responsibility and achieve sobriety. In fact, even decades into sobriety, many addicts continue to identify as addicts, and this helps them to maintain their practice of being responsible for themselves and their actions.[4]

The person-first language was introduced to attempt to help with stigmatization, but, as I will argue in this paper, the overmedicalization of addiction that treats people as victims of a disease can also be detrimental as it corrupts responsibility practices that help the addict. The push to change our language (as it too often does) comes from psychologists and academics, and not from addicts themselves.

2. Beliefs about responsibility can make people worse off

The complicated relationship between experiencing injustice and taking responsibility has been long appreciated by feminist philosophers. When understanding women's oppression, theorists correctly recognize these substantial and often structural harms as matters of justice and focus heavily on making sure that we are not blaming the victims (women) for the harm that they endure. However, this concentrated effort often leads to other problems, such as harm to the agency of the oppressed. Susan Wendell poignantly described this tension, and it is worth quoting her at length:

> Nevertheless, problems are created when feminists' efforts not to blame the victims lead us to deny or ignore two vitally important truths: first, that women do sometimes contribute, by the choices we make, to our own oppression and that of other women; second (and this is not at all the same thing), that women do have some power to avoid victimization and to end our own oppression and that of

[4]I use "addicts" as an all-encompassing term for people with any type of addiction. However, some addicts choose to identify with their particular addiction, for example, they identify as "Alcoholics" or as "Gambling Addicts." Regardless, one thing that most recovery communities have in common is this process of identification, which is a central part of their gatherings. This is evidenced in the books that recovering addicts write, such as Alcoholics Anonymous 2002, and Narcotics Anonymous 2008.

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> other women. Although these truths have often been distorted and misused in defense of sexist conservatism, they are vitally important to women's liberation. We must somehow balance recognition of them with our concern not to blame the victims and the oppressed. (1990, 21)

As such, Wendell advocated that we need to be able to understand these injustices from multiple perspectives to be able to solve the problem of women's liberation. This translates well to the context of addiction, and helps us to understand how our theorizing about addiction runs the same risks if we fail to recognize truths vitally important to recovery.

To deny that addicts have any responsibility would be what Wendell calls *the perspective of the victim*. The perspective of the victim is one where we focus on others as causes of our life events, where we "recognize the oppressor's responsibility and assign blame to the oppressor" (1990, 26). Responsibility, on this perspective, is merely a backwards-facing attribution of blame. The woman in a patriarchal society, facing oppression and sexual violence, correctly locates the cause of the harm, and thus, *the responsibility*, outside of herself—in social norms and the men who have hurt her. Trauma victims, with unexplainable flashbacks and outbursts, correctly locate the harm, and thus, the responsibility, in whoever (or whatever) traumatized them.

The perspective of the victim is necessarily incomplete. To take the perspective of the victim, we must "remain ignorant of certain facts"—facts about choices that *we* have made, and what the effects of those choices were (Wendell 1990, 37). And yet, we often prioritize the perspective of the victim because it is one that must be understood to work to enact structural change, and the impulse to participate in it (as a victim) is strong. Wendell reminds us that, while the perspective of the victim is sometimes necessary, it also robs the woman of agency, as she does not see herself as having actions that can or could affect the world. Without agency, she cannot decide to act in her own interest. If the woman in the patriarchal society is to act in a way that benefits her, her relationships, and other vulnerable people, she must take on a different perspective: she must view herself as a responsible agent, who can make choices that bring about her (and others') welfare.

Likewise, Alicia LaGuardia-LoBianco (2018) shows us why the trauma survivor, too, is caught in a trap by only taking on the perspective of the victim. When doing so, the trauma survivor becomes *complicit* in their suffering. To be complicit in one's suffering, according to LaGuardia-LoBianco, is to fail to recognize the ways in which one's own actions contribute to the continued pain one experiences.

These are insights that we can apply to the case of addiction. Consider an all-too-common scenario:

> Jacob was prescribed a high dose of OxyContin when he was a teenager, during the height of the opioid epidemic following the advertising campaign of Purdue Pharma. Jacob ended up hopelessly addicted to OxyContin, heroin, and eventually fentanyl. Jacob did not know about the high potential for abuse and addiction in relation to OxyContin, neither did his doctor, but Purdue did. Purdue is, in many ways, responsible for Jacob's addiction, and Jacob is angry with them for the suffering they caused in his life.

Jacob's anger is rational. His belief—that Purdue Pharma *is liable* for the harm caused—is true. Purdue Pharma, not Jacob, is *blameworthy* for the harm caused. Purdue Pharma, not

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Jacob, is *responsible* for causing Jacob's addiction.[5] Moreover, in virtue of their liability, Purdue Pharma generated a new forward-facing responsibility to redress the harm they caused. This is not controversial, as evidenced by the recent $7.4 billion settlement.[6]

Acknowledging all those facts, Jacob might rationally conclude that, since he is not liable for his addiction, and Purdue Pharma is responsible for redressing the harm that they caused Jacob and others like him, he is not responsible for redressing the harm—for addressing his addiction. It might seem equally rational for Jacob to be angry (as his anger would be apt[7]) and to practice indignant inaction (carry on in his addiction) while he waits for his settlement from Purdue Pharma. This, I aim to show, is a mistake, though one that it is easy and, in many ways, rational to make if we think of addiction only through the perspective of the victim.

In the meantime, Jacob listens to well-meaning professionals (whose laudable goal is to destigmatize addiction) rationalize his behavior. In virtue of his addiction—a brain disease, they say—he is not *capable* of choosing not to use or to remain abstinent, and therefore not responsible for his continued use. He suffers from cognitive deficits which entail that his using behavior is *compulsive* rather than chosen.[8] Even some who reject the disease model (addiction, though it is a malfunction, is not a malfunction of the *brain*) believe that addiction can be a "failure of control over mental life" (Levy 2011, 96), where cravings, like twitches, cannot be avoided or controlled. Under these models of addiction, people (like Jacob) cannot be responsible for their using behavior or addiction. However, if Jacob thinks of his addiction this way—takes on the perspective of the victim—he will not only remain injured by the injustice, but he could cause himself further harm. Jacob, like the trauma survivor, can become complicit in his own suffering. Even though the ultimate cause of Jacob's addiction lies elsewhere, it is Jacob's actions in his continuing addiction that cause him cumulating harm on a day-to-day basis.

I take Jacob's situation to be representative of many cases of addiction, even though we are often going to struggle to locate the party who is ultimately liable for the harm caused. As I mentioned before, those with marginalized identities (BIPOC, LGBTQ+ people, people with psychiatric disorders) make up the lion's share of people with addictions. The injustices done to, and harm experienced by, trauma survivors and people with marginalized identities are often connected to resulting substance abuse and addiction. In these cases, too, there will be liability for the addiction outside of the addict, though exactly where that liability lies will be harder to identify than in cases like Jacob's. These addicts can *also* take on the perspective of the victim around responsibility and find themselves in apt anger, indignant inaction, and complicit suffering.

Addiction in cases like this, where injustice and harm were the initial cause, can be seen as the result of well-intentioned, corrupted self-care—it is an attempt to deal with the pain of life that ends up being counterproductive. As Pickard describes, "problematic behaviour is often a habitual if ineffective way of coping with psychological distress, and so part of the cycle of dysfunction: in the short-term it may seem to service users like the

[5]Throughout, I will treat Purdue Pharma as though it is an agent that has responsibility and can be blamed. Whether or not we should think of companies this way is an open question, but I will treat it this way for simplicity's sake.

[6]Settlement as renegotiated in the beginning of 2025. https://www.purduepharma.com/news/2025/03/18/purdue-pharma-l-p-files-new-plan-of-reorganization-providing-for-more-than-7-4-billion-in-creditor-distributions/.

[7]As argued by Srinivasan 2018.

[8]This language is prevalent in the literature that describes addiction as a "brain disease" or often called "the disease model of addiction." For an example, see Everitt and Robbins 2005.

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only way of dealing with underlying, negative emotions and beliefs, but in the long-term it makes things worse" (Pickard 2014, 11). In recovery communities, addicts often say that in the beginning, using drugs wasn't the problem—it was their solution. "They tried to convince me that I had a drug problem, but using was my solution for every problem I had" (Narcotics Anonymous 2008, 242).

When we construe responsibility as equal to liability and backwards-facing accountability, and negate forward-looking responsibilities by talking about addiction as a disease, we can combat the moralization of addiction. It is all too easy for people who suffer from addiction to be seen as helpless victims of injustice, who deserve our pity instead of our blame. This again coheres with the *perspective of the victim* that we saw above. We can avoid victim-blaming in addiction by closing the story after deciding that affected people are victims of injustice and are, therefore, not responsible. However, we ought not stop here, because when we remove all agency from the addict, she has no ability to engage in self-care outside of its corrupted form, manifest in her addiction.

However, Wendell offered us other perspectives. People who experience injustice can, instead of taking on the perspective of the victim, take on *the perspective of the responsible actor*. Taking and having responsibility is often good for people—both those who do and those who don't suffer from addiction. It is required to "face the future with a sense of choice, responsibility, and purpose" (31). Taking the perspective of the responsible actor is required to move beyond victimhood and become the kind of person who participates in their life planning.

The importance of responsibility for addicts is often accepted in the clinical context—outcomes for treatments that embrace and bolster agency are far more effective for treating addiction. As Don Ross nicely summarizes,

> Lewis's rejection of the disease model is based mainly on what he sees as its pernicious clinical consequences, which are that it impairs many addicts' prospects for recovery by undermining their agency and sense of empowerment, while trading off moral stigmatization for stigmatization associated with allegedly chronic disability. (2020, 2)

The outcome-related benefits of believing in a responsibility to recover are easy to see. Believing in a responsibility to recover can counteract the damage to agency that results from addiction. First, we can see that addicts, just like everyone else, act in accordance with beliefs that they have. As Neil Levy explains,

> The empirical evidence supports the conclusion that we might have reached on the basis of observation of addicts' behavior. It looks like ordinary, instrumentally rational, behavior. It unfolds smoothly, flexibly adapting to small perturbations in the environment. It bears all the marks of what psychologists call controlled behavior: roughly, behavior that is rationalized and explained by belief-desire pairs. It looks so much like controlled behavior because it is controlled behavior. (2016, 269)

An addict without the belief that she has agency to exercise, then, will fail to act as though she has choices to make. Actions cannot be responsive to beliefs that one does not have. In other words, an addict believing that she cannot change is a predictable precursor to her not being able to change. On the flip side, a belief that one can change is

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a start to being able to change. This is why so many addicts find hope in realizing that there have been others who have come before them who have been able to find recovery, or as they put it, "the therapeutic value of one addict helping another" (Narcotics Anonymous 2008, 18).

Adopting a belief in the responsibility to recover, then, combats undermined agency in two ways. First of all, by empowering the addict to continue trying to positively affect her situation, even when she feels hopeless. Secondly, by displacing the idea that she cannot be responsible in virtue of the cognitive features of addiction that undermine free choice. By replacing the belief that the individual *can't* be responsible with the belief that the individual *does* have a responsibility, we empower her to not give up on herself—we can start to replace the perspective of the victim with the perspective of the responsible actor. The second benefit of coming to believe in a responsibility to recover is that, beyond just empowering her, recovery can give her tools to start to combat some of the cognitive deficits that are characteristic of addiction. Two cognitive dysfunctions that are argued to be central to addiction are *denial* and *judgment shift* (see, respectively, Pickard 2016, and Levy 2016).

Pickard (2016) argues that the phenomenon of denial is central to addiction and explaining the apparent paradox of addictive choice: if addicts are able to choose, why do they continue to use despite negative consequences? She argues that they continue to use despite negative consequences partially because they have not epistemically *discovered* the consequences of their use. There are different reasons and ways that addicts might engage in this denial. They might use motivated reasoning driven by the desire to avoid the psychological discomfort or distress of knowing that they caused certain events to happen or certain consequences to come about. They might be engaging in robust self-deception, wherein they know the "truth" at some level, but are hiding it from another part of themselves. Or, more innocently, they might have just been able to find other features of their lives that they could blame as the cause for the negative consequences, thereby leaving no need to see their using behavior as causally related to the outcome. Here we can see how addicts might continue using despite negative and extreme consequences, because they don't understand the causal relationship they have to the negative consequences.

Taking on the perspective of the victim, as though it is the full story, could lead to further forms of denial. If Jacob has a standing opportunity to blame Purdue Pharma for his situation, and thereby for the negative consequences that he sees in his life, then Jacob's denial would be very easy to understand. Why should he see his actions as producing bad consequences when he already has someone to blame? He has effectively linked cause and effect without the need to include his own actions. Instead, through thinking of oneself as responsible for recovering, and thereby as a responsible agent, the addict loses some ability to engage in denial. A central part of many recovery programs is *making amends*.[9] This includes accepting liability for past harms—even if one did not freely bring them about—because it is part of coming to understand the consequences of one's actions. When the addict begins to connect past actions to current needs to make amends, it helps him to not engage in denial about the future consequences of his current actions. This is integral for overcoming denial that can hinder one's ability to be free from suffering, and can be aided by a responsibility to recover.

[9]"Step 8: [We] Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all. Step 9: [We] Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others." Alcoholics Anonymous 2002, 59.

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Another cognitive dysfunction characteristic of addiction is judgment shift, which presents in moments where we recalculate our reasons for belief or action, without encountering new evidence, and come to change our minds (Levy 2018). Judgment shifts happen when we find escape clauses (reasons to make exceptions) in our resolutions because of the presence of an addictive substance, and not because we have encountered new reasons to doubt our resolutions. When the abstinent addict encounters his drug of choice, he begins to rationalize, "Just this one time won't hurt," "I've had a hard day, I deserve it." When the addict reconsiders his resolution in the presence of the drug, the question "should I use?" which he closed yesterday, is now reopened and vulnerable to judgment shift. Judgment shifts are especially likely to happen for people who are addicted, as they are more likely to discount future goods at steep hyperbolic rates than others. In other words, smaller-sooner rewards (whatever benefit—however small—is derived from the use of a drug) "win out" when compared to larger-later rewards (what a lifetime of sobriety might look like) (Ainslie 2018).

In recovery, the addict has a few tools to overcome judgment shift. First, they are encouraged to make resolutions that explicitly lack any escape clauses (to join the *No Matter What* club[10]). Secondly, they are encouraged to include others in the decision-making process, to engage in a kind of impersonal self-knowledge (Levy 2016), especially if they notice that they seem to have changed their minds about something. A responsibility to recover can encourage the addict to take on these characteristics. For each of us, this kind of interpersonal knowledge can play an important role in our ability to be responsible agents. As Card says, "Friendly external bonds can play an important role in establishing and maintaining good internal connections. It may be our luck to have to, or not to have to, work hard or self-consciously to develop and preserve such bonds" (1996, 48). However, due to their addiction, instead of being just one *possible* option for the addict, it becomes the *responsible* option to make categorical resolutions, outsource their decision-making, and not trust their epistemic faculties.

Without acknowledging a responsibility to recover, the addict can rationally justify inaction on the very difficult path of recovery by taking on the perspective of the victim. This coherent and true, though incomplete, perspective does not include the person who suffers from an addiction having a responsibility to do anything to redress her suffering. Without these tools that recovery has to offer, she is more likely to continue to suffer from the harms that come from continued use, denial, and judgment-shift. After all, it is unlikely that an addict who is not pursuing recovery would make amends or seek out people to whom they can outsource their decisions. These considerations support the need to believe in and understand a responsibility to recover.[11]

[10]From Narcotics Anonymous 2008 (emphasis added): "As long as we stay clean, *no matter what*, we have the greatest possible advantage over our disease." (84); "No matter how painful life's tragedies can be for us, one thing is clear, we must not use, *no matter what*!" (102); "I think the only things I had going for me then were the desire to stay clean, *no matter what*" (153); "do not pick up *no matter what*—all feelings eventually pass" (182); "The only way I will be able to obtain the freedom that so many before me have achieved is first of all not to use *no matter what*" (263).

[11]I use recovery communities as a premier source of knowledge about recovery from addiction instead of merely relying on clinical psychology because it is the only place where the knowledge comes *from addicts themselves*. This bottom-up theorizing is especially important when dealing with groups that are historically misunderstood and marginalized. I more often reference Narcotics Anonymous and 12-step programs because their texts are some of the only philosophies of addiction that we have that is written by addicts (bottom-up theory). Other recovery platforms (like SMART recovery) are top-down insofar as they are groups of addicts led by clinicians. While I often refer to Narcotics Anonymous while I am discussing

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By this point, I hope to have shown that there are pragmatic reasons to endorse belief in a responsibility to recover, insofar as this belief appears to help addicts. In the next section, I situate this claim within the broader theoretical framework in order to argue that such a belief is not merely pragmatic.

3. Reconsidering our responsibilities

Our practices of being responsible, holding responsibility, and taking responsibility exist to smooth our social fabric, not to tear it. When we find that vulnerable people are left out or injured by our responsibility beliefs and practices, we have good reason to reconsider whether we are working with the full picture. We should seek to fill in our theorizing about addiction and the responsibility facts that explain how addicts can (and do) become responsible caretakers of themselves and responsible members of our communities, instead of theorizing about addiction only in ways that embrace the perspective of the victim.

One reason, I believe, that we avoid asking about Jacob's responsibility is because of our focus when discussing matters of injustice. We are prone to ask questions about what the social moral community owes Jacob in virtue of the structural injustices he faces. However, when we focus purely on structural injustice, people like Jacob can be left behind in two ways. First, it is an unfortunate feature of many of the unfair situations that we have been saddled with, that we are either the only ones that can do anything about the situation, or we have the most direct power to change it. Regardless of how the situation was brought about; often no one else can do the work that needs to be done to get Jacob out of the situation that he is in. We cannot, as outside agents, no matter how much we wish we could, *un-addict* Jacob. This is all too often the case for victims of structural injustice—once the structure harms the individual, the harm it does is not one that the structure can redress. If redress is to be had, it must often be sought by the victims themselves.

Even when outsiders could help (maybe the social/moral community should dedicate themselves to building and funding more treatment centers and hiring more felons with possession records) Jacob cannot wait for the world to give him what it should have in the first place. While we are sitting around discussing what we, the community, owe him and how to keep others from ending up in the same situation, *Jacob's* life is not being made any better. If we care about Jacob and those like him, we should care about what can be done to make *him* better off, not just people like him that will come later.

A focus on structural injustice should not crowd out the individual. We shouldn't settle for a theory that lets Jacob fall through the cracks. To say that the individual is also important, does not preclude me from endorsing that we should work to change structural injustice. We should want there to be fewer people who experience suffering like Jacob. As a collective, we need people working on both problems, both levels. We need a focus on structural justice, and we also need a focus on the individuals: the ones who are actually facing injustice and suffering. In this project, I focus on the individual and how he can be a responsible caretaker of himself in virtue of his circumstances.

recovery and recovery communities, it should be noted that other agnostic recovery communities also focus heavily on the ideas of responsibility and agency. For example, SMART Recovery (https://smartrecovery.org/) is built on the idea of *self-empowerment* and choosing one's own recovery goals (two things that are impossible if someone doesn't have agency and responsibility).

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As described earlier, it is coherent and often useful to distinguish responsibility from blame, and we can take on Pickard's stance of *responsibility without blame* toward addicts. However, sometimes blaming *is* appropriate. For example, when we are in interpersonal relationships with a person who has an addiction, when they are someone that our lives are intertwined with that sometimes causes us harm, we need to be able to express blame. This, however, does not mean that we must be angry and hostile with our blame. We can instead practice what LaGuardia-LoBianco calls *compassionate blame*.[12] Compassionate blame involves an appreciation of the tragic circumstances that lead someone to commit a harm or wrong. With it, we view the addict as "a blameworthy agent *within* the recognition of their history as a fellow suffering being" (LaGuardia-LoBianco 2021, 529). When we practice compassionate blame, we appreciate the reasons why the person's history has led them to behave in this way, and we "suffer with" the person that we are blaming instead of holding ourselves above them (526).

Both *compassionate blame* and *responsibility without blame* offer us ways to embrace (some version of) the choice model of addiction, without moralizing or penalizing addicts for their use and behaviors. Given the compounding evidence that addictive behavior is *in some sense* chosen behavior,[13] and the benefits to addicts from embracing responsibility, we should not try to impose on them that they are not or cannot be responsible agents with our models of addiction, and be open to the idea that they are, in some important sense, responsible.

In addition to the ways that responsibility serves to help addicts specifically, responsibility serves them in the same way that it can serve anyone, by including them in the community. In removing responsibility from these individuals, we would truncate their ability to have meaningful interpersonal relationship and participate in the moral community (LaGuardia-LoBianco 2021). This can be very harmful. By putting them outside the moral community, we leave them on the outskirts. In the absence of meaningful interpersonal relationships or moral projects, corrupted self-care (their addiction) is the remaining form of self-care available to them. Moreover, if we took cognitive deficits and suffering unjust life events to be exempting conditions for responsibility, we would end up with far fewer responsible agents than we might realize.[14]

Accepting that being a responsible agent does not have to bottom out in punitive, moralizing blame, we can move forward with theorizing about responsibility in addiction. How should we make sense of the responsibilities that addicts have? Where do they arise from? We can borrow resources from feminist ethicists to understand how responsibilities and duties interact with injustice.

Commonly, it is thought that forward-looking responsibilities are generated by previous blameworthiness, or actions that have turned out badly. However, there is *also* a class of forward-looking responsibility that results from bad moral luck, like the harm of oppression that damages one's agency. Some have called this forward-facing responsibility the *duty to resist oppression* (Card 1996; Silvermint 2013; Biss 2018). In this case, when one experiences oppression, one has a moral duty to see to it that they do not succumb to that oppression. Card writes, "Overcoming and resisting our own

[12]While this is developed in connection to trauma, many of the same insights apply to addiction.

[13]Addictive behavior is responsive to incentives—changing the costs and rewards for use and abstinence results in differing rates of use. For a representative sample of people discussing this phenomenon, seePickard 2016; Ainslie 2018; Levy 2018; Ross 2020.

[14]This is a point that comes from the literature on Moral Luck, e.g., Card 1996.

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oppression require us to take responsibility for situations for which others could not reasonably hold us responsible (in the credit sense), despite our complicity" (1996, 41). For Card and others, many of our duties and responsibilities can arise from bad moral luck.

Resistance might come in many forms. It may amount to fighting to make intelligible a new way to exist in the world, a project that can be very harmful to oneself if the ends are not taken up by the social community (Biss 2018, 41). Alternatively, it could mean taking on a goal to end the oppression, making the oppression the center of one's attention, one's project, and one's life. Resistance in these forms might mean engaging in behaviors that further separate oneself from one's well-being. At other times, resistance may be more akin to putting pressure on a wound. Silvermint invites us to think of resistance as "self-respecting and self-directing" action (2013, 419). For Silvermint, the duty to resist is grounded in the fact that resistance is good for the one resisting, so proper resistance cannot itself be harmful to the person.

Whatever the duty to resist oppression amounts to, a *duty to resist oppression* puts as a focal point of one's moral life something that harmed or continues to harm them. I don't believe that this negative framing is helpful for the addict. Moreover, when we look at the literature of recovery communities, we find no such analogue of a duty to resist oppression. This wisdom, from people who have found their way out of addiction, tells us to focus inward, not outward. A responsibility to recover is a focus inward and focus on the positive—a focus on one's ability to overcome and flourish, not merely to avoid being beaten down. While I avoid using words like resistance which imply that the injustice must remain the center, the focus, or the reason for action, the responsibility to recover that I will describe shares much with such a duty, especially when conceived of as self-respecting and self-directing action that is grounded in bringing about one's well-being.

LaGuardia-LoBianco takes a different perspective than the duty to resist oppression, noting that if someone does become complicit in their suffering, such that they too are a cause of their suffering, then we can use the same responsibility conceptions as we started with to understand how the complicit sufferer is forward-facing responsible: they are responsible for redressing the harm they caused themselves in their complicity. This is helpful for understanding how people who are harming themselves can take responsibility for that harm and their futures but leaves no explanation for people who are on a precipice of complicit suffering.

Before one *is* complicit in their suffering, one first has to *become* complicit. There is a moment, for Jacob and others who have suffered an injustice or oppression, when they have not yet fed into their suffering, but could choose to. This is the moment I call the precipice of complicit suffering. In that moment, we are vulnerable—a desire to recognize the injustice and an appreciation of the fact that someone else is responsible for harming us suggest that we ought to become aptly angry. And yet, if we do so, we risk amplifying the injustice done to us by entering or feeding into vicious cycles, such as addiction.

In this moment, when we are vulnerable to entering into complicit suffering, there is a responsibility vacancy. However, that responsibility vacancy exists not because I am not taking responsibility for my actions, but because the wrongdoer fails to take responsibility for his actions. I am merely the one who will suffer if the responsibility vacancy remains unfilled. This is the situation that Jacob found himself in, on the edge of becoming a complicit sufferer. Purdue Pharma, while liable, fails to take responsibility and make reparations. In this absence, there is a vacancy of responsibility left: who is

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going to do something about the fact that Jacob is addicted to a drug he never should have been given? Who will fill the responsibility vacancy?

We can think of a responsibility vacancy as what Stephanie Collins (2019) calls a "prospective responsibility fulfillment gap." Classically, a responsibility gap results from the actions of collectives or of "learning automata" (now known as machine learning or artificial intelligence) where the backwards-facing responsibility cannot be assigned to any one person or group (Matthias 2004). A prospective responsibility gap, on the other hand, arises "when there are entities who can produce the desirable outcome, and there are justifications for their duties to produce it. However, they renege. There is a gap between the demands of the prospective responsibility and the reality of the responsibility-bearer's actions" (Collins 2019, 948). That is, the party that ought to be taking responsibility fails to do so. I use the term *responsibility vacancy* to differentiate this phenomenon from what people usually call *responsibility gaps*. Responsibility vacancies are instances where we have no difficulty assigning backwards-facing responsibilities, and those parties fail to take forward-facing responsibility for the consequences of their actions. In other words, the liable party has vacated their forward-facing responsibilities toward the individual or individuals that they have harmed.

When there is a job to be done, and whoever should have taken responsibility neglects or does not have the power to carry out that duty, then there is a responsibility vacancy left that has to be filled: *someone* has to do it. Someone has to *take on* the responsibility to do the job.[15] Taking *on* responsibilities is something over and above just *taking* responsibility for oneself. Taking responsibility is part of the normal, everyday, run of the mill experience of being a moral agent. It is something that we are already normatively expected, if not required, to do. We take responsibility for our actions, even when we are not formally blameworthy, by allowing ourselves to "feel remorse and express that remorse" (Mason 2019, 194),[16] and to follow that up with apologies and reparations (195). Taking responsibility for ourselves, our actions, and their consequences is to acknowledge that, sometimes, our good intentions still lead to bad consequences, and when they do, we ought to play a part in cleaning them up. This practice is central to being a part of a community. Mason writes, "Taking responsibility is a part of being in relationships, part of being a member of a community" (201). We generally *expect* people to be disposed to do this, to live up to these basic normative standards of expressing remorse when they have violated basic moral and social norms. We trust people to do this. When they do not, it is as though our basic trust is violated. We are shocked when people are not compliant with our social norms—it elicits a special kind of incredulous resentment (Calhoun 2024, 38). To be part of the social/moral community, we ought to take responsibility for ourselves and our actions.

Taking on responsibility, on the other hand, includes no presumption that we produced the situation that we are agreeing to rectify. Taking on responsibility is a morally supererogatory action. As Calhoun says, "Volunteering to be the one who sees to it that some valuable end gets promoted is extraordinarily important to our common life together. There are many goods that someone needs to promote but that neither our conventional moral obligations nor institutional arrangements assign to anyone" (2021, 22). When our moral obligations and institutional arrangements *do* assign the responsibility to someone, and that person reneges, we find a responsibility vacancy. Someone can then *take on* the responsibility of filling that vacancy. However, when we

[15]Calhoun 2021 identifies this as one of five ways that one can "take responsibility."

[16]A similar argument can be seen in the "contrition" model of taking responsibility offered by Bero 2020.

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face a responsibility vacancy that causes us harm, it is prudentially rational for us to be the one to take on the responsibility to fill that vacancy. If we refuse to fill a responsibility vacancy that is causing us harm, we amplify the injustice and the harm through our inaction. To not fill a responsibility vacancy that is harming me when it is within my power to try to do so, while not obviously a moral failing, is to not be a responsible caretaker of myself.[17]

Purdue Pharma is not only causally responsible for Jacob's situation, but they also have a repeated, ongoing failure to offer remorse and atonement for this harm. In the absence of Purdue offering even the measliest slice of goodwill towards Jacob and others like him, there is a responsibility vacancy. Jacob is put in a position where he has no choice but to either *take on* this responsibility that he should not have had to take on in the first place, or to continue to be complicit in his own suffering. Because Purdue Pharma neglects their forward-facing responsibility, Jacob has to take on that responsibility. Moreover, even if Purdue Pharma did everything in their power—provide Jacob with financial compensation for his treatment, provide resources such as housing, career coaching, and job training—they have created a harm that they could never fully make right. The responsibility vacancy would persist through their inability if not through their inaction.

Purdue Pharma could at best partially fill this vacancy. The social moral community could, in Purdue's absence, at best partially fill this vacancy. Neither of these parties can un-addict Jacob. The nature of that task is such that Jacob is the only one who *could* fill the vacancy that is causing him harm. Jacob, if he is going to get better, must take on the responsibility to recover. This contributes to Jacob's apt anger. On top of the fact that he is the victim an injustice, there lies the fact that he has to do something that, *ceteris paribus* (if not for the actions of Purdue) he wouldn't have to do. This is what makes indignant inaction seem so appealing.

Jacob is correct to point out that the responsibilities that he has to *take on* to avoid complicit suffering are *unfair, burdensome,* and *should not be his to take on.* He is right, contra LaGuarida-LoBianco, in pointing out that "others are responsible for redressing that suffering" (2018, 257) to the extent that they are able. That is just not where the story ends, because if he gets caught there, and plants his flag in indignation at the responsibility vacancy, he becomes (or remains) complicit in his own suffering.

These conceptual resources are important, because they help us to explain two things. First, they help us to understand why, in cases like Jacob's, where suffering has obvious and apparent external causes, we feel so resistant to *taking on* the responsibility to fix the situation. We resist because it is, in some important sense, true that the responsibility *shouldn't* be ours. However, it is also true that, for our own good, we must take it on regardless of the fact that it is over and above the basic duty for self-care that we all share. This helps us to explain why we *enter into* complicit suffering. Secondly, this helps us to see that we can retain our complaint against the wrongdoer while simultaneously taking on the responsibility to clean up the mess they have made. When we realize that someone has neglected their responsibility, we are hesitant to take it on because we do not want to absolve them of their responsibility. We want to be able to retain our apt anger: to appreciate and communicate that there is an ongoing injustice. With these conceptual resources, we can. When I choose to fill a responsibility vacancy, it does not

[17]This may also be described as a moral failing, and I can see good reasons to accept that there is a moral duty to take care of oneself, for reasons LaGuardia-LoBianco raises. That is just not a position that I will be defending here.

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absolve the party who neglected their responsibility of their ongoing failure or inability to make amends or reparations.

It is unjust that Jacob has to take on the responsibility of Purdue Pharma, in cleaning up the mess that they've made of his life. It *is* unjust, it *is* unfair, and it *is* overly burdensome. Jacob is right in recognizing that. However, to be a responsible caretaker of himself, he should *take on* these unjust and unfair responsibilities to avoid causing himself more harm, remaining complicit in his suffering.[18] He should take on the responsibility to recover.

When our well-being is at stake when someone vacates a responsibility they have towards us, we should, in the interest of care-for-ourselves, step in and *take on* that responsibility—someone else's responsibility. This is what lets us pursue our own well-being while also appreciating the responsibility facts about the situation. This is consistent with a feminist understanding of taking responsibility and the duty to resist oppression but also allows us to appreciate the injustice without causing ourselves further injury.

4. Does injustice or addiction ground the responsibility?

One might ask whether those who have suffered no injustice also have a responsibility to recover if they find themselves in addiction. Though I have spent much of this paper talking about those who have suffered injustices, I do not argue that the injustice is what *grounds* the responsibility to recover. The responsibility to recover is grounded by the nature of corrupted self-care, such as in the case of addiction. Self-care is corrupted when efforts to pursue one's well-being are counterproductive. The reason that I focus mainly on cases of injustice is because those are the cases where we are most likely to make *the mistake* of focusing on the blameworthy nature of the other to our own detriment and believing we do not have such a responsibility toward ourselves.

Addiction (and other vicious cycles) can come about in (at least) three different ways:

I. Addiction could be the result of an intentional choice of the individual (though I believe this happens rather rarely).
II. It can be a case of tragedy—where there truly is no one to blame (though some people believe tragedy to be an injustice that has come from the universe).
III. Addiction can be the result of experiencing and trying to cope with injustice.

How easy it is for us to make sense of a responsibility to recover depends on which of these we are dealing with.

We have no problem understanding the responsibility to recover under (I), choice, with conceptions of responsibility that easily circulate. To paint the picture, imagine Charlie: Charlie was a kid who idolized and glamorized the life of an addict. At the first chance he got, he took heroin *because* he wanted to become addicted. Charlie is backwards-facing responsible for the resulting addiction and is forward-facing responsible for redressing the harm he caused. This is a classic case of backwards-facing responsibility generating a forward-facing responsibility, and thus, not in need of further explanation. Since the harm that Charlie caused was that he himself became addicted,

[18]To be clear, this is not a bootstrapping claim, that Jacob ought to suffer in silence or do this without asking for help. He ought to use whatever resources he has at his disposal to accomplish this including the community. His responsibility is to seek out recovery.

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the amends he needs to make are to pursue recovery—when the harm is addiction, the redress is recovery. Charlie thus, when he takes responsibility for his past actions, has a responsibility to recover from his addiction.

We don't seem to get tripped up with (II). We accept that sometimes there are tragedies in our lives, and we have to respond to them responsibly. When a flood or a fire destroys my house, I must rebuild it. When addiction shows up with no explanation, so too must we take on the responsibility to recover. However, when it comes to (III), to matters of injustice, there is a pull to think that we are exempt from being responsible caretakers of ourselves for all the reasons I described.

To be a responsible caretaker of oneself when in addiction, one must do things that feel not at all like caretaking—things that are very hard, demanding, and challenging—in recovery. The focus on injustice is to show that being harmed does not defeat this responsibility. It is to explain a mistake that we are likely to make, and how we can avoid it.

While the responsibility to recover *from addiction* is for people who struggle with addiction, we can imagine a corresponding responsibility for others who are stuck in cycles of corrupted self-care (retail therapy, cosmetic surgery, etc.) or who have suffered an injustice or bad moral luck and found themselves on the precipice, or well into, complicit suffering. We can become responsible caretakers of ourselves by deciding that we will take on the responsibility to recover—from the injustice, the bad luck, or the damage to ourselves that has resulted from our own actions.

Imagine Dana: Dana is a woman of color who just graduated with a software engineering degree. She applied for an entry level job at Chase, one that she is qualified for and knows that she is qualified for. After the interview, Dana gets passed by for a white male classmate with a similar resume whom she can out-code any day of the week. If not for the implicit bias of the hiring manager, Dana would have gotten the job, but she can't prove it. The hiring manager is responsible for Dana not getting the job, and she is angry with him.

Dana faces the precipice of complicit suffering. in virtue of the harm he caused her, the hiring manager is responsible for making amends to Dana, but he neglects his forward-facing responsibilities toward her. Therein lies the responsibility vacancy: who is going to do something about the fact that Dana doesn't have the job she deserves? If Dana merely appreciates the hiring manager's liability, she might find herself falling off the precipice into complicit suffering, into apt anger and indignant inaction. If Dana refuses to try to get another job, she will unduly cause herself more suffering.

She is right to acknowledge that at least part of the forward-facing responsibility to correct the situation should lie with the biased hiring manager, but because he won't (or can't) discharge this responsibility, Dana has to take on that responsibility, his responsibility. She can continue to appreciate the ongoing failure while she accepts the responsibility to recover from the injustice. That Dana has to work more and harder for a job is unfair, and it is unjust, and yet, to be a responsible caretaker of herself, it is what she must do.

The responsibility to recover, then, is not grounded *either* by addiction or by injustice. The addict who has faced injustice is the clearest case to help us understand why this responsibility is important, and why it is easy to believe that we are exempt from it. The responsibility to recover, though, can be taken on by anyone who finds themselves caught in a cycle of corrupted self-care, however they found themselves there. It is part of being a responsible caretaker of oneself.

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5. The responsibility to recover

What is the responsibility to recover? A responsibility is a commitment to act with the intention to bring about a certain kind of outcome (Calhoun 2019). This means that recovery is not something that one ought to engage in only when one prefers behaving that way. The responsibility to recover means that one ought to, every day, attempt to break out of the cycles they are caught in.

Recovery is the way to take care of oneself when one is addicted. Addiction is a corrupted self-care cycle, where it feels like you are taking care of yourself when you engage in the addictive behavior. Using provides a reprieve from stressful situations, relationships, and physical ailments. The temporary nature of this reprieve is then accompanied by more problems, ailments, and strained relationships. Paradoxically, the addict must stop engaging in the behaviors that she feels are keeping her alive and sane to make herself well. Recovery from addiction is a complex notion, characterized not just by sobriety or abstinence, but by sustained effort to "become acceptable, responsible, and productive members of [that] society" (Narcotics Anonymous 2008, 18). Regardless of who there is to blame, and how incredibly difficult it will be to quit, Jacob owes it to himself to be a responsible caretaker of himself, and to recover from his addiction.

Jacob, in discharging his responsibility to recover, to exit complicit suffering and be a responsible caretaker of himself, should hold the intention of making himself well and exercising that intention in ways that are within his power. For Jacob, if there is little left that is within his power, discharging this duty might be as simple as turning to the community, asking for help, and being willing to accept that help. He is in no way required to do this alone.

This responsibility to recover is both self-interested and demanding. It requires effort from the individual, but he also reaps the rewards. It is dependent on the individual at hand, their particular circumstances and the options available to them, their psychological constitution, and their own conception of their well-being. It will look different for each person who finds themselves on the precipice of, or deep in, complicit suffering. Our responsibilities might look very different, but they are the responsibilities that we must *take on* to be responsible caretakers of ourselves.

6. Conclusion

In many ways the responsibility to recover mirrors the *perspective of the responsible actor* from Wendell. With this perspective, we are "interested in the past as a guide to the present and the future, and interested in the present for the choices that it offers" (1990, 29–30). Taking care of ourselves is hard. It is hard for lots of reasons. Sometimes it is hard because *people are harming us*, or because they have harmed us. When this is true, we for good reasons want to hold on to that complaint. We can mistakenly think that holding onto that complaint means that we need to remain unwell until someone fixes what has been done to us.

Understanding the difference between taking responsibility and taking *on* responsibility can help us make sense of why we make this cognitive mistake and *why it is so hard* to do some things that are good for us—to fill in where responsibilities vacancies leave us injured. My hope here is to give us further resources to understand this phenomenon and resist this mistake. Why do some reasons seem so compelling? Because they are, in an important way, true. It *isn't* fair. Unfortunately, though, stopping there will often cause more suffering without redress or relief. By adding the

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responsibility to recover to our repertoire of theories and beliefs we can aid people in moving forward when the world does not give them what they are owed.

> I am no longer a victim of others, or of myself. I don't have to use anymore, no matter what happens. I am responsible for my recovery. (Narcotics Anonymous 2008, 207)

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