# Depending on Others*

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*Abstract:* An ethics of care, Carol Gilligan wrote in 1982, "evolves around a central insight, that self and other are interdependent."[1] But, what, exactly, does it mean to say that we depend on one another? In this paper I analyze dependency as a relation in which someone normatively expects another person to perform work, and that second person countenances their expectations. Because I understand normative expectation as a disposition to engage in responsibility practices, this reflects a return to early care theoretical concern with *responsibility in relationships*. But it faces an obvious objection: what about the dependency of, for instance, newborn infants, who don't appear capable of normatively expecting work of others? To address this, I draw on a practice-based conception of action explored by feminist philosophers and apply it to parent-child relationships. From within familiar, cross-cultural parenting practices, infants are subjectified as expecters who perform actions like complaining, making directed demands, and expressing gratitude. This vindicates the idea that infants have a role in these practices even if they are not full-fledged responsible persons in the sense of being apt targets for reactive attitudes like blame. The resulting vision of dependency is both inclusive and illuminating. We all find ourselves in dependency relations, so long as we can be meaningfully treated as expecting work of particular others.

*Key words:* Dependency, Responsibility, Care, Feminist Philosophy, Ethics

Here is a now-familiar potted history in feminist ethics. Mainstream, male-dominated analytic ethical theorizing was woefully out of touch with women's perspectives and experiences. The 1982 publication of Carol Gilligan's studies of childhood moral development, *In a Different Voice*, and the subsequent philosophical exploration of an "ethics of care", offered an important correction. Feminist ethicists insisted that the very concepts through which we framed moral questions were insufficient. Philosophers now began to see that they had been overly focused on "fairness, equality, individual rights, [and] abstract principles," and lost consideration for "attentiveness, trust, responsiveness to need, narrative nuance, and cultivating caring relations."[2] Questions about "rights of noninterference, impartiality, rationality, autonomy, and principles" had crowded out concern for "contextual decision making, special obligations, [and] the moral motives of compassion and sympathy".[3] Here is how Gilligan herself put things:

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[1] Gilligan 1982, 74

[2] Held 2006, 15

[3] Calhoun 1988, 453, 451

> Women's construction of the moral problem as a problem of *care and responsibility in relationships* rather than as one of *rights and rules* ties the development of their moral thinking to changes in their understanding of responsibility and relationships, just as the conception of morality as justice ties development to the logic of equality and reciprocity.[4]

For men, moral improvement is marked by increasingly proficient rule application; for women, increasingly sophisticated navigation of relationships. On one side of the ledger: masculine *respect for rights*; on the other: feminine *responsibility in relationships.*

This binary picture, of course, overstates the differences in how individuals (men, women, and others) morally reason, and oversimplifies the required correction. But it licensed genuine philosophical progress. For the first time, many neglected moral concepts were offered the attention they had long deserved. One concept that all agreed had been left out was *dependency.* Not only had male-dominated ethics paid insufficient attention to dependency; it had scarcely been acknowledged on that side of the ledger. Feminist ethicists pursued the project of dismantling the "myth of independence" – the distorted conception of human life that treats independent functioning as a default and depending on others is a deficit or special circumstance.[5] An ethics of care, Gilligan wrote, "evolves around a central insight, that self and other are interdependent."[6] Developing a deeper understanding of dependency was, and remained, a linchpin of the care ethical corrective project. Decades after care ethics emerged and flowered, Stephanie Collins reflected that there is "widespread evidence from within the care ethical tradition that, *if* there were a general unifier of the theory, something like dependence would be it."[7]

But what, exactly, did these theorists mean by "dependence"? Thus far, the overwhelmingly dominant answer to this question has appealed to the notion of needs, defining dependency relations as *need-meeting relations.*[8] This accords with commonsense, and even some dictionary

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[4] Gilligan 1982, 73 (italics added)
[5] See Baier 1987; Calhoun 1988; Kittay 1999, 33; Held 2006, 13–15 for helpful summary of the actual or implied positions that care theory aims to correct. The "myth of independence" terminology comes from Kittay 2020, 417; see also Fineman 2004 on the "autonomy myth."
[6] Gilligan 1982, 74
[7] Collins 2015, 87–88. Though we felicitously speak of depending on laws of physics, complex systems, inanimate objects, or large groups, I focus on *interpersonal* dependence (i.e., dependence on identifiable persons) in this paper.
[8] For representative discussions of dependence itself, see Kittay 1999; Collins 2015; Dodds 2013; Engster 2019; Miller 2020. Scully 2013 also seems to presume a need-centered conception of dependence (see 211).

definitions of dependence appeal to needs.[9] And it supports some of the conceptual corrections above. Where men and boys were thought to uphold boundaries, girls and women were thought to exhibit an admirable *responsiveness to need.*

But such accounts face problems.[10] And, more to the point, need-centered approaches to defining dependence have enjoyed an unjustifiably hegemonic status in care theorizing. The need-centered approach, after all, neglects another, equally intuitive pre-theoretic sense of the word "dependence." Depending is frequently defined in terms of, or associated with, placing reliance or trust in someone, sometimes as a matter of "having confidence" in them.[11] To depend on someone in this sense is to *count on* them for help, regardless of whether that help is strictly needed. Dependency figures prominently in our everyday talk as an entreaty ("I'm really depending on you for this") and a complaint ("Hey, I was depending on you!"). In both cases, it plays a central role in our *responsibility practices.* Given early care theoretical interest in *responsibility* over *rights*, it is surprising that this dimension of dependency has largely dropped out of attempts to theorizing the concept. If there is a feminized skill of virtuous relationship management, it has much to do with establishing and managing dependency in precisely this sense.

In this paper I take seriously the idea that depending on others is about *responsibility in relationships.* In fact, I take this quite literally, arguing that participation in dependency relations is constituted by engagement in responsibility practices. My aim is not to capture every sense of the word "dependence", nor to argue directly against need-centered accounts. Instead, I hope to offer an alternative vision for dependency, rooted in a different strand of care ethical thinking.

I start by simply putting forward the account in detail. Dependency relations are relations in which someone normatively expects another person to perform work, and that second person countenances their expectations. I analyze "normatively expecting" as having a disposition to

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[9] The Cambridge English Dictionary, for instance, defines dependence as "the situation in which you need something or someone all the time, especially in order to continue existing or operating." ("Dependence" 2025)

[10] I argue against need-centered accounts in a draft entitled, "Dependency Relations are Not (Necessarily) Need-Meeting Relations."

[11] Both the Collins and Merriam-Webster dictionaries include "reliance or trust" as among the definitions of dependence ("Definition of DEPENDENCE" 2025; "DEPENDENCE Definition" 2020); Dictionary.com includes "confidence" as well ("DEPENDENCE" 2025). For philosophical discussion of a related notion of "reliance," see Alonso 2014; Alonso 2016. The literature on trust is vast, but see Carter, and, and Simion 2020; McLeod 2023 for overviews and citations (see also Jones 2017 on the closely related "but I was counting on you!" complaint). While these theorists are interested in trust or reliance as a mental state/attitude, I am concerned with dependence as a kind of relationship between persons, and as a matter of social functioning.

engage in responsibility practices (section 1). The account offers a plausible way to cash out the "webs of interconnection" that characterized the moral reasoning of Gilligan's female subjects. But it faces an obvious objection: what about the dependency of, for instance, newborn infants, who don't appear to normatively expect things of others? To address this, I draw on a practice-based conception of action explored by dependency theorists and other feminist philosophers and apply it to parent-child relationships. From within familiar, cross-cultural parenting practices, infants are treated as "expecters in training" and welcomed into responsibility practices of a certain kind. This vindicates the idea that infants have a role in these practices even if they are not full-fledged responsible persons in the sense of being apt targets for reactive attitudes like blame (section 2). We all find ourselves in dependency relations, so long as we can be meaningfully treated as expecting work of particular others.

## 1. Expectation-centered dependence

Here is the account of interpersonal dependence I will explore and defend:

> When A depends on B for X,
> A normatively expects B to perform some work for A in relation to some object/activity X, and B countenances this expectation.

I will often refer to A as the "depending person", B as the "dependency worker", and the relevant assistance as "dependency work". In the remainder of this section, I will say more about the important concepts at play in the expectation-centered account (normative expectations, countenancing, and work), making an intuitive case that these relations resemble relations of dependency on a familiar usage.

I have said that I am interested in dependency relations as they figure in our responsibility practices. When analytic philosophers think of responsibility, most think of expressed or experienced negative reactive attitudes of *indignation* and *blame*, and positive attitudes of *gratitude*. I have a more expansive notion of responsibility practices in mind, in at least the following two ways. First, responsibility practices discourage behavior that fails to rise to the level of *wrongdoing* and so doesn't elicit full-fledged *blame*. And they encourage behavior which is not commendable enough to call for *gratitude*. Milder forms of mild disapproval or approval

figure in the relevant practices. Second, our responsibility practices shape various unremarkable aspects of our interactions – not only the ways we respond when others treat us especially badly (or well). As Cheshire Calhoun points out, many of the ways we treat one another as "responsible persons" "fly under our conscious radar" precisely because they do not involve actions or felt emotions. We "trustingly assume the food is not poisoned and the clerk will correctly ring up items" at the grocery store, but this trust has no emotional component. Similarly, we treat others as responsible persons via *omissions;* not installing security cameras at work is a way of treating one's employees as responsible.[12] In this same spirit, we depend on one another in ways that are so securely nestled into the social fabric that they frequently fly under the radar. The notion of a dispositional normative expectation allows us to fill some of these gaps.

### 1.1. Normative expectation

The existence of genuinely normative – as opposed to predictive – expectations is defended by several theorists, from whom I borrow inspiration.[13] I can normatively expect each of my students to cite properly in their writing assignment even if I predictively expect that some number of them will plagiarize. On my use of the term, to normatively expect is to have a certain *disposition;* namely, the *disposition to meaningfully participate in negatively-valanced responsibility practices upon having one's expectations violated, and positively-valanced responsibility practices upon having them fulfilled.* (I leave aside discussion of the adverb "meaningfully", also used here as a term of art, until Section **2**.) I have a simple notion of disposition in mind here: to have a disposition just is to (be likely to) $M$ in condition $C$ (where $M$ is the manifestation of the disposition and $C$ are its manifestation conditions). In the case of normatively expecting, the manifestation conditions are conditions under which the expecting person becomes aware that their expectations have been *violated* or *fulfilled.* I will discuss these conditions in turn.

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[12] Calhoun 2024a, 225

[13] Mellema 2004; Mellema 1998; Horgan and Timmons 2022; Horgan and Timmons forthcoming; Calhoun 2015a; Martin 2014; Martin 2019; Martin 2021 each offer accounts of normative expectations that differ from mine in important respects. Breakey 2022; Wallace 1994 discuss expectations but focus on their connection to obligations. See also Basu 2023 on expectations, especially 155-156 on their relationship to dependence. Whereas Basu attempts to account for predictive and normative expectations in a unified way, I focus exclusively on the latter.

It is helpful to think of having one's normative expectations violated as being "let down".[14] We are let down by wrongings[15] – the breaking of a promise, the abandonment of a trusted friend – but also by more minor slights. I've said that normatively expecting involves being disposed to engage in "negatively-valanced responsibility practices" upon being let down. This includes expressions of familiar reactive attitudes like blame. But normative expectation may also involve a disposition to ignore, express mild disappointment or disapproval, initiate relational adjustments, make demands, withdraw intimacy, or lose trust.[16] On the other hand, normatively expecting involves engaging in "positively-valanced responsibility practices" upon having one's expectations fulfilled. Here, the paradigm case involves expressing gratitude. But I also include, for instance, expressions of mild approval, gestures toward intimacy, offers of trust, acts of reciprocity, taking up of care, and so on. Dependency, therefore, is a relation through which we participate in practices of responsibility in an expansive sense. And the account is ecumenical with respect to different understandings of these practices.

Responsibility practices are regularities we treat as normative, but, like all social practices, they do not perfectly track the moral truth. Letting someone down is only a moral failure, and fulfilling their expectations a moral success, when those expectations are *legitimate*. Our responsibility practices may be well deserving of scrutiny and reform. Dependency relations help constitute them as they are. This is why the mafia boss can depend on a loyal mobster to commit a horrible crime, being disposed to chastise him for his failure and to celebrate his success, though the mobster *ought not* carry out the crime. Morality counts against it, though perverse practices of responsibility in his community hold him to it; they are depending on him. Dependency relations are pervasive and their moral status varies.

### 1.2. Countenancing expectations

[14] Basu 2023 and Martin 2021, 66 also use this phrase (though I am using normative expectations to refer to a broader category of actions than the "directed personal bonds" Martin sometimes refers to as "normative expectations").

[15] Theorists like Horgan and Timmons 2023, for instance, deny this. On their view, it is internal to the concept of the "contra-expected" that violations of normative expectations do not wrong. They also use "normative expectation" to refer to *that which would be legitimately normatively expected* (often, "the expected") rather than that which is *in fact* expected. Thanks to Mark Timmons for helpful discussion. On Wallace's use, all expectations correspond to obligations (Wallace 1994, 35–36), disallowing the category of "mere expectations."

[16] See Mellema 1998, 480 and Mellema 2004, 6 on the appropriateness of blaming those who fail to carry out expectations. Calhoun 2015a describes what she calls "acts of common decency" as "*shameful* to omit" (107).

I've said dependency relations involve expectations of A's, where B *countenances* these expectations. To countenance another's expectation is to treat it as applying to you. This is less demanding than saying a dependency worker *takes responsibility for* the expected work (though they often *do* take responsibility for the expected work), but it is more demanding than merely being aware of the expectation.[17] It is helpful to think of countenancing as giving a normative expectation *uptake*. I countenance someone's expectation if I would feel guilty for failing to meet it, have an impulse toward its fulfillment, or, even, would see the failure to meet it as a deliberate rebellion.[18] This is thin and non-cognitive, and does not require awareness *that* I have countenanced the relevant expectation. Indeed, expectation-centered dependency relations can include parties who explicitly deny the existence of their expectations or the fact that the dependency worker countenances them. A stranger who begins to normatively expect me to care for her (unbeknownst to me, or to my offended confusion) does not thereby enter a dependency relation with me – I don't countenance her expectation in any way. But a family member who has sexist expectations of me might depend on me, insofar as I (problematically or upsettingly) can't help but give their expectations uptake.

### 1.3. Work

Work is the other concept playing a central role in my conception of dependence. Many theorists agree that seeking a single definition for work is misguided.[19] So while I won't offer a definition of work, I will understand it in terms of the following dimensions, which distinguish (paradigmatic) work from (paradigmatic) leisure.

1) *Effort:* Work is (often, though not always) contrasted with leisure because it demands more effort.
2) *Expertise:* Often, one is called to perform a particular kind of work because of her expertise or is expected to cultivate expertise in light of the work she is tasked with.

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[17] On the notion of "taking responsibility," see Enoch 2012; Sliwa 2023; Hieronymi 2023; Calhoun 2024b.
[18] Cases where one rebels against an expectation while countenancing it involve what Q. R. Kukla 2023 calls "transgressive refusals" (blatantly disobeying a police officer's legitimate orders), whereas cases where one denies that an expectation applies to her at all are what they call "entitlement challenges" (refusing an officer who lacks a search warrant entry to one's home) (12-13). See also Jenkins 2016, 411–12 for a helpful discussion of what it means to see norms as applying to you, including the idea that rebelling against norms require that they apply to us.
[19] Muirhead 2004, 4; Pence 2001, 96–97

3) *Other-guidedness:* Workers are "paradigmatically guided by the wills of others."[20]
4) *Response aptness:* Work is the apt target of compensation, reciprocity, or gratitude.

A final feature of work – *subjective determination* – helps settle whether some particular instance of candidate work is, indeed, work: work is partly subjectively determined by the worker.[21] In developing a sense of whether one subjectively experiences something as work, any of the four above features serve as an appropriate justification. For instance, I can appeal to the expertise required in cooking a meal to explain why I experienced it as work. Or I can appeal to the fact that no one owes me compensation for the meal to explain why I did *not* experience it as work. The subjective experience of an activity provides a great deal of latitude in settling whether it counts as work.

Because attributions of work are sensitive to context and aim, the work expected of dependency workers is properly described as work *from the perspective of understanding A's normative expectations for B*. I take the task of caring for my plants to be largely a leisure activity.[22] However, I begin to treat plant care *as work* the moment I consider expecting another person to undertake it. When I ask my roommate to look after my plants in my absence, the effort (physical watering, cognitive effort of planning and remembering), expertise (especially if my plants are finicky or sensitive), other-guidedness (he waters the plants because I asked him to, to my specifications), aptness of certain responses (he won't be confused by my gratitude or insistence on reciprocating with a similar favor), it is clear I should think of this as work. So, while plant care is leisure for me, it is work from the perspective of understanding my expectations for my roommate.

The fact that the normative expectations involved in dependence refer to *work* means cases in which the expectations refer to something other than work will not count as dependence. For instance, many normative expectations we have for one another refer to *omissions*.[23] Typically, it does not require work to omit an action. However, to the extent that an omission *does* require work, it begins to look more like a dependency relation after all. Imagine that my friend has a nasty, uncontrollable temper and it takes constant vigilance and effort to avoid

[20] Cholbi 2023
[21] Pence 2001, 95
[22] When I examine certain sub-activities of plant care (dragging around large bags of soil, cleaning up dirt after re-potting a plant), I begin to understand certain of them as work. But, considered as a unified activity, plant care is something I do for leisure.
[23] Mellema 1998, 480 discusses this.

raising her voice while we play Monopoly. If we both recognize that I expect her to speak patiently with me throughout the game, and if this takes serious effort on her part, we may stand in a dependency relation; "I'm really depending on you to keep your temper under control today." But notice that this seems odd to say to someone for whom angry outbursts are unthinkable. When no work whatsoever is required of them to meet my expectations (as in the case of non-effortful omissions that don't call for reciprocity, etc.), no dependency relation obtains.

Finally, I have said that the depending person's expectations refer to work performed *for them*. While I will not offer a full analysis of the relevant sense of "for", a few remarks will get the spirit of this clause in view.[24] Work is "for" a depending person when it is undertaken to help or assist them, rather than being work a depending person just happens to approve of or benefit from. It is sufficient for work being "for" a person that the work is *guided by their interests*. When work is guided by a depending person's interest, a dependency worker will make adjustments to their behavior in light of those interests, will persist through difficulties with performing the work (where they might otherwise abandon their project), and so on.

It is worth noting that this account captures *failed* dependency relations. My roommate may make virtually no plans or attempts to water my plants as promised – in fact, he may forget about them the moment our conversation ends – but I can still rightly complain, upon finding my pilea drooping, "Hey, I was depending on you!" The account requires the existence of the expectations *referring* to work, and his countenancing of those expectations (agreeing to the task, understanding my later disappointment in him, and so on). It does not require that any of this work is actually performed. These failures are, after all, when our responsibility practices, are most important, and often most salient to us.

### 1.4. Expectation-meeting relations as dependency relations

On the expectation-centered account, dependency relations obtain when we are disposed to perform acts that amount to participation in responsibility practices. (I will have much more to say about what is required of us to perform these acts in Section **2**, including what it means to perform them "meaningfully".) Because they involve *dispositions* whose manifestation conditions

[24] Thanks to Tom Dougherty, Zoë Johnson King, and Selim Berker for helpful discussion about this aspect of the account.

may be rare, unremarkable, or never come to pass, dependency relations are easy to miss. But these overlapping and interlocking connections with others are an aspect of how we relate to (nearly) anyone we've ever met.

Understanding dependency in the responsibility sense, then, does justice to the organizing metaphor through which Gilligan contrasted boys' and girls' descriptions of moral activity in her studies. Boys and men often viewed moral situations in terms of the imagery of *hierarchy*, asking: what moral principles or values govern how we should conduct our dealings with others, and how are they ranked? Girls and women, instead, viewed them in terms of "a network of connection, a web of relationships that is sustained by a process of communication."[25] Dependency in the responsibility sense situates us in richly-textured webs of connection, sustained by the communication through which we hold responsible, take responsibility, and treat as responsible.

It also honors the care ethical understanding of interdependence as not (always) volitionally adopted. As Eva Kittay writes, "noncoerced *yet not voluntarily chosen* associations fill our lives".[26] Expectation-centered dependency relations *can*, of course, be volitionally adopted; I depend on someone who's made a promise to me, and whose promise I accepted. But the account also illuminates the nature of *unchosen* intertwinements. The disposition to engage in responsibility practices at the (non)performance of others' work emerges naturally whenever we must coordinate, especially as the stakes of having predictive expectations met are raised. This reflects our agency, but not always our *choices*. We often find ourselves swept up in the tendency to be exasperated with a friend who is chronically late despite their never having promised to be timely. This frustration reveals a normative expectation for timeliness that we may not have realized we possess (and, when the friend cannot help but apologize for being late, this reveals that they countenance our expectation). We may not be able to resist countenancing the expectation of a family member to bake their favorite cake every year for their birthday. While they've never explicitly asked, their pleased reception of the cake each year makes us feel, over time, that we would be letting them down by giving up the tradition. As the norms of these relationships evolve through subtle acts of discouragement and encouragement, expressions of hope and disappointment, and patterns of support and responsiveness, we find, one day, that we are depending on someone, or that they are

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[25] Gilligan 1982, 32

[26] Kittay 1999, 68. See also Baier 1987 for excellent discussion of this point.

depending on us. These relations are not imposed by alien forces – they are products of our agency – but they are also not conceived and brought forth in a single, volitional act of norm transformation. Indeed, some of the most admirable navigation of dependency relations involves responding well when relationships of responsibility are thrust upon us.

## 2. Parenthood and dependency

In the remainder of this paper, I turn to how the expectation-centered account handles a dependency relation perhaps most salient in care theoretical thinking: parent-child relations. In responding to a possible worry about the account, I will have an opportunity to bring out a final feature of expectation-meeting dependence: namely, the "meaningfulness" of acts involved in expecting and countenancing.

Parent-child relationships represent deeply valuable and paradigmatic relationships of dependency. The expectation-centered account allows us to describe them with nuance, capturing not only the numerous dependencies of children on parents, but also complicated *interdependencies.* Parents, after all, expect work of their children, too. Consider dependency relations through which a parent holds their child to account for performing chores: "I'm depending on you to clean your room this weekend". These expectations exist within broader power dynamics making us hesitant to describe a parent as *in general* "dependent on" their child. But there is no pressure to ascribe such globalizing labels. The expectation-centered account individuates dependency relations by the content of expectations, so identifying dependency is not a matter of saying who is "in general" dependent on whom. Rather, it allows for many overlapping and interacting dependencies, often running in different directions. When parties are disposed to blame or thank for different kinds of work, they become enmeshed in complicated ways. On our vivid web imagery, there are numerous threads connecting each node, and only occasionally do they run in a single direction.

However, there is a stage of parent-child relationships that the expectation-centered account of dependence seems, on its face, poorly positioned to accommodate. Not only parent-child but parent-*infant* relationships are paradigmatic of the word "dependency." Take the following case:

> *Parent-Infant* | Alma is a newborn. She is too young to expect things of her parents, yet she seems to depend on them to care for her.

These are high-stakes cases of profound social enmeshment, and they seem like precisely the kind of relationship on which an account of dependence should shed light. If expectation-centered dependence cannot do so, this appears to indicate a fatal flaw in the account.

In responding to this concern, I will bring out the final, important aspect of the account mentioned in Section 1. On my view, depending is a matter of being disposed to participate in responsibility practices *meaningfully*. This prototypically includes blaming and expressing gratitude. In cases like *Parent-Infant*, there is no doubt that parents could countenance Alma's expectations, but it's doubtful that she can blame or express gratitude, and so doubtful that she can *normatively expect* at all. So what, exactly, does successful participation in responsibility practices require of us? Answering this question requires that we explore the relationship between action and practices.

### 2.1. The practice view of act-types

Perhaps the central question in action theory – what we might call the Action Question – is "What distinguishes *action* from mere behavior?"[27] The classic approach to answering this question focuses on what sort of contributions properly initiate and guide a being's bodily (or mental) behaviors, such that we describe these behaviors as exercises of agency. Through attending to the *sources* of agency, we can distinguish Alma's actions from her "mere behavior" (her sneezes and twitches). Theorists typically assume that our answer to the Action Question will supply a satisfactory answer to the closely related Act-Type Individuation Question: "What individuates actions as *particular* act-types?" To distinguish one *kind* of action from another, theorists assume we must again appeal to something about their sources, whether this is belief and desire, intentions, a properly-structured will, a guiding plan, or something else.[28] Because of the nature of Alma's mental states and how they govern her movements, we would describe her as *waving* as opposed to experiencing spasms, and indeed as *waving* rather than *jumping*, *running*, or *calculating the area of a triangle*. She would wave when and because her

[27] Or, as it is sometimes, called the "problem of action" (Frankfurt 1978; Donagan 1981).

[28] See, for instance, Vogler 2013, 245 for a helpful summary of Anscombe's treatment of act-types and its influence on action theory.

intention to move her hand back-and-forth as a greeting guides her bodily movements, and because she succeeds by her own lights in doing so.

But, as an important strand of feminist theorizing brings out, whether we perform one act-type over another depends not only on the sources of our bodily movements, but also on their *meanings*. Sally Haslanger distinguishes these two approaches:

> The contrast between mere behavior and intentional action depends, it seems, on the state of mind of the agent (allowing that the state of mind may be dispositional). However, another distinction worth drawing is between meaningful and meaningless behavior. The way I swing, or raise, or extend my arms, may or may not have meaning in a particular context.[29]

Individuating act-types on the basis of their public meaning (rather than their source) allows us to explain how the expressive content of my movements depends on the social environment in which they take place. Of course, what I intend to do is often relevant to the meaning of my action, but this view says that the action I perform is not exclusively "up to me" in the way suggested by traditional approaches alone. Successful action is the product of both the sources of my agential contributions and the way participants in practices make sense of them. It is one thing to distinguish *waving* from a spasm, and another to distinguish *meaningful* waving – where others can understand and treat what I'm doing as a greeting – from mere, meaningless waving. To wave meaningfully, one must be acting in a way that is intelligible as participation in the broader *practice* of greeting-offering, and so would succeed by *other's* lights.

On this view, which I will call the "practice view of act-types", we perform actions by meeting standards internal to practices in which they take place.[30] Practices include games and law-governed procedures, as well as more loosely-defined social regularities. Just as I can't *foul* someone unless we are playing a sport, I can't *thank* someone unless my actions meet the standards for thanking in my society and are minimally intelligible as an expression of

[29] Haslanger 2018, 235

[30] See Millgram 2020 on the "practice view of action" (a term I borrow and slightly amend here) for a summary of this view. See also Rawls 1955, and Schapiro 2001, who extends Rawls' discussion to a more general view about the structure of all actions. Much feminist work on the relationship between oppression and agency implicitly takes up this view – see Frye 1983; Langton 1993; Langton and Hornsby 1998; Dotson 2011; R. Kukla 2014; Khader 2011; Calhoun 2015b; Hirji 2021; Hirji 2024; Ward forthcoming. See also Sally Haslanger's work (including Haslanger 2018; Haslanger 2017) on the idea of social practices constraining and enabling our agency. Much of my discussion here draws out and precisifies remarks of this group of theorists.

gratitude. So, widely-shared social practices constrain and enable our agency by setting up their success conditions. What it is to act meaningfully, on this view, is to intentionally succeed in making a practice-dependent "move".[31] In other words, it is to act in a way that meets standards set by practices, rather than standards I set for myself. This is easy to miss, since usual cases involve doing both.

Two additional points about the practice view of act-types will allow us to understand what is required to stand in a dependency relation. First, practices set standards for performing *nonbasic* act-types by establishing the more-basic actions on which their performance depends.[32] Consider John Rawls's example of baseball-specific verbs.[33] According to the rules of baseball, one can successfully *get a base hit* by performing more-basic acts like *swinging one's arms*, *shifting one's weight*, *gripping tightly*, and *running* (not, for instance, by *singing a song*). Practices (in this case, game rules) are prior to the moves one can make within those practices. Outside the context of baseball, whatever one does, "whatever movements one makes, [they] will fail to count as a form of action which the practice specifies."[34] Within that context, *swinging one's arms* (and so on) just does amount to getting a base hit.

Second, the very same act-types can have different standards for successful performance within and without practices. The act-type of *getting a base hit*, which one can *only do* while playing the game baseball, has only practice-internal standards. But Rawls does not discuss act-types which have both practice-internal and practice-external standards. For example, imagine that Spiro and Selene are playing a game of capture the flag. In their game, you can "capture" a member of the other team by tagging them with your hand. Once captured, you are sent to "jail" (a designated patch of grass in enemy territory) and must wait there until "freed" by a teammate. The more-basic acts on which performing the nonbasic act of "capturing" depends are different within and without the game. Successfully capturing in the game requires a set of bodily movements (tagging you with my hand), while successfully capturing outside of the

[31] This is often supplemented with the idea that many socially-important act-types have meaningfulness built into their success conditions. One can't thank meaninglessly – if she does this, she hasn't thanked at all. This does not address many interesting questions about what it means for an act to be intentional, or for me to cause the success of my "move" in the right kind of way. The practice view of act-types does not address these questions and is compatible with various answers.

[32] I assume the existence of *more* and *less* basic actions, though I don't take a stance here about the existence of genuinely basic actions. Nor does what I say hang on any particular view about the relationship between more- and less- basic actions; less-basic actions might be constituted by more-basic ones, caused by them, or depend on them in some other way. To simplify language, I sometimes refer to more-basic actions "counting as" less-basic actions.

[33] Rawls 1955

[34] Rawls 1955, 25

game requires yet another set (perhaps, physically restraining you). Of course, the use of the label "capturing" to refer to this particular game move is contingent – calling it "tagging" might have worked just as well – but it's not totally arbitrary. To capture is to restrain and immobilize in some sense. And how one successfully immobilizes another person depends on the context. I might do it by tying you up, or by initiating a game proceeding whereby you'll stay still until the next round. Importantly, I can only successfully capture in the latter sense *while we're playing*. What this example demonstrates is that one might be capable of meeting practice-internal standards for performing an act-type, but not capable of meeting (typical) practice-external standards. The typical game-external standards for *capturing* are far more demanding. They are so demanding that Selene, who is younger and smaller than Spiro, is unable to meet them. She can capture in the game-internal sense but not if it requires keeping Spiro still while he thrashes about. She can capture *only while participating in the practice*. Thus, practices often make the standards for performing an act-type more accessible (i.e., accessible with a less demanding agential contribution) by creating contexts in which the practice is prior to the "moves" one can make.

### 2.2. Parenting as a dependency practice

We are now in a position to return to the acts that amount to participation in dependency relations. As I've characterized it, normatively expecting involves a disposition to engage in responsibility practices at the violation or fulfillment of one's expectations. This leaves the particular, more-basic bodily (or mental) behaviors involved rather vague. Whether or not one *blames*, for instance, depends on whether she performs various more-basic actions (*accosting*, *listing grievances*), which in turn depend on even more basic actions (*furrowing one's brow*, *stepping away*, *making noises with one's vocal cords*). So, too, with *expressing gratitude*, *mildly disapproving*, *losing trust*, *reciprocating*, and so on. And the precise more-basic actions on which these acts depend may have practice-dependent standards. I will argue that these standards make the normatively expecting more accessible to persons who would be unable to expect in practice-external contexts, just as the rules of capture the flag make *capturing* accessible to Selene in practice-internal contexts.

We are interested here in parent-child relations, and so on practices of *parenting*. Parenting practices are what help establish who counts as a "parent", and what acts count as acts of

"parenting". As Kittay points out, "biological relationships are neither necessary nor sufficient to define [parenthood]. For that we need social practices."[35] That gay or adoptive parents are "parents" is, after all, a function of the evolving meaning of the term, the evolving regularities in how such persons offer care to babies and children, how we treat and interpret this care, and its role in social life.[36] When a person performs more-basic acts of *nursing*, *changing diapers*, and *offering affection*, parenting practices determine what those acts mean. For some people, they amount to nonbasic acts of *parenting*; for others, they don't. When my brother helps his son put on his shoes, he is *parenting* his son; if I do the same, I'm not parenting. I'm not, after all, his parent.

…But it is less obvious that parenting practices are (or, involve) *responsibility* practices. As P.F. Strawson pointed out, one is typically and appropriately subject to *objective*, rather than *reactive*, attitudes "simply by being a child".[37] And while this appropriate exemption often ends at some stage (perhaps around the time my nephew better figure out how to put on those shoes himself) we might think that parenting is a domain characterized by an unusual *absence* of responsibility practices.

Let's focus on what these parenting practices are like. A description of parenting practices is different from a *rationalization* of them, and it is different from an accounting of parents' *beliefs*. As Haslanger writes, practices give us "roles to occupy, norms and patterns to follow, and reasons to act," allowing us to "draw on learned, locally transmitted social meanings that enable *mutually responsive and/or accountable performances*".[38] A baby cries out. A parent responds: she investigates, attempts to soothe, or shushes gently. The child is receptive – or not – to these attempts. The parent communicates, often literally speaking to her baby. If the baby continues to fuss, the interaction continues: rocking, distracting, pleading, and perhaps an eventual acquiescing. Or: a parent initiates an interaction by inviting a child to feed, sleep, or allow their diaper to be changed. The child responds, cooperatively or not. And so on. We have all witnessed, or participated in, such interactions, in public or in private spaces. For parents who raise newborns, these rhythms likely characterize their daily lives for years.

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[35] Kittay 2005, 111. Kittay understands a "social relation" in general as "a place in a matrix of relationships *embedded in social practices through which the relations acquire meanings*" (111; italics added). I focus here on parent-child relations in particular here.
[36] Haslanger 2019 makes a related point, that how we define the concept of *family* or *parent* governs whether (say) gay or adoptive parents can participate in the practice of parenting.
[37] Strawson 1974, 25
[38] Haslanger 2018, 240

So, what role do these practices cast children in, and how does it shape our agency? Parents interacting with infants optimistically interpret and frame their actions as participatory and socially engaged. The rhythms of parenting are *interactive*, in the way a conversation is interactive and bouncing a rubber ball against a wall is not. Moments of eye contact are treasured, sustained, infused with meaning. Through this labor, we do what Hilda Lindemann calls "holding someone in personhood."[39] Parenting practice, in other words, requires that we *subjectify* infants in various ways: they are persons whose experiences and feelings must be taken into account when it comes to how we treat them.[40] We ask them how they feel, what they want, and what's bothering them. In particular, parents interpret an infant's responsiveness as that of a being with a unified perspective, one capable of perceiving the world as populated by other persons to which she can express love, complain, or make demands.

That this involves a distinctive form of treatment is apparent when we consider what is involved in stepping in and out of the practice of parenthood. When a parent asks her infant "You want me to give you the bottle? Or maybe you want a nap?", they are engaged in an exercise of *interpretation*, not *projection*. They are, furthermore, engaged in what they treat as a genuinely communicative exchange. As a parent, they can sort out the right answer to the question and respond accordingly. Yet, stepping outside of this engaged parenting practice (perhaps, viewing things from the perspective of infant psychological development), it seems perfectly correct to say that these questions involve *projections* rather than interpretations. The baby doesn't "want the nap rather than the bottle" – her mental states are far too muddled and amorphous than this neat partition of desires suggests. And she certainly doesn't "demand" the bottle from a particular person. From a practice-external perspective, we can understand her parent as merely pretending to communicate with their baby, purely as a training exercise. There is no right answer to these questions. We might ask: "What do you mean, 'do you want a nap?'? She doesn't want anything! She's got no idea what's going on!" But to take this stance is precisely to *step outside of the parenting practice.*

The acts of demanding, complaining, expressing gratitude, and so on, that one must "interpret" in their infants while parenting are exactly the sorts of acts that make up our *responsibility* practices in the expansive sense. Insofar as infants like Alma are disposed to engage in these acts at the (non)performance of various kinds of work (soothing, feeding,

[39] Lindemann 2014. See also R. Kukla 2007
[40] This is how Nussbaum describes subjectification in Nussbaum 1995.

changing), they *normatively expect* this work of their parents. These acts have practice-dependent standards which infants are capable of meeting, even if they cannot meet the standards for performing them outside the practice. Parenting practice *just does* treat Alma's cries as an expression of blame directed at her parents. Parenting practice also treats Alma's reception of care as an expression of gratitude.[41] This is how such behavior is taken up from within the parenting practice. To put this another way, consider that the setup of the case has us view Alma from a practice-external perspective in describing her as "too young to expect things of her parents". For those of us not participating in her parenting, it is easy to say that her cries don't reveal a normative expectation, since she cannot meet the more demanding practice-external standards for expectation. Now imagine her parents, exhausted from an exercise of appeasing what they experience as a relentless series of morally-charged demands *directed at them* and scoffing, "Oh, she expects plenty!"

One might be skeptical that stepping into the parenting practices requires one to reify a baby's "demands" in this way. The scientifically-minded parent can recognize how playing at "conversation" and "interaction" with one's child is conducive to their development but doing this need not involve treating the child as an expecter in this rich sense. If they are, in each instance, just acting to promote Alma's development by pretending that she expects things of them, they never engage in a practice wherein Alma really *is* expecting things of them. If this is right, parenting practice doesn't treat Alma as capable of meaningfully demanding, complaining, or expressing gratitude.

I will not deny that some parents think of their actions this way. But, as a denial of the existence of the kind of parenting practice I am describing, this objection fails to distinguish two kinds of reasons: reasons justifying the existence of a practice *as a whole*, and reasons taken up by participants in the practice. This is Rawls' famous point about promising: even if the reasons to institute a practice of promise-keeping are utilitarian, the reasons to keep one's promise *once one is engaged in the practice of promising* are decidedly *not* utilitarian. Indeed, promising practice expressly forbids us taking up utilitarian reasons as relevant to whether one should keep their promise.[42] In the very same way, we can distinguish reasons for *taking up parenting practice* from the reasons to which one responds *while engaged in the practice*. The former sort of reasons might (harmlessly) objectify infants: "It is conducive to infant

[41] See Kittay 2019 on the notion of "taking up care", and especially how her daughter Sesha is properly interpreted as "taking up" care (186).
[42] Rawls 1955, 16

psychological development to subjectify them". But the latter sorts of reasons necessarily subjectify them: "Alma wants her bottle". And it is undeniable that there is a rich, familiar, cross-cultural tradition of responding to these latter sorts of reasons in parenting contexts – scientifically-minded parents notwithstanding.

The idea that infants depend on parents by making demands (and not, for instance, merely by possessing needs) in a distinctively practice-internal sense can be traced back to early care theoretical thought. In Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking*, she compares the "demands" of parenting practice (which she calls "mothering practice") to practice-internal demands that we find in other domains of activity. They are "imposed on anyone doing maternal work, in the way respect for experiment is imposed on scientists and racing past the finish line is imposed on jockeys."[43] Just as opting into scientific practice gives a person reasons, *qua* scientist, opting into the practice of mothering gives a person reasons, *qua* mother. This is only true of persons who have *stepped into* a mothering role; she "deliberately stress[es] the optional character" of adopting this perspective. To do so is to take on "maternal responses," "complicated acts that social beings make to biological beings whose existence is inseparable from social interpretations."[44] It is, indeed to adopt a kind of "double vision", whereby "biological vulnerability [is also seen] as socially significant and as demanding care."[45] In describing this double vision, Ruddick acknowledges the fact that parents can view children from outside parenting practices;[46] the scientifically-minded parent can perfectly understand the insistence that Alma cannot expect anything. They are, after all, familiar with practice-external standards for this action. But a parent declines to treat these standards as applicable to Alma while she is "playing the game" (i.e., parenting). This makes sense of Ruddick's idea that the "demands" of parenting practice – reasons to which one responds, *qua* parent – come *from children*: "children 'demand' that their lives be preserved and their growth fostered."[47] To parent at all, parents must treat children as demanding things of them in ways that generate reasons to respond. This is so regardless of their reasons for taking up parenting practice in the first place.

We can now see that the contours of dependency relations are shaped by our responsibility practices because the contours of the *acts* involved in expecting are shaped by such practices.

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[43] Ruddick 1989, 17
[44] Ruddick 1989, 18
[45] Ruddick 1989, 18
[46] This reading is supported by Ruddick's example of a goldfish, to which she sometimes does (and sometimes doesn't) view from a maternal perspective (Ruddick 1989, 18).
[47] Ruddick 1989, 17

Alma is able to meet the practice-internal standards governing these acts, which require less demanding agential contributions than practice-external standards. This is what affords her an important role in the back-and-forth characteristic of parent-child interactions. Participation in practices, after all, can involve strategic and thoughtful navigation of standards that we consciously apprehend, but is just as often unthinking, automatic, and habitual.[48] Our actions can have meaning regardless of whether those meanings figure in our intentions or beliefs. Insofar as she can meaningfully participate in responsibility practices, Alma is depending in the expectation-centered sense. This also allows that responsibility practices shape the contours of dependency relations in other, yet unexplored, ways. While I will not pursue this here, it is likely that many persons historically excluded from Strawson's "participant stance" (e.g., those with certain disabilities or mental illnesses) are legitimate normative expecters in this sense from within various caring practices. They might, therefore, play a role not merely as moral *patients*, but as moral *agents* in these contexts.

I've put forward a vision of dependency which characterizes webs of social connection as those through which we enact responsibility practices. And this, as we have seen, is an inclusive vision. One can meaningfully participate in responsibility practices, even if one is not an apt target for reactive attitudes, and can thereby depend on others. In addition to being inclusive, expectation-centered dependency is also illuminating. Gilligan saw moral success not just in how we respect one another's rights, but in how we exhibit responsibility in relationships. We can now see that this is a matter of how we establish, interpret, manage, negotiate, honor, preserve, adjust, complicate, and challenge what we expect of one another.

[48] See, for instance, Haslanger 2018, 235; Calhoun 2024a, 233

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