

**RETHINKING INTERPERSONAL DEPENDENCE**  
**Chapter summary | Updated January 2025**  
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Let's say I'm traveling out of town this weekend. This might in some sense reflect my independence, but my solo trip is layered with various forms of assistance from others. I depend on my friend to pick me up with plenty of time to catch my flight, and upon my arrival I depend on a rideshare driver to take me to my final destination. I'm depending on my partner for all kinds of things throughout my trip, from watering the plants in my absence to planning a nice meal for my return home. Finally, after years of reminders that I did not appreciate at the time, I no longer depend on my mom to remind me to pack an extra layer – I *know* I will be cold without it.

These are instances of *interpersonal dependence*. We correctly speak of depending on laws of physics (we can always depend on gravity to send objects rushing toward the ground), complex systems (we may depend on market forces to keep certain goods available), and even inanimate objects (as when we depend on a tree to shield us from the sun). But *interpersonal* dependence concerns relations between identifiable persons, *my* depending on *you*. We find ourselves in numerous, varied interpersonal dependency relations all the time, and often these relations (like parent-child or romantic ones) are some of the most defining and significant of our lives. In *Rethinking Interpersonal Dependence*, I develop a clear understanding of what it means to say “I’m depending on you,” one which affords us chances to request, offer, deliver, and interpret assistance from others in fairer and more caring ways.

I do this with two goals in mind. Both are responsive to worrying tendencies within everyday and philosophical uses of “dependence”: the tendency to use “dependence” in a way that draws from and reinforces oppressive ideologies, and the tendency to use “dependence” in a philosophically unhelpful way. To avoid these, a suitable conception of interpersonal dependence must be *clear-eyed* and *useful*. Our use of the term should help us successfully pick out and evaluate instances of dependence as ideal or defective without tracking stereotypes or excessively weighting the identities of the parties. This will permit us to be loyal to *some* of our commonsense usage of “dependence” and related terms but gives us strong reasons to avoid other commonsense uses of these terms, such as when we carelessly use “dependent” as a stand-in for old or disabled, or as shameful because of its associations with these groups.

Worries about ideological reinforcement are not lost on my interlocutors in care ethics and philosophy of disability; many of these theorists are quick to reject assumptions about who counts as “dependent” and remind us of our “inevitable interdependence,”<sup>1</sup> the “limits of our independence,”<sup>2</sup> and the “ubiquity of dependencies.”<sup>3</sup> But they often do this without offering careful definitions of dependence itself, making it difficult to say more than the fact that it’s everywhere you look. And those who do offer precise definitions focus on the dependency of disabled, very young, or very old people, failing to provide frameworks for thinking about the dependence that we *all* experience. (I

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<sup>1</sup> Miller 2012, 4

<sup>2</sup> Kittay 2020, 418

<sup>3</sup> Scully 2013, 215

develop this criticism in detail in Chapter 1.) As Jackie Scully puts a similar point, “In general, the [feminist care ethical] literature implies that there are long stretches in a normal life during which a person is independent, not in need of care, and effectively invulnerable.”<sup>4</sup> So, while these contributions encourage us to acknowledge dependence in more places, they don’t offer the tools to weave an understanding of our pervasive dependency into our philosophical thinking. We need something more precise to critique defective dependency relations, especially those that exploit the oppressive ideologies mentioned above, and to uphold certain kinds of dependency relations as guiding ideals. As such, my second desideratum for theorizing about dependence is that it can be usefully put to philosophical work.

## CHAPTER 1: DEPENDING ON OTHERS

The first chapter introduces and defends my account of dependence, dependence as an expectation-meeting relation, laying the groundwork for the remainder of the dissertation. Any philosophical discussion of dependence must be sensitive to three goals, which are embraced by dependency theorists in care ethics and philosophy of disability. First, these theorists aim to unmask the “myth of independence,” pointing out that numerous and varied dependency relations facilitate our comfort and survival. All people, regardless of their social position and including the very powerful, depend on others. Second, these theorists acknowledge that dependency relations can be valuable. Against the idea that all dependency is humiliating, degrading, or otherwise pathological, they insist that dependency relations are not only normal for human beings but are among the most worthwhile and important parts of our lives. Third, they are invested in showing that various forms of low-stakes dependency (like my depending on a friend for an airport ride) is the same phenomena that we see in relations of high-stakes dependency. The latter are relations between dependency workers and people who are vulnerable to (often, immediate) harm or death absent the attention of these dependency workers. All of us experience high-stakes dependency as infants, and many of us in old age or through periods of illness or disability. As these theorists point out, we should not “other” and ignore utter dependency, as we do when we think of low- and high-stakes dependency as fundamentally different kinds of relationships.

In this chapter I ask whether there is a unified way of understanding low- and high-stakes interpersonal dependence that allows us to make progress on the goals of dependency theorizing. I argue for replacing the received view in care ethics and philosophy of disability, which treats dependence as a need-meeting relation, with an expectation-centered account. In Section 1, I introduce these two conceptions of dependence, drawing the need-centered framework from previous discussions of dependence and introducing my novel view, dependence as an expectation-meeting relation. On my view, A is depending on B when A *normatively expects* B to perform *work* in relation to some object X, and B *countenances* this expectation. While the italicized words are terms of art with careful definitions, the basic idea is that I’m depending on you when I am disposed to experience various reactive attitudes (blame, disappointment, gratitude) in response to your

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<sup>4</sup> Scully 2013, 215

performing this work (or not), and where you treat this expectation as applying to you – whether each of us know we have these dispositions or not.

In Section 2, I argue that the expectation-centered account can better meet the goals of dependency theorizing than can need-centered accounts. In Section 3 I focus on how the expectation-centered account can meet the third goal, and, in particular, how it can accommodate cases where those who need assistance do not seem capable of forming expectations of others. The result is a novel and unified account of dependency relations, from the pressing to the mundane.

## CHAPTER 2: INVISIBLE DEPENDENCE

The account of dependence defended in Chapter 1 is particularly useful for unmasking the myth of independence in the context of a certain kind of defective dependency relation, which I call “invisible dependence.” Dependence is invisible when one or both of the parties denies or simply fails to perceive the existence, extent, or nature of the dependency relation. Research on gendered labor in heterosexual partnerships suggests that invisible dependence is pervasive in these contexts, in which women are often expected to perform disproportionate amounts of feminized household, emotional, and epistemic labor.

In this paper I argue that my expectation-centered account of interpersonal dependence is better suited than need-centered accounts to capture the ways gendered labor is invisibilized and to honor the moral contours of invisible dependency relations. In Section 1, I canvass six forms of invisible dependence, all of which correspond to aspects of the expectation-centered account of dependence. Dependence can become invisible when an expected fails to acknowledge their own expectations or fails to appreciate the expertise required for the performance of the work they expect – just to name a few. In Section 2, I argue that the expectation-centered account is well-suited to capture the morally-complicated status of efforts to adjust expectations. To properly recognize and value various kinds of “women’s work” – and to understand rebellions against it – we need to recognize how dependence on others goes wrong in many arrangements that saddle women with vast amounts of labor, including when this labor is unnecessary.

## CHAPTER 3: LOVE, FAIRNESS, AND SHARING A LIFE

The third chapter builds on the discussion of the gendered division of domestic labor in Chapter 2, leveraging these observations about dependence to offer an intervention in the literature on love. Given the gendered labor patterns mentioned above, many heterosexual partners tolerate profoundly unfair distributions of benefits and burdens. Research on household, emotional, and relationship maintenance labor in heterosexual partnerships finds women performing much more of this labor than men<sup>5</sup> (taking on unfairly large burdens) and receiving less (and less restorative) leisure

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<sup>5</sup> For overviews of gendered household labor, see Bianchi et al. 2012; Blair 2013; Schouten 2019, chapter 1. On various forms of cognitive labor, see Daminger 2019; Reich-Stiebert, Froehlich, and Voltmer 2023. On the deleterious effects of this “mental load”, see DeGroot and Vik 2020. Shiloh 2018; Ellie Anderson 2023 offer empirically-informed philosophical analyses of various forms of gendered cognitive labor.

time, less sexual satisfaction, and less emotional support than men<sup>6</sup> (enjoying unfairly limited benefits).<sup>7</sup> Most of us agree that these lovers are making moral mistakes and are less than perfect romantic partners. It may be difficult for them to sustain the emotions and attitudes characteristic of love in the face of lopsided distributions, as when resentment or pettiness crowd out affection and care. But we don't always think of these lovers as failing *by the lights of love itself*. In fact, philosophers often argue that the fairness and lovingness of relationships are at odds, and that justice is improperly imposed on intimate relations.<sup>8</sup> We even find related ideas in some strands of feminist theorizing; in early articulations of care ethics, care- and justice-based modes of moral engagement were seen as standing in tension with one another.<sup>9</sup> Philosophical accounts of love are tolerant of this idea, and do not directly write out the compatibility of profound unfairness with love.

In this paper I challenge the idea that love and fairness involve necessarily disunified modes of treatment. In particular, I argue that love and fairness are unified in the sense that some partners are only able to perform particular *act-types* – *loving* and *expressing love* – if their actions are responsive to considerations of fairness. This is true of partnerships that cultivate intimacy *via* acts of fair distribution. In Section 1, I narrow my focus to love's active dimensions, and specifically to the act-types – loving, expressing love, betraying love, and so on – that amount to participation in a particular “relational paradigm”. This allows me to precisify the skeptic's claim that love and fairness are at odds in Section 2: the defender of NO NECESSARILY FAIR LOVE insists that loving relational paradigms necessarily lack any special connection to standards of fairness. Put differently, the conditions we must meet to perform acts of loving exclude any reference to fairness, and this is true for all possible kinds of love. If this is correct, this claim would mean that evaluating acts of love using standards of fairness is a kind of category mistake. In Section 3, I advance a counterexample to NO NECESSARILY FAIR LOVE. A familiar relational paradigm which I call *life-sharing love* builds considerations of fairness directly into the relationally participatory acts of loving, insofar as partners express love by growing closer through distributing resources and responsibilities. This affords partners the opportunity to express love in more egalitarian ways than the traditional heterosexual love paradigm. In Section 4, I close with some remarks about the flexibility of life-sharing love. While previous views of love obscure or tolerate inequalities, adopting the truly shared life as a romantic ideal offers the tools to critique unfairly distributed dependency work by the lights of love itself. It also represents an ideal of mutual dependence and therefore reinforces the usefulness of dependence as an expectation-meeting relation in offering us guiding relational ideals.

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<sup>6</sup> On the “leisure gap”, see Yerkes, Roeters, and Baxter 2020; Gender Equity Policy Institute 2024. On the “orgasm gap” see Mahar, Mintz, and Akers 2020.

<sup>7</sup> This unevenness persists (and is sometimes exacerbated by) women working outside the home, especially if they make more money (see Syrda 2023, on the “gender deviance neutralization” theory). These divisions have endured, including through recent social changes; additional housework and childcare burdens arising from the COVID-19 pandemic were primarily allocated to women (Leap, Stalp, and Kelly 2023), who were also more likely to have their employment affected (Landivar et al. 2020).

<sup>8</sup> See Okin 1989 chapter 2 on the history of this idea.

<sup>9</sup> Carol Gilligan's views about this seem to have evolved over the course of her career; for overviews of this, see Baier 1987; Pettersen 2008, chapter 6, Tronto 1993, chapter 3 (especially 86). For attempts at “integrating” care and justice, see Bubeck 1995, 11; Tronto 1993; Dillon 1992; Friedman 1993; Clement 1996, 114–22; Pettersen 2008, chapter 6. Most contemporary care ethicists embrace some kind of integration of these values.

## CHAPTER 4: RETHINKING DEPENDENCE AND CARE

The final chapter of my dissertation leverages my account of dependence to offer an intervention in the literature on disability and care. Feminist care ethicists seek to characterize the unique value of entering and sustaining caring relationships. Meanwhile, a persistent strain within disability activism rejects care as undesirable and even insulting, sometimes advocating “independent living” instead. Theorists and activists associated with the Independent Living Movement (“ILM Members”) resist thinking of many relationships with personal assistants (“PAs”) and other people who help them move through their days as relations of care.<sup>10</sup> In a recent attempt to adjudicate what she calls the “quarrel between care ethics and disability theorists and activists”, Eva Kittay sees the latter group’s concerns as pushing us toward *either* accepting the moral importance of *independence*, or expanding our conception of care to include forms of assistance that disability advocates recognize as valuable.<sup>11</sup> The former overlooks feminist insights about the “limits of independence,” according to which dependence is pervasive, inevitable, and often valuable, and that the Western over-valorization of independence is problematic. And since ILM Members must be confused if they see themselves as operating independently, their positive relations with personal assistants must be caring in a general sense. Thus, she strives to identify “care *as it should be*,” in the hope that people with disabilities can embrace this adequately expansive, charitable conception of care.<sup>12</sup> Kittay’s strategy accords with a dominant approach in care ethics, which assumes that all idealized (valuable, respectful) dependency relations are caring. Call this position Care Monism. By contrast, Pluralism about relational ideals of dependency says that there is more than one kind of relationship of dependency which we should uphold as ideal.

In this paper I offer a different solution to the quarrel about care, developing the ideal of *help* as an alternative to the interpersonal dependency ideal of *care*. The best reconstruction of these disability activists involves embracing a role for various forms of valuable dependence on others, so long as this dependence is not publicly meaningful as caring. I first offer a framework for positing relational ideals like care and help. In Section 1, I argue that the action theoretic approach for thinking about relational paradigms of love in Chapter 3 can also help us understand acts of care. Relationships like romantic love, care, or student-teacher relationships are characterized, in part, by the practice-dependent standards they set for performing various “relationally participatory” *acts* (loving, caring, teaching). Part of what it is to stand in a caring relationship, then, is to navigate one’s relation via the act-types of *caring* or *receiving care*. In Section 2, I clarify how care theorists like Kittay individuate caring acts on the expanded conception of care. On this view, dependency worker’s acts

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<sup>10</sup> The Independent Living Movement emerged in 1960’s US and in 1980’s and 90’s Britain, and its members sought to move from traditional residential living facilities to independent living schemes, where they celebrated the ability to eat what and when they wanted, to spend time how they wanted and with the people they chose. Though this obscures important and ongoing disagreements among the disability rights community, I use “ILM members” to refer to those people with disabilities (and their allies) who consider people with disabilities to be the best judges of their needs in living arrangements, and who seek to center those perspectives in designing living arrangements which promote self-respect, dignity, and control. See Ratzka 1989.

<sup>11</sup> Kittay 2020, 416. For helpful discussions about these theoretical clashes and other solutions, see Collins 2015, 166–67; Watson et al. 2004; Kelly 2013; Shakespeare 2000; Kröger 2009; Thomas 2007, chapter 4.

<sup>12</sup> Kittay 2020, 417

are caring when they aim at meeting the genuine needs and legitimate wants of the depending person, bracketing their own needs, desires, prejudices, and preconceptions, and when their efforts are “taken up” by the depending person. In Section 3, with this conception of caring acts in view, I clarify the Care Monist and Pluralist positions. This allows us to precisely locate the disagreement: the care theorist’s way of picking out caring acts focuses too much on individual acts and neglects their role as *moves* within particular kinds of relationships. In Section 4, I argue that caring acts represent moves toward increased metaphorical closeness, while helping acts represent “isolated intimacies” which resist playing this role. Thus, caring and helping acts are importantly distinguished in ways not captured by the expanded conception. In Section 5, I offer another reason for embracing Pluralism: it can explain experiences of conflict between multiple relational paradigms and the challenge of navigating “hybrid” relationships.

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