

**RETHINKING INTERPERSONAL DEPENDENCE**  
**Chapter summary (updated July 2024)**  
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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 reliance on 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 relations) 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 an 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 give 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 many theorists who write insightfully about the pervasiveness of our dependence do this without offering careful definitions of dependence. As a result, it becomes difficult to say anything about dependence beyond the fact that it’s everywhere you look. 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.

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

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

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

## 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 two goals, both of 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 in this “everyday” sense. Second, they are invested in showing that this “everyday” dependency is the same phenomena that we see in relations of “utter 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 utter 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 everyday and utter dependency as fundamentally different.

In this chapter I ask whether there is a unified way of understanding everyday and utter 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*. 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 second 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 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 moral contours invisible dependency relations. In Section 1, I canvass six forms of invisible dependence, all of which correspond to the expectation-centered account of dependence. 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 second 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. Many heterosexual partners tolerate profoundly unfair distributions of benefits and burdens along gendered lines. Research on household, emotional, and hermeneutic labor in heterosexual partnerships finds women performing much more of this labor than men<sup>4</sup> (taking on unfairly large burdens) and receiving less appreciation for their labor, less leisure time, and less emotional support than men<sup>5</sup> (enjoying unfairly limited benefits). 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.

In this paper I defend an attractive relational ideal of love which directly incorporates fair ways of relating. I argue that *life-sharing love* draws from existing cultural understandings in Western society which treat acts of fair distribution as acts of loving. In the latter part of the paper, I argue that life-sharing love offers deeper insights into the *practice* of love – the actions constitutive of loving and betraying love – than other accounts of love in the philosophical literature. 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.

### 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 moral value of entering and sustaining caring relationships, but a persistent strain within disability scholarship and activism rejects care as undesirable and even insulting, advocating instead for “independent living.” In a recent attempt to adjudicate this disagreement – the so-called “quarrel between care ethics and disability theorists and activists” – Eva Kittay thinks this pushes us to *either* accept the moral importance of *independence* espoused by disability activists *or* expand our conception of care so that it includes the forms of assistance that people with disabilities recognize as valuable. The first seems to deny care ethical insights about the over-valorization of independence in Western culture, and is not the best interpretation of Independent Living Movement rhetoric.<sup>6</sup> Thus, she strives to identify “care *as it should be*,” in the hope that people with disabilities can

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<sup>4</sup> For overviews of the sociology of housework, see Blair 2013; Schouten 2019, chapter 1. See Daminger 2019 on epistemic dimensions of housework. On gendered emotional labor, see Bartky 1990; James 1989; Larson, Richards, and Perry-Jenkins 1994; Barry, Olekalns, and Rees 2019; Maushart 2002. On hermeneutic labor, see Anderson 2023.

<sup>5</sup> On the “leisure gap”, see Beck and Arnold 2009; Hochschild 2003, especially chapter 4. On the “appreciation gap,” see Bird and Ross 1993; Spitze and Loscocco 2000, 1096. On emotional support, see Ferguson 1989; Gunnarsson 2013; Maushart 2002, chapter 11.

<sup>6</sup> Both individual testimonials and mission statements of ILM organizations emphasize the fact that they are not interested in “fending for [our]selves” (Independent Living in Scotland) or “do[ing] everything by ourselves” (Independent Living Institute); rather, they are interested in assistance that is compatible with self-determination, freedom, choice, dignity, and control. For excellent sources of the testimony of ILM members in Britain, see especially Morris 1991; Morris 1993.

embrace this adequately expansive and charitable conception of care.<sup>7</sup> This approach is familiar in care ethics, where theorists often expand the ambit of care to include relations beyond those we typically think of as caring.<sup>8</sup> I call the view that caring relations are the only ideal dependency relations *care monism*.

In this chapter, I argue for a different solution to Kittay's dilemma, developing the ideal of *help* as an alternative to the interpersonal dependency ideal of *care*.<sup>9</sup> Care and help differ along several dimensions, including different roles for intimacy, paternalistic interventions, and identification with the depending person's ends; and distinct epistemic mechanisms for determining the depending person's expectations. Since *dependence as an expectation-meeting relation* is *pluralist* with respect to interpersonal dependency ideals, both care and help can serve as relational ideals for depending people and dependency workers. While *care monism* insists that caring dependency relations are the only ideal form of such relations, *pluralism* is more explanatorily powerful when it comes to the experience of moving between and balancing various kinds of relationships.

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<sup>7</sup> Kittay 2020, 417. For helpful discussions about these theoretical clashes and other solutions, see Collins 2015, 166–67; Watson et al. 2004; Thomas 2007; Kelly 2013; Shakespeare 2000; Kröger 2009.

<sup>8</sup> See Collins 2015, 35–36 for a concise summary of this idea in care ethical thought.

<sup>9</sup> I borrow this term for the preferred term of assistance among those with disabilities from Shakespeare 2000. Other disability theorists and activists use terms like "assistance" and "support" (see, for instance, Finkelstein 1998; Watson et al. 2004).

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