

RETHINKING INTERPERSONAL DEPENDENCE
Chapter summary (updated Feb 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 aim to 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,”¹ the “limits of our independence,”² and the “ubiquity of dependencies.”³ 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.

¹ Miller 2012, 4

² Kittay 2020, 418

³ Scully 2013, 215

CHAPTER 1: RETHINKING DEPENDENCE AND NEED

The first chapter introduces my account of dependence, *Dependence as an expectation-meeting relation*, laying the groundwork for the remainder of the dissertation. This account is *relational* (it refers to a way two people relate rather than, for instance, a feature possessed by the depending person), *value-neutral* (it allows us to recognize dependency relations as defective, ideal, or anywhere in between), and *pluralist* (because it admits of numerous relational ideals, several of which I explore in the dissertation).

I frame the paper by interrogating the presumed conceptual connection between *dependence* and *need*. Scholars in the care ethical tradition commonly think depending is something we do out of need.⁴ This is understandable, given their focus on addressing the “problem of devalued dependence” – namely, the fact that we tend to discount and undervalue depending people and dependency workers along ideological lines. An intuitive way for depending people to gain recognition is to claim a *need* for support; a reasonable way to communicate the dignity and importance of dependency workers is to describe them as *meeting needs*. Such thinking is natural, given the common assertion that needs have direct moral upshots and command urgent action.⁵ It has made needs “a kind of origin point for the normativity of care ethics,”⁶ an approach which extends to theorizing about dependency.

However, there are problems with embracing a need-centered account of dependence. Not only does it fail to describe a wide swath of dependency relations (excluding dependence that meets our unnecessary or even need-undermining desires), but it misidentifies the central normative concepts at work in defective dependency relations. It cannot, for instance, account for the devaluing of dependence involved in exploitative, non-need-meeting dependency relations, as when men expect attentive dependency work from women that goes far beyond meeting these men’s needs. I argue instead for a conception of dependence that appeals to the concepts of *normative expectations* and *work*. In short, we depend on others when we *normatively expect* that they perform *dependency work* in relation to a certain *dependency object*. I discuss in detail what I mean by normative expectations and work, drawing on feminist insights about undervalued and undercompensated “women’s work.”

Next, I show how my account can be put to work in understanding and critiquing dependency relations. I demonstrate this usefulness by drawing out six forms of “invisible dependence,” all of which correspond to a dimension of *Dependence as an expectation-meeting relation*, using the gendered division of domestic labor as a case study. It delivers the important result that men who expect women to complete housework are depending on them, even when this housework is not strictly needed, and it allows us to explain more precisely how this work is rendered “invisible” when this goes unrecognized. It turns out that solely recognizing dependency relations that are need-meeting *contributes to* rather than *solves* the “problem of devalued dependence.” I close with a discussion of how my account of dependence can better explain the moral status of actions undertaken to *adjust* expectations than need-centered accounts. To properly recognize and value gendered housework – 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 unnecessary labor.

⁴ See, for instance, Miller 2020, 646–47; Dodds 2013, 183; Engster 2019, 103. See Collins 2015, chapter 6 for an account of dependence as aimed at meeting “important interests” (including needs), and especially 105 for a discussion about the care ethical emphasis on need-meeting.

⁵ See Fletcher 2018; Reader 2007 on the normative upshots of needs.

⁶ Miller 2020, 645

CHAPTER 2: LOVE, FAIRNESS, AND SHARING A LIFE

The second chapter builds on the discussion of the gendered division of domestic labor in Chapter 1, 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 men⁷ (taking on unfairly large burdens) and receiving less appreciation for their labor, less leisure time, and less emotional support than men⁸ (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, a potent kernel of common sense instructs us that the pursuit of perfectly fair relations would be at odds with the lovingness of their relationship. As one research subject explained his resistance to his wife's request that he perform more domestic labor, "fairness' and respect seemed impersonal moral concepts, abstractions rudely imposed on love."⁹

The idea that justice is improperly imposed on intimate relations has a long history in philosophical thought.¹⁰ Accounts of love are tolerant of this idea, and do not directly write out the compatibility of profound unfairness with love.¹¹ Women pursuing more even labor divisions with their male partners are therefore often understood to be imposing a justice-oriented schema where it does not belong – damaging rather than defending their love. Opting for a more loving way of relating, we often think, allows partners to overcome the strains of unfairness, but setting our sights specifically on fairness is not how we treat those we love.

In this paper I defend an attractive relational ideal of love which directly incorporates fair ways of relating, and which therefore reframes the behavior of these women: they are fighting *for* their love rather than against it. I take seriously the idea that our ability to perform the acts constitutive of loving one another (*expressing love* or simply *loving*) depends on our being in a social context that renders acts intelligible as such. This immediately raises a challenge since the trends in gendered labor identified above are pervasive and normalized. Why should we think we have the cultural tools to understand love as incompatible with profound unfairness, given that we seem to tolerate unfair love?

In the first part of the paper, I argue for a conception of "life-sharing love," drawing from cultural resources in contemporary Western society that makes acts of love intelligible as such. I appeal to Talia Bettcher's idea of "intimacy tracks," sets of communicative resources that allow us to navigate our metaphorical closeness to others. Bettcher focuses on sexual intimacy tracks, and on the eroticization of familiar, culturally-encoded and ordered moves toward increased sensory and epistemic access.¹² But we have culturally-encoded communicative resources for understanding moves toward intimacy that is not (necessarily or only) sexual as well. I argue that a familiar intimacy track treats moves of *fair distribution* as steps toward

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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.

⁹ Hochschild 2003, 52

¹⁰ Okin 1989 chapter 2 summarizes this history. See Waldron 1988, 628 for another articulation of this idea.

¹¹ I am concerned with philosophical accounts of love as a *relational ideal* rather than accounts of love as an attitude, emotion, or disposition possessed by an individual. I therefore do not discuss views that treat love as a mode of valuing, a kind of robust concern, an emotion, or a disposition.

¹² Bettcher 2017, 168

increased closeness. Inviting others to distribute efforts and resources with us marks our increasing proximity to our fellow sharers on a “social map.” Children’s invitations to share toys with other children give rise to friendship; adult’s invitations to share property, responsibilities (for children or pets, say), or financial resources are treated as steps toward increased romantic attachment. For some romantic partners, this intimacy track culminates in the ideal of the truly shared life.

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 3: 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.¹³ Thus, she strives to identify “care *as it should be*,” in the hope that people with disabilities can embrace this adequately expansive and charitable conception of care.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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*.¹⁶ 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.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ See Collins 2015, 35–36 for a concise summary of this idea in care ethical thought.

¹⁶ 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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