

## **The Case for our Widespread Dependency**

[Review Essay: Eva Feder Kittay and Ellen K. Feder (eds.), *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), ix + 382 pp.]

Eva Kittay and Ellen Feder end their introduction to *The Subject of Care* with a powerful challenge to philosophers: "We must take account of the fact of dependency in our very conceptions of the self ... We cannot continue to build our conceptions of a just society and the good life and to shape our aspirations for freedom and sublime experience without facing human dependency head-on" (10-11). Their collection does compelling work in identifying dependency as a fact of life and demonstrating its importance philosophically. At a minimum, the collection builds a case against four tenets of traditional liberalism, which I shall represent as follows: (T1) Dependency can be avoided by adults and equals. (T2) Dependency should be avoided by adults and equals. (T3) Independence can be achieved by adults and equals. (T4) Independence should be achieved by adults and equals. The remarkable effect of the volume is the inescapable sense that we are all dependents and that the above four tenets are problematic ideals at best. This raises at least two questions, however. First, it is not clear to me whether I am correct that this is the intended effect; that is, do the contributors mean to make the case that we are all dependents, or merely that dependency is philosophically important? Second, I am interested in determining whether it is correct that we are all dependents; even if the volume does not make this case, perhaps the ideas within could contribute to establishing universal dependency. Both questions hinge on the definition of dependency, which is my focus in this essay.

### **Dependency as Reliance: A Broad Definition**

What sense of dependency is at work in the statements that dependency is central to correct conceptions of identity, agency, justice, and freedom? If it is interpreted too broadly, it becomes trivially true. For in-

stance, I may point out that we are dependent upon the presence of oxygen in the atmosphere, and dependent upon the laws of physics holding true; as Hume has famously argued, the statement that the sun will rise in the morning is ultimately a statement of faith that the future will resemble the past. Yet one could accept this kind of dependency without radically altering notions of self, justice, or freedom. While accepting our vulnerabilities, we can retain ideals of being as self-sufficient as possible within our physical limits. So I am earth-bound and depend upon this planet, but taxes are still bad, big government is still wrong, and if I'm lucky, I can develop a space program that will allow me to go live on Mars when this atmosphere is no longer sustaining. In other words, an overly broad conception of dependency may result in believing T1 is troublesome but not T2; while dependency cannot always be avoided, it should be, ideally.

Although one could take dependency in such a broad sense that it becomes uninteresting, and need not result in a radical revision of agency, identity or equality, I suggest the fact of dependency does not reduce to the trivially true in this collection. Yet there is some evidence that, at times, the contributors intend the term to be used really very broadly. Consider Kittay's comment from her own selection: "But who in any complex society is not dependent on others, for the production of our food, for our mobility, for a multitude of tasks that make it possible for each of us to function in our work and daily living?" (267-68). Relatedly, selections by Kelly Oliver and Bonnie Mann each observe that we are dependent upon the earth for the materials necessary to living and the grounds or conditions of human action. Martha Nussbaum argues for an Aristotelian (vs. a Kantian) conception of the person "as both capable and needy," requiring goods, activities, and "central capabilities" (194). Martha Fineman may put it most bluntly; in arguing that traditional liberalism presumes a family that provides caregiving for the individual, she suggests: "The ideal of family is essential to maintaining the myth that autonomy and independence can be attained" (215). And Kittay likewise concludes: "Independence, except in some particular actions and functions, is a fiction ..." (268). It is correct, then, to come away with the sense that this collection is devoted to showing that we are all dependents in one way or another, and dependency is so widespread, so constitutive of our personhood, that the ideals of liberalism as I first stated them cannot be true.

So described, dependency may be a state or relationship of reliance or vulnerability. Whether or not this is overly broad as a notion of dependency, it results in morally important conclusions. At a minimum, the case for mass dependency calls us to attend better than we currently do to the myriad dependency relations we take for granted. In urging our attention

to our manifold vulnerabilities, the authors succeed in showing us that we are not so independent as we are accustomed to believing. Jarred from our complacency, we may be more likely to see that persons and sources of the material stuff of life are treated well and justly, given their due, accorded rights in some cases, with the responsibilities of caregivers given better oversight and material support. Arguments for such behavior are repeated throughout the contributions, and the volume as a whole rightly calls on the reader to reject the ideal of independence as self-sufficiency in order to better treat the actual persons on whom we all depend and the planet we take for granted. This is important because it correctly locates our ethical obligations to those providing care for dependents. At base, we are reminded what justice requires. We end up with a broad definition of dependency that involves us all, but does not reduce to the meaningless, because it is a morally charged relationship more than a statement of reliance on the mundane.

We could also satisfy a broad claim about human nature and use the language of dependency by saying we are all potentially dependent. For instance, the poor and the temporarily ill are only potentially dependent if they are not yet depending on others for their basics, but may need to in the future. As Fraser and Gordon point out, Senator Daniel Moynihan did something similar when he argued that poverty and dependency are distinct, saying: "To be poor is an objective condition; to be dependent, a subjective one as well ... [Dependency] is an incomplete state in life: normal in the child, abnormal in the adult" (14). And indeed, at times the reconception of the poor as dependent sounds more accurately like a description of the ways in which they're vulnerable—which seems not the same. To be vulnerable is to be at risk of harm, but is compatible with people simply refraining from harming; although I'm persuaded of "the fact of human vulnerability and frailty," and can see how it may be true of all of us, this still leaves room for saying dependency is not true of all of us (3). I assume that the sense of dependency used by authors in this volume is richer than vulnerability and more of a concern than potential dependency.

### **Dependency as Need: A Narrow Definition**

On the above account, dependency often seems to equate to the condition of being reliant or vulnerable. I'm persuaded that this is rich enough to yield moral obligations, but it may inaccurately blur the distinction between reliance and dependence. Are all relationships of reliance properly relations of dependence? With Kittay, I agree that I rely on grocery stores and mass agriculture, the complex of institutions that constitutes "the production of our food." I am vulnerable to individuals and groups

within this institution that may do their jobs badly, or compromise public health for profit. But something seems amiss in saying that I depend upon those who produce my food. If I could produce my own food, but don't, am I dependent, or reliant out of laziness? Do I depend upon all food producers, or particular food producers, and does it matter that they are replaceable, that I could change my diet? I could argue that I actually depend on my government to oversee slaughterhouse operations and not on the slaughterhouses, *per se*.

In short, I wonder how much dependence must point to some ontologically true need and not to a makeshift relationship of relying on others. My husband expressed some moral outrage at a fellow driver who cut him off in traffic without warning. I asked him if he depends upon his fellow highway drivers, and he dissented: "I don't need others to signal, but I count on it. If they don't, I won't die, but it would help if everyone signaled." Food production again provides an interesting case here. Many of us who elect to eliminate meat from our diets do so out of the realization that we may not really need meat in our diets, especially if it's provided so cheaply only at the price of cruelty to suffering animals. Dependency seems to entail needs, not for that to which we are accustomed, but for that without which we could not live, or live decently. Dependency calls to mind actual needs, and not any and all vulnerabilities. I rely on my next-door neighbor to refrain from making hurtful comments to me; I would certainly say that I'm vulnerable to my neighbor. And yet I'd hesitate to say that I have a relationship of dependency upon my neighbor; all that may be necessary for the vulnerable is for those who could harm them to refrain from doing so. Dependents would, I assume, require more. Kittay argues that dependency relations impose obligations of positive care and assisting the other in flourishing, not merely refraining from cruelty. "Not being harmed is only part of what we require when we are dependent, and the lack of care—the full-blown sort, not the labor mechanically carried out—is equivalent to harm" (272).

This implies that dependency is richer than vulnerability, with which I'd agree, but now the sense that we're all dependents is somewhat lost. On the other hand, the narrower sense in which Kittay uses dependency, while it no longer captures the sense that it's widespread, does make better sense of the intuition that dependency refers to actual needs and not makeshift relations of reliance. The categorization of the "inevitably dependent" in Kittay's selection leaves one with the impression that the essential characteristics of dependents are much like long-standing assumptions of what dependency entails: "youth, severe illness, disability, or frail old age" (2). She adds that others, like the caregivers of such dependents, are derivatively dependent or secondarily dependent in virtue of social arrangements. On the narrow account, the pejorative ideology

of dependency as something to be avoided is effectively challenged, but the membership of what counts as a dependent certainly seems like less than the entire human race, and insofar as some of our social arrangements can be avoided, secondary dependency no longer seems constitutive of human nature. The narrow account seems to argue against independence as a moral ideal, but the idea that dependency can be avoided may regain new life.

Kittay and other contributors may offer a narrow conception of dependency precisely in order to get away from ideological conceptions of dependency and ground their definitions in material, demonstrable needs, where it is reasonable to expect that others would have to fulfill such needs for them to be met at all. Kittay's definition of the "dependency relation" is "the relation between one who gives care and one who is dependent upon caregivers for her most basic life functions" (260). Dependency work is "the work of caring for those who are inevitably dependent" (138). In a separate selection, Ofelia Schutte points out that the argument for "dependency work" is effective because such "terminology highlights the fact that dependency work is work, regardless of whether it is also motivated by love, duty, feelings of responsibility or gratitude," or even by salary or fear of punishment (138). This contributes to the distinction between relations of dependency as opposed to mere relations of vulnerability, and captures the sense that the dependent require more positive action than just refraining from harm.

In this narrow sense, dependency excludes what Oliver and Mann describe as our dependence upon the earth. It is central to narrow-dependency that another take up the responsibility for fulfilling those needs; implicitly, there are no dependents without dependency workers, and explicitly, Kittay excludes nonhumans from these relations (265-68, 272, 274 n. 7). Of nonhumans, more later, but as narrowly conceived, the notion of dependence here does call into question whether it is accurate to say that we are all in relations of dependence, not just potentially, but actually. If narrow-dependency is true, then either (1) independence is not a myth after all or (2) the rest of us are neither dependent nor independent.

### **A Third Sense of Dependency**

I suppose the obvious answer to the choice between (1) and (2) above is that many of us are neither independent nor dependent, and the safer claim in the volume as a whole is that independence is not attainable or desirable, so that while we are not all dependents, no one is independent in the sense idealized in traditional liberal theory. This is the focus of contributions by authors including Iris Marion Young, Martha Nuss-

baum, and Martha Fineman, who argue against self-sufficiency as descriptively true of humans or a desirable ideal; with many others, they point out that the caregiving work largely done by women around the world is taken for granted as a form of unrecognized, "unproductive" work, which enables and enhances the autonomy of the recipients. On this account, it is not the case that each member of the world community is dependent upon women's work in the narrow sense, and indeed, many adults who rely on women's work for their "independence" would not die if they just did the work for themselves. However, the theme of such arguments is that independence in liberal theory is a myth and impossible ideal, given the equating of independence with self-sufficiency for ideological purposes; therefore, no one is truly independent and some people are positively dependent. Young, Nancy Fraser, and Linda Gordon are especially attentive to "this normative linkage of citizenship with self-sufficiency," and Young notes that if independence is equated with being able to support oneself and one's loved ones, "only those with extraordinary material and personal resources ... have a right to full respect" (45, 46). Nussbaum agrees that "to be sure, nobody is ever self-sufficient," and argues for a new kind of liberalism reconceived "to make it possible for all citizens to have the support they need for the full development of their human capacities," and this includes animal capacities, rational capacities, and all the activities that allow for a life compatible with human self-respect (195, 197).

The arguments against the ideal of "independence" as self-sufficiency are persuasive. As a conception of humans, the idea that we are often neither dependents nor independent is less compelling to me, perhaps because the position is less radical a revision of dependency than the introduction proposed. Here, dependency is not radically reconceived to include more and different agents than we ordinarily would, so much as de-ideologized to remove the negative connotations associated with dependency. If so, however, the anthology does not succeed at its stated goal of seeing dependence as fundamental to human nature, although the effect is to achieve the more modest goal of seeing independence as ideologically loaded and unreachable if it connotes "self-sufficiency." I am left wondering why I had the sense that we are all dependents, however.

The answer may be to develop a third sense of dependence that is neither so broad as to easily include all relations of reliance or vulnerability, nor so narrow that many of us can avoid dependency much of the time. Schutte may suggest a direction in which to proceed when she mentions relying on Kittay's definition of dependency-work in identifying a broader class of care-work, care for others who are not, "strictly speaking," dependents (138). Why be strict? Isn't this part of the prob-

lem with past conceptions of dependency? What it means to be less strict is unclear in Schutte, but we could start with the possibility that dependency admits of more categories than Kittay and others identify. In her contribution, as elsewhere in her work, Kittay identifies dependency as “inevitable” for those who depend on a caregiver for basic life functions; “derivative” or “secondary” dependency is less clearly defined, sometimes describing the situation of those who become vulnerable by caring for the inevitably dependent, other times described as “not inevitable but ... derivative of or constituted by social arrangements” (263, 2). In the latter sense, poverty and racial or ethnic minority membership in a racist society are described in several of the selections as forms of dependency. My worry initially was that these might be more accurately described as vulnerabilities or relations of reliance on others.

However, in light of the possibility that dependency connotes material needs, we may now have reason to see non-inevitable dependency as something more than derivative or secondary, and something more specific and morally compelling than the wider class of relations of vulnerability or reliance on others. Poverty, in particular, may be a situation between that which Kittay calls “inevitable” and that which seems escapable because it is a product of social arrangements and therefore preventable. It’s arguable that poverty is in some senses relative or socially constructed, and here I am thinking of Vandana Shiva’s argument for a conception of “culturally perceived poverty.” Dorothy Roberts’s contribution to this volume argues relatedly that in a racist society, black caregivers are mistakenly perceived as dependent, while foster care systematically provides services that the biological parents are denied. As cultural constructs contingent upon social inequities, poverty and racism are not inevitable in the way that the dependency of the severely mentally disabled is, but at the same time I would argue that they are not entirely “derivative” sorts of dependency; poverty and racism are not clearly escapable to the poor and minorities, nor supervenient on the inevitable dependency of others. Although such social arrangements as these are avoidable in principle, they are not avoidable by individual humans at birth. To imply otherwise is suggestive of the sort of sharp split, which most feminist critiques of liberalism try to refute, between characteristics constitutive of one’s identity and the social circumstances in which one is embedded.

Even temporary illness can render us each other’s dependents in this third sense between the inevitable and the socially situated (and therefore avoidable). I recall the example of a friend suffering from mononucleosis, a temporary but severe problem when he couldn’t hold down water. While not inevitable, it was a unique relation between otherwise equal adults; not just anyone lived with him, knew his symptoms, had a key to

his home and felt motivated to be the one to see him adequately hydrated. And it's difficult to see how this dependency relation was either derivative or inevitable; temporary and severe illnesses are avoidable, true, but only until you've got one.

We would do well to consider a third sort of dependency, in light of such examples, which we could call dependency-in-relation or dependency-in-community, to better account for relations of dependency that are neither inevitable nor derivative of caring for dependent others, or observably avoidable with a change in social circumstance. Such a third category would better account for relations of dependency between adults who are otherwise presumed equal, and therefore increase the membership of the class of dependent persons. Although the contributors to this collection note correctly that relations between unequals are inadequately addressed in philosophy in general and in liberalism in particular, the idea that we are all dependents-in-community would do well to capture the ways in which adults and equals depend upon each other. This would be distinct from inevitable dependency, and in a way it may describe a weaker state of dependence, but could still include the condition that dependence connotes basic needs for a decent human life. For instance, the relation of dependence I have to those who produce my food is better represented by this third category; my dependency is demonstrably not inevitable (I could provide for my own food production with great effort) nor is it derivative (I have no dependency work in my life preventing me from growing my own food), but I do depend on my food production sources for something necessary to life that is so varied and affordable that it significantly enhances the capacities that allow me to live a decent and healthy life. My relationship to my neighbor no longer seems like any kind of dependency, and this is a good sign that dependency-in-community is not overly broad; although I practice trust or habitual reliance upon my neighbor, positive acts of care on his part do not seem necessary to a decent life.

In light of my earlier analysis, in which I entertained the significance of our ability to replace those upon whom we have dependency-in-community, it now seems to me that whether we depend upon individual humans we've encountered or groups or institutions whose members we have not encountered, dependency is a relation upon particular others and not upon abstract entities. If dependency-in-community is to be analogous to inevitable dependency, then I am not dependent upon food producers in general or in the abstract, because it is not the case that just any food producer contributes to my living well. This has important ethical implications; if I am properly said to be dependent upon the particular, actual people who contribute to my basic needs, then I have major ethical obligations to them that I would not have to an abstract idea. I am



a citizen in a position to see that the particular members of my particular food cooperative are treated well and justly, and because they enhance my autonomy and my life in critical ways, the institutions in my society that should take seriously the contributions of dependency-workers ought to attend to their thriving and prevent their exploitation.

### Dependency Between Humans and Nonhumans

I should add that with a couple of exceptions, all the selections in this anthology are concerned with dependent humans. Although ecofeminism is a powerful strain of feminism with a related tradition of reconceiving agents, relations of interdependency and a self-in-relation, almost no selection in this collection evinces interest in care for nonhumans. This is a striking lack in a collection which otherwise offers multiple and interdisciplinary feminist perspectives on dependency and agency. Indeed, the selection that raised the strongest point of contention for me as I read was Kittay's own entry, "When Caring is Just and Justice is Caring,"<sup>1</sup> an otherwise excellent selection in which she argues a minor point that "for nonhuman animals, it may be sufficient to invoke the principle that harm inflicted on them is wrong because of what it does to those who do the injury" (272). She further suggests that seeing charitable behavior as good and cruelty as bad is sufficient to direct our right conduct toward nonhumans dependent upon us (271-71). This is seemingly at variance with her observation in the same section that "not being harmed is only part of what we require when we are dependent, and the lack of care—the full-blown sort, not the labor mechanically carried out—is equivalent to harm" (272). It is hard to see how this is true of dependent humans and not of any dependent nonhumans, especially domesticated pets; dogs, for example, are the sorts of social creatures that require more than the absence of cruelty to do more than survive. Orphaned baby elephants dependent upon human caregivers are well-documented examples of nonhumans who cannot even survive on the minimal labor Kittay describes, let alone the bare absence of cruelty. And the larger implication that cruelty is bad for the cruel but may not be for the nonhuman sufferers runs counter to much literature that would seem persuasive in arguing against this view. I am not here arguing against Kittay that nonhumans are persons, a notion she explicitly rejects. I am suggesting, however, that one needn't be a person to be a dependent in need of robust care and just treatment, especially in the case of those nonhumans whom we have gone well out of our way to render dependent upon us.

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<sup>1</sup>A reprinted selection originally appearing in *Public Culture* 13 (2001): 557-79.

Kelly Oliver and Bonnie Mann separately argue for more holistic conceptions of our relations of interdependence, and although they do not directly address the dependence relation of domesticated or endangered animals to humans, they do expand the scope of inquiry to include nonhumans, especially human dependence upon the earth and the complex obligations that such a relationship engenders. Oliver relies on an interpretation of the Hegelian dialectic of dependence in which we “read independence as nothing more than the acknowledgement of one’s dependence,” through which we achieve subjectivity and the independence of one who is aware that the rest of the world exists in relation to the self rather than as an extension of the self (324). She explores the ways in which the subjective human and the environment are responsive and sustain each other, and argues that such a realization “requires that we promote the health and well-being of others and our environment in order to also sustain ourselves” (330). She adds: “Human life is dependent upon responsiveness—the ability to respond to the environment (a responsiveness that we share with other animals, who, by the way, do not pollute it like we do),” and argues for ethical obligations to sustain those who sustain us (330).

Mann argues similarly for extending analysis of dependency to include the “morally charged relation of dependence ... between persons and the earth,” and urges us to adopt a proper attitude of wonder and reverence as a consequence “of facing and acknowledging our dependence upon the earth” (347). Like Oliver, Mann does not address the ways in which nonhumans may also depend upon humans as a result of the world we have made. However, at a minimum she expands the scope of dependency relations to include the nonhuman world, suggesting that we have “an obligation to the Earth that gives us life, ... that sustains us” (358-59). She explicitly rejects the alternate response of domination over the earth and its members, which implies condemnation of the way most people perceive the relation of human to dependent animal and gives us a mechanism for seeing these relations as valuable. Last, in arguing instead that “the Earth has a claim on us,” she provides us a reason to consider the possibility that the relation between humans and their dependent animals is not, strictly speaking, a one-way relation; would humans domesticate pets and husband animals if it did not also contribute to our own thriving? Such a revaluing of our relations to nonhuman individuals seems called for when Mann concludes that “wonder, not doubt, ... is the appropriate attitude in relation to *our relation* to the earth ... called for in and by the very moment-to-moment sustenance, the moment-to-moment life-giving that is our dependence on the places the Earth provides us” (365).

## Conclusion

Akin to Annette Baier's well-known observation that we live in "a climate of trust," we may ask if we live in a climate of dependency. I'm persuaded that we do, or if this sounds more palatable to adherents of liberalism, I'm persuaded that we live in a climate of interdependency, as Iris Marion Young argues in her selection. The point to which each selection so effectively contributes is that each of us is subject to care; as Kittay and Feder say in the introduction, as children we are all dependent upon the care of others. More, the title calls attention to the work and well-being of not just the object of care, but the care-giver, the subject to that object, and many of the contributors argue that women are traditionally caregivers, offering valuable evidence that women do most of the unpaid care-work of the world.

This interdisciplinary anthology succeeds compelling and convincingly at the challenge of arguing for the central role of dependency in understanding human agency, sociopolitical philosophy and policy, and ethical obligations. The latter ultimately includes ethical obligations of society to caregivers of dependent humans, ethical obligations of caregivers to dependent humans, and even ethical obligations of dependents on the earth to the planet upon which they depend. By the end of the last selection, one is impressed with the importance of attending to so many persons' inequality and vulnerability in forming correct conceptions of freedom, equality, and agency. The wonder is that there are not more such collections.

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