

Disregard and Dependency

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A RESPONSE TO Javier Hidalgo (2013), “Do Employers Have Obligations to Pay Their Workers a Living Wage?” *Bus Ethics J Rev* 1(11): 69–75.

ABSTRACT

Although Hidalgo (2013) accurately identifies mine as a moralized account of dependence, he misconstrues the role it plays in my (2008) argument. A specified duty of beneficence is not based on the dependency of one person on another, but on the idea that our relationships with others provide the opportunity to disregard specific others’ basic needs. Hidalgo (2013: 74) thus misattributes to me the view that “relationships of dependence activate special obligations.” Only by conflating my argument for a specified duty of beneficence with my use of dependency to limit and clarify the extent of these demands, does my argument appear circular.

I WOULD LIKE to thank Javier Hidalgo (2013) for taking the time to comment on my (2008) article conceptualizing a form of exploitation and to thank the editors of the *Business Ethics Journal Review* for providing this space in which to respond to Hidalgo’s comments and to clarify my view.

Hidalgo accurately notes that I endorse a moralized account of dependence in my paper. The descriptive account of dependence is problematic as it holds that the mere experience of dependency creates

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an obligation, no matter the reason for that dependence. As Hidalgo correctly argues, if I foolishly fail to take steps to provide for myself when I've been warned that a benefactor will cease support at a later date, my failure to protect myself does not necessarily create an obligation on the part of my benefactor.

My use of a moralized account of dependence, Hidalgo charges, leaves me with a circular argument as to why employers owe their employees a living wage in some situations. As he frames it (2013: 74), my argument can be reduced to:

Person A has an obligation to person B to provide B with material support for B's needs if B is dependent on A and B is dependent on A if A has an obligation to provide B with material support for B's needs.

In making this claim for the circularity of my view, Hidalgo misunderstands the role of what he calls the moralized dependency thesis in my argument. I argue that our general duty of beneficence toward others can become specified toward specific others through our interactions with those others, including interactions where one person makes use of another as in the case of mutually beneficial exploitation. My argument for a specified duty of beneficence rests on the idea that we have a general duty to address the needs of others. The failure to address the needs of others with whom we enter into relationships of use (as well as other relationships) transforms a general disregard for the needs of others into a disregard for the needs of a specific person. The moral basis for this claim can be found in the idea that

This disregard can take the form of a use of another as a mere means, where a particular person's need are disregarded in preference to an overriding concern with the benefit to oneself that can be derived from one's interaction with her" (Snyder 2008: 396).

A specified duty of beneficence is not based on the dependency of one person on another, then, but rather on the idea that our relationships with others provide the opportunity to disregard specific others' basic needs. Thus, Hidalgo (2013: 71) misstates my view when he writes that, "Snyder argues that relationships of dependence activate special obligations."

What, then, is the role of the dependency thesis? I argue that the degree of dependency of one person on another is one factor that helps to determine the type and depth of the relationship between persons and so helps determine how much the general duty of beneficence is specified toward a particular other person. As others' needs can be quite great and the specified duty of beneficence seemingly extremely demanding as a result, the degree of dependency of one person on another puts a limit on these demands in keeping with the type and depth of relationship between persons. That is, dependency is a factor to be used in determining when a person's actions count as disregard for the basic needs of a particular other person. While other factors can determine the nature of a relationship, dependency will be central to employment relationships as employment typically serves to meet the material needs of the employee through wages. As I argue in my paper, other factors help to determine the specification of the duty of beneficence as well. These include requirements of what I call 'reasonability', including the capacity of the benefactor to live a flourishing life and the goal of a decent minimum of flourishing for all persons executed in non-ideal, real world conditions.

I do not go into detail on when norms are suspect in my discussion of the moralized account of dependency or what I call normatively adjusted prospective dependence. In my example, I discuss a feeling of dependency by a man on his wife for a clean house and freshly cooked meals at all times. Such a norm can be suspect as it can rely of oppressive gender norms, and other norms could be found suspect on other grounds. I do not offer an account of when norms are oppressive, though such accounts exist elsewhere (see, e.g., Young 1990). The point here is that the claim that employers 'should' provide support in the moralized dependency thesis is not empty, but rather makes the positive claim that some expectations of support violate values such as non-oppression. On these grounds they are suspect.

My argument for a specified duty of beneficence and my use of dependency to limit and clarify the extent of these demands should not be conflated, then. The first is an argument for why we have a duty to meet the needs of specific others, and the other is an elaboration of this argument, limiting its demands and interpreting when a failure to benefit specific others should be understood as disregard for their needs.

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