

# Dependence

Sarah Benton

Dependence and care are part of the human condition

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**W**e are all dependent, none more so than the rich and powerful, who could not maintain their status without an army of servants. Mrs Thatcher liked to say she did her own housework, which seems unlikely. Did she really hump the vacuum cleaner around while her husband snored gently?<sup>1</sup>

The rich also have dependants - indeed their wealth might be measured by how many dependants (those who need their protection) they have, although their staff have largely been outsourced from their personal households in modern times.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of this it is the relatively rich and famous who pour contempt on the 'dependency culture' of the poor, as though they themselves survive in a state of hermetic self-sufficiency. They think dependency means you directly rely on the state for housing or income. It does not mean your dependency on others to enhance your status, to wash and iron and put away your clothes, to buy, cook and store your food, to drive you to your office, to do your tax returns and arrange your diary.

Poor health can be a source of dependency. Wealth protects you from this, but poverty undermines health:

A report from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) and Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) paints a bleak picture of the wellbeing of children in low-income households. Among the problems cited are poor growth in children, whose parents cannot afford healthy food or to take them to medical appointments, respiratory illnesses being caused or exacerbated by cold, damp housing, and mental health problems resulting from financial stress.<sup>3</sup>

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I have a chronic illness which does not appear to be income-related: at least, googling produced no analysis of the relation between income and developing MS. A study of fifteen countries with the highest rates of MS found it to be highest in Canada and lowest in Germany. It is North European descent that is said to matter. Though I am of Sephardic Jewish descent, sunny Portugal via Gibraltar, on my father's side, my maternal grandfather was from Scotland, which has the highest rate of MS in the UK.

I am highly dependent on both the state and a network of good-hearted friends. I have a caring and proficient GP of whom I am very fond, and a caring and highly knowledgeable consultant of whom I am also very fond. This is my good fortune. I have met and known of consultants who appear to be repelled by the human body (though usually such medics are siphoned off to the machine-operating side of medical care). I would say I am dependent on both my GP (who phones me up if she hasn't seen me for too long) and my consultant, as someone who has some idea of what's going on. Having a chronic illness can be acutely lonely. The illness is locked into your body. It can't be shared.

My partner at the time I was diagnosed had the most vivid dream of his life some time later: he was running an Olympic race, was about to win, then suddenly had to give up the race to go back to the start to rescue me from a fire. He actually fled some months later. The next relationship began as a brief, opportunistic affair. Some weeks later he rang me from America and said he had spent the time acquiring what information he could about MS. I fell in love completely and absolutely, and consequently was rather mad for a while. At around the same time, one of my closest friends developed a rare cancer; initially successfully treated surgically, then the damn disease returned. She fell in love with her consultant and was quite convinced he was in love with her. With this happy delusion she put space between herself and her family, and on her last afternoon of her life, which I spent with her at the hospital, this great love affair is what she talked about. A form of protective madness.

I imagine dependence on GP and hospital care is a significant problem in the health service, although most consultants are protected by a cordon of GPs and women staff. However, their aim, a friend who is a retired GP tells me, is to provide treatments that make you as independent as possible.

I am also partly dependent on the state financially. This is where my life is most implicated in the warfare over 'dependency culture'. The idea of an under-class

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permanently dependent on state benefits was propagated by American political scientist Charles Murray in 1984.<sup>4</sup> In a section entitled 'The Law of Unintended Rewards', he asserted that, 'Any social transfer increases the net value of being in the condition that prompted the transfer' - i.e., the poor gain by remaining poor in order to continue receiving state benefits. This provided the respectable argument for the Thatcher government's assault on social security benefits, which has been continued by successive governments to this day.

John Moore, Thatcher's Secretary of State for Social Services from 1987 to 1989, first introduced the idea of 'welfare dependence' into postwar British discourse following a 'fact-finding trip' to the United States.<sup>5</sup> Launching a major attack on the post-war welfare consensus, Moore argued that 'a welfare state worthy of the name aims ... to widen the understanding that dependency is debilitating and that the best kind of help is that which gives people the will and ability to help themselves'.<sup>6</sup> As Jordan argues, 'these words were not idly chosen': the idea of people helping themselves was code for the introduction into Britain of US-style workfare schemes, which forced the unemployed to work for their benefits.

People propounding such schemes tend to view the dependency of the poor from afar, with tailored contempt (for if all dependency were disdained, where would they be?). They are ignorant of the price paid to receive state benefits. There is the endless waiting (why should the poor care? They can pay with their time). Then there are all the humiliations as you are processed through the system, which itself has changed constantly since the 1980s.

My own initial attempt to get Disability Living Allowance (DLA), as it was then called, was dismissed with alacrity by the Department for Work and Pensions. I think they automatically dismiss all claims made directly by the person in need and only take notice if a professional agency is involved. In my case the professional agency I then resorted to was my friend, the much missed, immensely warm and knowledgeable Mary MacIntosh. After years as an eminent sociologist she retired and worked as a volunteer for the Citizens' Advice Bureau. She knew how to fill in the forms. *Everything* has to be spelled out - can you clean your own teeth, eat on your own, do up a zip. I felt humiliated, suppressed a feeling of outrage that the state should demand such information of me, and complied. She was right. I was awarded DLA at a time when I had been refused unemployment benefit because to receive it I had to say I would do any job available. I had said - at this point I was already visibly

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dependent on a stick for walking around - well, obviously, I can't stack shelves at Tesco. I was told sharply I therefore could not receive unemployment benefit (despite over thirty years of National Insurance payments). The DWP does not acknowledge people who want work as editors, proof readers, journalists, and at that time I was too tired and defeated to hassle for such work myself. I was instructed to apply for what I knew as sickness benefit (it was called something like get-out-of-your-bed-and-walk at the time), to keep down the unemployment figures; thence began my forced journey to DLA and a particular form of dependence on the state.

I was glad to have the financial stability but minded the injunction that if anything changed in my condition I had to inform the DWP. This is a legal means of preventing a life of dependence on benefits. There is an atmosphere and reproach and grudge in the department's communications. The only claim on the state which is deserving is that for a state pension, for we all of us must grow old unless death comes first. All the rest of us are the undeserving poor who must be made to feel bad on some pretext or another. I felt neither grateful for nor guilty about my welfare dependence - something that is so excoriated by the right in the USA and UK as a sign of personal and national degeneracy. For them, the person, like the nation, should have the character of proud independence.

Iain Duncan Smith, Secretary for Work and Pensions from 2010 to 2016, was also strongly opposed to the 'culture of welfare dependency' and believed that the welfare state was 'broken'.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, the Coalition government of 2010 to 2015 continued the project begun by New Labour of reducing the numbers of people living on what was once called 'incapacity benefit'. Its efforts focused on introducing more workfare initiatives, which were targeted on groups who they thought more likely to spend a long time living on state benefits - such as the disabled and chronically sick. They argued that the Disability Living Allowance could act as a 'barrier' to work, and encouraged dependency.

DLA was subsequently changed to PIP (personal independence payments, viz, payments that would return the person to proud independence), and the government decided that everyone claiming DLA would have to be re-assessed. The re-assessment work was awarded to two companies, one of which was ATOS, a multinational digital services corporation with a long record of securing outsourced government work on the processing of welfare claims.

Atos actively recruited nurses from British hospitals to do the assessments (one

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reason for today's crippling shortage of nurses). The one who visited me asked when I 'planned to return to work'. The document in her hand contained the information that I was 67 and had progressive multiple sclerosis. I did get a letter, no doubt produced by an ATOS computer, telling me 'Tina' had looked at my case and decided I should receive PIP, signed 'Tina'. ATOS and Capita, the other assessment company involved in the operation, between them received over half a billion pounds - £507,000,000 - from 2013, when PIP was launched, to 2016, according to the *Daily Mirror*.

All governments, it seems, are prepared to spend any amount of public money in order to rid themselves of dependants. If there was once a social contract, the government has broken it, on the high moral ground of prohibiting the moral degeneracy of the state of dependence. So, led by the *Daily Mail*, it does its best to bring out the worst in everybody. Snitch on your neighbour, write a poison pen letter, you know you want to:

## *National Benefit Fraud Hotline*

Call the National Benefit Fraud Hotline to report benefit fraud to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

You can also report suspected benefit fraud online or by post.

## **The social curses and gifts of illness**

A complete stranger stood very - too - close to me at a party and told me what diet would cure my condition. In fact she hectored me as though I had been too dim-witted to realise that it was my diet that had made me ill. An acquaintance backed me into a corner because she absolutely knew I would be cured by what I heard as 'radio'. It's only now, twenty years on, that I realise she probably said radium, which is used to treat brain cancer.

A friend of mine, a serious scientist, was enthused by the discovery by a young friend of his that aspirin+coca-cola+some secret ingredient would cure MS. This appears to be a magical/mumbo-jumbo formula that is also advocated as an aphrodisiac, head-ache cure and 'a great way to get high'.<sup>8</sup> Because MS is so weird - like Lupus, it can manifest in any symptom in any part of your body (almost), so that depending on MS authorities gives you no hope - why not grab a passing whim?

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That also can create the feeling of being an independent pioneer, and free you from your dependence on GPs and hospital doctors.

Members of family have had distinctly different reactions to my being ill. My father could not talk about it. My mother thought I was making it up to get attention - and in hazy old age still says that.

Her own mother was a Christian Scientist, an organisation constructed on a most pernicious belief. Its founder, Mary Baker Eddy, argued that sickness is an illusion that can be corrected by prayer. Her 1875 book, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, became Christian Science's central text - along with the Bible - and by 2001 had sold over nine million copies.

What damage that has done to all those with untreatable illnesses.

It has also produced among my siblings fear, care and envy. Envy? Journalist Stuart Heritage surprised himself during an eye operation that he thinks has left him blind. 'Ahhh, what peace'.

The panic I had anticipated - the sweat-drenched, all-consuming fear that this was it and all was lost and my sight would never return - was nowhere to be seen. Instead, against all reasoning, I was overcome with an intense calm. 'This gets me out of so much stuff', I remember thinking.<sup>9</sup>

And I remember the words about having MS that popped up in my head one day: 'the emblem of exemption'. Chiefly, I could honourably NOT strive for position, for the top, to be the best. What a relief.

The most perceptive analysis of this was written by Karin Stephen (married to the brother of Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf). She posited that an illness, however disagreeable, was a defence against something much more frightening which threatened to overwhelm or destroy the self. The person produced symptoms which were not fake but originated in the unconscious not the organic processes of the body.<sup>10</sup>

Having an illness, or chronic condition, is likely to give you a new identity. Before the medical diagnosis I had diagnosed myself as an hysteric, limbs that tingled for six weeks and suddenly reverted to normal, days when my legs would suddenly give way,

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then carry on as though it never happened. After diagnosis - oh, all that time wasted thinking one is hysterical - one has to decide how to be a person with a chronic, and worsening, condition. It's up to the patient whether she will live this identity to the full, adopting a life of permanent invalidism, or treat it flippantly as a minor handicap.

## Giving and receiving

I returned to what I now see as another form of social contract, one much more personal, though with political underpinnings. This was with friends. Two in particular, Lynne Segal and Mandy Merck, pressed me to accept financial assistance from our shared network of friends. I balked at this. I was embarrassed, a little demeaned, and also fearful that friends would exchange a financial contribution for actual lived friendship, viz spending time with me. After the third proposal at a supper in a Highbury restaurant, I accepted. I suddenly realised that I was being ungracious. Friends, out of the goodness of their hearts, wanted to help me, to give to me. I was snarling No, because receiving with grace is harder than giving. (I am always amused by that Q&A section in the *Saturday Guardian*, inherited from the now-defunct *Independent on Sunday*, which asks the famous (who are thereby also rich) whether it is better to give or to receive. The rich and famous always reply, piously, oh, better to give.)

Receiving - and I have received so much - has its own demands. I do not feel grateful to the state, though I was the first of my family to be born into the 'cradle to grave' welfare state. I feel none of the gratitude for its benefits expressed by the elderly poor when the first state pension was introduced in 1908.<sup>11</sup> It is not difficult to be grateful for professional help, delivered with kindness. But the nature of gratitude towards giving friends is complex. (It is notable that psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, author of a paper on envy and gratitude is much better known for her early writing on envy than her later view of gratitude 'as an expression of love and thus of the life instinct, and as the antithesis of envy' as the Melanie Klein Trust puts it.<sup>12</sup>)

The recognition that the feeling of gratitude is a blessing, transforming, is something that came to me quite suddenly.

I was bedridden with some broken bone. I was more dependent than usual. My friend Barbara Taylor came round to help. I heard her fossicking in my fridge and I was filled with outrage. What are you doing in my fridge which contains my

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stuff? And quite suddenly - an epiphany - she was fossicking in my fridge because she cared about me, she wanted to know if I had enough to eat. As sudden and as absolute as the outrage was a blessed feeling of gratitude. How lovely this felt. This was the antonym of pride or resentment and it was a wonderful gift. There is no political literature on gratitude. Rather, political discourse depends on creating resentment: someone, somewhere, is taking advantage of you, you mug. Naturally, those whose status should be ensured by the state but think the state is undermining it, feel resentment, which is used by political bodies to build a case against immigrants/the rich/welfare dependants etc. Only those with secure status expect workers/immigrants/the poor to feel gratitude for state largesse.

I have learned that being 'fiercely independent' (as it is always put, the 'fierce' perhaps reflecting the feeling of besiegement and anger the dependant may feel) is a graceless rebuffing of those who care, and want to care for you. This has to be a two-way negotiation - how much care do I want and am I able to receive, how much can you offer and on what terms. I have learned that dependence is only a feasible way of life if people do what they say they're going to do at approximately the same time as they've said they'll do it. Otherwise you are left in a state ...

For a literature on gratitude we have to turn to psychoanalysis and to religion. Oliver Sacks, in his short book on gratitude completed shortly before he died, is quietly grateful that he, aged 80, is not 'trapped in a tragic and minimal existence' like so many of his contemporaries, and that he is now freed from the 'factitious urgencies of earlier days'. He has the humility that is the prerequisite of gratitude.<sup>13</sup> Melanie Klein is the most explicit writer on gratitude, which, in typically Kleinian way, she relates to gratification at the breast. The thus gratified child is able to experience and express gratitude and generosity.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, religion itself is posited on a state of dependence. All religions require submission to god, a reversion to being a child in the presence of Our Father or commutation into being a servant of Our Lord. This established, there follows a huge litany of praise and thanksgiving, again in all religions. The book of Psalms, thought to have been compiled between 1064 and 444 BCE, is accepted, again by all the monotheistic religions, as one of the supreme expressions of gratitude and praise (the absolute opposite of envy and resentment). In Hebrew, psalms are *Tehillim*, meaning 'praises', which are predicated on gratitude to god for his/her blessings.

This new blessing of gratitude changed my life, my relation to friends, to those



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working in state social and medical services. Because it allowed me to accept gifts it allowed me to accept my dependence on others.

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## Notes

1. No-one in fact knows how many domestic staff keep a PM going. Their number and wages appear to be a state secret, despite requests under the Freedom of Information Act. The Queen has 426 full-time staff at Buckingham Palace. The American President and family rely on ninety-six people in full-time jobs in the 'service' section in the White House, and 250 part-timers.
2. 'The greater the [mediaeval] lord, the more ostentatiously lavish his expenditure. His greatness, moreover, was reckoned in terms of his dependants - those who wore his livery and would maintain his cause on the battlefield or in the law court'. Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution*, Peregrine 1958, p219.
3. *Guardian*, 11.5.17: [www.theguardian.com/society/2017/may/11/poverty-blighting-health-of-many-uk-children-paediatricians-warn](http://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/may/11/poverty-blighting-health-of-many-uk-children-paediatricians-warn).
4. Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980*, Basic Books 1984.
5. See John David Jordan, 'The Rage of Well-fed Lions: The Economic Foundations of UK Welfare Claimant Demonisation in the Neoliberal Era', *French Journal of British Studies* XIX(I), 2014.
6. John Moore Interview, *Sunday Times*, 28.9.87, cited in Jordan.
7. For more on the welfare reforms of the Coalition government see <https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/free-book/WelfareReform.pdf>.
8. Snopes: [www.snopes.com/fact-check/painkiller-combination/](http://www.snopes.com/fact-check/painkiller-combination/).
9. Stuart Heritage, 'My life was so hectic that I welcomed getting ill', *Guardian*, 12.5.18: [www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/may/13/my-life-was-so-hectic-that-i-welcomed-getting-ill](http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/may/13/my-life-was-so-hectic-that-i-welcomed-getting-ill).
10. Karin Stephen, *The Wish to Fall Ill*, CUP, re-issued 2014.
11. 'They were suddenly rich! Independent for life! When they went to the Post Office to draw it, tears of gratitude would run down the cheeks of some, and they would say "God bless you, miss" and there were flowers from their gardens and apples from their trees for the girl who merely handed them the money.' Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford*.
12. *Furthering the psychoanalytic theory and technique of Melanie Klein*, Melanie Klein Trust: [www.melanie-klein-trust.org.uk/envy](http://www.melanie-klein-trust.org.uk/envy).
13. Oliver Sacks, *Gratitude*, Knopf 2015, pp9, 11.
14. Melanie Klein, 'Envy and Gratitude' [1957], essay included in book of the same name, Virago Press 1988, p189.