

Is coercion objectionable because it is inegalitarian?

Abstract: Coercion is morally objectionable: it's bad to be coerced and it's wrong to coerce people. But why is coercion objectionable? In this paper, I advance an egalitarian account of what's objectionable about coercion. The account is rooted in the idea that certain relationships, like those of master to slave and lord to peasant, are relationships of subordination or domination. These relationships are morally objectionable. Moreover, such relationships are in part constituted by asymmetries of power. A master subordinates a slave because the master has more power over the slave than vice versa. The account says that coercion is objectionable because it creates such asymmetries of power, and so creates relationships of subordination. I show how this account can address its most serious challenges, and how it can illuminate a wide range of cases that seem problematic in the same way as is coercion.

Keywords: Coercion · domination · relational equality · blackmail · exploitation

Introduction

Imagine you are walking through a park. It's night-time, but it's not too late: the sun only set a couple of hours ago. Suddenly, you see a gun in your face. A man has appeared from nowhere, or so it seems to you. He is brandishing a weapon and demanding your wallet. He's telling you not to be stupid, "just hand over the money" he says. You don't give much thought to being stupid: you are utterly terrified, and you would do whatever he told you. You very quickly comply with his demand. Notice that when this man points his gun at you, your will is subjugated to his. You are subordinated or dominated by him. You are rendered servile by the mugger's threat and are wholly in his power. Intuitively, this is at least part of what is bad about your situation and part of what is wrong with the mugging: the mugger has subjected you to a relationship of subordination.

The aim in this paper is to spell out and defend the intuition that the objection to the mugger's behavior, and the objection to coercion more generally, is that it subordinates its victim. The idea is connected to a claim of Niko Kolodny's. He claims that the "worry about state coercion is itself a deeper worry about subordination" (Kolodny 2017, 114). The thought is that some relationships, such as that of "slave to master, servant to lord, Brahmin to untouchable" (109) are relationships of subordination and that these relationships are in part constituted by "asymmetric power" (ibid): what it for a slave to be subordinated to a master is, at least in part, for the master to have much more power over the slave than vice versa. Kolodny's claim is that our objection to coercion *by the state* is an objection to such relationships of subordination. In this paper, my aim is to spell out and defend a broader version of that idea. The broader idea is that our objection to coercion *in general* is an objection to being subordinated. When the mugger points his gun at you, the reason he has wronged you is that he puts you under his power. Coercion is wrong, the idea goes, because it subordinates its victims.¹ Let's call this idea the egalitarian account of coercive wrongs.

There seem to be insurmountable problems with this account. First, there is the problem of temporality. The issue is that, although the mugger's victim is temporarily under the power of the mugger, they might be enduringly much more powerful than the mugger. Imagine the victim is the

¹ For a similar idea in the neo-republican tradition, see Lovett and Pettit (2018, 375).

mayor of the city or the chief of a large bank. The mugger is not a mayor; they are probably disempowered by society's social and political structures. In this case, it seems that the mugger's victim is simply far more powerful than the mugger is. But then it seems tendentious to describe the situation as one in which the victim is under the power of the mugger. When we get just the tiniest bit of perspective, it seems that the mugger is under the power of their victim. Their pointing the gun at their victim is just a way to, briefly and imperfectly, equalize the power relationship between the two. More generally, the egalitarian account of our objection to coercion seems to imply that when one person is much less powerful overall than another person, there is no objection to that person coercing the other person. But this is absurd; mugging the mayor is still wrong. So the account looks untenable.

Second, there is the problem of potentiality. The issue here is that to have power over someone is to have the ability to affect them in some sort of way. One can have this ability, like any ability, without exercising it. But it seems like the mugger stands in the exact same position to their potential victim when they walk by them, gun concealed, than when they wave their gun at the victim. In the former case, they are able to brandish their weapon; they could demand the potential victim give them their wallet, and if they did so the victim would quickly succumb to their threat. So, on the face of it, it looks like they have just as much power over them in this case then in the case where they actually do brandish the weapon. But it is only in the latter case that they really wrong the victim in the way that coercion distinctively wrongs people. More generally, the egalitarian account seems to imply that merely being able to threaten people is as objectionable as actually threatening them. But that is absurd: our objection to coercion is activated only when people actually issue coercive threats, not simply when they are capable of doing so. So the account seems unsustainable.²

I think both these problems can be solved. My aim in this paper is to show how. What we need is some careful thought about the kind of power asymmetries that give rise to inequalitarian relationships. The first key thought is that having asymmetric power over someone at one time does not offset being under their asymmetric power at a different time. The latter still constitutes a relationship of subordination. This solves the problem of temporality. The second key thought is that how much power one has over someone is sensitive to how costly it is to affect what they do. Moreover, threatening people with violence is almost always costly. So when one has threatened someone, one faces lower costs to affecting what they do, and this gives one more power over them. The aim of this paper is to spell out these ideas. Here's the plan. We'll start, in Section 1, by saying a little bit more about why we might want an egalitarian account of coercive wrongs: autonomy-based accounts of such wrongs are hard to sustain. Then, in Section 2, I'll lay out and motivate the ideas behind the egalitarian account. In Section 3, we'll see how they solve the problems of temporality and potentiality. And finally, in Section 4, we'll see how the egalitarian account can make sense of what's wrong with blackmail, exploitation, withholding aid and compulsion. Overall, this provides a strong case for the egalitarian account of coercive wrongs.

I'll make two final framing comments. First, my focus is on what is wrong with coercion, rather than on what coercion is. There is a large literature on the nature of coercion, a literature that tries to give necessary and sufficient conditions for something being a case of coercion.³ I don't intend to contribute to this metaphysical project, but instead to the normative project of identifying the moral objection to coercion.⁴ Second, however, it'll be useful to have a working definition of coercion to proceed with. I'll understand coercion in terms of threats of violence. On this view, you coerce someone when you threaten to inflict violence on them if they don't do something. This is probably not a very good account of what coercion is. Plausibly, one can coerce someone without threatening them with violence. But it captures the paradigmatic case of getting mugged

² Richardson (2002, 33) and Gädeke (2020, 200–204) both also raise this kind of problem.

³ This work flows from Nozick's extremely influential (1969) paper.

⁴ This approach is now common. See Pallikkathayil (2011, 2), Sachs (2013, 63–64) and White (2017).

in a park, and it captures what's so distinctive about the state-citizen relationships: the state threatens its citizens with violence if they disobey it. Thus, this account identifies some of the most important cases of coercion. In Section 4 we'll explore cases that go beyond such threats of violence. But it'll usually suffice for our purposes to think of coercion as threatened violence. With that clarified, let us explore autonomy-based accounts of coercive wrongs.

1. Coercion and Autonomy

Equality is one great moral and political value. The egalitarian account of coercive wrongs construes the problem with coercion in terms of this value. But another great moral and political value is autonomy. Autonomy is the ability to be author of our own lives. And one might think that we obviously do not need to invoke equality in order to explain what is wrong with coercion; coercion straightforwardly violates autonomy. There are two ways this view can be spelt out. First, one might observe that one's autonomy is a function of what options one has available to one. If one has fewer decent options, one is less able to make an autonomous choice. The mugger reduces your options, and so impairs your autonomy. Second, one might observe that one's autonomy requires a certain independence from the influence of others. If one's choices are driven entirely by the influence of someone else, for example because one is manipulated, one is also less able to make an autonomous choice. The mugger makes your choice dependent on his command, so impairs your autonomy. My aim in this section is to indicate why neither of these options captures the entirety of our objection to coercion. Coercion is not wrong solely because it impairs autonomy; it is wrong for some other reason too.

Let's first consider the idea that coercion reduces the coercee's options.⁵ The underlying thought is that one's autonomy is partly a function of how many acceptable or good enough options one perceives oneself to have.⁶ To evaluate this, we first need to see how good your options seem to you. Some options fall below some important threshold of acceptability or decency: being tortured, killing an innocent or getting shot are all examples of such options. The idea is that when one has many decent options one can choose autonomously. When one's options are all or almost all indecent one cannot make a very autonomous choice. How does this apply to coercion? Well the mugger makes it seem to you that you only have one decent option: to give them your wallet. And, more generally, the idea is that coercers make it seem to their victims that the option of not complying with the coercer's commands is not an acceptable option; it is too burdensome. This leaves the coercer with very few decent options. Thus, coercion impairs autonomy.

There are two issues with this view. On the one hand, the restriction in one's options could just as well be brought about by natural forces as by interpersonal threat. Imagine you are walking in a (national) park, and you get hopelessly lost. Night falls, and it starts to get cold. You won't make it through the night without a fire. But to start a fire you need something very flammable, and it just so happens that the money in your wallet is the only thing that'll do the trick. Here you have no decent option but to give your money up unto the flames. But this situation just doesn't seem very similar to one in which you must give you money up unto a man brandishing a gun. Specifically, this situation is not bad for you in the same sort of way as getting mugged is bad for you. The fact that your options were reduced by natural forces, rather than by an individual, makes a difference. This can be well-explained if part of the problem with coercion is an egalitarian problem. When the cold makes you give up your money, you are not in an inegalitarian relationship with the weather. The weather is an inanimate thing; you cannot have any social relationship with it. In contrast, this all seems inexplicable if coercion merely diminishes your options.

⁵ This sort of view is also discussed by Wollner (2011), Sachs (2013) and White (2017). But my objections to it are somewhat different to theirs.

⁶ Sachs (2013, 71–72) addresses this sort of view by saying that being threatened doesn't affect one's actual options. Yet it may well affect our perceived options. Hence, the view is better articulated in terms of perceived options.

On the other hand, there are many cases in which restricting someone else's options doesn't wrong them. Imagine you're the best candidate for a job. If you apply it will restrict other people's options: it means they won't be offered the job. And this may well leave them with few decent options; they might have only one or two good alternatives to this job. Still, you don't wrong your competition by applying to such jobs. The same goes for opening a coffee shop, proposing to your paramour or training hard in athletic competitions. All may reduce other people's options. You might put other coffee shops out of business, you might frustrate the hopes of your romantic competition, you might prevent your fellow athletes from being able to win. Yet you have very little reason not to do such things, and certainly you don't wrong your competitors by doing them. So it is not true, generally, that restricting people's options wrong them. This makes it hard to see why coercion would be wrong simply because it restricts people's options. At most, one might think that restrictions of people's (perceived) options that are *antecedently* impermissible are especially wrong. But then we need a prior explanation of why coercive option restrictions are impermissible when other option restrictions are not. The options-restriction account cannot be the whole story.

Let's turn to the second idea. The thought here is that autonomy requires our decisions to be appropriately independent of other people; coercion impairs this independence. This line of thought stems, to a large extent, from Raz. As he puts, the idea, "[c]oercion and manipulation subject the will of one person to that of another. That violates his independence and is inconsistent with his autonomy" (Raz 1986, 378).⁷ The idea is that when you're mugged, your compliance with the will of the mugger makes you dependent on that mugger in an objectionable way. The key problem for this view lies in distinguishing objectionable from anodyne ways in which we can influence other people. Manipulation and coercion (and deception and indoctrination) are objectionable ways. But many kinds of interpersonal influence are entirely harmless. We can get people to do something by persuading them, advising them, encouraging them, paying them, galvanizing them or requesting them to do the thing. None of these forms of interpersonal influence (need to) impair their autonomy. The challenge is to give an account of independence in which coercion impairs independence, but these other forms of interpersonal influence do not.

We can crystalize this challenge by considering concrete versions of the view. In truth, we don't have a surfeit of options here; little progress has been made in articulating independence since Raz wrote about it. But the most prominent proposal is probably that of A.J. Julius (2013). He thinks when I "(do y, intend by y'ing to bring it about that you do x, and fail to believe with warrant that, for some reasons R independent of me, my y'ing facilitates your [doing x because you take R as giving you sufficient reason to x])" (ibid, 363), then I threaten your independence. The core of this claim is the notion of a reason 'independent of me.' He says that "a reason to x is independent of A if the fact that this reason counts in favor of x'ing does not depend for its being a fact on attitudes and actions in virtue of which some person A counts as trying to bring it about that x is done" (ibid). This is, admittedly, a bit of a mouthful. But the basic idea is simple. The idea is that when I get you to do something, and your reason to do that thing is grounded by my trying to get you to do it, then your independence is impaired. To apply this view to coercion, the thought is that when a mugger gets you to give him your wallet, your reason to give him your wallet is grounded by his threatening you. That threat just consists in him trying to get you to give him his wallet, and you have the reason because you were threatened. So, the mugger makes your choice dependent on him and that, the idea goes, is how the mugger impairs your autonomy.

Unfortunately, this view fails to meet the challenge we've just raised. To see this, simply consider requests. Suppose you know your brother is struggling financially and is at risk of losing their house. He asks you for help. The fact he's asked you for help grounds a reason to help him. You wouldn't have this reason had he not asked you. Indeed, it might well be impermissible to help him without having received the request: he would see such help as condescending. In this case, your reason to

⁷ Wollner (2011), White (2017) and Kolodny (2017) also discuss this sort of view. Julius (2013), as we'll see, endorses it.

give your brother a loan is very much dependent on an action, him asking you, which consists in him trying to get you to give him a loan. Yet your brother doesn't wrong you by asking for a loan. Certainly, he does nothing at all like what a mugger does to you by pointing a gun in your face: a request is not a firearm. So Julius' account of independence does not properly distinguish anodyne from objectionable sorts of influence. Julius' account of independence is of course just one possible account (although the paucity of such accounts in the literature is striking). Yet it highlights the more general issue: it is very difficult to give an account of independence on which coercion impairs independence, but requests, advice, encouragement or rational persuasion do not. Yet, without such an account, we cannot take an independence-based theory of coercive wrongs very seriously.

Does this mean that independence has no bearing on autonomy? It does not. Consider manipulation. Suppose a car rental agent tricks you into buying insurance by vividly describing a crash. Here, it seems the autonomy of your decision is impaired. We can capture this by noting that the rental agent is taking advantage of your rational failings: they are taking advantage of your tendency to overestimate the risks of well-described possibilities. They get you to buy insurance by inducing in you an unfitting assessment of the risks. This also happens in deception and indoctrination. A deceiver induces in you a false, and thereby unfitting, belief. An indoctrinator induces in you unjustified, and thereby unfitting, beliefs. In all these cases, someone affects what you do by inducing in you an unfitting attitude. Thus, generally, we can say that when someone gets you to do something by inducing in you some unfitting attitude, they violate your autonomy. This captures the independence condition on autonomy.⁸ But nothing like that happens in cases of coercion. When one is coerced, it is often perfectly rational to do as the coercer wants one to do. The coercer is relying on their victim to behave rationally: they aren't trying to induce in them any unfitting attitudes. This exacerbates the problem for independence-based theories of coercive wrongs. We can straightforwardly capture the intuitive idea that independence matters to autonomy. But the most natural way to do so is incompatible with independence-based theories of coercive wrongs.

Let me sum up. It doesn't seem possible to capture the entirety of the objection to coercion in terms of how coercion impairs autonomy. Versions of this view that say coercion is wrong because it impairs the coerced's independence are implausible. On the most defensible account of independence, coercion does not impair one's independence. The view that coercion is wrong because it restricts people's perceived options seems somewhat more tenable. But it faces formidable challenges, and in any case cannot be the whole story. For one thing, it fails to elucidate the difference between natural and manmade restrictions of your options. Thus, an autonomy-based account of coercive wrongs is not satisfactory on its own. Yet, as I've said, autonomy is one of our great political values; equality is the other. So, it is reasonable to explore whether we can think of the problem with coercion in terms of equality.⁹

2. Inegalitarian Relationships

The egalitarian account says that coercion is wrong because it puts the coerced in an inegalitarian relationship with the coercer. In this section, I am going to explicate such relationships. The best way to get a grip on the relevant relationships is through thinking about examples. Think of the relationship between a master and a slave. This relationship is not only objectionable because the master tends to inflict violence on the slave, or because such relationships tend to cause the slave's interests to get sorely neglected. Even were the master wise and benevolent, even if they never

⁸ For this sort of view about manipulation, see Noggle (1996).

⁹ A different approach is to rest on the idea that coercion involves the threat of wrongdoing, and it is generally wrong to threaten to do wrong. For this kind of view, see Bermann (2002) and Sachs (2013). I think extant criticisms of this view are very convincing; it is often perfectly permissible to threaten wrongdoing (Anderson 2011; Kolodny 2017). Thus I omit discussion of these views in the main text.

inflicted violence on their slave and even were the slave better off under the master than they otherwise would be, their relationship would be objectionable. Inegalitarian relationships of this ilk are intrinsically problematic. There are many other examples of such relationships. Consider the relationship between husband and wife or foreman and worker in Victorian Britain. In both cases, the relationships are inegalitarian; the husband is the superior of the wife and the foreman of the worker. That makes these relationships objectionable.¹⁰

These relationships are objectionable in the sense that they're bad in themselves and people have a claim against being in them. They're bad in themselves in that it makes people's lives worse to be in inegalitarian relationships. Much like it is good for you to have good friendships and other egalitarian personal relationships, it is bad to be subordinated. And one has a claim against being subordinated. You owe it to people not to subordinate them, and you owe it to people to free them from subordination. This isn't merely a claim against the harm subordination visits upon you. Even were it overall beneficial to you to be someone's slave (because they were so wise and benevolent), you would still have a claim against enslavement. This claim is akin to the claim against being touched without your permission or being stolen from. It is not rooted directly in the ways these things harm us but is rather a fundamental moral constraint: people owe it to us not to subordinate us. Indeed, plausibly inegalitarian relationships matter to well-being because we have a claim against being subjected to them. Such relationships make people's lives worse in large part because they violate their claims. The most fundamentally important fact about inegalitarian relationships is that people owe it to us not to subject us to them.¹¹

What constitutes inegalitarian relationships? We should see these relationships as constituted, at least in part, by asymmetries of power.¹² Slavery is an inegalitarian relationship in part because the master has much more power over the slave than the slave has over the master. I propose to construe power in terms of the ability to affect actions: one has power over someone insofar as one can affect what they do.¹³ This means that, if one tries to get them to do something, this makes them more likely to do it, and if one tries to stop them from doing something, this makes them less likely to do it. Notice the "making" relationships here are causal relations: one has power over someone insofar as the probabilities of them doing certain things are causally dependent on what you try to get them to do. A master has great power over their slave because they can have an enormous affect their actions. If the master tries to get the slave to jump that makes it very likely that the slave will jump. Similarly a foreman had great power over their workers; if the foreman didn't want the workers to take a break, the workers would stay on the job. In these cases, the sort of power underpinning inegalitarian relationships can be thought of in terms of the ability to affect what people do.

There are of course alternative accounts of what power is. Perhaps the most attractive holds that power consists in the ability to affect well-being.¹⁴ On this view, one has power over someone insofar as one can influence how well their life goes. I think, however, that power over someone in this sense needn't make a relationship inegalitarian. The cases that convince me of this are cases of defiance. Imagine you are a political dissident standing up to a dictator. The dictator can throw you in jail, execute you, torture you. These are all terrible wrongdoings, and they evidently make your life much worse. The dictator threatens to visit these wrongs on you unless you confess your crimes, turn in your co-conspirators and pay homage to his majesty. Ordinary people would acquiesce, but let's imagine that you are made of far sterner stuff. You defy the dictator; you do

¹⁰ For the roots of the position in this paragraph, see Anderson (1999) and Scheffler (2003). A similar sort of idea can be found in the writings of neo-republicans, most prominently Pettit (1997).

¹¹ Here I'm following Kolodny (forthcoming).

¹² For this view, see Kolodny (2014, forthcoming).

¹³ This was the dominant view of power among social scientists writing about power mid-century. See e.g., March (1955), Dahl (1957) and Harsanyi (1962). More recently, Lovett (2010, 75) and Forst (2015) adopt essentially this position.

¹⁴ For this view, see Goldman (1972, 258) and Lukes (2005, 29–38).

not let him affect how you act. It seems to me that this sort of defiance is one way of striking against the domination of the dictator. It prevents the dictator's will from subjugating your own, and so undermines his attempt to make you his subordinate. However, it does not much sap the dictator's ability to affect your well-being; dictators can still execute defiant dissidents. So the sort of power that constitutes subordination is not just the ability to affect well-being. To be clear, I'm not denying that other senses of power may be important for certain purposes. But I suspect the kind of power that constitutes relationships of subordination is solely the ability to affect actions.

There is one crucial other factor that determines how much power you have over someone. That is how costly it is to try and get them to do something. Imagine the foreman's power over his workers is effectively overseen by a union representative. The foreman can get the worker to work through the day, without breaks, but he'll be disciplined for doing it. The union official will intercede, and the foreman will find himself out of a job. Here exercising his influence over the workers is extremely costly, and intuitively that reduces the extent to which he has power over his workers. At the least it reduces the extent to which his power creates an inegalitarian relationship. Effective union (or governmental) oversight can help draw the sting from workplace subordination. The same applies in our other examples. If a husband can only affect the behavior of his wife at great personal cost, then the power differential between them is ameliorated. If a master can only determine what their slave does at great cost to themselves, we're hesitant to think of the situation as one of slavery. The more costly it is to get someone to do something, the less power one has over people and, conversely, the less costly it is to get someone to do something, the more power one has over them.¹⁵

There is a serious question about how power asymmetries interact with time. There are, roughly, two views one could take here. On the one hand, one could endorse a time-relative view. On this view, asymmetries of power at any one time constitute an inegalitarian relationship at that time. Whenever one person has asymmetric power over another person, at that time the first person subordinates the second. On the other hand, one could endorse a complete-lives view.¹⁶ On this view, it is only asymmetries of power over people's entire lives that constitute inegalitarian relationships. Concretely, that requires us to sum up how much power A has over B at each time and how much power B has over A at each time. If these two sums are equal, then A and B are never in an inegalitarian relationship. The complete-lives view allows A's power over B at one time to be compensated by B having power over A at another time; it allows us to balance out differences of power at each time.

There seem to me decisive reasons to endorse the time-relative view. For consider the following case. Suppose that Sven and Bjørn are both twenty-year-old Vikings. Sven captures Bjørn in a raid and makes Bjørn his slave. Sven dictates the details of Bjørn's life and threatens him with violent punishment if he is disobeyed. Twenty more years pass, and Bjørn is part of a successful slave uprising. Bjørn then takes up a position of mastery over Sven. From this time, Bjørn's dictates the details of Sven's life. After a further twenty years, let's imagine, they both die peaceful deaths. The complete-lives view says there is nothing problematic, from the point of view of equality, in this situation. Over their entire lives, Sven and Bjørn have equal power over one another, and so, according to the complete-lives view, they are never in an inegalitarian relationship. Intuitively, however, that seems to me absurd. There is clearly something objectionably inegalitarian about the relationship between Sven and Bjørn. From the point of view of equality, their situation is much worse than were there never any relationships of slavery and mastery between the two. It would be better if Sven had never captured Bjørn. That is strong evidence against the complete-lives view. Thus, when choosing between these views, we should adopt the time-relative view: inequalities of power at any time constitute an inegalitarian relationship at that time.

¹⁵ For this point, see Harsanyi (1962).

¹⁶ For a related distinction, see Lippert-Rasmussen (2017, 131).

Let me sum up. On the picture I've just outlined, inegalitarian relationships are constituted by the asymmetric ability to affect people's actions. How inegalitarian one's relationship is is a function of how low cost the exercise of the ability is to the person with superior power. And, although some thinkers focus on power asymmetries that are "woven into the fabric of ongoing relationships" rather than part of "one-off" encounters (Kolodny 2017, 110) on my (time-relative) view this is a little myopic. Power asymmetries that are ongoing may be worse than momentary ones, because they create inegalitarian relationships at more times. But momentary power asymmetries are still objectionable in the exact same way: they still constitute inegalitarian relationships. Their brevity only changes the quantity of badness, not its quality. This furnishes us with all we need to defend the egalitarian account of the wrong in coercion.

Nonetheless, it is worth addressing some challenging cases for this picture. Consider, for example, teacher-student relationships. A professor has a lot more influence over what their students do than vice versa. But professors aren't in objectionably inegalitarian relationships with their students. So, one might think, power asymmetries cannot constitute inegalitarian relationships. To address this case, it's important we understand the normative significance of subordination in terms of claims. People owe it to us not to subject us to asymmetric power. This is important because this claim, like almost every claim, can be waived. Think of the claim to physical integrity. You have a claim against being punched in the face, but if you step into the boxing ring you waive that claim. When your opponent punches you, they do not wrong you. Similarly, when you voluntarily join a teacher-student relationship, you waive your claim against being subjected to asymmetric power. A similar point explains why doctor-patient relationships and certain employment relationships aren't objectionable: in all these cases the claim is waived. Of course, there are conditions on when a claim can be validly waived: one must have a certain level of practical rationality and one must have decent alternative options to validly waive a claim. And one never permanently alienates claims against subordination; one merely temporarily lifts them. But, generally, these conditions are satisfied in the case of intuitively anodyne asymmetries of power. This is why teacher-student relationships, for example, are not objectionable.

There are some anodyne power asymmetries that cannot be understood in this way. Consider parent-child relationships. Parents wield a lot more influence over what their children do than vice versa. Yet children cannot voluntarily waive their claim against subordination: they lack the rational capacities (one might think) to voluntarily waive such claims. So how do we explain why parental relationships are not deeply objectionable? The key point here is that many children's claims are relatively weak. For example, children have a much weaker claim against paternalism than do adults. This is likely for the same reason that they cannot waive claims: their cognitive limitations weaken their claim against paternalism. Likewise, plausibly the weight of one's claim against subordination depends on one's rational capacities: the less capable one is of making decisions rationally, the less weighty is one's claim. On this view, children do have some claim against subordination, but it is far less weighty than an adult's claim against subordination. It is outweighed by parent's duties to protect their child's well-being. Thus, parents need not wrong their children by wielding asymmetric power over them. This identifies some strategies for defusing potential counterexamples to the picture of inegalitarian relationships I've outlined. None of these strategies will apply in cases of coercion, but they do buttress this picture. So let us turn to its applications.

3. Coercion and Equality

Why does coercion create an inegalitarian relationship? What is it about the mugger's relationship to his victim that subordinates the victim? The answer to this is now quite straightforward. The mugger has a broad ability to control what his victim does. The mugger demands the victim give him their wallet, and so they do. But if the mugger had told the victim to jump, or run away, or do a little dance, the victim would have done these things. The victim does not have a similar level of control over what the mugger does. Thus, the relationship between the two is one of starkly

asymmetric power. But asymmetries of power constitute inequalitarian relationships; they constitute relationships of subordination. And that is why, when one is coerced, one is subordinated to the one doing the coercing. Such subordination is bad in itself, and one has a claim against being subordinated. Thus, this generates a weighty moral objection to coercion; the objection to coercion is that it subjects people to inequalitarian relationships.

We now surmount our two problems. We'll start with the problem of temporality. The problem here was that a mugger might rob someone who is, in general, much more powerful than them. The worry was that that means, on the egalitarian account of coercive wrongs, that in such cases there will be no wrongdoing. We can now see that this worry rests on something like a complete-lives view of inequalitarian relationships. For when the mugger is pointing his gun at his victim, the mugger does have asymmetric power over his victim. The worry is that that asymmetric power gets balanced out by compensating asymmetries at other times; by the fact that the victim may have more power over the mugger before or after the mugging. But, given we've rejected the complete-lives view, we cannot balance power inequalities over time in this way. It is bad that the mugger has asymmetric power over his victim at the time he does, regardless of whether the victim has more power at other times. And so we easily solve the problem of temporality. Coercion need not create an ongoing, enduring relationships of subordination. But it does create one-off, momentary relationships of subordination. The egalitarian objection to coercion is an objection to such relationships.

Let's turn to the problem of potentiality. The problem here came from comparing two cases. The first case is the one in which the mugger pulls his gun out and starts making demands. The second is one in which the mugger just walks on by without pulling out his weapon. The worry was that in the second case the mugger *could* have started brandishing the gun, and so in the second case the mugger had just as much ability to influence his victim's behavior as in the first case. He just chooses not to manifest the ability. Thus, the egalitarian account seems, blindly, to see no moral difference between the two. Yet au contraire; the egalitarian account does have the resources to distinguish the two cases. The mugger in the second case has less power than the mugger in the first case. That is because, in order to influence his victims, the mugger has to brandish his gun and start making threats. It is extremely costly to brandish a gun in a public park. It is costly to mug people. In the first case, the mugger has already incurred these costs and so, when he is making threats, his power is not constrained by them. In the second case he has not incurred the costs, and so his power is constrained. Thus, contrary to appearances, the mugger has much more power in the first than the second case. That, very roughly, is the solution to the problem of potentiality.

I'll go over this solution in a little more detail. We can start by getting clear on the ways in which it is costly to pull out a gun and threaten someone. First, doing this is illegal, and it breaks the kind of law that gets enforced. So, by pulling out his gun, the mugger exposes himself to the serious risk of a lengthy jail term; this risk is a severe cost. Second, although you (his victim) would not be so stupid as to fight back, some people are very stupid. The mugger runs the risk of pointing his gun at a hero, and the hero might pull out a gun of his own. The mugger thus greatly increases the risk of being shot by the person he brandishes a weapon at. I am less certain about the third way, but it seems to me especially interesting. By pulling out his gun, the mugger increases the risk of committing a great wrong; he increases the risk of actually shooting someone (and almost guarantees he scares someone). But a life containing great wrongdoings is a blighted life, and so this is a kind of moral risk connected to his unholstering the gun. In sum, threatening someone with a gun is, ordinarily, a very costly thing to do.

Now remember that how much power one has over someone is in part dependent on how costly it is to try and get them to do things. Before taking out his gun, it is very costly for the mugger to try to get his (potential) victim to give him his wallet. Doing this will impose all kinds of risks on himself. This reduces how much power the mugger has over these potential victims: the fact that actually affecting their behavior would be extremely costly means there is not a stark asymmetry of power between him and them, and so he has not subjected them to a relationship of subordination.

But once the mugger has taken out his gun, he has already incurred these enormous costs. He is already a man marked by the law, he has already opened himself up to retaliation and he has already terrified someone and increased the chance he'll kill them. At that point, it is not much additional cost for him to affect his victim's behavior in any way he likes. It does not cost him much more to get his victim to jump as to get the victim to give him their wallet. And so, at this point, his power over his victim is very great. Thus, it's this latter case that realizes a truly deep relationship of subordination.

We can generalize this line of thought. Typically, it is very costly to issue threats of violence. The issuing of such threats opens one up to punishment by the law and to social condemnation. It increases the risk of retaliation. And it constitutes the moral wrong of harming someone (e.g., by scaring them), which perhaps is also a blight on the threatener's life. But once one has issued the threats one has incurred these costs. Thus, one's power before and after issuing a threat is different in exactly the way that matters to inequalitarian relationships. Or, to put the point in modal terms, merely being *able* to issue threats does not give one the same amount of power over someone as being able to control their behavior once one has issued such threats. Threatening people is costly, and so actually issuing threats changes how much power one has over people. This is the solution to the problem of potentiality.

Is this really plausible? The clearest way to check the sanity of this solution is to think about cases in which issuing threats doesn't make the threatener more powerful. So let's consider some such cases. Imagine that you are a court jester, and your king has a penchant for horrific acts of violence. He beheads those who displease him even mildly. Just the other day, the cook slightly burnt the toast; now their head is on the castle gates. However, the king has an iron grip on power: after all, it is better to be feared than loved. Nobody dares stand up to him. The king clearly subordinates the subjects in his domain. And because of his iron grip on power, his actually issuing further threats is utterly costless for him. Nobody will retaliate against such threats and the law will not punish him; he is the law. Let's suppose that you know for a fact that, if you fail to amuse the king, your head will join the cook's. And suppose the king chooses to threaten you; he says that unless you make him laugh, he'll execute you. This is a rare case in which there is no difference between the king's power over you before and after issuing the threat. And my own sense is that the threat doesn't make any moral difference either. The king is already seriously wronging you (and the rest of his subjects) by wielding the sort of power over you that he does. Adding an explicit threat of violence on top of that doesn't worsen the situation, or if it does it only worsens it negligibly. And that is exactly what the solution to the problem of potentiality would predict.

This case is one in which issuing a threat doesn't increase the threatener's power, because they are already so powerful. A different class of cases are those in which issuing threats doesn't increase the threatener's power because they are so powerless. For a case of this kind, imagine you are locked behind bars. You have no way of reaching your gaoler, and they are impervious to your entreaties. You threaten to kill them unless they let you out of the jail. In this case, your threat also needn't change the power relationship between the two of you. It is an *empty threat*: the gaoler knows you have no way of executing it, and so they regard it with at most mild bemusement. Perhaps you've shown something vicious or craven about your character by issuing this threat. But you haven't done anything wrong in the distinctive way that coercion is wrong. Again, that is exactly what the solution to the problem of potentiality would predict. In this case, a threat of violence does not increase your power, and so does not subject your gaoler to even a momentary relationship of subordination. So this solution to the problem of potentiality does pass the most obvious sanity check.

Let's address one final challenge to the solution. One might worry about its implications in cases of unsuccessful threats. Suppose the mugger points a gun at you but you are completely insensitive to his demands; you do not do what he tells you to do. Here it seems to mugger has not established asymmetric power over you, and so has not subordinated you. So, one might worry, the egalitarian account incorrectly implies there is nothing wrong with what the mugger had done. Fortunately,

the worry is misguided: this is not actually consequence of the egalitarian account of coercive wrongs. That is because it is clearly wrong to attempt wrongdoing, even if you are unsuccessful. Consider the wrong of killing somebody. If I attempt to kill you but fail, I've done something very seriously wrong. The wrong is not the wrong of murder; it is the wrong of attempted murder. Equally, when a mugger points a gun at you and you are insensitive to his demands, he still does something very seriously wrong. The wrong is not the wrong of subordinating you; it is the wrong of attempting to subordinate you. It is wrong to try to subject others to your asymmetric power, even if you fail. Indeed, this story seems to identify a strength rather than a weakness of the egalitarian account. Intuitively, successful coercion does seem morally different from, and worse than, unsuccessful coercion. The egalitarian account can explain why that is: successful wrongdoing is usually worse than unsuccessful wrongdoing: it's worse to murder someone than to merely attempt to murder them (although both are wrong). So it seems that the egalitarian account of coercive wrongs can deal with its most serious problems.

In the next section, we'll look another virtue of the egalitarian account. But let's now compare the account to another, somewhat similar account of coercive wrongs. Scott Anderson also thinks that coercion is intimately tied up with differentials of power.¹⁷ But he thinks that coercion consists in the *exercise* of power differentials. As I've construed power, this would mean that A coerces B when A is asymmetrically able to affect what B does, and A manifests this ability: A does in fact affect what B does. Now this is an account of coercion, not an account of what is wrong with coercion. But we might think that it points towards a more straightforward view of what is wrong with coercion than the one I have advanced. I have claimed that coercion is objectionable because it creates power differentials. But one might, inspired by Anderson, think it is problematic because it involves the exercise of such differentials. It involves actually using power disparities in order to affect people's behavior, rather than the creation of new such disparities.

This view is less satisfying than the view I favor. It has difficulty explaining why exercising power differentials is bad. Anderson himself says very little about this; he doesn't really try to meet this explanatory challenge. But the natural idea, in the present context, is that it makes a relationship more inegalitarian when power differentials are exercised than when they're present but unexercised.¹⁸ Yet that doesn't seem true in the case of the king and the court jester. It seems like the relationship here is no more inegalitarian when the king actually issues a threat than when he merely enjoys enormous power over the jester. Everything that make the relationship one of subordination is already there; the actual exercise of the asymmetric power does not exacerbate the subordination, or if it does so, only does so negligibly. That is good reason to deny that the wrong in coercion consists in the exercise of power. So I prefer the view that the wrong in coercion consists in the creation of power asymmetries rather than in their exercise. Let me be clear: the difference between this view and an Anderson-style view is not vast. We both think that the action when it comes to coercion lies in power inequalities. But I think the appeal to a special problem in the exercise of power disparities is unnecessary. It is enough to appeal to the problem with inequalities of power.

4. Illuminating Other Cases

So far, we've been focused on cases of coercion understood as threats of violence. In this section, I want to explore how my account of such cases illuminates the connection between such threats and other wrongdoings. First, consider blackmail. Imagine you have found out a colleague is having an affair. You say you'll publicize the information unless they support you in your upcoming tenure review. They desperately want people to not find out about their infidelity, and so they succumb to your threat. Here you've wronged your colleague, and the wrongdoing seems similar in kind to

¹⁷ See Anderson (2008, 2010). McGregor (2002) also takes this view.

¹⁸ Kolodny (2017, 111-12) outlines an expressivist account of why this might be.

a threat of violence. Second, consider exploitation. Imagine that you are the boss of a small company, and you tell an underperforming worker that you'll fire them unless they sleep with you. They really need the job, and so they do sleep with you.¹⁹ Again, your wrongdoing in this case seems of the same sort as threatening violence. Third, consider the withholding of aid. Imagine you've invented a cure for a fatal disease. You refuse to take money for the medicine, but you say you'll disburse it if the disease-sufferers beat up your rival. They do beat up the rival. This case also seems normatively akin to threats of violence: intuitively, all are wrong in the same way that threats of violence are wrong. As we'll soon see, the egalitarian account of coercive wrongs can explain this normative commonality.

It is difficult to explain this commonality on purely autonomy-based accounts of coercive wrongs, or at least on the (most attractive) versions of such accounts, that say coercion is wrong because it restricts people's options. The problem is that, in these cases, no one's options are restricted. In each case you expand your victim's options. In the case of blackmail, you might ordinarily tell your colleague's partner about their affair, but you are giving your colleague the option of non-disclosure. In the case of exploitation, you might ordinarily fire the worker, but you're giving them the option of keeping their employment. In the case of withholding aid, the disease sufferer would die but for your intervention; you are giving them the option of continued life. Indeed, not only do you give your victim more options in these cases, but you also make their lives better than they would otherwise be. It may be worse to be unemployed than to sleep with your boss, and it may be worse for your affair to be publicized than to support a colleague for tenure. Your victim may well welcome your threat compared to the alternative situation. So the tenable autonomy-based account of coercive wrongs seems incapable of explaining what is wrong in these cases. It seems unable to explain why, intuitively, blackmail, exploitation and withholding aid seem wrong in the same way that threats of violence are wrong.

The egalitarian account of coercive wrongs explains this straightforwardly. Start with blackmail. When you blackmail someone, you have a lot of power over them. You can affect how they behave, but they cannot affect how your behavior to the same degree. And note that making the blackmail threat amplifies this power. That is because it's costly to blackmail people; blackmail is illegal and making blackmail threats risks retaliation. Thus, once you've threatened your colleague your power is enhanced in the sense relevant to egalitarian relationships.²⁰ The same is true for exploitation and the withdrawing of aid. When you threaten to fire someone unless they sleep with you or to withhold a life-saving cure from them unless they beat up your rival, you are exerting asymmetric power over the person you threaten. And, in both cases, your situation is different before and after the threat. By making the threat, you open yourself to public opprobrium, legal jeopardy and personal retaliation. Once you've made the threat, you've already incurred these costs, and so your power is greater than before. Thus, just like threats of violence, these threats subject people to an unequalitarian relationship. The egalitarian account of coercive wrongs, of course, says that threatening someone with violence is wrong precisely because it subjects them to an unequalitarian relationship. So, on this account, the wrong in blackmail, exploitation, withholding aid and threats of violence are all of the same sort: all subordinate their victims. The egalitarian account of coercive wrongs explains the normative commonality between these cases.

Let me mention one final case: compulsion. Compulsion involves the actual application of a certain kind of physical force, rather than just the threat of it. The paradigm example is putting someone in manacles or behind bars. Doing this doesn't constitute a threat of violence, it involves a quite specific kind of violence in its own right. Many people have thought that compulsion is also akin to coercion (or perhaps just is a kind of coercion).²¹ Chaining someone with one's threats seems similar to chaining them with iron. The egalitarian account of coercive wrongs also explains why

¹⁹ Kolodny (2017) discusses a similar case.

²⁰ For a similar view, see Solove (2006, 543–45).

²¹ For examples, see Bayles (1972), Gunderson (1979) and Anderson (2010, 6).

that would be. When you lock someone up, you have a very substantial influence over what they do. If you keep them locked up, they cannot do very much at all. They can do only the sorts of things one can do in a prison cell. If you liberate them, then they can and will do a whole lot more. Thus cases when one person physically forces someone to do something (for example, stay in a cell) are cases where the first person has a very large amount of power over the second. Typically this power is asymmetric, and so typically it constitutes deeply inequalitarian relationships. So compulsions and threats of violence share a problem in common: both constitute subordination. Collectively, then, the egalitarian account of coercive wrongs can illuminate a wide range of cases. I view this as weighty abductive evidence for the account.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that coercion is wrong because it subordinates its victims. The idea, as I've said, is inspired by (or perhaps lifted from) work by Kolodny. So let us end by returning to Kolodny's interests. Kolodny is interested in what the objection to state coercion is. As Michael Huemer puts the point, "the legal system is founded on *intentional, harmful coercion*" yet "in common sense morality, the threat or actual coercive imposition of harm is usually wrong."²² In light of this commonsense objection, "modern states stand in need of an account of political legitimacy," a need that Huemer does not think can be satisfied.²³ The idea is that states, and their officials, routinely do something—coerce people—to which there is a very serious objection in ordinary cases. Huemer thinks that this objection carries over to state coercion: state coercion really is impermissible. And so he concludes that police officers should refuse to enforce the laws, that private citizens may violently resist their enforcement and that we should seriously consider doing away with the state altogether.²⁴ Kolodny is interested in the objection to state coercion because he is interested in this kind of anarchist line of thought. Does the commonsense objection to coercion really have such radical political consequences?

If the view I have outlined is correct, the objection to state coercion is the same as the objection to any coercion anywhere: coercion creates asymmetries of power, and that creates subordination. This is a serious objection to state coercion: we should be worried about being subordinated by police officers, judges, elected representatives. Yet this worry does not, I think, entail anarchist conclusions. That is because we can ameliorate the problem with asymmetries of power. We can stop asymmetries of power from creating relationships of subordination, or at least mitigate the badness of the relationships they create. There are two ways to do this. First, we can impose external constraints on the use of asymmetric power. When how a police officer uses their power over you is under the control of elected representatives, and when how those representatives use their power is under popular control, the asymmetry of power is less bad than it would otherwise be. Second, we can erect internal barriers to the misuse of such power. When a judge is strongly disposed not to misuse their power because they care deeply about justice, then the subordinating sting is drawn from their possession of power.²⁵ These constraints address the ordinary, egalitarian, concern about state coercion. And so the facts that coercion is generally objectionable, and that the state is a pervasively coercive enterprise, need not commit us to doing away with the state.

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²² Huemer (2013, 10).

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Huemer (2013, 161–163, 166–168, Part II).

²⁵ I defend the first of these points in [redacted] and the second in [redacted].

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