
THE EGALITARIAN OBJECTION TO COERCION

BY

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Abstract: I develop 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 or lord to peasant, are relationships of subordination or domination. These relationships are morally objectionable. 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. Coercion is objectionable, I argue, because it creates such asymmetries of power and so creates relationships of subordination. This account, moreover, illuminates what's wrong with blackmail, exploitation, withholding aid, and compulsion.

1. Introduction

Imagine you are walking through a park. It's nighttime, 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.

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The aim of 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, p. 114). The thought is that some relationships, such as those of 'slave to master, servant to lord, Brahmin to untouchable' (p. 109), are relationships of subordination and that these relationships are in part constituted by 'asymmetric power' (ibid.): What it is 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. State coercion subordinates us to the officials of the state. 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.² 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 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

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

²The egalitarian account of coercive wrongs has not, as far as I know, been clearly advanced in literature. So these are not objections you find in the critical literature on it – there is no such literature. Why, then, focus on them? Primarily, because they seem to me to be the most serious objections to the egalitarian account. Autobiographically, they convinced me for several years that the account was untenable, and, anecdotally, others seem to find them compelling. Responding to these objections does a lot to make the account plausible.

like the mugger stands in the exact same position as 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 as in the case where they actually 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.³

I think we can solve both of these problems. 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 unequalitarian 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 2, 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 3, I'll lay out and motivate the ideas behind the egalitarian account. In Section 4, we'll see how they solve the problems of temporality and potentiality. And finally, in Section 5, 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 an 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 to be a case of coercion.⁴ I don't intend to contribute to this metaphysical project but instead to the normative project of identifying the moral objection to coercion.⁵ Second, however, it'll be useful to

³Richardson (2002, p. 33) and Gädeke (2020, pp. 200–204) both raise this kind of problem for republican theories of coercive wrongs – these theories are closely connected to the account I will advance (see footnote 22).

⁴This work flows from Nozick's (1969) extremely influential paper.

⁵This approach is now common. See Pallikkathayil (2011, p. 2), Sachs (2013, pp. 63–64), and White (2017).

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 in a park, and it captures what's so distinctive about 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 5, 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.

2. *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 the 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 spelled out. First, one might observe that one's autonomy is a function of what options one has available. If one has fewer decent options, one is less able to make an autonomous choice. The mugger reduces your options and, therefore, 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, which 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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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

⁶This sort of view is also discussed by Wollner (2011), Sachs (2013), and White (2017). But my objections to it are somewhat different from theirs.

⁷Sachs (2013, pp. 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.

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 on one's options could just as well be brought about by natural forces as by interpersonal threats. 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 your 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 unequalitarian relationship with the weather. The weather is an inanimate thing; you cannot have any social relationship with it. In contrast, this is inexplicable if coercion merely diminishes your 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, and 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 generally true that restricting people's options wrongs 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 on 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, p. 378).⁸ 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 with 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 crystallize 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., p. 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 in 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 in his threatening you. That threat just consists of 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.

⁸Wollner (2011), White (2017), and Kolodny (2017) also discuss this sort of view. Julius (2013), as we'll see, endorses it.

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 that 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 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 in 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.⁹ 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 of 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

⁹For this sort of view about manipulation, see Noggle (1996).

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, it cannot be the whole story. For one thing, it fails to elucidate the difference between natural and manmade restrictions on 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.¹⁰

3. *Inegalitarian relationships*

3.1. THE PICTURE

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 by 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 if the master were wise and benevolent, even if they never inflicted violence on their slave, and even if the slave were better off under the master than they otherwise would be, their relationship would be objectionable. The 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.¹¹

These relationships are objectionable primarily in the sense that people have a claim, or a right, against being in them.¹² 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

¹⁰A different approach rests 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 Berman (2002) and Sachs (2013). 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.

¹¹For the origins of this view, see Pettit (1997), Anderson (1999), Scheffler (2003), and Kolodny (2014, 2023). I develop it in detail in Lovett (2024, pp. 17–35). I'll elaborate on the connection between my specific views and the views of these authors later in the section.

¹²Here, I'm following Kolodny (2023).

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 a fundamental moral constraint: People owe it to us not to subordinate us. Now, being subjected to an inegalitarian relationship likely still harms you. Much like it is good for you to have good friendships, it is bad for you to be subordinated – inegalitarian relationships detract from your well-being. But, plausibly, the axiological import of such relationships is derivative of their deontic significance: Inegalitarian relationships make people's lives worse because they violate their claims. Having your rights violated makes your life worse. Inegalitarian relationships matter primarily, then, in that people owe it to us not to subject us to them.

What constitutes inegalitarian relationships? We should see these relationships as constituted, at least in part, by asymmetries of power.¹³ 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: To put the idea roughly, one has power over someone insofar as one can affect what they do.¹⁴ More precisely, one has power over someone insofar as, 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.¹⁵ A master has great power over their slaves because they can have an enormous affect on 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 power. Perhaps the most attractive alternative holds that such power consists in the ability to affect well-being.¹⁶ On this view, one has power over someone, in the relevant

¹³For this view, see Kolodny (2014, 2023). This sort of view is also endorsed by the other authors cited in footnote 11.

¹⁴This was the dominant view of power among social scientists writing about power in the mid-century. See, for example, Dahl (1957) and Harsanyi (1962).

¹⁵One case this allows us to address is the following: Suppose, by gambling on my computer, I could win an enormous amount of money right now. And, if I won the money, I would have the ability to influence a lot of people's actions (e.g., by paying them to do things). Still, that doesn't give me much power over said people. That is because, were I to try to influence their actions now without having actually won the money, I wouldn't have much impact on them. So this definition of power allows us to address why this kind of ability – what Morriss (2002, p. 67) calls a 'latent' ability – doesn't subordinate. I thank a reviewer for this observation.

¹⁶For this view, see Goldman (1972, p. 258) and Lukes (2005, pp. 29–38).

sense, insofar as one can influence how well their life goes. I think, however, that this kind of power over someone isn't what makes 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, or 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 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, therefore, 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. I suspect it is solely the ability to affect actions.

I'll make a methodological remark here. There are many different notions of power. Some don't matter much to inegalitarian relationships. Suppose, for example, that I can affect someone by turning the thermostat up – this will make them sweat a little but affect neither their actions nor their well-being. There's a sense of 'power' in which this gives me power over them, but I doubt that asymmetries of this kind of power are subordinating. So we're not after an account of just any notion of power here. We're after the notion of power, which plausibly matters to subordination. My contention is that such subordinating power is the ability to affect someone's behavior. Additionally, writers commonly distinguish between *power to* and *power over*.¹⁷ You have the power *to* do something when you can bring that thing about. Perhaps you have the power to dance in a coffee shop or to run a marathon. You have power *over* someone when you can affect them specifically. It's power over that matters centrally to relationships of subordination: This is the kind of power that masters have with respect to their slaves. And so the behavioral conception of power is an account, specifically, of what it is for one person to have subordinating power over another.

Let's clarify some further key issues. Another crucial factor determines how much subordinating power you have over someone. That is how costly it is to try to get them to do something. Imagine that 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

¹⁷For this distinction, see Goldman (1972, pp. 260–264) or Morriss (2002, pp. 32–34).

subordinating power over his workers. It reduces the extent to which his power creates an inequalitarian relationship.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

A second crucial issue concerns 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 inequalitarian 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.²⁰ On this view, it is only asymmetries of power over people's entire lives that constitute inequalitarian 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 inequalitarian 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 to be decisive reasons to endorse the time-relative view. Consider the following case: Suppose that Sven and Bjørn are both 20-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 on, Bjørn's dictates the details of Sven's life. After a further 20 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

¹⁸For this point, see Harsanyi (1962).

¹⁹Does this conflate how cost and difficulty matter to power? It does not. Let's say something is difficult insofar as one is unlikely to succeed at it if one tries to do it, while it is costly if trying to do it makes your life much worse (see Cohen, 1989, pp. 918–919). These might both be inversely related to power, but they might be related by different functions. And there are clearly some differences between those functions. For example, if it is so difficult to influence someone that it is impossible, then one has no power over them. But no matter what the cost of influencing someone, if one can still influence them, then plausibly one still has some power over them. So we can treat the way in which difficulty detracts from power differently from the way in which cost does so. Thanks to a reviewer for pressing this point.

²⁰For a related distinction, see Lippert-Rasmussen (2018, p. 131).

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 if there were 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.

Let's sum up. In the picture I've just outlined, inegalitarian relationships are constituted by the asymmetric ability to affect people's actions at specific times. How inegalitarian one's relationship is is a function of how costly the exercise of the ability is to the person with superior power. How does this picture of (in)egalitarian relationships connect to other views in the literature? It is a development and extension of Kolodny's view – we're both interested in accounting for a distinctively objectionable kind of inegalitarian relationship in which slavery or serfdom constitute a paradigm case, and we both think that such relationships are, in part, grounded by power asymmetries.²¹ But Kolodny (2017) thinks that such power asymmetries have to be 'woven into the fabric of ongoing relationships' rather than part of 'one-off' encounters (p. 110). I've argued that ongoing power asymmetries 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. And Kolodny is largely silent about how costs matter to power asymmetries – I've suggested that such costs have an important role. So my picture is similar to Kolodny's in many ways, but also differs in important ways.²²

Both my and Kolodny's approaches are broadly relational egalitarian, in that we're interested in the egalitarian aspects of relationships. But our target relationships are quite different from those of other relational egalitarians, for example, Elizabeth Anderson (1999), Samuel Scheffler (2003), or Daniel

²¹Some people, such as Motchoulski (2021) and Cox (2022), deny that power matters in these kinds of relationships. They think these relationships are characterized solely by inequalities of regard or appraisal respect. I think that's wrong – it seems objectionable to be under the power of, say, your kidnapper, regardless of whether the kidnapper is shown any regard or appraisal respect. Perhaps inequalities of regard or appraisal respect make a difference to inegalitarian relationships, but they aren't the only constituents of them.

²²Another related class of views are republican views, most influentially expounded by Pettit (1997). Kolodny (2019) addresses the connection between these and his own at some length. They are importantly similar – both think of subordination, or domination, in terms of power. But Pettit thinks that you're dominated whenever someone has power over you, regardless of whether that power is asymmetric. That seems false. Consider loving relationships. I might have enormous power over my partner (they'd be devastated if I left, they'd move country for me, etc.), but that needn't mean that they're dominated or subordinated – they're not subordinated precisely because the power is symmetrical. So I prefer the view that it's only *asymmetries* of power that are subordinating.

Viehoff (2019). The important difference is that we're interested in identifying a certain kind of objectionable relationships – a relationship to be avoided.²³ These other authors are often primarily interested in identifying a positively desirable relationship – one to be achieved. Hence, Scheffler (2015) claims that the participants in egalitarian relationships care about one another's well-being. This may be true for a certain kind of positively valuable relationship, but it's not necessary just to avoid subordination. Non-subordination is much thinner than civic friendship (cf. Viehoff, 2019). That's not to say these positively valuable, desirably egalitarian, relationships lack import. But in spelling out the egalitarian objection to coercion, we only need to refer to objectionably inegalitarian relationships. The key parts of the picture I've advanced are that asymmetric abilities to affect people's behavior at a time generate such relationships, and the less costly is the exercise of those abilities the more severe are the relationships.

3.2. CHALLENGING CASES

Let's address some challenging cases for this picture of inegalitarian relationships. One class of such cases includes 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 that 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 are not objectionable.

Here is a related case. Imagine that Ben is a people-pleaser. He will generally do what other people try to get him to do because he ineluctably wants to make them happy with him. This gives other people asymmetric influence

²³For more on this point, see Kolodny (2023, pp. 270–271).

over Ben's behavior – his friends, for example, tend to be more capable of influencing what Ben does than Ben is of influencing what they do. Yet one might doubt that this is an objectionable asymmetry of power, and so one might doubt the picture of inegalitarian relationships that I've sketched. The key thing to say in response to this case is that it involves no wrongdoing by the people who have power over Ben. They cannot prevent him from wanting to make them happy, and so they cannot prevent themselves from having power over him. But 'ought implies can': You wrong me by doing something only if you could refrain from doing it. So, if Ben's friends cannot prevent themselves from having power over him, they are not violating any of his claims by having such power.²⁴ Yet subordination only really matters when it involves the violation of such claims. So the relationship between Ben and his friends is not objectionable.²⁵ Indeed, it's not clear that it's even bad for Ben – above, I suggested that being in an inegalitarian relationship is bad for you solely when and because it wrongs you. Here, Ben isn't wronged. This explains why the case of people-pleasers strikes us as so different from, say, the relationships between a king and each of their subjects.

Let's consider a third case. 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 rational

²⁴A reviewer raises the following worry: Consider the relationship between a white American and a Black American in the Jim Crow South. The former has asymmetric power over the latter by dint of the fact that other people, due to prevailing racial hierarchies, will side with the white person in any dispute. But the white American might not be able to rid themselves of this power. They cannot flatten racial hierarchies by themselves. So, one might worry, this principle commits us to the view that this relationship is unobjectionable. But, on the contrary, the principle implies no such commitment. It's true that the objection to this relationship is not that this particular white person wrongs the Black person by having power over them. They don't, as they cannot prevent themselves from having such power. But there's still an objection to the relationship. It's that other people wrong the Black person by subjecting them to this power asymmetry. Other white Americans (George Wallace, say), and white Americans as a collective, could prevent the power asymmetry. They could flatten racial hierarchies. They violate the Black person's rights against subordination by not flattening the hierarchies, and so the power asymmetry is objectionable.

²⁵Is it a relationship of 'subordination'? I've said that one is 'subordinated' when one is subject to asymmetric power. On this definition, Ben is subordinated. One might balk at that claim. One might thus prefer to say that one is subordinated when one's claim against being subjected to asymmetric power is violated, and perhaps reserve the more bloodless term 'inegalitarian relationship' for a simple power asymmetry. I regard this as a purely definitional issue. The morally important claim is that Ben isn't wronged, and this comes out true however we use the word 'subordination.'

decisions, 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 a parent's duty to protect their child's well-being. Thus, parents need not wrong their children by wielding asymmetric power over them.

My response to these cases identifies some general strategies for defusing potential counterexamples to the picture of unequalitarian relationships I've outlined. None of these strategies will apply in cases of coercion, but they do buttress the picture of unequalitarian relationships that I've advanced. So let us turn to its applications.

4. *Coercion and equality*

Why does coercion create an unequalitarian 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, 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 unequalitarian 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 unequalitarian 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 unequalitarian relationships. For when the mugger is pointing his gun at his victim, the mugger does have asymmetric power over the victim. The worry is that that asymmetric power gets balanced out by compensating for asymmetries at other times and by the fact that the victim may have more power over the mugger before or after the mugging. But, given that 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 relationship of subordination. But it does create one-off, momentary relationships of

subordination. The egalitarian objection to coercion is an objection to such relationships.

I'll address one concern about this solution. One might worry that the objection to momentary, one-off relationships of subordination is not very weighty. Even though such relationships are objectionable, one might worry that they are not very seriously objectionable. Yet the objection to coercion is very weighty. So the objection to coercion cannot be an objection to short relationships of subordination. I think, however, that this worry underestimates the seriousness of our objection to short relationships of subordination. Suppose you come across a bureaucrat with enormous power over you – for example, a police officer who can shoot you without repercussions if they want to do so. Here, your encounter with them might be fleeting. It might just last a few minutes. Still, you have a weighty objection to them having such enormous power over you. Or imagine someone kidnapping you for only a few hours. The objection to their power over you during this short period of time is a very weighty objection. Plausibly, long-lived relationships of subordination are even more objectionable. But these cases provide evidence that short-lived subordination is very seriously wrong and so weighty enough to explain the wrong of coercion.

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 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 case than in the second. 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 him. This reduces how much power the mugger has over these potential victims: The fact that actually affecting their behavior would be extremely costly means that there is not a stark asymmetry of power between him and them, and so he has not subjected them to a relationship of subordination.²⁶ 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 of an 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 than 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 egalitarian 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.

²⁶The relevant costs come due in the future – after the gun has been pulled. One might wonder, then, whether what I say here is compatible with time-relative egalitarianism. It is. The time-relative view says that asymmetries of power at a given time are objectionable. This doesn't imply that the determinants of whether you have power at that time must also occur at that time. They can, like costs, occur at other times. Thanks to a reviewer for raising this point.

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 burned 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, 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.

I'll buttress this intuition with some further remarks. For a start, it's important to note that here we're evaluating the wrongness of the *threat* specifically – not carrying through the threat. If the king executes you, he wrongs you more seriously than if he doesn't. But let's imagine no execution happens in either case yet that the king is equally willing to execute in both. Then it's my sense that a threat to execute doesn't make a moral difference in your situation. Violence, and perhaps the propensity for it, makes a moral difference, but a mere threat does not. Additionally, this doesn't mean that in ordinary cases, actually coercive monarchs aren't worse than potentially, but not actually, coercive ones. In most real-world cases, for a monarch's threat to affect people's behavior, they have to be credible, and that usually means the monarch will have to carry through some of their threats. So monarchs who coerce effectively will typically be much worse than those who never coerce – they'll inflict a lot of violence on their subjects, and, again, this makes a moral difference. But that doesn't matter for the intuition I'm trying to capture in the above case. I'll say one final thing. My inclination is to think that the threat in this case makes no moral difference. But I only need a weaker claim to defend my solution to the problem of potentiality. The weaker claim is that it's not obvious or intuitively compelling that the threat does make a moral difference. If this claim is true, then this solution doesn't have obviously untenable implications. It passes the most obvious sanity check.

Let's consider another case. This king and jester case is a situation in which issuing a threat doesn't increase the threatener's power because they are already so powerful. There are also cases 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 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. 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 does not subject your gaoler to even a momentary relationship of subordination. So it seems to me that the view under discussion is not subject to straightforward counterexamples. On the contrary, I'm inclined to think it generates the correct verdicts about the cases discussed.

I want to address two further challenges to the egalitarian account of coercive wrongs. First, 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 that the mugger has not established asymmetric power over you and so has not subordinated you. So, one might worry that the egalitarian account incorrectly implies there is nothing wrong with what the mugger has done. Fortunately, the worry is misguided: This is not a 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 but that 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 but that 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 (but both are wrong).

Let's look at a second challenge. One might worry about cases of symmetrical coercion. Consider the following case: Bill and Wyatt are gunslingers in the wild west. Bill threatens to shoot Wyatt if Wyatt disrespects him. Wyatt

simultaneously threatens to shoot Bill if Bill disrespects him. Both coerce the other, but here there needn't be any asymmetry of power. Each gunslinger might have the same amount of power over the other – they can both equally shoot one another.²⁷ Is the egalitarian account of coercive wrongs compatible with this? It is. The key point is that the account is an account of what's wrong with coercion, not what coercion is. So the account doesn't contradict the claim that Bill and Wyatt mutually coerce one another. On my working definition of coercion – on which coercion is a threat of violence – the gunslingers straightforwardly do so. The egalitarian account does contradict the claim that the gunslingers wrong one another via this coercion. If the wrong of coercion is about subjecting someone to asymmetric power, cases of symmetrical coercion cannot involve symmetrical wrongdoing. But this seems like a virtue, rather than a vice, of the account. Neither Bill nor Wyatt wrongs the other by their threat. Symmetrical coercion typically, I think, doesn't involve symmetrical wrongdoing. That is not to say this situation is anodyne. Perhaps each gunslinger intended to subordinate the other, and if so, that would be wrongdoing. And perhaps both Bill and Wyatt are willing to shoot the other purely due to being disrespected. This is a character failing. But all that is compatible with the egalitarian account of coercive wrongs. So it seems that the account can address its most serious problems.

In the next section, we'll look at 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 power differentials.²⁸ But he thinks that coercion consists of 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

²⁷Schmidt (2018) discusses some cases like this. He, I think, says the incorrect thing about them – that in case of symmetrical power relationships, each person wrongs the other. I say why I don't believe that in footnote 22. More generally, I think the objection to the cases Schmidt discusses, where one can easily be killed by other people, is that these are situations in which one is very unsafe. One could easily lose everything. I suspect that safety, or security, is good. We don't want to just enjoy good things in our lives; we want their safe enjoyment. That's why it's bad to be in the Wild West – the Wild West is a dangerous place.

²⁸See Anderson (2008, 2010). McGregor (1988) also takes this view.

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 egalitarian when power differentials are exercised than when they're present but unexercised.²⁹ Yet that doesn't seem to be true in the case of the king and the court jester. It seems like the relationship here is no more egalitarian when the king actually issues a threat than when he merely enjoys enormous power over the jester. Everything that makes the relationship one of subordination is already there; the actual exercise of the asymmetric power does not exacerbate the subordination, or, if it does, it only does so negligibly. That is a 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.

5. *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 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.³⁰ Again, your wrongdoing in this case seems to be 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 a disease-sufferer beats 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.

²⁹Kolodny (2017, pp. 111–112) outlines an expressivist account of why this might be.

³⁰Kolodny (2017) discusses a similar case.

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 with the alternative situation. So the more appealing 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 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.³¹ 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 wrongs 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.

³¹For a similar view, see Solove (2006, pp. 543–545).

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 a kind of coercion).³² Chaining someone with one's threats seems similar to chaining them with iron. The egalitarian account of coercive wrongs also explains why 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 where one person physically forces someone to do something (e.g., 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 it constitutes a deeply unequalitarian relationship. 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.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that coercion is wrong because it subordinates its victims. The idea, as I've said, is inspired by Kolodny's work. 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.'³³ 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.³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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?

³²For examples, see Bayles (1972), Gunderson (1979), and Anderson (2010, p. 6).

³³Huemer (2013, p. 10).

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Huemer (2013, pp. 161–163, 166–168, part II).

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, and 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.³⁶ 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.³⁷

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³⁶I defend the first of these points in Lovett (2021) and the second in Lovett (2022).

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