Suppose A threatens B: "Stay out of Malibu, or you'll be sorry." And B has every reason to believe he will indeed be sorry if he shows up in Malibu again. And so B stays out of Malibu. Most of us, will think that, *prima facie*, A has done something wrong. There is perhaps some background we could fill in that would make it permissible for A to issue the threat. But in the absence of some special justification, this type of coercive threat is objectionable.

But what exactly has A done to B, so far, that one might object to? Of course, it would be wrong of A to carry out her threat and, say, break B's legs. But A hasn't done that yet and, in fact, won't do that, because B, we can suppose, will stay out of Malibu.

In the literature on the topic, there is an interesting divergence of emphasis. Different accounts focus attention on different aspects of the coercive interaction. We can, I think, distinguish three approaches to explicating the moral objection to coercive threats.¹

¹ Unless otherwise noted, my focus in this paper will be on the act of threatening someone in order to influence his or her behavior. Paradigmatically, this will involve communicating to the person (the recipient) that unless he or she does or refrains from doing something, the issuer of the threat (the coercer) will visit some harm on the recipient or, more generally, bring about some consequence the recipient does not want. I will not undertake a full analysis of the concept of a threat, or of coercion. I will, however, restrict the terms “coercion” and “coercive threat” to those cases that are presumptively wrongful—that is, to those threats that attract a (perhaps overrideable) moral objection. This is purely to simplify the exposition, since much of my discussion will concern the question of what distinguishes perfectly permissible threats from objectionable ones.
The first approach, probably the most familiar, focuses on the victim's will and the way in which it is influenced or undermined by a credible threat (or even, in some cases, by an offer). On this view, the core objection to this mode of influence is found in the idea that, when the recipient succumbs to a coercive threat, she does whatever she does against her will—her choice is in some way unfree or not fully autonomous. Understood in this way, coercion is a matter of the coercer's subverting, or circumventing the victim's agency. He prevents his victim from making up her own mind about what to do, substituting his own will for hers.²

Although this perhaps seems the most natural—even obvious—line to take, there is a danger of falling into tautology. It is no doubt true that B’s choice to stay out of Malibu is not a free or autonomous choice. But if our primary reason for thinking this is that B was coerced into staying away, then although this may be an important fact about our concepts of freedom and autonomy, we will have merely located the moral objection to coercion in the fact that it is coercive. Hopefully a more illuminating account is available. The question for this first approach, then, will be whether there is a suitably independent conception of freedom or autonomy, such that the claim that coercion undermines freedom or autonomy is non-trivial, but still true.

A second approach places the emphasis, not so much on the idea that the recipient of a

coercive threat is in some sense forced to do something against her will, but on what it is that she is led to do in response to the threat. Here the objection is to fact that successful coercion brings a person to pursue some end or purpose she does not see any good, independent reason to pursue. When the mugger threatens to shoot her victim if he doesn’t give up his money, for example, she is attempting to get him to do something he would otherwise— i.e., but for the threat itself—see no good reason to do.³ Wrongful coercion, on this view, is inconsistent with the recognition that our reasons for action are coordinate with and constrained by the independent reasons other people have for their actions.

Both of the above approaches identify important features of the coercive interaction. A satisfying account of the wrong of coercion should have something to tell us about both topics— viz., the sense in which a threat can impact an agent’s ability to act freely or autonomously; and how it might matter that a credible threat is designed to bring an agent to do something she would not otherwise recognize any reason to do.

Whatever their merits, however, these first two approaches share a common deficiency. Neither is well-positioned to explain a striking fact about the morality of coercion. This is that, as a general rule, the deontic status of a threat— whether it’s permissible or impermissible—seems to depend on the deontic status of the act being threatened.⁴ For example, barring unusual circumstances, there is nothing objectionable about a coach threatening her players with having to run laps if they are late to practice. And a prosecutor may, under normal circumstances, induce a defendant to plead guilty


to one crime by threatening to indict her for other crimes the prosecutor has good reason to believe she is guilty of as well.⁵ In cases like these, where we have a permissible threat, it is, I think, no accident that the course of action being threatened is itself permissible.

This motivates a third approach to understanding the morality of coercion. The leading idea is that the moral objection to the threat is directly tied to the objection to doing what one is threatening to do (if the recipient doesn’t comply). The challenge, on this approach, is to account for the connection between the moral quality of the threat and the moral quality of what is being threatened.

In this paper, I will concentrate on this last feature of wrongful coercion, the apparent link between the (im)permissibility of threatening someone and the (im)permissibility of doing what one threatens to do. My conjecture is that the key to understanding what is wrong with coercion is understanding why the deontic status of the threatened act should transfer to the threat itself. I’ll motivate this approach by first illustrating the phenomenon—what I call the Deontic Dependence Principle—with some cases, and second by showing that, in addition to other shortcomings, the first two approaches cannot adequately account for this phenomenon on their own. I’ll then argue for a particular theory of the deontic dependence exhibited by coercive threats. My proposal will be that the core moral objection to coercion lies in the fact that the coercer influences her victim by illegitimately forcing the victim to take on a responsibility that should be borne by the coercer herself.

⁵ Cf. the Supreme Court’s decision in Bordenkircher v. Hayes, 434 U.S. 358 (1979) (cited in Wertheimer, Coercion, p. 133). The trial prosecutor offered Hayes a plea of five years in prison if he plead guilty to forgery, and threatened that, if Hayes rejected the plea deal, he would be indicted in addition under the Kentucky Habitual Criminal Act, which applied since Hayes had already been convicted of two prior felonies, and which carried a sentence of life in prison. The court held that the prosecutor’s threat was constitutionally permissible on the grounds that it was it was permissible for him to seek the additional indictment.
II

What is the connection between the morality of threats and the morality of what is threatened? Begin with the fact that it is not always objectionable to threaten a person in order to get him or her to do something. As I noted above, there seems to be nothing objectionable about a coach who threatens her players with having to run laps if they're late for practice. Other examples exhibit a similar structure. There is no moral objection to a potential car-buyer threatening to go elsewhere if the dealer doesn't throw in the extended warranty. A boss may threaten to fire her employee if he doesn't get his TPS reports in on time. And the employee may threaten to take another job if he doesn't get the promotion he feels he deserves.

Contrast these cases with cases of clearly impermissible coercion: "Your money or your life;" 'I'll break your legs if I catch you in Malibu again;' "If you don't get off of my barstool, I'm going to pour beer all over your head."

If we think about these examples (and many others), it seems that in cases where we intuitively take the threats to be impermissible, the threatened conduct is itself impermissible. And on the other hand, where the threatened conduct is permissible, it often seems that making the threat is as well.

These cases suggest the following:

Deontic Dependence Principle: Other things equal,\(^6\) It is wrong for A to communicate to B that A will do X unless B does Y if and only if it would be wrong for A to do X if B fails to do

\(^6\) That is, I am interested in accounting for the characteristic, *pro tanto* moral objection to coercion. This objection may be defeasible. I do not argue that there are no extenuating factors that could override the normal objection to making a threat which it would be impermissible to carry out. What I do claim is that there is no similar (defeasible) presumption against threatening to do what one is anyway permitted to do.
If the Deontic Dependence Principle (“Dependence Principle,” for short) is correct, then in asking after the moral objection to coercion, we will need to focus on those cases of coercive threats in which the threatened conduct is itself impermissible.

The general rule linking the moral valence of the threat to that of the threatened act appears to have some important exceptions. Consider the case of blackmail. Much philosophical and legal writing on blackmail has focused on the supposed “paradox” involved in thinking that it should be wrong (or illegal) to threaten to reveal information about a person which it would be perfectly permissible (and legal) to reveal.⁷

There are two things to note about such cases at this point. First, it is telling that these cases seem paradoxical precisely because they appear to break the link between the wrongfulness of the threat and the wrongfulness of what's being threatened. That is, even if they are counterexamples to the Dependence Principle understood as a universal generalization, the fact that they violate this principle makes them especially puzzling cases for moral and legal theory. This would seem to indicate that the Dependence Principle captures something important about the standard case. If there are exceptions to the rule, they call for special explanation. We would therefore still need some account of the general phenomenon the Deontic Dependence Principle describes.

Second, it is actually not so clear that blackmail and similar cases are genuine exceptions to the Dependence Principle. Mitchell Berman and James Shaw have each argued (persuasively, in my view)

that the basic assumption behind the blackmail “paradox”—that it is sometimes wrong to threaten to reveal information about a person that one may nevertheless permissibly reveal—is false.\(^8\) Suppose A has access to some information whose revelation would cause B misery or harm, but that there is adequate justification for A’s revealing it despite this. Perhaps the information implicates a politician (someone other than B) in some questionable dealings, which it would be beneficial for the public to know about. The fact that such a justification is available does not imply that, in revealing the information, A does no wrong. For A may reveal the information, caring nothing for the public good and indeed for the express purpose of making B suffer. A’s motives in revealing B’s secret are, plausibly, relevant to the moral quality of A’s act. When A tries to extort B by threatening to reveal his secret, we should not assume, then, that what A is threatening to do is act in a way that draws no independent moral objection. A’s use of this threat in order to get money from B is motivated by her awareness that revealing the information will be harmful to B. This licenses the inference that, if A were to carry out her threat, she would be doing so because of the harm it will cause B, rather than in spite of it. As Shaw argues, this way of treating B would seem to show an impermissible disregard for B as a person. If so, then in blackmailing B, A is not in fact threatening to do something that by itself raises no moral objection.

I will return at the end of the paper to the question of how we should understand cases like this, which appear to be exceptions to the Deontic Dependence Principle, in light of my eventual account of that principle. For now, I’ll simply repeat that, even if there are exceptions that call for special treatment, the link between the moral valence of the threat and the act threatened is robust enough to justify inquiry into its grounds.

---

I now want to argue that, if the Deontic Dependence Principle is true—even if it is only a characteristic feature of wrongful coercion and admits of exceptions—it raises a problem for the first two approaches mentioned in section (1).

Consider the first, autonomy-based approach. It is not clear why the ability of a person to make a free or voluntary choice in the face of a threat should depend on the moral evaluation of what’s being threatened. On the traditional approach to understanding coercion, what matters is not the moral content of the threat that is designed to influence its recipient but the mode of that influence. This would seem to depend psychological features of the coercee—what she cares about, what she is afraid of, what she is equipped to handle. But there seems to be no necessary connection between such things and the impermissibility of someone’s bringing about the consequence that is being threatened.

To see this more clearly, we need to consider the form that an autonomy-based view must take. It does seem natural to think that, when a person is coerced into performing an action, there is a sense in which he has not really made the choice for himself to act in that way, or at any rate that his choice is not a free one. Joseph Raz, for example, says that coercion invades another's autonomy. This is so, he thinks, because in order to be autonomous one must not be “subject to another's will.” He thinks it's clear that a person who is coerced into doing something is subject to the will of the coercer.

Earlier, I mentioned the danger, on this approach, of falling into tautology. And it is not clear that Raz's claim actually contributes to a substantive account of what makes coercion wrong. The idea that autonomy requires not being subject to another's will is perhaps illuminating as a thesis about autonomy. It may tell us, for example, that autonomy involves an irreducible relational or social

---

aspect. But the claim that by coercing someone you subject her to your will—and thus undermine her autonomy—will not tell us what is wrong with coercing someone unless we have an independent grip on the notions of autonomy or of being subject to another's will.

Any account that appeals to autonomy and related notions in order to explain why coercion is wrong will therefore need to do two things. First, it will need to provide an independent conception of autonomy that is of some recognizable value. And second, it must explain how coercion undermines autonomy so conceived. If the first condition is not met, then the account will not have any real explanatory power. If the absence of coercion is built into the conception of autonomy we are working with, then the claim that coercion renders the choice non-autonomous will be trivial. It will, therefore, be uninformative as an account of what is wrong with coercion. This seems to be a problem with Raz's remarks about coercion as a way of subjecting another to your will, at least if they're intended to explain what is wrong with, or bad about, coercion. For what is it to subject another person to your will? If all we can do is point to coercion as a paradigm case of this, then it seems we are left, at bottom, with the claim that coercion is wrong because it's coercive.

Of course, not all conceptions of autonomy have, built into them, the condition that autonomous action is not coerced. Some philosophers have thought, for instance, that an account of autonomy that centers on the agent's motivations or motivational capacities will help with a substantive explanation of what's wrong with coercion. When thinking about autonomy in this way, we might be concerned with whether the agent's actions or motives are under her control, in some relevant sense; whether she was capable of resisting the desire on which she acted; whether she could reflectively endorse or identify with her motive for action; or whether her choices were appropriately responsive to reasons.

The problem is that, when autonomy or freedom is understood in any of these ways, there
seems to be no reason to think that there should be any correlation between the threats that are likely to undermine autonomy, and the deontic status of what is being threatened. The moral quality of the consequence does not appear to be relevant.

Consider, for example, Harry Frankfurt’s account of coercion.\textsuperscript{10} Frankfurt thinks that one is coerced into doing something if two conditions are met. First, he claims that someone who is coerced "is \textit{compelled} to do what he does. He has \textit{no choice} but to do it."\textsuperscript{11} This condition is met, Frankfurt claims, when the person who is coerced is unable to resist the desire to avoid the consequence being threatened and so, in that sense, has no alternative to doing what the coercer wants.\textsuperscript{12} The second condition is that the coercee must prefer not to act on the desire that actually moves her. He adds this second condition because he thinks that it’s possible to be presented with an offer so attractive that one might not be able to refuse it. But he is hesitant to say that making such an attractive offer amounts to coercion.\textsuperscript{13} Thus, on Frankfurt’s account, if A succeeds in coercing B into doing x by threatening some consequence C if B does not do x, then B must (1) be moved by a desire to avoid C that she is unable to resist and (2) prefer not to be moved by that desire. It is clear, however, that one can have very strong, perhaps even irresistible, desires to avoid certain consequences (for example, being fired from one’s job) that do not involve any moral wrongdoing whatsoever. There seems to be no reason to assume that such desires to avoid morally legitimate consequences could not meet conditions (1) and

\textsuperscript{10} Harry Frankfurt, “Coercion and Moral Responsibility,” in \textit{The Importance of What We Care About} (1988).

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 36. “If

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 39: “If the victim’s desire or motive to avoid the penalty with which he is threatened is—or is taken by him to be—so powerful that he cannot prevent it from leading him to submit to the threat, then he really has no alternative other than to submit.”

\textsuperscript{13} Or that one would therefore not be morally responsible for one’s action. For related discussion, see Frankfurt, “Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility,” in \textit{The Importance of What We Care About}. 
(2). Nor is there any real reason to expect that there is some special difficulty, in general, with resisting or endorsing a desire to avoid a wrongful consequence.

These cases point to a more fundamental problem with Frankfurt’s view, one that I think raises to a deep difficulty for the whole autonomy-based approach. The problem is that, if Frankfurt is right about what it takes for there to be a case of genuine (or at any rate wrongful) coercion, it probably happens only very rarely, if ever. Surely in most cases of what we’d normally call coercion, the coercees do not face literally irresistible threats. Even where someone is threatened with some truly dreadful consequence, there is a difference between being unable to resist succumbing to the threat and its being the overwhelmingly obvious choice to make. The fact that it would be entirely unreasonable to do anything else does not mean that doing something else is impossible. This seems true on any plausible account of when a threat counts as irresistible or as overwhelming the recipient’s will.

Moreover, even if we concentrate solely on Frankfurt’s second condition, and insist that a victim of coercion does not act autonomously merely because he does not identify with or endorse the motive that causes him to act, we will not have solved the problem. For it is difficult to believe that victims of coercion do not identify with their motives—and thus fail to act autonomously—in the way Frankfurt suggests. If you threaten my life in order to get me to fork over my money, I’ll fork it over because I want to live. This is a desire I fully, wholeheartedly identify with. There is a sense in which it’s true that I don’t really want to give you my money. This is because I don’t want to be in this situation; I wish you hadn’t threatened me in the first place. But it is not generally an affront to a person’s autonomy—nor is it generally impermissible—to put him in a situation he would prefer not to be in. When I travel on airplanes, I prefer to sit in an empty row. This doesn’t mean that the person who sits down next to me is doing something wrong. In any case, this is different than saying that, in
responding to a threat, I do not endorse the motive on which I act in my situation as it actually is.\textsuperscript{14}

Thus, while Frankfurt does provide an independent conception of autonomy, he fails to make it plausible that coercion tends to undermine a person's autonomy in this sense.

The objections I've raised against Frankfurt's viewpoint to a quite general problem in attempting to specify the wrong of coercion by appeal to some sense in which the coercee's choice is defective—non-autonomous or involuntary or non-reason-responsive, or whatever. Although a coercive threat may often involve distorting influences such as fear, it primarily works by altering the reasons the recipient has for pursuing certain options over others. But responding to changes in one's situation that make certain alternatives more attractive or reasonable is just what acting rationally and autonomously normally involves. The fact that the situational change that affects one's reasons is due to a threat is not in this respect relevant. To be sure, from the point of view of the victim, the overall situation is hardly desirable. But people frequently make free, rational decisions in less-than-ideal circumstances. It is very difficult to supply an understanding of what it is for a choice to be unfree that (a) is independent of the choice being coerced, and (b) makes it plausible that, in central cases of wrongful coercion, the coercee’s choice is unfree in that sense.

IV

We have reason, then, to doubt that the moral problem with coercion is that the choice to comply with a threat falls short of some independently specifiable conception of autonomy or freedom. This is because threats typically work by introducing reasons the recipient is expected rationally to respond to. This difficulty with autonomy-based accounts leads naturally to the second approach outlined in

\textsuperscript{14} For a related discussion of Frankfurt’s account, as well as further objections to the autonomy-based approach, see Japa Pallikkathayil, “The Possibility of Choice.”
section (1). Perhaps, that is, the problem is precisely that the coercee is being given reason to do something she would not otherwise take herself to have good reason to do.

In a recent paper, A.J. Julius has defended an account of coercion as violating what he calls the Independence Principle:

*Independence Principle*: I should not (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]).

If I threaten you, I generally intend to get you to do something without believing that you will thereby come to act on the basis of some reason you have independent of my threat. This may either be because there is no such independent reason (you don’t have reason to give me your money), or because, even if I believe there is independent reason for you to do what I’m trying to get you to do (as in paternalistic coercion), I will be leading you to do it *in order to avoid the threatened consequence*, and not for the sake of that independent reason.

The most immediate problem for this view, as Julius is acutely aware, is that even instances of permissible and desirable offers appear to violate the Independence Principle. If I offer to make you dinner if you’ll walk my dog, it certainly does not seem that I intend to bring you to act on the independent reasons you have to walk my dog. Julius devotes much of his article to arguing that this apparent consequence of his view does not actually follow from it. To do this, he develops an ingenious account of permissible offers and exchanges that implies that they do not violate the Independence Principle after all.

Briefly, the argument is that there are sometimes combinations of actions performable by

---

several people, which these people have joint reason to perform. Legitimate offers are then to be understood as, in effect, catalysts to the performance by the parties of a set of actions that they as group have independent reason to perform. For instance, you and I might have a joint reason to perform the combination, *you walk my dog/I make you dinner*. My offer can then be seen as a means of bringing us both to act on this joint reason, a reason we would have anyway. In that case, my proposal is consistent with the Independence Principle after all.

Perhaps this is an effective response to the objection that the Independence Principle would condemn too many run-of-the-mill offers to exchange goods and services to be plausible. I will not pursue the question of whether it gets the cases right. However, the Independence Principle should, I think, strike us as puzzling in any case. After all, we frequently act in ways that affect other people’s reasons. Generally speaking, there seems to be nothing objectionable about this as long as what we do is otherwise permissible. When I build my sandcastle at the beach, I create a reason for you to stop and look at it. We might wonder then why it should be forbidden to intend these reason-altering consequences of our otherwise permissible acts and intentions.

This puzzlement is confirmed by the somewhat different difficulty for Julius’s view posed by the Deontic Dependence Principle. It is, it seems, generally permissible to threaten to do what one has a right to do. But a threat, if it is not simply superfluous, would seem to influence the recipient in ways other than by bringing her to act on reasons that apply to her independently of that threat. If you have to threaten to fire me to get me to file my TPS reports in a timely manner, this is presumably because I am not sufficiently moved by consideration of the ways in which the needs of the company are served by TPS reports. But it hardly seems that, in leading me to do-my-job-so-as-not-to-get-fired, you wrong me. There is, again, no reason to think that the moral status of carrying out a threat will be the thing that determines whether or not it introduces new reasons for the recipient to act beyond those that
already apply to her.

V

It is time now to investigate the Deontic Dependence Principle directly. The principle holds that it is wrong for A to communicate to B that A will do X unless B does Y if only if it would be wrong for A to do X supposing B fails to do Y. What explains this dependence? Why should the moral status of seeking to influence a person by way of a threat depend on the permissibility or impermissibility of doing what one is threatening to do?16

Japa Pallikkathayil offers a nuanced answer to this question in a recent essay.17 On her account, the fact that the coercer is threatening to do something impermissible plays an important role in explaining how the threat undermines any possibility of the victim’s consenting to the transaction. And this—acting in a way that undermines the very possibility of consent—is in turn said to violate the Kantian injunction never to treat a person merely as a means to one’s ends.18

According to Pallikkathayil, a coercee’s inability to meaningfully consent to what the coercer demands stems from the fact that her options have been limited in a way that undermines the moral purpose of consent.19 If I make a coercive threat—if I tell you that I’ll break your legs if you don’t stay

---

16 I assume it is obvious that this is the direction of dependence.

17 Pallikkathayil, “The Possibility of Choice.”


19 Pallikkathayil, “The Possibility of Choice”
out of Malibu—I limit your options. It's not that hanging around in Malibu is no longer an option for you. It's that you no longer have the option of hanging around in Malibu with your legs intact. But being able to hang around in Malibu with your legs intact is, it seems, an option you are entitled to have available to you. And on Pallikkathayil’s view, the moral purpose of consent is served only if the agent has access to the options she is entitled to.

In making a coercive threat, the coercer thus removes or "takes possession of" an option her victim is entitled to have. And if one does not have discretion to choose from at least among the options one is entitled to have available, then any putative act of consent—"here, take the money"—will not reflect the type control over one's circumstances that it is supposed to. It will therefore not qualify as genuine or valid consent. It is in this way that coercion is supposed to undermine the possibility of the victim's consenting to further the coerer's ends. Coercion undermines the moral significance of consent because it eliminates at least some of the options in relation to which it is the normative function of consent to provide one with a meaningful form of discretion or control.

Here, we can see why it matters for Pallikkathayil that what is being threatened is itself impermissible. One is normally entitled, for instance, to have available the option of keeping one's money without not being murdered. One is not necessarily entitled to have the option of showing up to work late without being fired. This is why your boss's threat to your career is permissible, whereas your mugger's threat to your life is not.

---

20 In saying this I'm assuming the threat is credible. But a related point can be made even without this assumption. There is an important sense in which one can be said to lack an option if one merely believes (or, we might add, believes with good reason) that a certain possibility is closed off. This is because, even if, objectively speaking, a certain option is open, if one nevertheless believes that it is unavailable, it cannot sensibly figure in one's thinking about what to do. In this sense, the threat need only be credible in that there's good reason to believe it, rather than that the threat will in fact be carried out.

There is much to be said for this account. But there is a serious objection to it. The problem is that eliminating a certain option by way of a threat is often wrong even when eliminating that very same option by some other means is permissible. The wrong of coercion thus cannot depend on its eliminating options the victim is entitled to have. Consider: I make a bid of a hundred thousand dollars on a houseboat at a police auction. Now you can no longer purchase it for eighty. When I take the last seat at the bar, you have to stand or go find somewhere else to drink. There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with such ordinary ways of limiting another person's options. Sitting down on the last available barstool and thus forcing you to stand or go elsewhere is permissible. Telling you I'll pour my beer over your head if you sit down is not. You have no claim against me not to limit your options in the first way; you do have a claim against me not to do so in the second way. In both cases, I remove (by different means) your option of sitting at the bar without having beer poured on your head. It appears, then, that we can't explain what's wrong with making the threat simply by appeal to the fact that you are entitled to that option.

We are left with a question, then, as to why the coercive restriction of options is so objectionable when there are myriad other ways one's options—indeed, the very same options—might be limited that are perfectly legitimate.

VI

If a coercive threat constrains the recipient’s choice, it does so in a sense that goes beyond the brute elimination of options. How so? In cases of wrongful coercion the person being threatened faces a peculiar deliberative situation. She has to take into account the fact that opting for certain courses of action will likely lead another to treat her in ways that are morally prohibited. It’s natural to think, however, that one should not have to consider, in deliberating about what to do, the possibility that
others will behave impermissibly as a result of the decision one makes.

To explain this, let me first introduce a definition.

**Deliberative Security:** A person has deliberative security with respect to a particular option P if she can, given the circumstances, rationally proceed on the assumption that whether others act permissibly does *not* depend on whether she chooses in favor of P.

For example, if, in thinking about whether you should take a trip to Malibu, you have to take into consideration the likely fact that I will break your legs if you do take the trip, then you lack deliberative security with respect to the option of going to Malibu.

Consider, now, the

**Deliberative Security Thesis.** The characteristic feature of wrongful coercive threats is that they undermine a person’s deliberative security with respect to some option otherwise open to that person.22

---

22 Where “open” is shorthand for: (a) the option is one the agent could perform if she chose to do so and/or she believed this was the case, and (b) it’s an option it would be morally acceptable for her to seriously consider performing. Thus the Deliberative Security Thesis is intended to apply specifically to options that are both practicable and morally “on the table.”

23 Compare Shaw: “If one is permitted to deliberate about performing an action A at all, one is entitled to deliberate as if one could perform A free of any sanction on its performance that would constitute a wrong,” ("The Morality of Blackmail,” p. 187). The claim I am making is similar. However, Shaw’s formulation raises a number of questions. Does his principle imply that one is entitled to deliberate as if one could perform A free of any impermissible sanction *even in the face of good evidence* that such a sanction will be attached to A? If so, it cannot plausibly be construed as a rational entitlement. Is it then a moral entitlement to deliberate in this way in the face of credible evidence to the contrary? This too, seems doubtful. It’s not clear what value there would be in a moral entitlement to deliberate irrationally. The principle
The case for accepting the Deliberative Security Thesis is clearest, I think, when what’s being threatened is a violation of the coercee’s rights. Think, for example, of rights to bodily integrity, or rights to personal property. On many accounts of such rights, their significance lies at least partly in supporting the right bearer’s autonomy—she is entitled to be the one, by and large, who decides what happens with her body and possessions. Arguably, then, part of the point of having such rights, is that they provide some security that one can rely on in making plans for the future. If this is right, then the entitlement to expect that one's rights will be respected cannot be contingent on any (permissible) decisions that one makes. Moreover, even if, say, one’s right to bodily integrity is not itself violated, if one is deprived of the ability to (rationally) rely, in one's deliberation and planning, on the expectation that this right will be respected, one loses something of significant value. This supports the claim that one wrongs a person if one undermines the deliberative security provided by that person’s rights.

Consideration of these autonomy rights might suggest that the best way of explaining the Deliberative Security Thesis is by postulating an independent right to deliberative security. This seems promising, since the Deliberative Security Thesis would appear to follow from such a right, together with the Deontic Dependence Principle. We would thus be able to explain why coercive threats to do what is impermissible are themselves wrong, whereas threats to do what is permissible are likewise permissible: the former, but not the latter violate their target’s right to deliberative security.

There is, however, a basic problem with attempting to account for the wrong of coercion by construing it as a violation of some independently characterizable deliberative right. A credible threat seems best read as a moral entitlement to the conditions under which it would be rational to deliberate as if one could perform A free of any impermissible sanction—an entitlement, roughly, to what I have called deliberative security.

24 Roughly along the lines endorsed by Shaw. See footnote 21.
would certainly undermine such a deliberative right. But so, it seems, would a warning by a third 
party. Suppose you know that Ralph, who has anger issues, is extremely sensitive about the size of his 
nose and that, if I so much as mention it, he’s likely punch me in mine. In telling me this, you 
undermine my deliberative security with respect to the option of, for instance, asking Ralph whether 
he has to have his sunglasses specially made. But you do not coerce me into keeping my mouth shut, 
nor do you wrong me in the way that Ralph would wrong me if he were to threaten to break my nose 
should I call attention to his. You do not wrong me at all. So, if we are to understand coercion as 
objectionable in virtue of its constituting the violation of some deliberative right, like the right to 
deliberative security, we will need to explain why a threat to do something wrong infringes this right, 
while a warning that someone is likely to do something wrong does not. I do not know how to do this. 
I’m therefore skeptical of the attempt to account for the objection to coercion by appeal to a prior 
theory of deliberative rights.

This does not mean, however, that we should abandon the Deliberative Security Thesis. It may 
not rest on a prior right to deliberative security. But we may be able to supply an alternative basis for 
the thesis. This is the task I turn to now.

VII

Let’s briefly retrace our steps. I argued that the most promising approach to understanding the nature 
of the moral objection to coercion is one that focuses on the way in which the deontic status of a threat 
seems to track the deontic status of what the coercer is threatening to do (the Deontic Dependence 
Principle). I then argued that, in pursuing this line, it is not enough to show that a coercive threat 
eliminates certain options that should be available to the victim; what is peculiarly objectionable about 
coercion is the way in which it standardly impacts the victim’s deliberation concerning the options
that are open to her. This led us, finally, to the Deliberative Security Thesis and the question of its basis.

I now want to suggest that we understand undermining a person's deliberative security as, in a sense, involving an illicit extension or transfer of responsibility. Suppose, for instance, that a mugger threatens to shoot you if you don't give her your wallet. It is now, in a sense, up to you to decide whether to do one thing and be shot, or do something else and walk away unharmed. Your life depends on handing over your wallet, and the choice is yours. From your point of view, then, it is as though you are the one responsible for ensuring that you are not intentionally shot by this person. Hence, whether, in this respect, she acts as she is morally required to has become your responsibility. She has evidently disavowed it. But it is obviously a responsibility that properly falls to the mugger herself, not you. In disavowing her responsibility in this way, as a means of influencing your deliberation and choice, the mugger thus wrongs you, even if she never pulls the trigger.

One might object to this account on the grounds that it cannot really become your responsibility to ensure this mugger does not shoot you. Of course I admit that, in one sense, her responsibility not to harm you does not transfer to you. The mugger is still herself responsible for whether or not she shoots you; threatening you could not change this. But it does not follow that your responsibility with respect to your own rights has not been wrongly extended to cover what properly belongs in this other agent's sphere of responsibility. We all bear a certain degree of responsibility for protecting ourselves from harm. And, I think, it's safe to assume this includes the responsibility to protect ourselves against metal objects slamming into our bodies at very high speeds. This responsibility to protect yourself comes into play when faced with the mugger's threat. There is no reason to think you would be entirely blameless if you were shot as a result of refusing to hand over your money. Of course, it's the mugger who's primarily to blame. Nevertheless, in refusing to give in,
it may be perfectly reasonable to criticize you for acting recklessly and with disregard for your well-being and perhaps the well-being of those who depend on you.

If this is right, then the victim of coercion does take on a responsibility she should not have to bear. And although there is no normative sense in which the coercer is thereby relieved of his responsibility to govern his actions in accordance with his moral obligations, it is no accident that the extension of the victim’s responsibility is accomplished through the coercer’s effective disavowal of his own responsibility. That is, via his threat, the coercer forces his victim to take responsibility for how, ultimately, she is treated by him (whether he harms her, for instance). And the coercer does this precisely by refusing himself to take responsibility in the way that he should for how he treats his victim. The threat is effective only because the coercer successfully communicates to his victim his renunciation of his responsibility to make his decision about what to do depend what he is morally permitted to do. We might say, in light of the direct connection between this renunciation of responsibility, on the one hand, and the subsequent imperative for the coercee to take up the responsibility the coercer has renounced, on the other hand, that coercion effects a kind of “transfer” of responsibility. And that is the problem. It is not a morally valid transfer. It is in some ways analogous to a transfer of one person’s physical property into another’s possession that occurs by way of fraud or theft. Such a transfer has no legal or moral reality. But its empirical effects are real enough. The practical possession and control of the object now belong to someone who has no right to them. Coercion effects a similar sort of mismatch between the practical reality concerning who must take responsibility, say, for ensuring the victim’s rights are not violated, and the moral reality, concerning whom that responsibility properly belongs to.

This sense in which the responsibility is transferred—disavowed, on the one hand, taken up on the other—also helps to distinguish what happens when one issues a threat from what happens when
one issues a warning that someone else is likely to behave impermissibly. For in that case, the imperative for the recipient to take up for avoiding or preventing another’s wrongful conduct does not stem from a refusal, on the part of the one who warns, to accept responsibility for what she should.

We should now ask: what light does this theory shed on the features of coercion that provide the starting points for the rival approaches introduced in section (1)? Let’s first consider, the issue of the effect of a coercive threat on the coercee’s will. A coerced choice is not a free or autonomous choice. But we have seen the difficulty of explaining this truism by appeal to some general and independent conception of autonomous agency. It’s not plausible that, given some such account of autonomy, coercive threats will typically inhibit the exercise of the coercee’s capacity for autonomous agency in choosing to act as the coercer demands.

But we are now, I think, in a position to account for a sense in which the coercee’s choice is constrained. Her deliberation is burdened with having to take on a responsibility she has a right to be free of. This is plausibly construed as, to use Raz’s phrase, an “invasion of autonomy,” insofar as it constitutes the introduction of what is, morally speaking, an alien factor into one’s decision-making process.25 The exercise of one’s rational agency is not free when subject to this type of illegitimate interference.

The other feature of coercion, which motivates the second approach, is that the coercer announces his intention to act solely for the purpose of providing his target with a reason to do something she would not otherwise take herself to have good reason to do. This can be insidious. But it is most obviously so where the (conditional) intention expressed is an intention to do something the coercer is prohibited from doing. As I noted, it does not seem to be generally true that one needs to be concerned with whether one’s activities and intentions alter other people’s reasons for action. And this

---

should lead us to wonder why it should be the case that one may not have that as one’s aim. What is insidious is that one would decide to do what one has decisive moral reason not to do in order to provide another with a reason she would not otherwise have to do something. The problem is most plausibly seen, then, not as a matter of creating a reason that would not otherwise exist, but as creating a reason that should not exist—a reason the other should not have to take into account.

This completes the core of my account of what is distinctively objectionable about coercing someone by threatening to do what one has no right to do. We can explain why the Deontic Dependence Principle holds, at least as a general rule, by appeal to the way in which such threats undermine their targets’ deliberative security with respect to options otherwise open to them. Other things equal, this is wrong when and because it illegitimately saddles the victim with the responsibility to ensure the coercer acts as he or she is morally required to.

VIII

I now want to reconsider, in light of the above account, how we should think about supposedly paradoxical cases such as blackmail. Are these sorts of cases genuine exceptions to the Deontic Dependence Principle?

The basic idea that underlies the Deliberative Security Thesis is that each of us is fundamentally responsible (under normal conditions) for ensuring that our actions conform to moral standards. A central component of this is the responsibility, first, to find ways of pursuing our ends without harming others or unduly interfering with them, and second, to ensure that any intentional harm we do inflict is justified. Now, in some cases of blackmail, there is simply no good reason for bringing about the harm or interference with a person’s life that would result from the revelation of the
information.26 Telling a person’s elderly and conservative parents that he or she is gay, for instance, will in most cases be an unjustified interference with that person’s life and relationships. These are easy cases insofar as they do not even appear to be counterexamples to the Deontic Dependence Principle. But there are harder cases, in which it seems it would have been permissible—even obligatory—to reveal information the target wants to keep secret.

For example, Red might have sufficient justification for informing Green’s spouse of her adulterous affair. Even where this is so, it does not mean that Red may threaten to expose the affair in order to induce Green to pay him to keep quiet. It would be wrong for Red to use the information in this way to coerce Green. But can we fit this wrong into the account I’ve offered? Does this threat undermine Green’s deliberative security—that is, does it undermine her ability to rationally proceed on the assumption that Red will act permissibly regardless of how she chooses?

In section 1, I noted the possibility that, despite appearances, it is possible to understand this type of threat as a threat to do something wrong. This becomes plausible if we take into account Red’s motive for revealing the information, as implied by his threatening to expose Green’s infidelity. In carrying out his threat, Red will presumably have it as part of his aim that Green suffer. Arguably, it would be wrong to reveal the affair for the sake of the damage and misery it would cause. If that’s right, then Red’s threat is a threat to act in a way it would be morally wrong for him to act. And whether he does act wrongly depends on Green’s decision whether or not to pay. Green’s deliberative security with respect to the option of refusing to pay what Red is asking is therefore undermined by Red’s threat to expose the affair—even though, we are supposing, Red could have justifiably gone

26 By “blackmail,” I mean what is sometimes called “informational blackmail”: the threat to reveal compromising information in order to extract payment or favors from the person who would be affected by the information’s being made public.
straight to Green’s spouse with the information.

This way of accommodating the case of blackmail may arouse skepticism on two counts. First, not everyone agrees that an act can be made wrongful just by the motive or intent with which it is performed. Second, one might be skeptical of the claim that what Red is threatening to do is expose Green’s affair for the sake of ruining her marriage and causing her pain, as opposed to merely threatening to expose the affair. That is, it is not clear whether we should understand the content of the threat as implying anything about the motives Red would be acting on were he to carry it out. In either case, we cannot say that what Red is threatening to do is itself impermissible—though were he to carry out his threat, his motives for doing so would likely be objectionable.

Luckily, however, I do not think we need to decide either of these issues in order to make good on the account I’ve offered. Even if, strictly speaking, cases like the one described above are exceptions to the Deontic Dependence Principle, the objection to what the blackmailer does can still be explained on the same underlying basis as other cases of wrongful coercion. We have, again, not only the responsibility to see to it we do not inflict gratuitous harm on others, but also the responsibility to make sure whatever harm we do inflict is justified. In issuing his threat, however, the blackmailer disavows that responsibility. The question of whether Red tells Green’s spouse about her affair is no longer to be decided by way of Red’s reflection and judgment as to whether the damage it will cause is justified by the reasons in favor of revealing the information. Rather, it is to be determined by Green’s decision as to whether avoiding this damage is worth the sum of money Red is asking for. This constitutes the type of illegitimate disavowal and extension of responsibility we found

---

in the other cases of wrongful coercive threats.

One virtue of this account is that it can explain what might seem like a puzzling divergence between otherwise similar cases. It seems wrong for Red to threaten to expose Green’s infidelity in order to get Green to pay him. But it does not seem in the same way objectionable for Red to use the same threat to induce Green to confess to her spouse herself. If the objection to blackmail were simply an objection to the use of sensitive information to manipulate the vulnerable party, these two cases should appear equally problematic. Nor is it merely that, in the second case, Red is not seeking to benefit himself. It would, after all, remain objectionable if Red were to threaten to expose the affair in order to get Green to donate to some worthy charity.

Rather, the difference is that, given that Red’s demand is for Green to fess up on her own, there is no indication that Red has abdicated his responsibility to ensure that, insofar as he plays a role in causing Green marital strife, there is sufficient moral justification for doing so. The suggestion, implicit in Red’s threat, that Green’s refusal to confess will be taken by Red as reason for going to Green’s spouse himself, is not obviously inconsistent with his taking appropriate responsibility for his behavior in this matter. This is in clear contrast to the suggestion that Red would take Green’s refusal to pay him as reason to take the information to Green’s spouse. If this is right, then, on the view I’ve here, it also what explains why Red’s threatening Green for the sake of financial gain is wrong, whereas threatening her to get her to confess is not.

IX

28 Of course, this might be objectionable. Perhaps it is simply not Red’s place to intervene in Green’s marriage in this way. But if this is so, it’s doubtful that Red would be justified in going straight to Green’s spouse with the information. This is not the case I am imagining.
Coercion constrains one’s choices, but not by subverting one’s will, nor by simply limiting one’s options. Rather, it does so, paradigmatically, by undermining one’s freedom to rationally deliberate about what to do on the assumption that others will act only as they are morally permitted to act, regardless of what one decides. In so doing, the coercer, as it were, transfers to the victim the responsibility for ensuring that he (the coercer) behaves as he morally should. He takes advantage of the power he has to act in ways that he should not. But he takes advantage of this power underhandedly—not by exercising it directly, but by shifting the responsibility to prevent its exercise onto someone else, in order to influence her choices. A person ought to be free of such influence.\textsuperscript{29}