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THREATS, WARNINGS, AND RELATIONSHIP ULTIMATUMS

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“You have a choice between the cigarettes and me.” “If you don’t want to marry me, then I think we should go our separate ways.” These utterances are infamous in magazines, advice columns, books about dating, and pop-psychology. We call them ultimatums. They carve out the boundaries of relationships—establish what the necessary conditions are for one person to enter a relationship or stay in a relationship. Less flatteringly, we call them “threats.” Men complain that marital ultimatums force them into marriage before they are ready. Popular movies portray the marriages that result from ultimatums as fraught with problems. Advice columns caution women to use ultimatums only if they are willing to carry out the threat of a break-up. In this chapter I explore three types of relationship ultimatums—those that come in the form of: warnings, threats, and bluffing threats. I explain how ultimatums can be used as part of coercive strategies. I make some suggestions as to when and why they are wrongful. I argue that some coercive strategies within intimate relationships, especially when they are insincere, involve a special, additional wrong that does not arise in most cases of coercion operating outside of intimate relationships.

Before I delve into the topic of ultimatums, I want to discuss the concept of coercion and distinguish it from a related concept, exploitation. This will be important for understanding the coercive nature of some ultimatums. Later in the chapter, it will be a distinction important for examining different uses of exit power in an intimate relationship.

One very common way of distinguishing coercion from exploitation is to associate coercion with threats and exploitation with offers. This certainly is not a perfect method for demarcating the two concepts, and I will not discuss the various, nuanced complaints here. However, as a general method of distinguishing one from the other, it is useful. When the mugger says, “your money or your life,” he is coercing you. When the surgeon demands an exorbitant price for a simple surgery, but you have no time to find another surgeon, she might also say, “your money or your life.” However, she does not coerce you into giving up your money. She exploits you.

Coercion is not the only thing that can have a coercive effect on an individual. Poverty, desperation, offers that we cannot refuse—these all might constitute circumstances that constrain our options, or what counts to us as a viable option in ways that feel coercive (Sachs 2013: 69–70). However, when I say “coercion” as a manipulative strategy, I mean something very particular. Coercion involves taking away some conjunction of options (e.g., keeping both your

money and your life) that otherwise the person targeted by coercion, the coerced, would have had available to him—with the expressed intention of getting the coerced to do what it is rational for him to do in light of his restricted options—something that the coercer wants him to do (e.g., keep his life, but give the mugger his money).

What about the surgeon? He is taking advantage of the fact that the victim is about to die without surgery. Why isn't this a type of threat? Robert Nozick suggests that the reason why this is an offer and not a threat is because the option provided by the surgeon—paying an exorbitant amount for life-saving surgery—is still better than the options previously available to the victim (Nozick 1969; Wertheimer 1987: 202–221; Frankfurt 1988: 28). David Zimmerman does not think that the difference can be explained in terms of “better” and “worse.” He suggests that the reason why the surgeon makes an offer and not a threat is because the option provided by the surgeon is *preferred* by the victim to the options previously available to her (Zimmerman 1981: 121–145). Benjamin Sachs suggests that neither Nozick nor Zimmerman's explanations adequately account for very bad offers. For instance, a sardine-enthusiast might say to a vegetarian: “Give me your wallet and I will seek out and purchase all of the sardines that you can afford.” Now, you do not prefer, nor are you made better off, by the option presented. However, you can refuse both to give the sardine-enthusiast your wallet and refuse to be saddled with truck-loads of sardines. Similarly, you *can* refuse to give the surgeon your money and refuse the life-saving surgery (however little you might want to refuse). Whereas, with a threat, you *cannot* refuse the introduced terms (Sachs 2013: 69–70). The mugger does not say, “if you accept this arrangement, then give me your money or I'll take your life.” The surgeon says, “if you accept this arrangement, then give me your money and I'll save your life.”

These are extreme examples of wrongful threats and offers. The sort of coercion and exploitation that occurs between loved ones is more subtle and harder to discern. However, I will point out that there certainly are marriages that start or stay together because of very brutal uses of these manipulative tactics. Imagine a couple living in a country where men are legally entitled to the custody of children after a divorce. Men in such situations can say, “if you leave me, then you'll never see your children again.” There may be no love between husband and wife. However, there is clearly love between a mother and her children—love that can be relied on, by the husband, to keep the wife in the marriage.

It is also clear how marriages can start out with an exploitative arrangement. Alan Wertheimer considers a case in which a man (A) and woman (B) are dating, and the woman very much wants to get married, whereas the man is rather ambivalent.

Now, suppose that A proposes to marry B if but only if B will agree to terms that are unfair with respect to the distribution of financial resources, care for children, the division of household labor, and so forth. In other words, a traditional marriage. B would prefer to marry A on non-exploitative terms, but that option is unavailable.

(Wertheimer 1996: 290)

Wertheimer asks us to imagine that the woman really is better off in the exploitative marriage than she would be if not married to this man at all (imagine some combination of extreme love, plus children that she would otherwise not have, etc.). Wertheimer claims that it is perfectly reasonable to say that, even though the woman is made better off by the marriage, it is morally worse for the man to marry her in this unfair way than to refrain from marrying her.

Wertheimer calls this traditional marriage arrangement exploitative. He thinks that no matter what the difference is between how much the man values the marriage and how much the woman values the marriage, the man acts wrongfully in using this difference in valuation to

secure an unfair marital arrangement. Whereas if an employee cares less about receiving a job offer than an employer cares about hiring him, then it might well be morally permissible for the potential employee to hold out for an unusually high salary to sweeten the deal. However, for Wertheimer, relationships are not like employment negotiations. Wertheimer says, "Relationships create a new moral context, a different moral baseline, so to speak" (Wertheimer 1996: 291).

We have looked at coercive and exploitative methods for starting/maintaining marriages that are clearly wrongful—involving abuses of power or unfair domestic arrangements. However, there are some coercive ways to initiate marriages that are not clearly wrongful. Consider a common phenomenon that initiates marriages: ultimatums. Often one member of a couple, after a lengthy period of dating, will say something to this effect: if you want to stay with me, then you must marry me/commit to me. Now, marriage ultimatums are not the only ultimatums used in relationships. Ultimatums can be used to articulate any deal-breaker. For instance, "if you don't stop using drugs, then I will break up with you." It is clear why this ultimatum might be permissible: maintaining a relationship with a drug addict—or someone who habitually uses drugs—can be too much of a burden to bear. However, marital ultimatums can also be motivated by considerations of real moral concern.

Usually, pre-marital relationships involve romantic and sexual exclusivity—just like marriages. For this reason, pre-marital relationships prevent members from exploring other romantic and sexual futures with other potential partners. Once one member of a couple is certain that she or he wants to commit to the relationship, and the other member is not certain, then the relationship becomes analogous to submitting an article for consideration in a philosophy journal. The submitter may not submit her paper for review at any other journal until a decision is rendered, or the paper is withdrawn. At some point, if the journal has sat on the article for too long, it is sensible for the submitter to withdraw it. If it will be refused eventually, then the time it spends in review is harmful to the submitter. However, before withdrawing it, it is prudent for the submitter to give the journal a chance to hurry up and review it. This might sound a lot like a marital ultimatum: if you don't want to commit to this paper now, then I am withdrawing it. Notice that what I am calling a "marital ultimatum" could just be called a "commitment ultimatum," since the commitment is what the ultimatum-maker is seeking from the marriage. I will continue to use "marriage ultimatum" for consistency, but my discussion could equally well apply to cases of commitment ultimatums that do not come in the form of marriage ultimatums.

Notice that if pre-marital relationships were not romantically and sexually exclusive—more similar to submissions at law journals—then marital ultimatums would not be necessary to prevent harm (opportunity cost) to more-committed members of couples. Of course, marital ultimatums still might be useful in situations wherein one less-committed partner was asking a more committed partner to make a sacrifice (e.g., to move across country, to change jobs, etc.). It might be reasonable to say, "I will only quit my job and follow you across the country if you marry me." After all, quitting one's job and moving are both sacrifices—ones that would be unworthy for a relationship that might end at any time.

Are ultimatums, as I have described them, truly forms of coercion? One might object and say that *if* the more-committed partner really deems the extension of the relationship, on its current terms, undesirable (or deems it a bad gamble because of the opportunity cost), then when he or she voices the ultimatum, it is a warning, not a threat. Certainly, in the case of the drug-use ultimatum, the utterance sounds like a warning and not a threat. ("If you don't stop using drugs, then I will break up with you.")

Some philosophers characterize the difference between warnings and threats (pertaining to one's own future actions) by saying that warnings are descriptions of previously formed conditional

intentions. Threats may use the same words as warnings. However, it is only when we *make* a threat that we form the conditional intention. We link the antecedent and consequent together in our intentions for the sake of the strategy (Sachs 2013: 70–71; Greenawalt 1983: 1081–1124). Of course, threats can also involve no intention to follow through, when they are bluffing threats. Let me explain these differences using the example of the drug-use ultimatum. Sammy wants her partner, Pat, to stop using drugs. Sammy says, “if you don’t stop using drugs, go to rehab, and stay clean, then I’m going to break up with you.”

Drug Ultimatum Scenario, Warning: Sammy no longer wants to be in a relationship with Pat if Pat continues using drugs and has already formed the conditional intention to break up with Pat if Pat does not stop using drugs. Sammy issues the ultimatum, which gives Pat the information and Pat’s restricted options that will allow Pat to make a choice between Sammy and drugs. Of course, Sammy hopes that Pat will choose to stop using drugs.

Drug Ultimatum Scenario, Threat: Sammy really wants to stay with Pat whether or not Pat continues using drugs. Sammy hopes that, if faced with a choice, Pat will give up drugs rather than lose the relationship. Sammy is willing to take a chance at losing Pat by issuing the ultimatum. If Pat refuses, Sammy will carry through on their threat.

Drug Ultimatum Scenario, Bluffing Threat: Sammy really wants to stay with Pat whether or not Pat continues using drugs. Sammy issues the ultimatum. Sammy hopes that, if faced with a choice, Pat will give up drugs rather than lose the relationship. However, if Pat refuses, Sammy will stay with Pat anyway.

In all of these scenarios, the ultimatum is being used with the hope that it will convince Pat to stop using drugs. However, in *Warning*, the ultimatum is not part of any scheme—let alone coercion. Why not? Sammy does not take away Pat’s preferred option (i.e., doing drugs and keeping Sammy) as part of a strategy for getting Pat to stop using drugs. Note that words are not coercive *because* they are an attempt to get the hearer to do something. For instance, imagine Sammy follows up the ultimatum with something like the following, “You really should choose me over drugs. I’m good for you. I encourage you to finish your projects and invest time in your career. The drugs are slowly killing you and, in the meantime, they’re keeping you from fulfilling your dreams.” This is not coercion even though Sammy is choosing her words in an attempt to get Pat to stop using drugs. Sammy has previously reduced Pat’s options—by making a decision that she is not going to stay in the relationship as it is now. With her ultimatum, Sammy informed Pat of the limited options available to Pat. With this little follow-up speech, Sammy is giving Pat reasons for choosing one of Pat’s existing options over another option—engaging in rational persuasion (Conly 2004).

In *Threat*, Sammy is using a coercive technique to try to get Pat to stop using drugs. Perhaps Sammy presents the threat as if it is a warning and says, “I’ve decided that the relationship is not worth it to me anymore if you’re going to keep using drugs.” This is false—Sammy actually prefers to stay with Pat in any case, but has decided to take a gamble in an effort to stop Pat’s drug use. However, Sammy might also be completely honest with Pat and say, “I love you so much that I *want* to stay with you no matter what, and had intended to do so. However, now I’m going to use some tough love and make you choose. It’s either me or the drugs. If you choose the drugs, I’m going to follow through on my threat.”

Before moving forward, I want to make it very clear that I am not claiming that Sammy’s method—the tough love method—is really a good strategy at all for getting Pat to stop using drugs. We know that drug addiction is complicated and that decisions about drug use are rarely made rationally. However, I have chosen a case involving drug use because it is precisely the sort of case in which threats are often implemented in the name of “tough love.”

In this case Sammy is using a coercive technique, and being completely honest about it, in order to get something that she wants. Below, I’ll discuss the moral implications of a sincere

threat. By contrast, in *Bluffing Threat*, Sammy is dishonest, and makes Pat believe that Pat's options have been limited by Sammy's conditional intention, when in fact Sammy's conditional intention has not altered. Below, I will suggest that there might be an additional problem with bluffing threats in the context of ultimatums between members of an intimate relationship.

For now, let us return to the marriage ultimatum—because I suspect that many readers who are sympathetic to Sammy in some, if not all, of the above scenarios will nonetheless find a marital ultimatum hard to endorse. Consider Tammy, who says to her girlfriend, Bette, “If you don't agree to marry me before the lease is up for our apartment, then I'm going end our relationship.” Consider these analogous scenarios to the above cases.

Marital Ultimatum Scenario, Warning: Tammy wants to have a family with children, and knows that it will take time to find someone whom she really loves and who would be a good co-parent. She wants to spend time dating any prospective partner, and living with her. She has done all of these things with Bette for many years. However, Bette has not committed to Tammy. If Tammy ultimately will need to spend years finding someone else, dating, and co-habiting with her, then she needs to get started on that exploratory project soon. So, unless Bette is ready to commit now, Tammy is ready to move on. She has already formed the conditional intention to break up with Bette if Bette will not commit. Tammy issues the ultimatum.

Marital Ultimatum Scenario, Threat: Tammy is in the same situation as above and recognizes the time/opportunity costs involved in staying with Bette. However, she prefers to stay with Bette even if Bette does not commit. Tammy is not ready to move on and has not yet formed a conditional intention to break up with Bette. However, she is resolved to follow through on her ultimatum. She hopes that the ultimatum will make Bette recognize how important the relationship is to Bette's happiness, and to commit.

Marital Ultimatum Scenario, Bluffing Threat: Tammy is in the same situation as above and recognizes the time/opportunity costs involved in staying with Bette. However, she prefers to stay with Bette even if she does not commit. Tammy is not ready to move on. She hopes that the ultimatum will make Bette recognize how important the relationship is to Bette's happiness, and to commit. However, she is not resolved to follow through on her ultimatum, and knows that she probably will not.

Tammy's *Warning* is not coercive, as with Sammy's *Warning*. What about Sammy and Tammy's threats? One important difference between relationship ultimatums, when they are threats, and most other threats that we consider in moral philosophy is that the content of the threat in relationship ultimatums is not wrong. It is permissible for Sammy and Tammy to carry out their threats and break up with Pat and Bette—at least, it would not be a wrong done to Pat or Bette. No one is entitled to another person remaining in a romantic relationship, unless commitment has been made. If there is anything morally wrong with their issuing of threats it is because of the threats' role in a coercive strategy.

Another important difference between relationship ultimatums, when they are threats, and most other threats that we consider in moral philosophy is that the coercers are withdrawing an option from the coerced that they themselves have been providing. In blackmail cases, I might threaten to do something that is otherwise permissible—if it was not done as part of a coercive strategy—like tell your wife that you have been cheating on her (Shaw 2012). However, this would not be the withdrawal of an option that I had myself been providing and sustaining up until this point. The option-elimination involved in blackmail cases usually involves the coercer meddling with something that is not his business. However, with relationship ultimatums, the coercer is eliminating an option that is well within the realm of her own discretion.

Do these features of relationship ultimatums, when they are threats and not warnings, render them permissible? Some think that there is always *something* morally problematic about

coercion—even legitimate coercion, for instance coercion by the state (Sachs 2013: 74). Here is a general way of describing the type of reasoning used by a variety of theorists who think that coercion is a *pro tanto* wrong: For anyone, A, to use a coercive strategy on another, Z, always involves A controlling, or trying to control Z. After all, one is constraining another's options for the sake of re-routing the other's deliberations toward a particular end, rather than merely providing the other with reasons to choose that end (Feinberg 1986: 189–262; Pallikkathayil 2011).

I am not going to take on this view—that there is always something wrong with coercion, and so it requires justification. However, I do want to point out that even if it is not true, in general, it might be true in the context of a loving relationship. Perhaps, when negotiating a raise in one's workplace, it is permissible to threaten to leave the job (perhaps with another offer in hand) just as a strategy for getting the raise. However, in the context of a loving relationship, intentionally reducing someone's current array of options (even by means of withdrawing an option) for the express purpose of trying to get them to do something that they otherwise would not choose to do is a method of steering one's partner's decision-making. Even if justifiable, there is, perhaps, always something problematic or, at least, sub-optimal about attempting to steer a romantic partner's decision. We should try to change our partners' minds through discussion and debate—forms of persuasion that leave our partner in the driver's seat, doing his or her own steering. In other arenas, like in jobs, markets, and in politics, changes that might benefit an individual are often not the sort that can be achieved through discussion and debate, but *must* be triggered by something like an external job offer, a price offer from another supplier, or a threat to vote against a future bill. Certain institutional contexts might demand it, or persons expect it, and plan accordingly. In fact, depending on the job, giving an employee a raise in response to an employee appealing to his own interests might be unfair to other employees.

Further, there is an opportunity cost to using a coercive strategy instead of discussion or debate to persuade a partner in an intimate relationship. If one member of a couple changes his or her behavior because of the other's interests, or the other's reasons, that is a change that is an expression of care—something vital to an intimate relationship. If he or she changes his or her behavior because of restricted options, this is not an expression of care, just an expression of preferences. For example, he or she would prefer to change an element of behavior instead of exiting the relationship. I think these considerations suggest that there is, at least, a moral reason against using coercion in an intimate relationship, one in which two people are meant to care for one another.

If coercion within a relationship always requires *some* justification—in light of the reason against—then this might explain why we are more sympathetic to Sammy's ultimatum-making than to Tammy's. Sammy has more moral justification for implementing her threat than does Tammy.

First, Sammy is more harmed and wronged by Pat's drug use than Tammy is harmed or wronged by Bette's failure to commit. Second, Pat might not be responsive to reasons, offered through means of rational persuasion. It could be that what Pat really needs to stop doing drugs is some external pressure and deliberative control. By contrast, Bette suffers from no addiction that compromises her rationality. Tammy can articulate her circumstances to Bette and Bette can weigh Tammy's reasons and interests against her own. Sammy is better justified in making a threat than Tammy is justified. However, note that Tammy is gradually more and more harmed by Bette's delay and the degree to which she is justified in implementing a threat probably increases over time.

There is a missing detail in the narratives that I have described above—especially important, I think, in the case of Tammy's threat. Just how confident is Tammy that Bette will choose

marriage over a break-up? If Tammy is quite confident (in the way that a mugger is confident that I will choose my life over my wallet), then Tammy does not take herself to be risking much in making the threat. If she knows that Bette won't break up with her, then Tammy really does coerce Bette, in the traditional sense, defensible or not. She knows that her threat will leave Bette with only one acceptable option and, in this way, Tammy steers Bette into marriage.

However, if Tammy is not confident about Bette's ordered preference ranking, then Tammy takes on a big risk in making her threat. She withdraws her own second-choice option, knowing that she could end up with either her first choice or her least preferred option. I think that this type of threat is different. When relationship ultimatums are (i) sincere threats, (ii) with uncertain outcomes, then the threat-making takes on a different character. The threat-maker who knows that her partner will comply sits in a seat of power, as a rule-maker over her partner. The sincere threat-maker who is uncertain whether her partner will comply, and very much hopes that her partner will comply rather than exit, is not in a powerful position. If she believes that her partner takes exit to be a viable option, then by issuing the ultimatum, she is making herself vulnerable to her partner. She eliminates an option valued by her partner, but her partner might well eliminate an option valuable to her. For these reasons, under uncertainty, the threat is not as *controlling*. As you will see in my discussion of insincere threats below, I believe that controlling behavior is particularly problematic in intimate relationships.

When she decides to make a sincere threat to break up with Bette if Bette will not commit to marry her, Tammy resolves to choose a conditional course of action that is different from her preferred one—for an albeit strategic reason. Tammy might not have had sufficient motivation to break up with Bette without making the threat; the threat is what generates her [conditional] resolve (Sachs 2013: 66–68). The same is true with Sammy's sincere threat. Sammy is willing to take on the chance of losing the relationship in order to have a chance at keeping Pat, and losing the drugs. Bette's non-commitment and Pat's drug use may not have been deal-breakers for Tammy and Sammy before they made their threats. However, upon making their sincere threats, they turn these issues into real deal-breakers. Bette is being forced to respond to what is now a real deal-breaker of Tammy's. Responding to real deal-breakers is part of the real, negotiative work of relationship building.

Consider: sometimes a threat is the only means by which we can truly adopt a new deal-breaker—because announcing it to our partner is what generates our resolve. Perhaps we want to adopt a new deal-breaker because we think it is one that is consistent with our self-respect, or what it takes to stand up for ourselves.

Let us now consider the *Bluffing Threats*, made by Sammy and Tammy. In all cases of bluffing threats—inside or outside the realm of intimate relationships—there is the wrong of deception. However, ordinarily, when the content of threats is wrongful, it is morally better if a coercer is *not* sincere. For instance, if the mugger is insincere and actually would never shoot you, certainly this is better than if his threat is sincere, even if the bluff is deceptive. Because of the bluff, you think that you are in a situation where your only options are to hand over your wallet or be shot. Certainly, thinking that you are in such a situation is sufficient to undermine your autonomy and render the wallet “stolen” rather than consensually given. However, it is surely better if it is the case that the mugger does not have the conditional intention to shoot. It is not better in terms of the probable consequences for you. However, it is less wrongful on the part of the mugger—he did not initiate an action that had the possible consequence of you ending up dead.

With relationship ultimatums, there is a difference. First, as I explained at the outset, ending the relationship (if there is no existing commitment) is not any sort of violation of the other person's rights or entitlements—even if it might, in some respect, and for some period of time,

constitute a harm. For this reason, there is no moral *advantage* to a bluffing threat like there is in the mugging case. Further, I will argue that there is a wrong done when a bluffing threat is used in an intimate relationship that goes beyond the wrong of deception.

Keep in mind that when Sammy and Tammy make bluffing threats, they do not turn Bette's non-commitment and Pat's drug use into real deal-breakers. They merely present these issues as real deal-breakers to Bette and Pat. Sammy and Tammy use a coercive strategy to increase the chances of getting what they most want. However, they do not allow their threats to alter their own conditional intentions. So, they are forcing Bette and Pat to seriously consider an outcome that they themselves are not taking seriously—ending the relationship. Now, we could say that this is the wrong of deception that I have described—the bluffing threat is worse than the sincere threat because the bluffing threat implements two forms of manipulation, and the sincere threat just one. However, I think that there is some extra wrong involved in bluffing threats, beyond deception.

With the bluffing threat, Sammy and Tammy don't have a real stake in their partner's decision—or rather, they stand to win but they do not stand to lose (except maybe their credibility).

Part of what makes a threat defensible, I think, is that it is brought about by a real crisis of discontent—one that makes a partner really consider leaving a relationship. When we use our deal-breakers—existing ones, or those adopted through sincere threats—to shape the boundaries of our relationship, and our partner does the same, then we are left with a relationship that is open to all the possibilities that are not governed by deal-breakers. Those possibilities are the subjects of our debates, speculative discussions, hypothetical plan-making, persuasion, temporary disagreements, and persistent disagreements. Whenever we adopt a new deal-breaker, we carve out a relationship with a slightly narrower array of topics in this realm of possibility—which is fine, if it represents our true conditions for maintaining the relationship.

When we implement bluffing relationship ultimatums, we deceive. Further, our deception has a very particular kind of consequence. We usurp complete control over issues that belong in the array of possibilities—the realm of debate and disagreement. If I say, “You must choose between your pornography and me,” and I don't really mean it, then there a wide range of options on the table that I have blocked my partner from accessing. For instance, there is the option of him continuing to use pornography and me being upset about it, and occasionally arguing or fighting about it. There is the option of him generally avoiding pornography, to indulge my preferences and keep the relationship harmonious, but to use it when I am away, or when we are fighting about something else—and the relationship is already out of harmony. There is the option of him asking me to try to persuade him that there is something wrong with pornography—and that if I convince him, then he will stop using it. These are the kinds of options that are usually on the table for features of relationships that are under dispute. When I make my bluffing ultimatum, I take control of the disputed issue. In so doing, I take it out of the Realm of Dispute.

When one partner regularly makes bluffing ultimatums—regularly threatening to leave the relationship without meaning it—and his partner perceives him as credible (or credible enough that she won't risk non-compliance), then he controls her by blocking her access to all of the possible ways that she could contribute to shaping the relationship. Someone who engages in this behavior needs to know his partner well enough to choose only those ultimatums with which she will comply, rather than leave the relationship. After all, a long-term strategy of this sort cannot involve too many instances of the bluffs being discovered. If he can maintain his credibility, then a long-term bluffing strategy allows the bluffer to control all features of the

relationship that are not themselves deal-breakers for his partner. Knowing what falls into this category is tricky; so, it is the type of manipulation that is easiest to employ in a very intimate relationship.

My depiction of the man with the long-term strategy of employing bluffing ultimatums is importantly different from the man described by Wertheimer, in his example of an exploitative marriage arrangement. In Wertheimer's example, the man isn't bluffing. He only wants the relationship if it has traditional gender roles and an unfair division of domestic labor (Wertheimer 1996: 290). Wertheimer describes the man as making an exploitative offer, rather than a coercive ultimatum. However, we know from the context that Wertheimer provides that the couple has already been in a relationship—such that the woman loves the man enough to favor the unfair relationship over no relationship. We could describe the same case as the man saying, “accept this unfair arrangement or I'll end our relationship.” That is: we can describe his act as a sincere threat instead of an offer.

Susan Okin describes the various ways that traditional marriages are bad for women. She points out that women consent to unfair terms of marriage because men have more exit power. (She has a comprehensive political theory accounting for why men have more exit power, and what we could do to address the power imbalance.) She explains that women “give in” on any number of household disagreements for the sake of keeping their marriages harmonious, and keeping their husbands from leaving (Okin 1989: 134–169). When commentators object to views like Okin's, they often point to the women's consent—much like a libertarian might highlight the fact that workers at a sweatshop consent to their conditions of employment. It is women's choices (e.g., quitting their jobs to stay home with babies) that lead to the conditions that give men more exit power from marriage, and allow women to be exploited.

In this way, we tend to think about (and write about) men benefitting from their exit power as exploitative—at worst. It is rather like an employer benefitting from a tough job market in making his hiring negotiations. However, when we think about (and write about) women benefitting from their exit power—from using ultimatums, for instance—we use the language of coercion. Perhaps men's exit power is more obvious and does not need to be verbally threatened. When a man is unhappy with a relationship, a woman knows that he might leave, whereas women's exit power is less obvious. A man might not worry that a woman will leave him because of some source of unhappiness in the relationship unless she says so. If Okin's sociological premises are still correct, and women still have less financial exit power, then perhaps ultimatums are ascribed to women because women are the only ones who need to say them out loud. This makes them sound like threats.

I am not going to theorize about the difference between how we talk about women's ultimatums versus men's ultimatums. However, I want to end this exploratory chapter by pointing it out, and recommending some consistency. I have argued that ultimatums can be morally permissible or not—and that the difference will have to do with whether they are warnings or threats, sincere threats or bluffing threats, and whether the outcome is uncertain. I have argued that any threat, in an intimate relationship, requires some justification (in ways that threats outside of intimate relationships do not), but that threats with uncertain outcomes are less problematic because they are not devices of power and control. Finally, I have made a case that insincere threats involve a moral wrong beyond deception when implemented in intimate relationships. Insincere threats are power plays to control areas of relationships that should properly remain in the relationship's Realm of Dispute.

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