



Ethics // Spring 2026

Handout 8

Coercion: Frankfurt

THE SUBTRACTION BASELINE. As we saw, Nozick argued that a proposal is a threat if it makes the consequences of an action worse than they would have been under normal circumstances (=Nozick's baseline). Frankfurt disagrees: we shouldn't identify a threat by comparing a proposal to the 'normal and expected course of events'. Such a baseline is often unstable. For example, if a merchant raises his prices, he makes his customers worse off than they were previously, yet he is merely making a poorer offer rather than issuing a threat. 29

Frankfurt proposes instead the 'subtraction baseline'. We must compare the consequences of the proposed intervention with what would have occurred had the proposer never intervened at all. If the recipient is worse off with the intervention than they would have been in its absence, the proposal is a threat. Conversely, if the intervention leaves the recipient better off, it is an offer. 30

There are, therefore, specific circumstances where a refusal to confer a benefit will have the character of a threat. This occurs when the proposer has the recipient 'in his power'. Such power is established through the following conditions:

(8-1) **Dependency:** The recipient cannot readily obtain the necessity from any other source. 33

Need: The avoidance of the deprivation is essential to prevent a significant deterioration of the recipient's welfare. 33

Exploitation: The proposer demands an 'unfair' or 'improper' price for the benefit, such as requiring a wrongful act in exchange for a life-saving drug. 33, 46

By this logic, a threat is defined by its imposition of a penalty or the exploitative withholding of a necessity. It has the role of narrowing the agent's viable choices. See Example 3 for more on the nature of such choices. 44

THE SUBJECTION OF THE WILL. Frankfurt's second major argument shifts the focus from the external structure of the proposal to the internal state of the agent. 'Duress' is not the same as 'coercion'. An individual who submits to a threat because they judge it to be the most reasonable course of action (handing over a wallet to avoid a beating) is still making a choice. Such an agent retains moral responsibility because the decision, however unpleasant, remains their own. 37

True coercion, in Frankfurt's view, only occurs when we can say: 'The victim had no choice but to do it.' This condition is met only when the threat appeals to desires or motives that are 'beyond the victim's ability to control'. In these cases, the victim's will is not merely influenced; it is *subjugated* to the will of another. The agent is driven by a motive so powerful that they cannot prevent it from determining their response, regardless of whether they consider the action reasonable. 39

This leads to Frankfurt's further claim: the possibility of *coercive offers*. If an offer arouses an irresistible desire for a benefit, and the agent resents being moved by that desire, their autonomy is circumvented. The hallmark of the coerced agent is that they act on a will they *do not want to be their own*. They are moved by a force that, although internal, is alien to their own evaluative aims. 41

Ultimately, Frankfurt argues that the source of this pressure—whether it be a human threat or a natural catastrophe like an avalanche—is irrelevant to the question of freedom. What matters is the way the desire operates within the agent. If the motive is irresistible and violates the agent's autonomy, they are not acting freely, and the burden of moral responsibility is lifted. See Figure 1. 45

ILLUSTRATIONS. Let's walk through particular cases to see how Frankfurt's account works.

Example 1 (The drug supplier and the baseline of subtraction). *P* is a drug supplier and *Q* is an addict. *P* proposes to give *Q* drugs only if *Q* beats up a specific person. 29, 33

Is this a threat or an offer? We must subtract *P*'s intervention from the course of events. If *Q* is dependent on *P* and needs the drugs to prevent a significant deterioration of his welfare, then *P*'s refusal to provide them except at the exploitative price of a risky, wrongful act constitutes a threat.

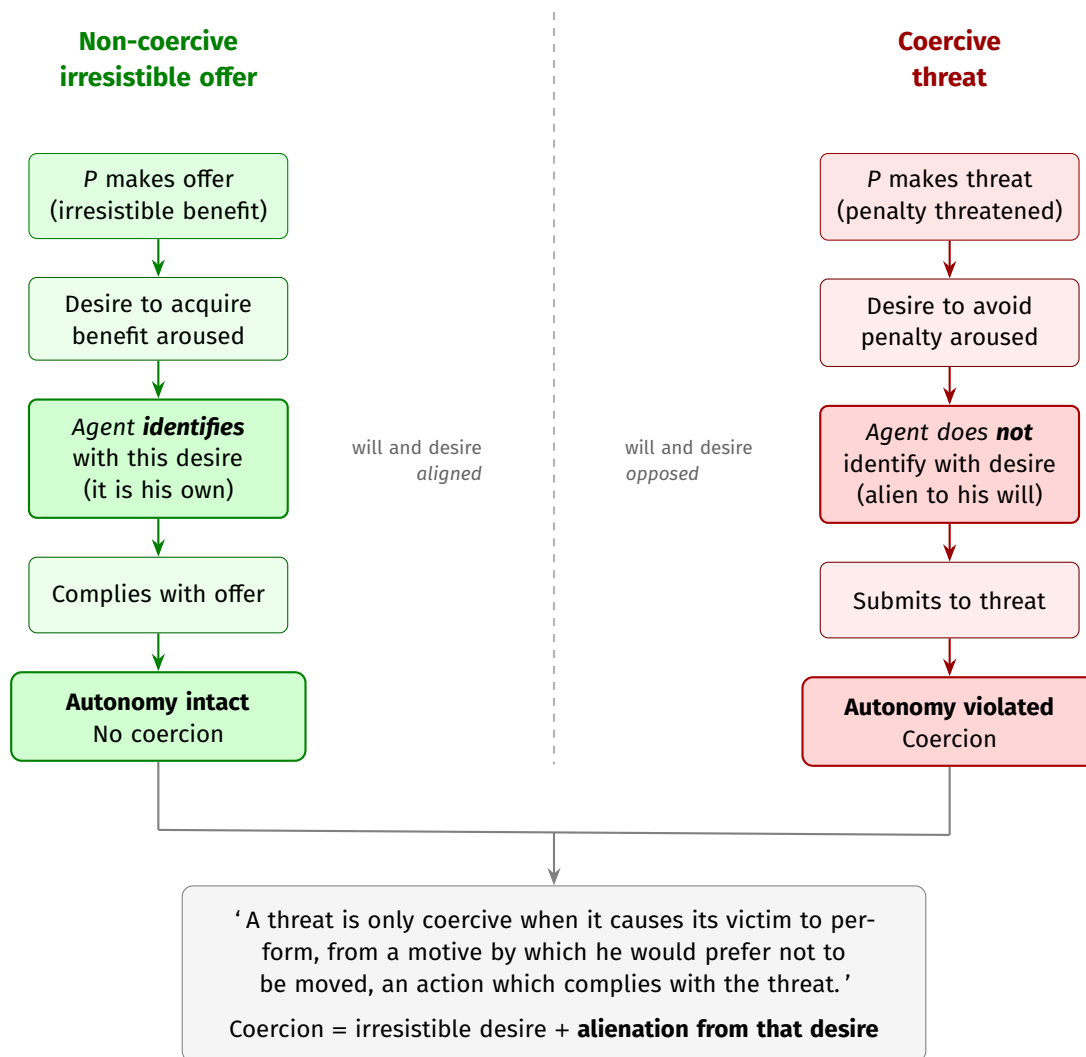


Figure 1: Coercion reconsidered

This illustrates that a proposal to refrain from conferring a benefit becomes a threat when the proposer has the recipient ‘in his power’ and demands an improper price.

Example 2 (The seven-league boots and the absence of power). *P* confronts *Q* with the demand of ‘your money or your life’.

Under ordinary circumstances, this proposal constitutes a threat: *Q* is dependent on *P* for the necessity of his own life. However, if *Q* possesses magic *seven-league boots* that enable him to escape *P*’s presence instantly and without effort, the conditions for *P* having *Q* in his power are not met. *P* only possesses power over *Q* if *Q* has no ready means of avoiding the penalty except on *P*’s terms and if the avoidance of that penalty is essential to *Q*’s welfare. Because the boots provide an immediate and costless alternative, *Q* is not dependent on *P*.

Furthermore, Frankfurt argues that a penalty to which it is reasonable to be entirely indifferent is not a penalty at all. Since *Q* can use the boots to make *P*’s violence irrelevant, the proposed *life or death* choice fails to function as a threat. At most, it remains an ‘ineffective threat’, as it fails to make the action of giving the money more desirable than the alternative of simply walking away.

Example 3 (The judge and the bargain fine). A criminal who has already spent his stolen money and been convicted is told by a judge that he will go to prison for ten years unless he pays a fifty-dollar fine. 35

While the judge is technically threatening imprisonment if the fine is not paid, he is also offering a benefit. Because the price for freedom is a bargain—it is lower than the price that might fairly be demanded—the judge is taking less advantage of his power than he properly could.

This case demonstrates that a proposal can be both a threat and an offer depending on the fairness of the price set for withholding a penalty.

When you look at the prisoner's situation through Frankfurt's lens, his choices are 'viable' because even though paying the fifty-dollar fine is a total no-brainer compared to ten years in prison, he's still the one making the call. The judge isn't just leaning on him—he's actually offering a bargain: USD50 is way below the 'fair and proper' price of a decade behind bars.

It's a viable, useful option because the prisoner actually has the cash and the move clearly improves his life compared to just letting the legal system take its course. Unlike a truly coercive situation where someone is driven by a pathological terror he can't fight, the prisoner is just making a smart, reasonable decision that he identifies with, so he stays in the driver's seat of his own moral responsibility.

Example 4 (The pathological terror of bees). A person who is pathologically terrified of being stung by a bee is told he will be stung unless he performs a certain action. 39

Even if the person recognizes that suffering the sting would be more reasonable than performing the action, the fear may be so irresistible that he cannot prevent it from determining his response.

In this instance, the person is genuinely coerced because the threat appeals to a motive beyond his ability to control, thereby leaving him with no alternative but to submit.

Example 5 (The coercive offer of fame). A man who prefers fame to obscurity nonetheless does not want to be motivated by this preference. 41

Despite his best efforts to overcome his desire for fame, he finds himself unable to decline an offer that would make him famous. He is coerced by this offer because the desire that drives him is one by which he does not want to be driven.

His will, in this moment, is a will he does not want to be his own, and the offer thus circumvents his autonomy and violates his own desires. Note here that the desire's strength doesn't matter. What matters is whether the person 'wholeheartedly' identifies with this desire.

Example 6 (The two avalanches). Consider two cases. In the first case, a man at a fork in the road is threatened by a person on a hillside who will start an avalanche if the man takes the left fork. In the second case, the man simply notices that natural conditions will cause an avalanche if he takes the left fork. 45

In both instances, the man is irresistibly moved by his desire to live to take the right fork. Frankfurt argues there is no basis for regarding the man as acting more or less freely in either case.

Moral responsibility depends not on whether the pressure is human or natural, but on the way the desire to avoid injury operates within the agent.