"I Love You," "Don't Worry About It": A Theory of Non-Deontic Normative Powers*

Abstract

Normative powers are often assumed or defined to be abilities to change requirements by one's say so. Promise and command generate duties (and so requirement); consent waives them. I argue that alongside such deontic powers, we enjoy a suite of non-deontic powers: abilities to shape non-requiring interpersonal norms by our say so. Suppose that we are meeting and we explicitly agreed to talk for an hour, but I see that the day is really getting away from you; it would be helpful to you to end early. My keeping you is permissible but still interpersonally defective—it's rude, imposing, graceless, etc. You can change that by your say so; you could, for instance, tell me "don't worry about it!" Your say so is not deontic consent as it did not change what was permissible; but it did make a normative difference, rendering my carrying on no longer graceless or rude. I defend a set of three atomic non-deontic powers that I call "allowance," "assurance," and "pressure" (analogues of consent, promise, and command). Molecular powers, most importantly the power exercised in telling another "I love you," are built out of atomic ones. The upshot is a novel theory of ubiquitous, understudied normative phenomena and a picture on which the deontic and non-deontic dimensions of interpersonal life are continuous.

Through promise and consent, we shape who we are to one another—no longer trespassers but guests, not just dating but partnered, not just regular advice-givers but committed advisors. Our lives are structured by deontic relations—the nexus of permissions, duties, claims, etc.—and we have the power to shape those relations by our say so. Promise and consent are tools whereby we exercise agency over our interpersonal lives; they allow us to let others in and commit ourselves to them.

That said, the domain of normativitity with which consent and promise is concerned is in a certain sense narrow. Promise and consent[1] create and waive *deontic* relations—rights, duties, claims, permissions, requirements, and the like. But these deontic norms

*Thanks to XXXX.

[1] By "consent" I mean what is sometimes called "permissive consent"—consent by which we give permission. I thereby follow almost all contemporary philosophers who write on consent, e.g., Thomson (1990); Hurd (1996); Alexander (1996, 2014); Ferzan (2016); Shiffrin (2008); Beauchamp (2009); Miller and Wertheimer (2009); Owens (2012); Dougherty (2013, 2015, 2021); Tadros (2016); Manson (2016); Bolinger (2019); Chadha (2020); Renzo (2022); Liberto (2022); Goodin (2024). One exception is Setiya (2024), see n.26.

don't exhaust the space of interpersonal normativity. There is a gap between merely doing what is *required* as a friend, spouse, teacher, neighbor and being a *good* friend, spouse, teacher, or neighbor. Much of we do with, for, and on account of others isn't a matter of right and wrong or doing what is required. Imagine my friend is hosting a house party; I should go, but I'm not required to. Staying home wouldn't *wrong* my friend; but she might be right to feel disappointed in me or let down—I haven't acted as a good friend would. Our relationships are also structured by *non-deontic norms* of this sort, establishing standards of what is good, but not required, to do.[2]

Can we exercise our agency over norms like that? That is, do we have *normative powers*, i.e., the ability to shape norms by our say so, over non-deontic norms?[3] Failing to go to my friend's party would let her down; but (I'll argue) she can relieve my action of that defect by telling me "don't worry about it." This is not consent—she does not thereby *permit* me not to attend since that was already permissible. But her say so makes a normative difference; there was a norm in virtue of which I had strong reason (though no requirement) to go; and I'll argue that her say so can release me from that norm. Such "allowance," as I'll call it, is a non-deontic analogue of consent: where consent eliminates a *prohibition*, her words allowed me to do what would otherwise be *disappointing* without any such normative defect. "Assurance" is the analogue of promise: to assure another one will ϕ imposes a reason, but not a requirement, on oneself to ϕ. "Pressure" is the analogue of command: it imposes a reason (but not requirement) on someone else. In addition to these *atomic* powers, we also have *molecular* powers built up out of them. Foremost among those is that exercised when we tell another "I love you." To tell you that I love you doesn't just express my feelings; it changes who we are to another by reshaping the (non-deontic) norms between via a blend of allowance, assurance, and (sometimes) pressure.

So far as I can tell, no one has ever argued that we have powers only over deontic

[2] It is a matter of ongoing, lively debate, how exactly to understand these norms, e.g., Driver (1992); Calhoun (2016); Martin (2013); Harman (2016); Martin (2019, 2021); Lewis (2018, 2022); Kukla (2021); Fricker (2022); Telech and Katz (2022); Darwall (2024), XXXX.

[3] Some use "normative powers" to refer to non-conventional theories of promise and consent as opposed to theories (Habib, 2022) or theories that tie promise and consent to a special kind of interest or value (Raz, 2014); but I use the term "normative powers" as totally non-committal about their basis; maybe we have powers by convention, maybe in virtue of our interests, or maybe on some other grounds, see §4.

phenomena; instead, they take it for granted.[4] Hohfeld's seminal work on legal rights and powers understood powers *in terms of* the rights they acted upon (1923); the work on powers that came in Hohfeld's wake maintains that deontic focus (e.g., Hart 1955; Raz 1977; Thomson 1990; Dougherty 2015; Liberto 2022). Hence definitions of normative powers like Watson's as the ability to "create and rescind normative *requirements* at will" (2009, 155, my emph.); Tadros's as the "ability to alter *rights and duties*…directly" (2020, my emph.); or Darwall's picture on which the exercise of powers are "undertakings in which one person comes to be *obligated* to another in a new and distinctive way by virtue of a second-personal interaction with that person" (2013, 133, my emph., see also, e.g., Shiffrin 2008; Owens 2012, 2014; Westlund 2013; Valentini 2024).[5] And even when an account of normative powers is less explicitly committal, it's target is virtually always power over the deontic, e.g., Raz's:

> Normative powers are the abilities of people (or institutions) to change normative situations or conditions (i.e., to impose or repeal *duties*, to confer or revoke *rights*, to change status etc.) by acts intended to achieve these changes…. (Raz, 2014, 61, my emph.)[6]

Widespread neglect of the very possibility of non-deontic powers has a partially sociological explanation: much of the work on powers has been done by *deon*tologists working on rights, duties, and other *deontic* relations.[7] It's no great surprise that theorists of the deontic would develop understandings of normative powers unconcerned with non-deontic

[4] Exceptions to this trend include Enoch (2011) and Lewis (2018; 2022), who defend non-deontic accounts of request (see §3.1) and Chang (2020), whose account of powers as generating will-based reasons isn't essentially deontic (see n.40). Lance and Kukla (2009; 2013) develop a neo-Brandomian account of the pragmatics of forms of second-personal communication designed to "capture a great deal of deontic complexity" (2013, 458); but their account, to which I am deeply indebted, turns on how second-personal address can shape *the space of reasons* (whether or not they are tied to deontic categories in my sense), and so captures what I think of as *non-deontic* phenomena (§1.2).

[5] McGowan likewise sees powers—what she calls "exercitives" (following Austin 1975)—as deontic "Exercitive speech acts enact rules (or permissibility facts), thereby fixing the bounds of permissibility in a certain domain" (2004, see also 2019, Ch. 1–2). But her central notion of "permissibility" may, in fact, be non-deontic; she argues "permissibility" is gradable, and uses terms like "inappropriate" and "worse" to describe the normative status of actions that violate "permissibility norms" (2019, 19–20). I argue in §1.2 that such changes should be seen as *non-deontic*.

[6] In the full passage, Raz builds into the definition that powers are grounded in the *value* of powers; my usage "normative powers" is neutral on that (see §4).

[7] See, e.g., those in n.1.

phenomena—that's just not their topic.[8]

Behind this tendency, however, lies something deeper: an (often implicit) substantive conception of deontic phenomena as set apart from other aspects of our interpersonal life. Rights, duties, promise, and consent are all quasi-juridical notions—they are connected with notions of authority, enforcement, and sanction (be it punishment or blame). By contrast, whatever norms recommend (but do not require) I go to my friend's party are decidedly *not* quasi-juridical in this way; whatever is going on when we say "I love you" does not seem to involve an exercise of authority by a "small-scale sovereign" (Hart, 1982, 183). And so, it might seem a deep mistake to think of us as having normative power over non-deontic phenomena. Hart, for example, sees our normative powers as essentially—and so *uniquely*—tied to the deontic:

> To some philosophers the notion that moral phenomena—rights and duties or obligations—can be brought into existence by the voluntary action of individuals has appeared utterly mysterious; but this I think has been so because they have not clearly seen how special the moral notions of a right and an obligation are, nor how peculiarly they are connected with the distribution of freedom of choice; it would indeed be mysterious if we could make actions morally good or bad by voluntary choice. (1955)

But I claim the mysterious is commonplace. Restricting normative powers to the deontic leaves vast swaths of our interpersonal ethical lives—including much of what constitutes connections of love and intimacy—*beyond our power*. By contrast, the view on offer here is one that sees us as empowered to exercise agency not only over deontic (moralistic, quasi-juridical) relations with others but over the non-deontic dimensions of our interpersonal life as well. Instead of seeing a sharp break between the moral and the non-moral aspects of our interpersonal lives—between, e.g., what we *owe* and what it is to act *well*—this picture emphasizes a *continuity* between the deontic and non-deontic (§6).[9] We have a say—literally—over our relations with others, and that power isn't confined to moralistic matters of right and wrong. "I promise" and "I love you" both reshape the normative landscape—with respect to different kinds of norms.

[8] Theorists of relational normativity like Lewis (2018; 2022), Martin (esp. of 2013) and the *new* Darwall of (2018; 2019; 2024) are *exceptions* that prove the rule.

[9] Cf. Setiya (2014); Ebels-Duggan (2023); White (2025a); contra Darwall (2024), see XXXX.

I'll open with the case for allowance, along the way developing an account of what non-deontic change amounts to and how powers achieve it (§1). I'll then turn to other non-deontic powers, including pressure, request, and that exercised in saying "I love you" (§2–§3). §4 offers a big-picture, in-principle defense of non-deontic powers by arguing that leading accounts of the foundations of promise and consent (including conventionalism, interest-based accounts, and others) naturally *extend* to vindicate non-deontic powers. I finally develop and reject rival explanations of my cases (§5); §6 concludes by re-framing my thesis, and in so doing defends a deep continuity between the moral and non-moral dimensions of interpersonal life.

Before beginning in earnest, I need request a bit of patience (and thereby, according to §3.1, give you some reason to be patient without requiring you). The paper front-loads the positive arguments and delays consideration of objections to §5. Although I can't convince you my explanation is *best* without considering its rivals, it's crucial to develop the big-picture account first; it is in the big picture that the attractiveness of the view lies.

1 Getting the Phenomena in View

I open with cases in which agents make a normative change to their situation by their say so *even when* their say so neither creates nor waives any rights or duties or otherwise changes the deontic status of the action at issue. The agents in these cases do something *like* consent, but neither permit nor require any action.

1.1 Allowance

"Allowance" is the non-deontic analogue of consent. (If you hear "allowance" and "allow" as essentially tied to permission, another name for this power is "release.")

Suppose the two of us are colleagues but not close. I write asking for a meeting; we set aside 2–3 PM. By 2:30, however, I notice you are a bit harried—you mentioned this is an unexpectedly busy week, and a handful of people have knocked on your door during our meeting. Though I'd love to continue our conversation, I (correctly) see you would benefit from wrapping up early. I have a choice: should I just carry on? Or wrap things up early? Suppose that carrying on would not be wrong; I'm *entitled* to the full hour in virtue of our agreement; you can't demand we end early. (Were things *really* hectic, maybe it

would be wrong to keep you—adjust the details as needed so that my remaining is not wrong.) Nevertheless, keeping you would be in some way defective: graceless, inattentive, imposing, or suberogatory.[10] Why think it's defective? Some impulse to apologize afterwards is intelligible ("I am sorry—I really shouldn't have kept you"). And while *resentment*—the reactive attitude sensitive to *wronging*—would be inapt on your part, other reactive attitudes like feeling frustrated with, disappointed by, or let down by me are not (Telech and Katz, 2022). Though it might be a bit overblown to explicitly articulate, the following complaint seems apt: "granted you had a right to stay, I was pretty frustrated with your thoughtlessness." I have *reason* to let you off early, letting you off early would be the *better* thing to do, but I don't *owe* it to you to leave.

Here's my key claim: you can make a normative difference by your say so, rendering my carrying on no longer defective. Imagine I start to wrap up early: "I should let you go; this has been so helpful. Thank you!" You warmly respond, "please, don't worry about it! We can chat the whole hour!"[11] You thereby allow me to carry on without defect.[12]

Or imagine that before I say anything, you notice that I am getting nervous about your time. You want to ensure that, despite your obvious business, I feel at ease and not under any pressure to cut the meeting short. You pre-emptively say "please don't worry about my schedule; we have a full hour."

Your say so changes the normative status of my carrying on: it's no longer graceless or rude. That's what I mean in claiming you exercised a normative power—you changed the normative landscape by your say so in a manner analogous to consent.[13] Reactive attitudes like disappointment in me or feeling let down by me are rendered inapt by your having

[10] You can understand that defect in lots of ways, n.2. Whether or not one believes in Driver's particular notion, it's worth seeing that as presented, this interaction has a structural feature that Driver thinks marks out the *suberogatory*: I can either do something she thinks of as supererogatory (generously give up the time to which I'm entitled) or something slightly morally unhappy (by standing on my rights) (1992).

[11] Cases in which your say so is clearly insincere raise questions I turn to in §5. Cf. Bolinger (2019); Goodin (2024), XXXX.

[12] For ease of exposition, I will talk of *the same action* having a different status; but we can just as easily talk of allowance transforming a defection action into a non-defective analogue.

[13] Much of what I say in this paper could be recast in terms of a mental-state theory, where it is some kind of intention, willing, or mental activity which does the normative work and say so is evidence thereof (Hurd, 1996; Alexander, 1996, 2014; Ferzan, 2016). Likewise is it compatible with hybrid views of normative powers on which it is both a communicative act and a mental state together that do the normative work (Dougherty, 2015; Goodin, 2024). "Say so" might amount to a wordless gesture—a nod, a warm smile, etc.

told me not to worry about it. Imagine you complained that I was being thoughtless; a decisive rejoinder would be "you (sincerely) *said* not to worry about it!" This is akin to how consent functions as a basis for interpersonal justification (Dougherty, 2021): if I protest that my invited guest is trespassing, he can respond "but you *said* I should come in!" It both cases, it is the *fact you said so* that justifies what would otherwise be subject to interpersonal complaint.

Here's one last way into this kind of case. Imagine a variant in which you are so visibly overwhelmed by unexpected demands on your time that I *owe it* to you to let you go early—you have a right or claim on my leaving—but you decide to waive that right and permit me stay.[14] Your saying "don't worry about it" in this context would then be a simple exercise of consent; you permit me to stay by your say so. My claim is that you can exercise normative control over our interaction in much the same way *even when* you don't have such a *right*. Consider again the case with which we started where my carrying on wouldn't be wrong but would be interpersonally defective. You don't altogether lose your power to make (normative) space for me when the barrier to my staying is less stringent. You can still *allow* me to stay even though you cannot *permit* me to stay (since I was already permitted).

Of course, your saying "don't worry about it" cannot remove a defect in *any* situation. Imagine, e.g., that I'm some bigwig in the profession and a bully who bad-mouths those who don't acquiesce to my wishes. As with consent, this *coercive* backdrop can prevent what would otherwise change the normative landscape from doing so. That the phenomenon at issue is, like consent, sensitive to coercion, is further evidence that something consent-like is at play.[15]

1.2 Non-Deontic Change

At this point one might wonder what is essentially *non-deontic* about your changing the normative landscape by saying "don't worry about it."

A "deontic" norm is one that is essentially in the business of making actions required,

[14] This is consistent with our agreement being otherwise binding if, either, promises or joint commitments are understood to be defeasible, *or* if we think of them as having in-built, tacit exceptions clauses (Korsgaard, 2009).

[15] One can imagine some conditions of ignorance or incompetence similarly preventing a normative transformation.

forbidden, or permissible; rights, duties, wrongs, (directed) wrongings, permissions, and requirements are all deontic notions. A non-deontic change is just a change in normative status that doesn't involve a change in rights, duties, what is wrong, permissible, required, etc. We can offer a positive characterization of the change in terms of a shift in appropriate reactive attitudes, actions' (non-deontic) normative statuses, and the normative relations between speaker and addressee.

First consider reactive attitudes. *Resentment* or *moralized anger* are apt when an agent is wronged; in the case of our meeting, they have no place. But your say so changes the fittingness of *other* attitudes. Were I to permissibly stay in the meeting, you can have some negatively valenced, interpersonal reactive attitude in (or with) me: frustration, disappointment, vexation, etc. These attitudes are non-deontic inasmuch as their fittingness is not fixed by whether an action was forbidden or a wronging. Your say so effects a non-deontic change inasmuch as it renders these *non-deontic reactive attitudes* unfitting.[16]

Now consider the normative status of the action at issue, my staying in our meeting. There was a change in its status, not from forbidden to permitted (deontic categories), but from disappointing to neutral or welcome (non-deontic categories). To use language less parasitic on reactive attitudes, the action changes from being graceless, indecent, rude, imposing, or (most generally) *interpersonally defective* to neutral or welcome. One might want to characterize these statuses as *aretaic*, a matter not of right but of virtue.[17] That is fine so long as we honor the distinctively relational quality of these vices—that they are not merely defects of the agent but defects that involve a special directionality. The rudeness, gracelessness, or imposition would not merely be a defect *in my agency*, but one done *to you*.[18] That directedness is borne out in the special standing you have to bear reactive attitudes towards me, the directness of the complaint or rebuke *you* can address

[16] On one kind of Strawsonian approach (championed by Darwall 2006) the reactive attitudes *define* the deontic; but we needn't take that strong view to appreciate the point. So long as one thinks some reactive attitudes are especially tied to deontic norms, we can note that your say so effects a change in the fittingness of *other* interpersonal reactive attitudes: disappointment in, feeling let down by, or being personally hurt by. On varities of *hurt* as a reactive attitude, see Darwall 2024.

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[18] Cf. Thompson on the vice of *injustice* that is manifested in wronging someone. As he puts it, injustice does not just involve its victim as "*raw materials for wrongdoing*, but *someone whom [the wrongoer] wrong[s]*" (Thompson, 2006, p. 352, emph his). I, similarly, claim the vice of gracelessness (often) involves another as not just the raw materials for defective action but a victim whom one *lets down* (Martin, 2021; Telech and Katz, 2022).

to me, etc….

Note a key difference between deontic and non-deontic statuses: only the latter are *gradable* (Berker, 2022). Nothing can be more or less forbidden, more or less permissible, or more or less required.[19] By contrast, action can be more or less rude, graceless, imposing, hurtful or defective. That means that some non-deontic changes are changes in *degree*. In some variants of our running example, your say so might not fully cure my staying in our meeting of its defect but instead make staying *less rude* than it would be otherwise. Consent either waives a right or it doesn't;[20] allowance can be partial.

Lastly, perhaps most importantly, we can characterize the normative change in terms of the underlying normative relations that ground actions' normative statuses. Hohfeld's influential analysis sees legal powers as creating or eliminating first-order legal claims and duties. Many have defended extensions of that analysis to non-legal, deontological relations.[21] Consent waives a pre-existing right, claim or (directed) duty between the two agents; promise creates these normative relations.

We can understand the non-deontic change at issue in a similarly Hohfeldian spirit. Though it isn't true that I had a *duty* to you to leave, we stood in a normative relation in virtue of which my not leaving warranted disappointment/hurt/frustration *with* me. There was a *non-deontic*, bipolar normative relation between us. Your say so eliminates that particular non-deontic, normative relation from the normative landscape. (In the case where the change is only in degree, it *attenuates* the norm.) I'll go on to argue that other non-deontic powers can, analogously to promise and command, *create* such norms. Where Hart thought willful choice over the good was mysterious, this model sees it as equally plausible and similarly explained: deontic and non-deontic powers alike are ways of acting on interpersonal, Hohfeldian relations. The difference is only in the character of the relation at issue.

[19] That's not to say that there are not deontically significant properties which are gradable—something impermissible can be more or less severe. But permissibility, forbiddenness, and requiredness *per se* are not gradable—nothing is more permissible than something else; it is or it isn't. "More wrong" is also incoherent—something can be more severe, but not more wrong. So, too, for rights and duties. Despite philosophers' occasional, unfortunate usage of "pro tanto duties," so-called pro tanto duties are not gradable—nothing is more or less a duty. The duty might be more or less easily overridable, and it might have a greater claim on me in that it results in stronger practical reasons. (I.e., the reasons it issues can be less easily overridden by countervailing reasons.)

[20] This is consinsistent with fine-grained control over the scope of consent, cf. Dougherty (2021).

[21] Above, pp. 2–3.

What exactly is the non-deontic normative relation allowance eliminates? Just as various rights theorists might agree about the existence of rights but disagree about their nature (are they special interests, domains of mini-sovereignty, kinds of joint agreement, primitive, something else?)[22], there is a growing literature about what such non-deontic relations might be. As Martin would put it, we can have *normative hopes* in one another, where a normative hope is like a normative expectation except in its being non-requiring (2013, see also Telech and Katz 2022). Darwall argues that debts of gratitude and relations of trust, love, and intimacy are "second personal relations of the heart" which govern action without issuing in requirements or permissions (2019; 2024).[23] Though not relational, Driver, Calhoun, and Harman defend the existence of practical norms that give us strong reasons without requiring us (Driver, 1992; Calhoun, 2016; Harman, 2016). Just as a theory of promise or consent can make progress while remaining neutral about the exact nature of the norms these powers act *upon*, I will remain neutral about non-deontic norms' precise nature. (Just as not all requirements can be eliminated by consent or created via promise, not all non-deontic norms are subject to powers, see §4.7.)

Most of the recent attention on non-deontic interpersonal relations has been on such weighty non-deontic norms. Martin, Darwall, Telech, Katz, Driver, and Calhoun all highlight weighty, serious ways of falling short of non-deontic norms: failure to abide by them is *indecent* or *disappoints* another. But we can take a still wider view on the kinds of non-deontic norms that connect us. Friends should respond to each other's phone calls, texts, and emails somewhat quickly; and when I'm a bit slow, my friends' feeling of *mild* annoyance with me is apt. If I do this too often, they might be *quite* annoyed or frustrated; if I fail

[22] E.g. (respectively), Raz (1986); Hart (1982); Gilbert (2018a); Zylberman (2021); Setiya (2024)

[23] Some theorists in this growing tradition would characterize what I call non-deontic norms in deontic terms. Fricker defends the idea that some duties are not demandable because to issue a demand would involve a kind of pragmatic self-defeat (2022); still, for her, such norms are *duties*. Cornell argues that we can *wrong* those who do not have *rights* against us (2015; 2017; 2025); he would characterize much of what I think of as non-deontic defects as cases of *wrongings* that do not correlate with rights violations. Notwithstanding her earlier work, Martin has since offered accounts of non-moralistic normative expectations in terms rights over ends but not means, personal bonds (obligations without correlative rights), and rights which are non-legalistic and private as opposed to legalistic and public (2019; 2021; 2025). (See also Dougherty 2025; Sreenivasan 2025.) My view is translatable to these account of non-rights-correlating duties: where the orthodoxy is that normative powers waive and create *rights*, I claim powers waive and create pragmatically self-defeating duties; removes or establish an action's non-rights-correlating wrongfulness; or waive and create rights over means, personal bonds, or private/non-legalstic rights. That said, the arguments of §5 caution against treating *all* such cases as essentially tied to obligation or wrongfulness.

to respond, they could be *severely* disappointed. There is a wide bandwidth of normative defect at play here—non-deontic norms can be mild, middling, severe, and everything in between. But whatever they are, they don't issue in requirements or make actions wrong.

While I prefer the Hohfeldian model, it is not necessary. Another way to understand the underlying normative change is in terms of *reasons* for action. We could say that by 2:30 PM, I had a justifying, enticing, or commendatory reason to leave early although I did not have a requiring, peremptory, or deontic reason to do so.[24] Where consent eliminates requiring reasons, allowance removes commendatory reasons. Or, singing in a different reasons-based key, we can understand the change in terms of the reasons agents can offer one another to complain about or justify action (in an extension of Scanlon 1998).[25] If I remain in our meeting without your allowance, you have a complaint—not about what I owed, but about my gracelessness. That non-deontic complaint (not of wrongdoing but another defect) is one I cannot meet—I cannot justify myself. Your say so, however, is something I could cite to justify my action *to you*. On this model, allowance (like consent) *gives* the allowed person an interpersonal justification she lacked. It is not at all mysterious how we can make an action "good or bad by voluntary choice" (Hart, 1955); it's by furnishing, or eliminating, bases for interpersonal justification. (What explains our ability to do so? See §4.)

1.3 The Ubiquity of Allowance

If I'm right that we have a non-deontic power of allowance, its usage seems utterly commonplace. Imagine we're all going to dinner and it's up to you to decide where. Among our friends, that's challenging: you're vegan, I have dietary restrictions, he's very picky, etc. You all would choose local mainstay Pepe's, but it's common knowledge I dislike it. If the group decides on Pepe's, it would be a bit frustrating, but not (suppose) wrong. You all don't want to disappoint me, and so we start to discuss our options; I might, in the interest of avoiding the usual 20 minute deliberation, offer to take one for the team: "Don't worry about it! Let's do Pepe's!" I've thereby made acceptable what was otherwise in-

[24] Gert (2007, 2012); Little (2013); Little and Macnamara (2021); Tucker (2025), but see Berker's criticisms (forthcoming), which, *a fortiori*, constitute an argument against this model of non-deontic change. See also Lance and Kukla (2009; 2013), which posit different flavors of reasons (e.g., requests issue *petitionary* reasons).

[25] Cf. Manne (2014).

terpersonally subpar. Though I still dislike Pepe's, I've changed how that consideration figures in the normative space we share: it no longer renders attending interpersonally defective. That can be true even if my dis-preference was and remains common knowledge.

Imagine after dinner, you head home by bus, where (suppose) there's a social norm of not needlessly sitting next to someone—one should try for one-seat-spacing if possible. Someone boards the bus with hesitant steps, looking a bit at sea; with a smile, you gesture at the seat next to you. You have thereby made an allowance by your non-verbal communication. What would have been rude is now welcomed.[26]

The next morning you run into one of your best students. She clearly wants to send you a fourth draft of her end-of-term paper, but is worried she'd be overstepping; and indeed, while it wouldn't be *wrong* for her to send it, it would be a bit much. You encourage her, saying "please, send it!" What would otherwise have been presumptuous is, by your leave, fine.

One last example of allowance might be in the practice of *blessing*. Imagine I'm a graduate student with a committed, yet demanding, supervisor; she won't approve of my submitting a paper to journals until it's in tip-top shape. But suppose neither of us thinks that I am *required* to get her approval to submit it. That said, while submitting without checking wouldn't wrong her, it would (we'd both agree) let her down. So before sending it, I send her the final draft, hoping for her blessing. In giving it, she does not waive a right, but make an allowance.[27]

[26] Cf. Setiya (2024). Setiya gives this as an example of *consent* which is not *valid*, reserving "valid consent" for cases which waive a right. On his picture (designed for his unorthodox analysis of rights *in terms* of consent) "consent" has both deontic and non-deontic instances. Nothing in this argument turns on whether we understand "consent" to have non-deontic and deontic instances or, as I suggest, reserve "consent" for its deontic usages. But it is awkward, I think, that Setiya treats welcoming someone to sit next to you on a bus as *non-valid* consent; that makes it sound unsuccessful or defective qua consent. Allowing someone to sit next to you on a bus even when you don't have a right is a successful communicative exchange—nothing invalid or non-valid about it.

[27] Though the politics here are complicated, another case may be a parent's blessing a child's engagement. Some such practices may just be toxic hold-overs from a patriarchal, property-exchange conception of a marriage. But others might not be. Imagine my son feels that if he proposed to his boyfriend without my blessing, he'd risk a strain on our relationship; this could be so even if we are all on the same page that he does not need my *permission*. So he asks for my blessing and receives it. Having given it, it would be pretty rich—i.e., *defective*—for me then to complain about his upcoming nuptials. I've already *said* I was on board. XXXX.

2 Other Atomic Powers

2.1 Assurance

Assurance is the non-deontic cousin of promise. To assure another that one will ϕ renders a failure to ϕ *defective* without being *wrong*. (As I use "assure," I mean *merely* assure and not promise; another natural reading of "assure" picks out a genus of which promise is a particular species.[28] For now, I will just stipulate that "assure" means "merely assure." I'll walk back that stipulation in §6.)

Imagine I tell my spouse "I'll pick up some groceries on the way home"; I run out of time and decide to get them tomorrow. Do I wrong her? Maybe—if the groceries were urgent, if she was really counting on me, if this is a regular occurrence, or if we understood those words to signal promise-making. But we needn't think what I did was *wrong* to understand that what I did was in some way *defective*; it could just be (slightly or severely) disappointing, irritating, or annoying. My say so licenses complaint on her part: "you *said* you'd get it." Her reactive attitudes are apt *because* I said so. It would be a hollow rejoinder if I responded "true, but I didn't promise." She could agree I didn't promise and still be rightly annoyed with me. Indeed, we threaten a crudely moralistic picture of intimate relations if we think every exchange of this kind generates *duties* whose violation is *wrongful*. Loving relationships are filled with norms that recommend action without requiring them. To assure without promising is to put my-getting-the-groceries in the same normative domain; it *puts me on the hook* to my partner without generating a requirement, duty, or right. In the terms of §1.2, I create a non-deontic, interpersonal relation, give myself a non-requiring reason, or give her a basis for (non-deontic) complaint. (Like promise,

[28] Scanlon and subsequent "assurance" theorists of promise see the promissory obligation as grounded in this more basic speech act along with a background principle of fidelity (1990). My argument in this section can be read as a challenge to simple assurance theories inasmuch as my cases involve assurance and do not, I claim, obligate the assurer. That said, a more nuanced assurance view could accommodate my phenomena by drawing a distinction between different kinds of assurance—say, strict and non-strict assurance—with the latter implicating something like a *deontic* Principle of Fidelity and the latter hooking into a less strict, non-deontic analogue. Likewise is this a challenge to Thomson's *monistic* view of "giving one's word" (1990), where word giving only ever generates a right; this view, too, can be nuanced. Moran's notion of *telling* turns on the idea that in telling another that *p*, we make ourselves *responsible to her* (2018, drawing on Grice 1957 and Strawson 1962); my argument here can be understood as the idea that there are *two* ways of being responsible—one deontic, one non-deontic—in much the same way that Strawson's own list of reactive attitudes includes non-moralistic ones like love (cf. Darwall 2024).

non-deontic assurance might require uptake.)

Nor is this phenomenon confined to intimate relationships. Imagine I'm throwing a party. You and I are mere acquaintances, and as things stand, you won't wrong or disappoint me by not coming—non-attendance is faultless. (By contrast, if we were best friends, I might be let down by your not attending.) Though it's common knowledge that you love parties and will likely attend, I anxiously worry no one will come. One kindness you could extend is a *promise* that you'll attend; that new normative relation is the kind of thing that I can lean on. It matters (e.g., to my anxiety) in a way that merely predicting you will come does not.

But suppose you *cannot* responsibly promise and so should not—you're behind on grading, or you've just been feeling pretty worn down. You can still make *some* normative difference: you might instead invite me to *hope* that you'll come: "I can't promise, but I hope to come!" You thereby give yourself some extra reason to come; you've created a normative expectation, but one whose violation isn't wrong. Its violation would warrant not just disappointment *that* you weren't there, but disappointment *in you*. If my disappointment were queried, I could cite your say so as the reason I feel let down by you.[29]

The normative relation you create when you say "I hope to come" is *already present* between good friends. If my good friend doesn't show up to my party, that would let me down or make irritation/annoyance with her apt (even though it's permissible). When you say you hope to come, you give me something akin to what a friendship already provides even though we are not friends; so far as party-going is concerned, you've moved the norms between us in a friend-ward direction. My partner and I are already connected by a rich suite of non-deontic norms; when I tell my partner I'll pick up the groceries, I add one more. I give *picking up the groceries* the same normative character that so many actions in our life already have: things we should, but are not required, to do.

[29] One way of hearing "I can't promise, but I hope to come" is as a kind of half-hearted, mealy-mouthed failure on your part to commit as you should. This kind of of worry is given powerful voice by Berislav Marušić with respect to promising *to try*. "[T]he promise to try to come to your party…indicates that something is off. Usually when someone promises to try to come to your party, you pretty much know that she won't" (2017, 249). Marušić argues promises to try are wrong when and because they serve as a bad-faith obfuscation, hiding our unwillingness to commit under the auspices of chance. But I don't have some miserly psuedo-promisor in mind. (So my argument is consistent with Marušić's.) I am imagining you, the non-deontic assurer, seek with genuine concern and attentiveness to give me something—as much as you can—to lean on.

2.2 Pressure

Pressure is the power one has to give another reason to do something without giving her a duty to do so. It is the non-deontic cousin of *command*.

Imagine I've invited you to my party, and as before, I'm worried no one will come. But this time, I'm more assertive. I tell you "I'd really like you to come!" What have I just done? One might assume that all I've done is try (perhaps confusedly) to *inform* you about my preferences. But suppose that you already *knew* that. My forceful say so has a further effect: I thereby give you more reason to come. To bring this out, contrast two versions of the case. In both, assume it's morally permissible for you not to come. In the first, I invite you and say nothing further. I might by disappointed *that* you didn't come; but imagine I complained that *you let me down* by not coming. A good rejoinder might be "if you really wanted me to come, you should have said so!" In the second case, imagine I explicitly say "I'd really like you to come." Now if you don't attend, I have complaint I would otherwise lack: I *said* I really wanted you to come. Put another way: it's one thing for you not to attend when invited; another for you not to do so in the face of my urging you to attend; the latter involves an additional interpersonal strain.

The ability to pressure—and what we can successfully presure others to do—is context sensitive. It is in this way like command: although all of us can impose *some* requirements on *some* others—on our students, on our colleagues, on our friends, on our partners—we don't have blanket authority to command anyone. The same is true of pressure. Imagine I *know* that my spouse would like me to get the groceries (she hates the supermarket); that preference is common knowledge. That already gives me some reason to get the groceries on my way home. But imagine she *says* "it would be great if you could do the shopping on your way back." Our marriage is such that she has that kind of *say so*; but it needn't be that failure to get the groceries is *wrong* for it to be *disappointing*. Or to take a less banal case, imagine I'm planning a trip to visit my aging grandparent; it's common knowledge I'd like my partner to join me. Here are three very different ways I might approach the situation: I could *require* she come ("This is of the utmost importance to me—it's not optional"); I could tell her I'd like her to come without requiring her by saying "I'd really like it if you joined me"; or I could say nothing. My claim in this section is that the middle option really is distinct from the other two; I can, by my say so,

give her more reason than she had just in virtue of my preferences without *binding* her.

Pressure needn't be self-serving; I could pressure my partner to join me *for my grandmother's* sake. One can pressure another on *his own* behalf. Imagine my friend is too hard on himself; he regularly beats himself up for things that are out of his control, fails to appreciate his many virtues and successes, etc. He tells me that he's endeavoring to work on this aspect of himself—coming to see himself in a more realistic light and refraining from the pathological self-criticism to which he's prone. In the context of our trusting, intimate relationship, I lovingly and firmly tell him "I'm trusting you will" or "I'll hold you to that."[30] He always had reason to avoid the self criticism. But I've just given him a kind of *interpersonal* reason to do so—failure to do so lets *me* down. This could be burdensome—and indeed, the pressure I'm exerting via "I'm trusting you will" is the kind of thing he could *resist* via something like "it's none of your business!" or "stay out of it!" But it could also, in context, be *helpful*, especially for someone who is often able to do things for others but is exactly less able to do things for himself. In such a case, his indulging in further self-flagellation would not *wrong me*; but it would *let me down*.[31]

What exact change does pressure enact? It imposes a non-deontic normative relation on another; it gives another more reason to do something without requiring it; it supplies a basis for interpersonal complaint. Having pressured you, your nevertheless permissibly deciding not to is no longer neutral but disappointing, rude, annoying, or otherwise interpersonally defective. Or if your action would already be defective absent my pressure, my pressure can make it *even more so*.

The normative significance of pressure can sometimes lead us *not* to say something or to deny others opportunity to say so. In the case of deciding whether my spouse will accompany me on a family trip, I might hesitate to say I want her to go to *avoid* pressuring her. Or I might specifically disclaim that I am *merely* expressing a preference and *not* trying to pressure her at all; that we sometimes feel the need to say something to that effect is evidence that our say so *can* do more than express a preference.

Likewise, we might choose to avoid *empowering* others to pressure us so as to avoid that same residue. Imagine that in my class, I very purposefully do something I know the students hate but which is for their benefit: short weekly reading quizzes that (suppose)

[30] XXXX

[31] Cf. Tian's rich discussion of offers of *interpersonal faith* in her (2025).

radically increase engagement, their hatred notwithstanding. I tell them that I know the quizzes are a pain, but I explain that while I sympathize, I am making a thoughtful, pedagogical decision. Now suppose I offer a mid-semester course evaluation with the question "do you have any suggestions to improve the class?" to which 80% of the students respond with some variant of "cut the quizzes!"

My carrying on with the quizzes has a different normative valence. True, everyone *knew* that students disliked them. But to have their displeasure thus aired in the form of *pressure* on me makes my continuing to assign the quizzes normatively fraught. Suppose I said nothing about the survey and just carried on as is my prerogative. The students would be right, I think, to be frustrated with me. After all, I just *solicited* their *suggestions*; I thereby *empowered* them to pressure me. If I am to carry on with the quizzes, there is normative residue I need to navigate. I should explain why, even in light of the survey, I have decided to stay the course.

The delicacy resulting from declined pressure can be reason *not to make space* for pressure to be exercised. Of course, the best teachers are constantly gathering signals about what is working or not working in their classes; but if we're not ready to navigate the upshot of *pressure*, we shouldn't empower others to pressure us. In this case, the normative *risk* inherent in empowering one's students to exert pressure we know we'll decline is reason to design the questions in a way that don't make space for pressure, *or* to be ready to confront the resulting pressure honestly and openly.

3 Molecular Powers

3.1 Request

Requests are a special kind of pressure that constitutively involves allowance; they are our first *molecular* power.

To be sure, some requests are requests for a *deontic* commitment. "Will you marry me?" is a request whose acceptance institutes a promise (to marry). "Will you be my advisor?" or "can you coauthor this paper with me?" are likewise requests which, when accepted, impose obligations. Maybe accepting a request inevitably results in a (deontic)

commitment to do the thing requested (though I doubt it).[32]

But consider the situation as things stand not after a request has been made *and accepted*, but after it's been made and *before* its been accepted. As others have observed, my *requesting of you* gives you *some* reason even before you've accepted (Enoch, 2011; Lewis, 2018; Gläser, 2019). Imagine I ask "could we set up a meeting?" or "I know it's a lot to ask, but would you mind reading a draft of my paper?" My request *explicitly* makes room for you to decline. I give you *some* kind of reason without binding you.[33] As Lewis puts it, request is essentially *discretionary*.

In this sense, request is non-deontic: my mere request effects a change in the normative landscape without changing what is required. It pressures. But unlike the more blunt form of pressure above (e.g., "I'd like it if you joined me"), requests constitutively *defer* to the discretion of their addressee (e.g., "could you join me?"). Request just is pressure which constitutively acknowledges the discretion of the addressee to decline. Or as the terms of this essay would have it: requests are forms of pressure which by their say so simultaneously *allow* the addressee to decline. They *make normative space* to decline while at the same time giving the addressee *some* reason to comply. Request is a *molecular* power made up of two atomic ones—allowance and pressure.

A request can make greater or lesser allowance to decline. Compare two requests: "can you read my manuscript?" and "can you read my manuscript? *Please* feel free to say no! It is *totally* fine if you don't have time." They differ with respect to *how much space* they give the addressee to decline.

3.2 "I love you"

Those three words do not merely reveal my feelings, which might be obvious already; they *do* something. Saying "I love you" feels *momentous* because it doesn't just register an emotional shift that has already occurred but *changes* who we are to one another. "I love you" exercises a power which shifts (non-deontic) norms we stand in with one another (perhaps subject to an uptake requirement).[34]

[32] de Kenessey (2022); Gläser (2019).

[33] Sometimes norms of etiquette require that command be issued in the guise of request, e.g., in the UK.

[34] In some social contexts, "I love you" might engender deontic commitments, e.g., a promise (or something like a promise) to begin a process of courtship, or a promise to conform to certain deontic norms that constitute what it is to be romantically involved. But at least in contemporary western society, it doesn't

For the moment, focus on cases in which one tells another "I love you" for the first time. To so tell you that I love you does at least two things. First, I thereby *give you* my heart. To give you my heart is not a deontic matter—I don't thereby give you a right to my love (involving, at least, attention, a disposition to be partial towards you, and emotional vulnerability). Love is not something we can have by *right*; failing to love isn't *wrong*.[35] But failing to love can be defective. "I love you" *assures you* of my attention, partiality, emotional openness, etc. To see this, imagine that I tell you I love you for the first time; a few days later my love has, sadly, cooled. Though I *was* sincere, I discover I'm no longer moved to open, let alone give, my heart to you. I cut things off. I let you down. To withdraw my heart warrants negative reactive attitudes on your part like hurt feelings and disappointment (Darwall, 2024); Apologizing to you makes sense—not just for the fact *that* some unfortunate fate has befallen you but for *my* lack of responsiveness to you. The fact that "I love you" assures explains why the commitment-averse have trouble saying it; a fear of saying "I love you" is a fear of (non-deontic) heartfelt commitment.

Second, in addition to assuring, telling you "I love you" also *allows* you act lovingly towards me in return. Loving behavior—especially the intimate stuff of close friendship or romance—is very often inappropriate. Just being *looked at* intensely can be rude, imposing, or creepy. But such attention is *allowed* by saying "I love you." Some topics—about our bodies, our fears, our desires—*overstep* the boundaries of appropriate conversation with non-intimates;[36] but they can be rendered appropriate by another's telling you that they love you.

Sometimes, but not always, "I love you" does more than *allow* for you to love me, it constitutes a *bid* for reciprocation—it is a *request* to be loved in turn.

In short, telling another "I love you" exercises the heart's *power* to love—the power to thereby shift the norms between us in a love-ward direction. This is very much *not* to say that "I love you" on its own (even with uptake) establishes a loving relationship; a full-blown relationship might involve further normative shifts and require a history, the ongoing presence of various attitudes, etc. But telling another "I love you" shifts who we

typically constitute a *promise*—or even if it does, that's not *all* it does.

[35] A right to love that might be a conceptual or metaphysical impossibility inasmuch as much of what is constitutive of love is involuntary and we can only *owe* what is voluntary(Sidgwick 1874/1962, Darwall 2018; 2024), pace Liao (2015).

[36] White (2022); Berstler (2023).

are to one another by shifting the norms between us in a love-ward direction.

One might worry that most utterances of "I love you" do not initiate any great, momentous shift. Couples, family, and friends declare their love regularly, often well after any initial shifts occurred. Is that evidence that "I love you" doesn't really exercise the power after all, but rather reports an ongoing attitude?

To defuse the worry, first consider (deontic) promise; it is commonplace to *reassure* another of one's promises.[37] Having *promised* a friend I'll make it to his (very out of the way) party, I might intelligibly *reiterate* that promise to him. Married couples can "renew" their vows even when there is no change in their content and the initial vows were permanent. Whatever one thinks of the politics of pledges of allegiance in schools, the commitment to country and principle that they enact can be repeated daily. Nonetheless, these are all best understood as reiterated deontic powers. When someone says that "I pledge allegiance to the flag," they are not reporting *that* they are so committed but re-committing.

Daily "I love you"s function like that—they reaffirm the non-deontic norms of love. They are a recurrent (non-deontic) pledge of love—to the norms constitutive of one's loving relationship with them.

None of this is to say love for another is under our voluntary controlor that we can enter into loving relationships just by our say so. The claim is rather that some of the normative relations connecting beloveds—which include non-deontic norms of openness, vulnerability, attention, partiality, etc.—can be shaped via non-deontic powers. We can *promise* to have and to hold, in sickness and in health; we can *consent* to physical and emotional intimacy; and our power to shape loving relationships doesn't stop there—at the borders of the deontic. So, too, can we bring others closer with respect to the emotions, feelings, attention, and behavior which isn't subject to deontic norms—assuring them of that which we cannot promise, like love itself. This is a picture on which loving connection isn't just something that happens to us, but something over which we can exercise a kind of agency—in being able shape the norms of love that connect us.

[37] Cf. Dannenberg (2019).

3.3 Other Relationship-Shifting Powers

The power excercised via "I love you" is a species of a genus of relationship-shifting powers.[38] While not as common, sometimes friendships blossom with the help of an explicit "let's be friends!"—itself a way of saying "I love you" in a more reserved key.

Imagine in a slightly different case that we are colleagues in a department with a norm against popping in others' offices to chat. No one registers it as wrong or resentable, but it's a bit *off*, clearly not-to-be-done. What if the two of us want a closer, easier professional relationship? You could offer "You should just pop in whenever, and I can do the same—what do you think?" That offer, when accepted, *changes the norms*—involving an interplay of allowance (no longer normatively defective to pop in) and assurance (that we'll give each other the kind of attention constitutive of this new way of being together).[39]

Likewise, there are *negative* relationship shifting powers which have at their core an exercise of withdrawal. "We're over" I might yell to my (now ex-)partner—thereby severing our relationship and its constitutive norms. Whereas before a failure to open my heart was interpersonally defective, now it's not. I also thereby *allow* forms of behavior that would otherwise have been defective; if she closes her heart to me, that's fine—after all, I *said* we were over. "I hate you" or "F— off!" can serve much the same effect.

4 Shared Foundations: From Deontic to Non-Deontic Powers

This section argues that leading views of the foundations of deontic powers, e.g., conventionalism or an interest-based account, naturally extend to non-deontic powers. If that's right, it constitutes an independent basis for countenancing non-deontic powers: whatever explains our ability to promise and consent simultaneously predicts an ability to assure, allow, and pressure. Indeed, that non-deontic powers can so seamlessly fit into such different foundational accounts suggests deep continuity between deontic and non-deontic powers.[40] I don't endorse the approaches considered in §§4.2–4.6, nor is it

[38] What Lance and Kukla label "entreaties" (2013).

[39] Some have argued forgiveness is a normative power (Owens, 2014; Bennett, 2018). Such a view becomes easier to defend against objections once we allow the norms over which powers act (like a norm rendering my resenting you unfitting) needn't be deontic, XXXX.

[40] I omit detailed discussion of Chang, whosedefense of normative powers is *not* essentially deontic (2020). She argues that when world-given reasons are on a par, we can make further, parity-breaking prac-

important for my argument that the reader does. My aim is not to establish the foundations of deontic powers and show *the true account* extends; it is instead provides evidence for the premise that *whatever* grounds the power to promise and consent grounds non-deontic powers as well. Put another way, this section suggests that *even if* one rejected my analysis of particular cases, there remains an *in principle* reason to expect our deontic powers have non-deontic analogues.

I briefly sketch my own, novel, account of foundations of normative powers in §4.7.

4.1 The Question

How can we promise? Why do promises have a normative upshot? As Hume puts the explanatory challenge with characteristic verve:

> [E]very new promise imposes a new obligation of morality on the person who promises, and since this new obligation arises from his will; 'tis one of the most mysterious and incomprehensible operations that can possibly be imagined, and may even be compared to *transubstantiation*, or *holy orders*, where a certain form of words, along with a certain intention, changes entirely the nature of an external object, and even of a human creature. (Treatise 3.2.5.14, SBN 524-5)

In short, Hume found promises baffling, and he could have said much the same about consent.

4.2 Conventionalism

But Hume provides an answer: promises make a normative difference because we constructed a convention of promising. That convention then hooks into the rest of the Humean normative picture: roughly, we approve of the convention, and that gives us reasons to act in accordance with it. This basic schema— (1) the existence of a convention plus (2) some background normative principle vindicates powers—can take many forms. The Rawls of "Two Concepts" argues that the existence of a convention and the nature

tical reasons by an act of *will*. I doubt that we can promise to ϕ only when ϕ-ing and $\neg\phi$-ing are on a par. But if we can, our doing so can surely result in non-binding (non-deontic) reasons just as, or even more, naturally than it can binding (deontic) ones.

of *constitutive rules* can render the constitutive rules of a practice authoritative (1955); the Rawls of *A Theory of Justice* argues that a convention of promising and a background principle of fair play does the trick (Rawls, 1964, 1971; Hart, 1955).[41] It's no small thing to defend any of these background principles; but with a defense in place, one can defend (deontic) powers by an appeal to convention.[42]

Inasmuch as these conventionalist accounts work for promise, consent, and command, they extend to non-deontic powers. Recall our schema: (1) the existence of a convention plus (2) a background normative principle vindicates powers. The above argument for the ubiquity of non-deontic powers is an argument that we *in fact* have a robust practice or convention in place—that's part one of our schema. And any number of background principles could play the role of (2). The Humean might argue that our approval of the convention suffices to establish its normative authority; an early Rawlsian might argue the convention has *constitutive rules*, and a later Rawlsian could argue we shouldn't free ride off of such useful practices.[43]

[41] See also Laura Valentini's recent account of the construction of morally efficacious social norms, including normative powers (2024). Valentini offers a (conditionalized) conventionalist account of deontic normative powers that falls out of her generalized picture of the moral upshot of social norms. For Valentini, the fact that individuals in a community accept norms gives everyone reason to follow those norms provided the norms are morally permissible, not too costly, and authentically accepted (i.e., without coercion or ideological distortion) by their adherents. Why? Because to fail to follow norms to which others are committed manifests insufficient regard for their commitments—in particular, violating others deontic commitments is a matter of disrespect—and by extension to them. To flout others' norms disregards *them*, and we always have reason to give due regard to others (and so, by extension, their commitments). Valentini thinks this basic machinery applies not only to first order norms, like the norm of queuing at a bus stop, but to *second order* norms, i.e., norms about the functioning of normative powers. To flout the conventional norms of promising evinces disregard to those are committed to the convention and in particular wrongs the person whom I promised (Valentini, 2024, Ch. 4). If Valentini's account works for deontic norms, it can be extended to non-deontic norms: individuals accept norms of allowance and assurance, and so we should, as a matter of giving them and the norms they accept due regard, abide by them. White (2025b) develops extension of Valentini's account to cover non-deontic social norms; while I have worries about this extension, Valentini herself endorses the proposal enthusiastically (in correspondence). To flout such powers' apparent changes in the normative landscape would let them down—indeed, imagine the disregard expressed in *not taking seriously* others' attempts to allow, assure, pressure, request or say "I love you."

[42] Cf. Lewinsohn (2024).

[43] A fair-play based account of non-deontic powers by convention would require a *non-deontic principle* analogue of fair play. See n.41.

4.3 Interests-Based Accounts

Raz and Owens claim that we have normative powers *because it is in our interests* to have such powers (Raz, 1977, 2022; Owens, 2012, 2014). The basic story is roughly this: we don't just have contingent social practices of promising, consenting, contracting, and commanding. Those practices *serve human needs and interests*; a world without promising or consent is one in many values of a human life are either harder or impossible to secure. On Owens's account, when and because our having powers serves human interests, we are in fact empowered.

If that story works for deontic powers, it should work for non-deontic powers. We have interests that are served by the ability to reshape the normative landscape in ways that are distinctively not obliging or permitting: think of how useful it is to be able to request things of others; likewise to be able to assure without committing or to allow that which is already permitted. There is *value* in having various non-deontic relations, and so we have an interest in being empowered to shaping those relations.

4.4 The Preconditions of Good Relationships (A Transcendental Argument)

Seanna Shiffrin offers a transcendental argument for promise and consent—having these powers is a necessary precondition of morally adequate relationships (2008).

The basic form of the argument is:

P1. x is a precondition for the possibility of y.

P2. y is actual.

C. x is actual.

For Shifrin, x is the power to promise and consent, and y, minimally decent moral relationships. To extend this kind of argument, we let x be the power to assure, allow, pressure (including request), withdraw, love, etc.; and y be something like ethically rich relationships. Consider *request*. Any interpersonal relationship shorn of the ability to request would be ethically impoverished—we need the ability to relate to others in a way that allows us to give them reasons to do things without binding them as a precondition of realizing morally good relationships. Imagine a relationship with a friend, spouse, student, advisor, co-author, parent, child, in which the only way that you could give others

reasons to do things was either by generating a duty (via command) or indicating your mere preferences. The motivating cases of assurance can likewise be fit into exactly this argumentative schema. Imagine a relationship in which the *only* way I can make myself responsible to you for my ϕ-ing is to promise. I would have a quite ham-fisted ability to shape our interpersonal relations—I could only bind myself, but never give you non-deontic assurance, and that seems inadequate to the rich texture of interpersonal ethical lives.

4.5 Robust Reason Giving

Enoch argues that among the preexisting normative facts governing interpersonal counters are complex conditionals which empowers us to "robustly" give each other practical reasons (2011). One is (*very* roughly): if S intends to give R a reason to ϕ by way of S's own communicative act and R recognizes this, then R gains a reason to ϕ. Enoch argues this conditional underwrites the power of request, which Enoch thinks does not, on its own, generate requirement (Lewis, 2018, cf.); similar of conditionals explain duty-generating powers (Enoch, 2014). The view can easily expand further to cover allowance, assurance, and other forms of pressure by positing additional, preexisting, conditional normative facts that capture the kind of reason creation, and elimination, involved in those powers.[44]

Enoch himself raises the worry that his view doesn't really make request a normative *power*: S's requesting of R does not create a *new* normative relation or reason so much as trigger an *already existing* reason by satisfying its antecedent. (In this respect it resembles Scanlon's account of promising on which a preexisting, conditional norm—Principle F—is triggered by certain forms of assuring behavior (1990; 1998).)[45] Enoch's defense of this

[44] Cf. Manson (2016) for an Enochian account of consent that would serve as a model for allowance.

[45] "Principle F: If (1) *A* voluntarily and intentionally leads *B* to expect that *A* will do *X* (unless *B* consents to *A*'s not doing so); (2) *A* knows that *B* wants to be assured of this; (3) *A* acts with the aim of providing this assurance, and has good reason to believe that he or she has done so; (4) *B* knows that *A* has the intentions and beliefs just described; (5) *A* intends for *B* to know this, and knows that *B* does know it; (6) *B* knows that *A* has this knowledge and intent, then, in the absence of special justification, *A* must do *X* unless *B* consents to *X*'s not being done" (1998, 304). My defense of non-deontic assurance—alongside the responses to objections in §5—challenge the details of Scanlon's account by establishing that that we can assure others without *obligating* ourselves (Lewinsohn, 2021, see also). But they do not constitute a challenge to the *structure* of his foundational picture, shared by Enoch's, on which a preexisting norm is (self-consciously) triggered. Can a Scanlonian model of promise in some way be extended to the non-deontic? Doing so would

triggering model notwithstanding,[46] I prefer accounts (like the others in this section) on which non-deontic and deontic powers alike generate genuinely *new* normative relations or reasons. But *if* this account kind of account suffices for promise, consent, and request, it will serve for the full range of non-deontic powers.

4.6 Virtue Theory

Theorists like Philippa Foot and Michael Thomas ground the normativity of promises in the virtue of *fidelity* (2001; 2008).[47] A character which treats promises as binding realizes the human good, and so (via virtue theory), promises make a normative difference. To take consent seriously manifests justice; to take commands (where authoritative) seriously manifests obedience. To treat assurance, allowance, pressure, request, "I love you," etc. seriously manifests the virtues of interpersonal life—graciousness, collegiality, neighborliness, friendliness, lovingness, etc. Nothing about virtue theory is uniquely suited to *deontic* powers—it's just that some virtues involve sensitivity to deontic relations; so just as plausibly, many virtues are sensitive to non-deontic normative relations.

4.7 A Relationships-Based Account

It is not my goal in this paper to defend an account of the foundations of our non-deontic powers. We shouldn't worry about the absence of such a theory because as I've sketched above, it looks like *lots of other* accounts would vindicate the existence of non-deontic powers. But, to borrow a phrase from Steve Yablo, I can offer an "advertisement for a sketch of an outline of a prototheory" of the foundations of normative powers.

require a picture of interpersonal justifiably, unlike Scanlon's own, that is designed to accommodate both deontic and non-deontic phenomena. Perhaps no one could reasonable reject a principle (F') whose antecedent singles out the *non-deontic* assurance I defend and whose consequent is "*A* has reason, but is not required, to do *X* unless *B* allows her not to." In countenancing both deontic and non-deontic contractualist principles, however, such a view would involve a significant departure from the animating spirit of contractualism as a *minimal* account designed only to settle what we *owe* and pointedly *not* what it is to act well (Hieronymi, 2011).

[46] Which turns on the fact that the exact terms of the conditional involve a "robust" form of second-personal address in which we *self-consciously* give each other reasons. This distinguishes normative powers' triggering conditions from more mundane cases of triggering conditional reasons, e.g., when a grocer's raising the price of milk gives you reason not to buy it. For criticism, see Monti (2021).

[47] See also Quinn (1992); McDowell (1998).

The central thought is that *part of what it is* to stand in particular relationships with others is to enjoy a *particular* set of normative powers.[48] For some powers, this is obvious. Part of what it is *to be* a sergeant is to be such that you enjoy the power of command over privates. Part of what distinguishes sergeants from generals is that the latter have the power to command a lieutenant. In both cases, part of what defines the relationship and its roles is the scope of behavior subject to command (e.g., in the US Army, a commanding officer can order a subordinate to run 5 miles, but not to date, marry, or break the law). In the case of an army, the constitutive *powers* are obviously central to defining these relational roles.

So, too, are such powers central to defining other relationships. Part of what it is to be not just a person who occasionally gets academic help but *my student* is to be such that one has special *powers of pressure*. My students can give me very strong reasons to do things by requesting. Sometimes, they don't even request, but pressure more directly, e.g., "I really need help with this draft." That they can do so is part of what defines our relationship—it makes it what it is. Some of my students have greater powers to pressure; in a meeting at the start of the year, I tell my senior thesis advisees what they can ask of me, and in so doing, I make our relationship *different* than that I have with other undergraduates.

So, too, when we think of friendships, collegial relationships, romantic relationships, etc. Part of what gives those relationships the character that they have isn't just the first order norms that govern their occupants but the further powers with which they endow them.[49] Friends can make allowances that advisors or mere colleagues cannot; that they *can do so* is constitutive of their intimacy.

Moreover, some intimate relationships *restrict* the use powers. Imagine in a well-meaning but confused attempt to make things easier for my spouse, I tell her "look, I know that you often feel pressure to care for me in ways that go beyond what you are obligated to do. Don't worry about it! I hereby allow you *not* to let my welfare, projects, and concerns have the kind of normative weight in your life that they do." That's not possible!" she could rightly respond. "That's what it is *for us to be partners*. I can't get

[48] Cf. Raty (2024).

[49] Cf. Lewis (2018). He thinks that that when a friend makes a request of me, that request's normative force is dependent on my (discretionarily) valuing him *as a friend*. I say that part of what it is to be a friend is to be such that one has the power of request. I think these are two ways of getting at a similar or the same thought.

off the hook for that—and neither can you. To do that would be to stop being partners in anything like the loving, intimate sense we are." Normative powers cannot change *any* non-deontic norm, and relationships-based account has a way of drawing the line between the things that are and are not subject to such changes: agents have whatever powers are constitutive of the relationship. Intimate partnership does not empower me to discount myself that way.

Not all relationships that we occupy are genuinely normative. Part of what makes a patriarchal marriage *patriarchal* is the suite of normative powers that, by the lights of the relationship, are enjoyed by the husband: to command, to pressure, to request, etc., and the *lack* of normative control allotted to the wife. So like any plausible appeal to norms of a relationship or practice, this story will rely on a background account of how relationships' norms can successfully generate reasons for agents to act—and, moreover when and why *bad* relationships fail to generate normativity. One such account is defended by White (2022):

> TRANSMISSION If an agent is actually in a relationship, then her reasons to follow the constitutive standards of that relationship are as strong as her reasons to be in that relationship. (That is, if an agent has decisive reason to be in the relationship, she has decisive reason to follow its standards, if only weak reason to be in the relationship, then only weak reason to follow its standards, etc.) [50]

5 Rejecting Rival Accounts

How might someone who shares Hart's sense that non-deontic powers would be objectionably mysterious resist my argument? By offering rival interpretations of my animating examples. They might *not* involve a change in the normative landscape by an agent's say so; or they might involve exercises of *deontic* powers, after all. This section argues that these strategies fail.

[50] Another is given by Valentini: norms transmit when they are not too costly, authentically adopted, and morally permissible (2024). Cf. Wells (2025); Thompson (2008).

5.1 Purely Epistemic Reason-Giving

Perhaps the phenomena at issue all involve what Enoch terms "purely epistemic reason-giving" (2011). On this view, "don't worry about it," "I love you," etc., reveal preferences/feelings, and it is these revealed states that do the normative work. Perhaps assurance is just a matter of giving evidence of my intentions, evidence which effects reasonable expectations, which in turn give others reason to comply. So-called "powers" just give evidence of some *other* normatively significant consideration.

This view cannot explain why one's say so makes a difference even in cases where the underlying preferences or feelings are *already* common knowledge (Enoch, 2011; Lewis, 2018). Imagine it is common knowledge in our meeting that today is unexpectedly, exceptionally busy, but that nevertheless, you are the kind of person who wants others to feel welcome and wants to chat. Nevertheless, your actually saying "don't worry about it" makes a difference. Your actually saying that you hope to make it to my party makes a difference even when it is common knowledge that you're very likely to come. Actually saying "I love you" matters even when it's obvious. (The argument here parallels that made against deflationary views of *consent* on which all "consent" does is reveal preferences.)[51]

In what amounts to an expression of the same basic problem, a merely epistemic view fails to explain the interpersonal defect in failing to give due weight to what someone *says* in saying not to worry. Imagine, for instance, that I am *extremely* good at reading people's preferences off of their behavior and non-voluntary body language; that is, imagine I am an extremely intuitive therapist-type who can *just tell* what is going on with others quite reliably. And suppose, as can be the case in therepuetic settings, that I am actually *better* at figuring out your preferences by my methods of intuition than I am by taking you at your word—after all, you are sometimes (even often) wrong about what you want. With that set-up, let's go back to the original scenario: we are in the meeting, you're busy, I'm wondering if I should leave. I submit that there would be something *defective* about my trying to figure out whether to leave solely on the basis of my *reading you* instead of listening to what you are *telling me*.[52] If I take your saying "don't worry about it" as just

[51] Cf. Owens (2012); Goodin (2024).
[52] Cf. Flowerree (2023).

one bit of evidence among many, here perhaps swamped in its evidentiary significance by my intuitive read on what you *really want*, that would be *objectifying*. It would be to take up the kind of objective stance that *is* appropriate for therapists and doctors, but is *not at all* appropriate for me to do *to you* as your colleague in a meeting (Strawson, 1962). It's your say so—*your agency*—over the situation that matters, not just the preferences or feelings for which they are evidence.[53]

Moreover, this reductive account cannot explain how my say so can make a difference even when the underlying preferences or feelings are *not* present. Imagine you really *would* rather we cut our meeting short, but you *tell me* not to worry about it. If you then complain that I let you down, I could cite your say so as a basis for interpersonal justification for what I did—preferences notwithstanding. ("You said not to worry!")[54] Your words themselves make a difference.

Similarly, suppose that I don't really have whatever feelings a revelatory/epistemic theory of "I love you" would claim the phrase expresses. After earnest, sincere self-reflection, however, I *incorrectly* think I do have those feelings, and I say "I love you." Then it dawns on me I don't feel whatever that phrase is supposed to express, and I realize that in the end, I don't (and didn't) love you. I apologetically tell you so. You can and should feel disappointed in me. But on a revelatory view, the most you could complain about is that I told you something false—despite (let's stipulate) my best efforts. As a diagnosis of my defective behavior, pointing to the incorrectness of my assertion rings a bit hollow. An earnest mistake, corrected as soon as possible, is no great interpersonal defect. While my past mistaken utterance is *a* problem,[55] you can *also* be disappointed in me for something in the present: my now not opening my heart to you. Put yourself in the shoes of someone who was in this way mistakenly mislead; is the basis for hurt

[53] Cf. Moran 2018.

[54] Cf. Bolinger (2019); Dougherty (2021); Goodin (2024) on consent. Another argument: imagine I am a jerk who relishes transgressing non-deontic norms. We are mid-meeting and you know the only reason I am keeping you is to viciously relish the transgression. You could allow me to stay—removing the transgression and, thus, my motivation to stay—in order to satisfy *your* preference I *not stay*. This is impossible on the deflationary view where your allowance supposedly indicates a preference that I stay. This all parallels Owens's argument that *consent* doesn't constitutively involve a preference that the addressee do the consented-to thing; he gives the case in which A permits B, the jerk, to come to his party so as to get B (who would come only if it counts as party-crashing) to stay away (2012; 2014).

[55] Feelings are relevant to a powers-based account of "I love you" as felicity conditions, especially in romantic contexts.

feelings and disappointment in me—some kind of interpersonal rupture that calls for accountability and repair—merely that I *misspoke*? Or that *I don't love* you as I assured you I did?

5.2 Very Minor Deontic Shifts

A second line of resistance concedes that my cases involve the exercise of powers, but tries to interpret the cases in deontic terms. Maybe allowance, assurance, pressure, withdrawal, and telling another "I love you" do make a deontic difference, but the change is in some way more *minor* than that made by promise, consent, and the like.

Maybe the changes at issue are deontic but involve changes in very weak (i.e., easily defeasible) rights and duties. Maybe you did waive a minor right to my not carrying on the meeting, and I gained a minor right to your coming to my party.

With respect to love, this account is hopeless: "I love you" often enacts (or reaffirms) norms of the utmost importance, not very minor shifts. The idea that the norms of love invoked by that phrase are *very weak* is a non-starter. We need to recognize that we can have very strong, interpersonal reasons for action that are not deontic. And, indeed, it is common place to recognize very strong, non-requiring reasons exactly in the domain of love (Kolodny, 2003; Velleman, 1999; Jollimore, 2011; Kolodny, 2003).

More generally, non-deontic changes cannot be understood as minor deontic changes. To draw on an example from Lance and Kukla, suppose I tell (and thereby *require*, i.e., command) my bank-teller to withdraw $5, and she refuses without cause; she does a minor wrong to me (she wrongs me not very severely). Now suppose I *request* my friend take care of me amidst great emotional turmoil, and he declines; he does not wrong me (it was a request!), but he disappoints me *a lot* (Lance and Kukla, 2013; Lewis, 2018). That I can be *massively* disappointed in him while only *minorly* affronted by the clerk shows that there are cross-cutting distinctions here: whether something is deontic or not comes apart from the strength of the consideration, ease of its being overridden, or severity of the breach. The same cross-cutting can be found for every power whenever the *content* of the non-deontic norm changed by the power is in some way more practically significant than a minor deontic norm.

5.3 Deontic Powers with Special Content

Maybe the changes at issue are deontic and important, but they are changes in some special kind deontic norm or a norm with special content.

Perhaps non-deontic assurance is really a *conditional* promise, e.g., to attend the party iff you have time. But love resists conditional treatment; while one *might* think "I love you" involves a promise to love iff one can (i.e., so long as your heart cooperates), that won't work. "I love you" seeks to assure the other *exactly about* the sometimes-uncooperative feelings themselves! And that same problem shows up with the assurance that you'll come to my party:[56] if you're busy and don't come, I think can thereby let me down. But a conditional promise would not even be triggered—no reactive attitude would be warranted.

A more promising line of resistance recasts non-deontic powers as deontic powers over imperfect duties. On an orthodox understanding, these are requirements with respect to our *ends*.[57] An imperfect duty of charity isn't a duty to do any particular thing but to adopt the wellbeing of others as a (weighty) end among others in one's overall practical outlook. On the powers-over-imperfect-duties view, to assure you is to promise to set you as a (weightier than normal) end; allowance (partially) waives (or discounts) my right to feature as an end.

Many of the examples seem amenable to this kind of treatment. When you tell me not to worry about it in the meeting, it's like saying "discount the weight you set on me as an end!" When you assure me that you hope to come to the party, it's like promising to set me as an *extra* weighty end. "I love you" might be understood in the same way.

While I whole-heartedly agree that we can reshape imperfect duties by our say so (e.g., "I promise to take you into account as I decide"), this kind of account cannot explain the phenomena at issue.

In insisting the only kind of defect we can remove or create by our say so is wrongfulness, an imperfect-duty-only picture unduly *flattens* the normative landscape; it makes the only normative upshot of the landscape *wrongfulness*—albeit with a wide variety of content. It is too *reductive*. Set my arguments about powers aside; it is clear that there is

[56] Cf. Marušić (2017).
[57] Though cf. Herman (2022).

such a thing as falling short without doing *wrong* (Bolinger, 2017). This view either needs to deny that or insist that there are no such cases over which we can exercise assurance or allowance.

Turning back to my cases, this view claims that *inasmuch* as your say so can make a difference to the normative status of my carrying on the meeting or your attending my party, it has to be in terms of right and wrong; inasmuch as there is a defect, it is resentable or demandable.[58] But the intuitions I've relied on above say otherwise.

Such a picture also predicts too much latitude. Non-deontic norms often govern *specific actions* (e.g., continuing the meeting, attending the party). In my examples, the normative status of those specific actions change. The norms and the changes thereof are in that way *narrow*. By contrast, imperfect duties are (famously) wide, allowing latitude in their fulfillment, and only very exceptionally requiring specific actions. To have an imperfect duty as regards, say, my happiness, does not require anything specific of you, like going to the party. So far as an imperfect duty is concerned, if you don't go the party but do take me out for a lovely meal, the duty is discharged. (Just as if I didn't donate to Oxfam last month, but throw myself into union organizing this month, I can thereby meet my obligations of general beneficence without any moral residue/remainder.)

But that is exactly not what is at issue here. When you invite me to hope that you'll come to the party, the newly made normative relation is essentially about *party attendance*; if you miss it and instead take me to dinner, you don't come out of the exchange clean. Dinner could intelligibly be seen as a form of *apology* or *making up* for the earlier disappointment; in contrast, union organizing doesn't *make recompense* for not donating to Oxfam—it simply fulfills the duty directly. The means of fulfilling a wide duty are in that way fungible—any means will do as long as it serves the relevant end adequately.[59] By

[58] You might think that imperfect duties cannot be demanded. I disagree. Though no one can demand of me that I discharge my duty of beneficence *to him in particular*, anyone who is a possible object of my duty of beneficence can represent a demand on behalf of all who have an imperfect right: "I'm not saying you needed to spend your time, attention, or money on *me*; but you need to do *something*!" Cornell might hold my cases involve wronging but no ex-ante deontic phenomena (like the license to demand or otherwise require behavior) (2025); but I worry his view predicts the same reactive attitude is apt in third-party wronging and in not getting the groceries. The argument of the next paragraph offers independent reason *not* to treat all of my cases as powers over ex-post deontic relations. Moreover, I think a non-deontic analogue of demand is appropriate, ex-ante, in the wake of assurance or pressure—an urging not of a requirement, but still an ex-ante directive of another's behavior.

[59] Cf. Martin (2019).

contrast, the *means* of party-attendance-norm-fulfillment here are *not* so fungible—you have to actually come to the party.

Might this picture be saved by being more specific about the relevant end which is the content of the imperfect duty? Could we say, e.g., inviting me to hope you'll come to the party makes *coming to the party* the relevant end that you've promised to set greater weight for? Again, I don't want to cast aspersions on the idea that one can promise (or broadly commit) to narrower ends; the problem is that this is *not* the phenomenon at issue. If we are to maintain any distinctive *imperfection* or *width* in the duty, it must be that the duty allows one *not to act in service of the end* without thereby violating the duty. If that latitude doesn't hold, the duty is just a perfect one. And it is *that* gap that the argument of the last paragraph puts pressure on—no such gap exists for assurance.

6 Conclusion: Creeping Moralism?

Promise, consent, and command are quasi-juridical; they are connected to what we can demand others do or what kinds of coercion are permissible.[60] Whether right in the details, Hart is surely onto something in seeing deontic powers as exercises of small-scale sovereignty (Hart, 1955; Dougherty, 2021; Liberto, 2022). One might object, then, that a view which sees non-deontic powers as an extension of promise, consent, and command suffers from a kind of creeping moralism. Whatever it is to tell someone "I love you" is clearly *not* to exercise small-scale *sovereignty*. Even if non-deontic powers aren't literally exercises of sovereignty or change what is is apt for coercion, we threaten to do violence to non-deontic phenomena by seeing them as mere extensions of the moral. Even calling these "*non*-deontic" powers situates them vis-à-vis what might seem like the (deontic) paradigms. They are, as it were, *just like them* but with respect to norms that are less strict; "I love you" is decidedly *not* a quasi-juridical exchange stripped of a little extra strictness.

But my view does not suffer from a creeping moralism—on the contrary, it puts morality in its (rightful) place. To bring this out, allow me to restate my view in a new key: we have normative powers of assurance, allowance, and pressure, and we can excer-

[60] On the connection between deontic norms and demand, see Darwall (2006); Gilbert (2018b). On coercion, (Kant, 2017; Ripstein, 2009; Pallikkathayil, 2010). On *making* others conform to a norm, (Setiya, 2024). On public enforcement, (Mill, 2001).

cise such powers over non-deontic norms as well as deontic ones. On this way of putting things, there aren't so much *non-deontic* powers as there are simply normative powers, which, contrary to popular understanding, are not restricted to deontic relations. On this way of thinking, the deontic doesn't have any special priority; nor does the non-deontic. There are, instead, a rich suite of interpersonal norms, and we have agency over norms on both halves of the divide.

This way of thinking emphasizes continuity not by *extending* paradigmatically deontic (moralistic) phenomena into the non-moral domain, but by treating the moral as just one special case among many. Indeed, it is with some awkwardness that I have insisted on a sharp break between deontic and non-deontic powers in order to make the case that there *really is* something afoot that isn't merely the shadow of promise, consent, and command. I went out of my way in giving the above cases to *force* a non-deontic reading. In the above cases, you *cannot* reasonably promise you'll come to my party; you *clearly committed* to the hour long meeting so have no right to waive when you tell me not to worry. But real life often isn't so sharp. Imagine we just agreed to meet and there is a conventional understanding in our subculture that meetings *often* last an hour. You tell me not to worry about it. Did you (deontically) consent? Or (non-deontically) merely allow? It's hard to say. I tell you I'm coming to the party—sometimes it matters a great deal whether what I said was a promise; sometimes, whether it was a promise or something less isn't at issue because it just hurts that I didn't come.

On one way of thinking, a lot rides on the question of whether the change at issue was deontic or not—whether my behavior is *merely disappointing* or *resentable*, i.e., merely interpersonally defective or *wrongful*. Sometimes, this matters a great deal. If we are to force someone to do something or punish their behavior, we need *sharp lines* to distinguish when such force is permissible.

But in our interpersonal life, the boundary between these at times matters less, much to the dismay of a moral philosopher who has ever had the misfortune of trying to explain to a friend or family member why her behavior, while indeed problematic, isn't exactly *wrong*.[61] If I've deeply disappointed a loved one, the fact that I did no *wrong* is cold comfort—the deontic-non-deontic divide is not at issue.

So on another way of thinking of things, the boundary between the deontic and the

[61] Cf. Darwall on trying to justify hurtful behavior (2024).

non-deontic—that which sets apart the distinctively moral—is often, but *not always*, what matters. On this way of thinking, it doesn't make especially good sense to insist that our powers and the norms they act on are always on one side of the line or the other. And on this way of thinking, it is much more natural, therefore, to think there are just normative moves that we can do with others: bring ourselves closer together, make space in the normative landscape, or achieve a certain a distance. Sometimes, it's crucial that those moves take place firmly on one side of the line separating the deontic/moralistic from the non-deontic; sometimes on the other; and sometimes *it doesn't really matter*. Seen this way, the key thing isn't that we have deontic or non-deontic powers; it's just that we have *powers*—we can shape the normative landscape in all kinds of ways. And on that way of seeing the upshot of the paper, I haven't defended an *extension* of the moralistic (i.e., the deontic); it's just one case among others. The continuity between the deontic and non-deontic, in other words, doesn't require we accord pride of place to the former. This isn't creeping moralism so much as putting morality in its place—it is just one part of life with others.

This picture doesn't downplay the importance of the deontic. Instead, it sees rights, duties, requirements, norms of right and wrong, and our attendant powers of consent, promise, and command, as *special*e. Exactly in virtue of being deontic, they are *special cases* of the more general domain of interpersonal norms and powers. But they are no more (or less) a paradigm of the agency we have over our relations with others than our power to tell another we love them.

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