

CAN CONSENT BE IRREVOCABLE?
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This article argues that consent must be revocable. I present two arguments for this conclusion. On the argument from informed consent, irrevocable consent lacks validity because it cannot be sufficiently informed. On the argument from bodily integrity, irrevocable consent lacks validity because we do not have the authority to deny our future selves the ability to protect our bodily integrity. I explain why the argument from bodily integrity captures unique moral problems raised by irrevocable consent and illuminates an important but undertheorized distinction between autonomy and bodily integrity.

1 INTRODUCTION

In a video that went viral in 2013, a woman named Jessica is on a canyon swinging trip, preparing to launch herself off a cliff into a hundred-meter bungee fall.¹ She is clearly terrified. Her boyfriend, Clayton, urges her to jump. He counts down from five, but when he gets to one, Jessica still can't bring herself to jump. He counts down from five over and over again; eventually, Jessica insists that she does not want to jump anymore. She also makes it clear that she does not want Clayton to push her, and he assures her that he won't. But after continuing to urge Jessica to jump (and being told time and again that she does not want to be pushed), Clayton pushes her and bursts into laughter as she swings into the canyon.

The video is excruciating to watch. I have seen it many times and I still cover my eyes at the end. Jessica's fear is palpable as she stands on the edge of the cliff, anxious and tearful, begging Clayton not to push her. After he pushes her and starts laughing, Clayton looks like the biggest jerk of all time. Some representative remarks from the comments section of the video include "worst boyfriend ever," "[s]hame on you for pushing her off and laughing," and "[t]hat's just terrifying for that poor girl, you're a monster."

However, in an interview conducted after the video went viral, Jessica revealed that earlier in the day they had gone canyon swinging, she had given Clayton consent to push her off the cliff. She had said to Clayton, "you know, I'm really nervous about this. I don't know if I'll be able to jump. *If I can't jump, you need to push me.*"² In the interview, Jessica also shared that after she had both feet back on the ground, she was glad Clayton

¹ Devin Graham, "Boyfriend pushes Girlfriend off cliff – Insane Rope Swing," Youtube, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iuv__-nyO1M.

² CNN, "Guy pushes his girlfriend off a cliff," Youtube, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPVzfjXxF28>.

had pushed her. After listening to the interview, Clayton seems like much less of a jerk. After all, Jessica intended for her consent to be *irrevocable*; she had instructed Clayton to push her off the cliff because she suspected her fear of heights would cause her to change her mind about jumping. She wanted Clayton to push her off the cliff *no matter what*.

This article considers whether morally valid consent can be irrevocable. Morally valid consent is consent that succeeds in generating a moral permission, making otherwise impermissible conduct permissible.³ For example, when you give your hairdresser consent to cut your hair, you make it morally permissible for them to do so; without consent, cutting another person's hair is wrongful. When consent is not morally valid, it fails to generate a moral permission. Some widely accepted conditions for consent include that it be informed and that it be uncoerced. My aim in this article is to show that consent must also be revocable. If I am right, then Clayton wronged Jessica because he pushed her off the cliff without consent. Although she had intended for her consent to be irrevocable when she told him earlier in the day that he needed to push her if she couldn't bring herself to jump, when she later said she no longer wanted to be pushed, she revoked her consent.

A few clarifications before I begin. First, for the purposes of argument, I assume a performative account of consent and its revocation (on which these require public communication, such as verbal or written speech, or body language) rather than an attitudinal one (on which they simply require adopting the relevant mental attitudes).⁴ This allows for more straightforward moral evaluation of the cases that follow, as we can assume that the relevant permissions are granted when a person publicly communicates her consent and dissolved when she publicly communicates her revocation, not when she privately adopts the relevant mental attitudes. However, nothing in particular hinges on this assumption; the argument I present may be reinterpreted under an attitudinal view.

Second, my focus in this article is on high-stakes consent: consent that is needed to avoid a serious moral wrong. Consent to push someone off a cliff is high-stakes because it is seriously wrong to push someone off a cliff without consent. I focus on high-stakes cases not only because our intuitions about them are clearer, but because these are cases where we care about consent the most. For instance, we feel very strongly that sexual consent—a paradigm of high-stakes consent—must be informed and uncoerced. But consider a case of low-stakes consent, such as consent to brush past someone on a crowded bus. In this case, we have a far more permissive view as to what counts as informed consent. Philosophical discussion of consent focuses primarily on high-stakes cases for

³ Heidi M. Hurd, "The Moral Magic of Consent," *Legal Theory* 2, no. 2 (1996): 121.

⁴ For discussion of whether public communication or simply a private intention is necessary for morally valid consent, see Tom Dougherty, "Yes Means Yes: Consent as Communication," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 43, no. 3 (2015): 224–253.

these reasons, and I will follow suit.

Finally, my focus is on bodily consent: consent we give others to touch or control our bodies in ways that would otherwise be impermissible. I will not discuss cases involving consent to use or control our property. I think there are unique reasons for thinking that bodily consent must be revocable because of the unique importance of bodily integrity and the role consent plays in protecting it. Indeed, it is not hard to think of cases where property consent is unproblematically irrevocable. For example, one might think of gift-giving as a practice where someone gives irrevocable consent to another person to take her property as theirs.⁵ Although the view I present does not easily permit a unified theory of bodily and property consent, I do not think this is a weakness of the view. Rather, my argument that bodily consent is always revocable because it exists in part to protect our bodily integrity puts pressure on the prevailing assumption that all kinds of consent can be theorized under the same umbrella. There is good reason to think that the norms governing permissible interactions with our bodies and our property are different.

The paper proceeds as follows. In section two, I consider two reasons why it might seem as though consent can remain morally valid despite attempts to revoke it: prior consent and subsequent consent. I explain why we should be skeptical of both these explanations. In sections three and four, I consider two arguments against irrevocable consent. On the argument from informed consent, irrevocable consent is not morally valid because it cannot be sufficiently informed. On the argument from bodily integrity, irrevocable consent is not morally valid because we do not have the authority to deny our future selves the ability to protect our bodily integrity: the experience of our bodies as the point of integration between our subjective experience and the rest of the objective world. I explain why the argument from bodily integrity captures unique problems raised by irrevocable consent and illuminates an undertheorized distinction between autonomy and bodily integrity. On my view, our power to consent is not wholly grounded in our autonomous agency, as consent theorists have largely assumed, but also in our interest in protecting our bodily integrity.

2 PROBLEMS WITH PRIOR AND SUBSEQUENT CONSENT

Broadly speaking, there are two reasons one might think Jessica's consent remained morally valid when Clayton pushed her off the cliff despite her attempt to revoke it. One is that she had consented to being pushed off the cliff prior to ascending the cliff.

⁵ Hurd has this conception of gift-giving in mind when she claims that consent has the "moral magic" to turn "a theft into a gift". Hurd, "The Moral Magic of Consent," 123.

Another is that after Clayton pushed her, she was glad he had done so. Let us call consent to X prior to X *prior consent* and consent to X after X *subsequent consent*. We can contrast prior and subsequent consent with *present consent*, or consent a person gives at the time of action.⁶ In what follows, I will first explain why we should be skeptical of prior consent's relevance to the moral validity of present consent and then I will explain my concerns about subsequent consent.

2.1 Prior consent

Why might prior consent bear on the moral validity of present consent? To answer this question, it is helpful to think about the circumstances under which a person might intend for her consent to be irrevocable. Usually, these are cases where a person expects a change in her state of mind—in her desires, aims, or rational capacity, among other things—and wishes for her decisions in her present state of mind to be respected over her future ones. It is often thought that some perspectives and attitudes better represent who we really are than others. When Odysseus ties himself to the mast to prevent himself from being seduced by the Sirens' song and wrecking his ship, we think that his desire to stay on course is his *true* desire—that when his preferences change and he begs his crew to untie him, he is in some way "out of his mind," unable to form authentic preferences.⁷ Before and after hearing the Sirens, Odysseus prefers to stay on course with his ship. His decision to tie himself to the mast is what Jon Elster calls a "precommitment": a way of setting himself up to act in accordance with his true desires in the face of temptation, knowing that afterwards he will be glad he did it.⁸

It may seem as though if a person gives prior consent when she is in a sound mental state and later dissents when she is in an altered one, it is morally permissible to disregard her dissent. Tom Dougherty has argued that in general, present dissent trumps prior consent, but when the consenters' dissent is ill-formed—when she is "insane," "irrational," or otherwise "out of her mind"—we may permissibly act on the basis of her prior consent despite her present attempt to revoke it. To illustrate this idea, Dougherty presents the following case:

⁶ Strictly speaking, present consent is always given prior to an action: we do not consent to actions exactly at the moment of action, but before the action occurs (if only moments before). However, I hope that my discussion reveals the meaningful distinction between "present" consent given moments before an action and consent given enough time prior to an action for an agent's circumstances to change, even if the distinction can be hazy.

⁷ For further discussion of this case, see Jean Hampton, "Selflessness and the Loss of Self," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 10, no. 1 (1993): 151.

⁸ John Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens: Studies in Rationality and Irrationality* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 37–47.

Suppose someone consents to undergo surgery without anesthetic, but is unable to bear the pain, fear, and anxiety during the surgery itself, and so asks the surgeon to stop. Plausibly, the surgeon may disregard this dissent on the grounds that it is ill-formed in light of the patient's perturbed mental state.⁹

My evaluation of this case differs from Dougherty's. Even though the patient consented to the procedure without anesthesia beforehand, and even if she will be glad that she underwent the procedure without anesthesia afterward, it is hard not to see the surgeon's action as a violation. Dougherty defends his evaluation on the basis that pain, fear, and anxiety are examples of temporary preference shifts produced by an "alien cause": emotions that undermine a person's autonomy and therefore their capacity to revoke prior consent.¹⁰ Dougherty thinks that in order to revoke consent, a person must be in a "sound state of mind."¹¹ However, there is reason to think that a person's soundness of mind should *not* bear on how seriously we take a revocation of consent. Suppose a person gives prior consent to sex knowing that she will be afraid. If she later decides that she is too afraid to go through with it, yet her partner proceeds, disregarding her revocation, what happens can only be called rape. Indeed, the more "out of her mind" with fear she is—the more she resists—the more seriously her partner seems to wrong her when he ignores her revocation. Pain, fear, and anxiety are legitimate reasons for revoking consent. And, troublingly, these are emotions whose importance and magnitude we are prone to underestimating when we are in a so-called "sound state of mind."

When it comes to *giving* consent, we tend to have very high standards. We think that there are many conditions under which a person cannot give consent. There is good reason for this. It is widely accepted that our ability to consent—to waive certain rights we have and grant permissions to others to interact with our bodies in ways that would otherwise be impermissible—is closely tied to our autonomy.¹² Autonomy is a notoriously tricky concept to pin down, but in the context of discussions about consent, it can be helpfully understood as *self-governance*: the power to determine how one acts, in accordance with one's genuine desires, free from external influence. Our power to consent is closely tied to our interest in preserving our autonomy because it allows us to dictate freely what external forces may permissibly interact with or control us. You cannot consent under gunpoint because you cannot freely cede control over your body under such threat. The relationship between consent and autonomy also explains why we generally

⁹ Tom Dougherty, "Fickle Consent," *Philosophical Studies* 167, no. 1 (2014): 27.

¹⁰ Dougherty, 28.

¹¹ Dougherty, 28.

¹² See Renée Jorgensen Bolinger, "Moral Risk and Communicating Consent," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 47, no. 2 (2019): 185. For further discussion of the connection between one's autonomy and one's ability to consent, see Hurd, "The Moral Magic of Consent," 124, and Tom L. Beauchamp, "Autonomy and Consent," in *The Ethics of Consent: Theory and Practice*, ed. Franklin Miller and Alan Wertheimer (Oxford University Press, 1999), 55–78.

do not think that young children, individuals who are mentally ill, or individuals who are severely intoxicated can consent: they lack the requisite competence, understanding, and capacity for reason required to make autonomous choices.¹³ While we generally think that limiting a person's autonomy by treating them paternalistically is a wrongful infringement upon their liberty, we do not think that treating a child paternalistically is similarly disrespectful.¹⁴ Indeed, acting paternalistically toward a child can be a way of respecting them, of furnishing them with the conditions they need to develop their capabilities so they may one day make autonomous decisions of their own. Another condition under which a person might be unable to exercise autonomy and give consent is in a state of emotional disturbance. When we are emotionally disturbed, we are often unable to act on our genuine desires that represent who we are and what we stand for.¹⁵ According to Heidi Hurd, "any emotional disturbance, reasonable or otherwise, is sufficient to render prima facie consent suspect."¹⁶ Although emotional disturbances are not literally external to a person's body, they are in an important sense not attributable to her.¹⁷ This is why we often think that a person compelled by fear, anxiety, or anger cannot act freely, but acts "in spite of herself." If our power to consent exists in part to protect our autonomy, and if emotional disturbances are autonomy-undermining, it makes sense that a person in a state of emotional disturbance cannot consent.

The relationship between consent and autonomy helps explain why the standards for giving consent ought to be high and the standards for revoking consent low. When we give consent, we generate a *permission* for another person to interact with us in ways that would otherwise be impermissible. In general, it is wrong to act upon another person's body without their consent; doing so would violate their autonomy and their right to articulate the rules for others' permissible interactions with them. It is not similarly wrong to *fail* to act upon a person's body even after they have given consent and made the action permissible. Managing moral risk therefore demands an asymmetry in our treatment

¹³ For discussion of young children's power to consent, see David Archard, *Children: Rights and Childhood*, 3rd ed. (Routledge, 2014); for discussion of the power to consent under the influence of alcohol, see Alan Wertheimer, "Intoxicated Consent to Sexual Relations," *Law and Philosophy* 20, no. 4 (2019): 373–401.

¹⁴ Tamar Schapiro, "What Is a Child?," *Ethics* 109, no. 4 (1999): 715–738.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Sarah Buss, "Autonomous Action: Self-Determination in the Passive Mode," *Ethics* 122, no. 4 (2012): 647–691, and Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 1 (1971): 5–20. The idea that a person is not herself in the grip of strong emotional disturbances is the basis of deep self views of moral responsibility, on which a person acts autonomously only when her actions emanate from (or at least are consistent with) her "deep self": the privileged subset of attitudes that are fundamental to her practical identity. For discussion of the deep self view of moral responsibility, see, e.g. Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder, "Praise, Blame and the Whole Self," *Philosophical Studies* 93, no. 2 (1999): 1203–1232, and Chandra Sripada, "Self-expression: A Deep Self Theory of Moral Responsibility," *Philosophical Studies* 173 (2016): 1203–1232.

¹⁶ Hurd, "The Moral Magic of Consent," 141. Emphasis in original.

¹⁷ Harry G. Frankfurt, "Identification and Externality," in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 58–68.

of consent and its revocation.¹⁸ Respecting another person's autonomy requires being careful to ensure that their consent is freely given, which in turn requires being attentive to conditions that might undermine their freedom. In Dougherty's scenario, the surgeon disregards what ought to be regarded as a *prima facie* revocation of consent (the patient's verbal resistance to the procedure) and therefore acts wrongly.

One might object to the asymmetry between giving and revoking consent on the basis that respecting a person's autonomy requires prioritizing wishes they communicate in a cool, calm, and collected state over any wishes they communicate out of pain, fear, or anxiety. Because a person is in an important sense "not herself" in a disturbed mental state, ignoring her prior consent and respecting her present revocation appears to be a way of *failing* to respect her autonomously formed preferences. A person's past decisions are, after all, *her* decisions. A person's past self cannot slave her present self to her purposes; her present and past selves are one and the same person.¹⁹ Indeed, without the ability to make decisions ahead of time—to "divide deliberative labor intertemporally" to our past selves who are better positioned to make decisions—we would be unable to make plans at all.²⁰ This is a pressing objection, and I address it at length in section four, when I argue that our need for the ability to protect our bodily integrity and not just our autonomy explains why we ought to respect revocations of consent, even if we are in a state of emotional disturbance and in an important sense "not ourselves" at the time of revocation.

2.2 Subsequent consent

I have explained why I am skeptical that prior consent can remain morally valid when an agent revokes it, even when she does so in a perturbed mental state. I am also skeptical that *subsequent* consent can transform a previously nonconsensual act into a consensual one. We often use our expectation of subsequent consent as a justification for actions that appear to violate someone's autonomy. For instance, Gerald Dworkin has argued that parents are justified in acting paternalistically toward their children when they do so expecting "the child's subsequent recognition of the wisdom of the restrictions."²¹ We also use subsequent consent to justify emergency interventions and other actions where we

¹⁸ For discussion of the moral risk we incur when we act upon another person's consent, see Bolinger, "Moral Risk and Communicating Consent."

¹⁹ Julia Nefsky and Sergio Tenenbaum, "Extended Agency and the Problem of Diachronic Autonomy," in *Time in Action: The Temporal Structure of Rational Agency and Practical Thought*, ed. C. Bagnoli (Routledge, 2022), 172–195.

²⁰ Luca Ferrero, "Decisions, Diachronic Autonomy, and the Division of Deliberative Labor," *Philosophers' Imprint* 10, no. 2 (2010): 1–23.

²¹ Gerald Dworkin, "Paternalism," *The Monist* 56, no. 1 (1972): 76.

cannot appeal to prior or present consent.²² At first blush, the idea that one could waive an earlier right with subsequent consent is mysterious, appearing to invoke backwards causation.²³ How could subsequent consent possess such moral magic?

Eric Chwang grounds the moral power of subsequent consent in the reactive attitude—whatever it may be called—that takes the form of "I won't press charges or demand compensation for an infringement on my liberty."²⁴ On Chwang's view, this is exactly the attitude we have when we give present consent; essentially, when we give present consent, we are communicating that we "do not mind" the intervention. For Chwang, it is irrelevant whether we adopt the attitude before or after the intervention itself.

However, I think the timing of this attitude *is* relevant for the moral power of consent. Consider how we might say to someone who failed to ask for our consent when they should have, "It's okay, but ask me next time." This phrasing implies that we perceived a moral infraction, and while we don't mind that it occurred, we request that in the future our permission be sought in advance. Another reason why the timing of this attitude is relevant to the moral power of consent has to do with the fallacies involved in reasoning about what a person will be glad to have happened.²⁵ Suppose a patient breaks his nose and needs surgery. He gives consent to his surgeon to perform a procedure that will restore his nose to its previous functioning. The surgeon asks the patient whether he would also like some cosmetic work done on his nose while he is in surgery, and the patient clearly communicates that he does not consent to any unnecessary cosmetic work. However, the surgeon—who, let's say, is a very good predictor of whether someone will be happy with their plastic surgery results—goes ahead and performs the cosmetic procedure. When the patient wakes up, he loves his new nose. Perhaps he says, "If I had known my nose would turn out looking like this, I would have consented!" The fact that the patient is happy with his nose and will not press charges against the surgeon does not change the fact that the surgeon seriously wronged him by performing the procedure without his consent. Similarly, Jessica can be glad that Clayton pushed her off the cliff, but her positive attitude toward Clayton's actions does not change the fact that Clayton seriously wronged her by acting without her consent. This is the case even if being pushed off the cliff is what she "really wanted" all along, and her change of mind was simply a result of her perturbed mental state. A person can have a reasonable preference

²² Eric Chwang, "A Defense of Subsequent Consent," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 40, no. 1 (2009): 117.

²³ Donald VanDeVeer, "Paternalism and Subsequent Consent," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 9, no. 4 (1979): 631–642.

²⁴ Chwang, "A Defense of Subsequent Consent."

²⁵ This claim is inspired by discussion of the challenges of reasoning about what a person would be glad to have done in Elizabeth Harman, "'I'll Be Glad I Did It' Reasoning and the Significance of Future Desires," *Philosophical Perspectives* 23, no. 1 (2009): 177–199.

for the way things turn out and decide not to "press charges" even when things only turned out that way because she was seriously wronged. This point is especially clear in cases where victims are not subsequently grateful for the violation they experienced. Suppose that instead of being happy with the cosmetic work done on his nose without his consent, the patient wakes up upset about what happened, but not enough to press charges. Eventually—perhaps after a few years—his anger dissipates and he no longer minds that the surgeon infringed on his liberty. On Chwang's view, the surgeon did not act wrongly because the patient comes to not mind the intervention, which I find implausible. Whether an intervention was performed with or without a person's consent cannot depend on her attitudes toward the intervention after the fact.

I have explained why prior and subsequent consent do not provide sufficient grounds for ignoring a person's present dissent. However, in what follows, I wish to provide an account of what precisely is wrong with irrevocable consent that justifies these preliminary thoughts. I propose two arguments against irrevocable consent: one on which irrevocable consent can never be sufficiently informed and another on which agents lack the authority to deny their future selves the ability to protect their bodily integrity.

3 THE ARGUMENT FROM INFORMED CONSENT

One might argue that irrevocable consent is not morally valid on the basis that it cannot be sufficiently informed. There is widespread agreement that without a person's informed consent to a high-stakes intervention, the intervention is impermissible even if it would help her, is recommended by experts, or would benefit third parties. Call this *the argument from informed consent*.

I won't give an account of precisely the information a person must have or have access to for her consent to be informed—for that, I turn to previous work on informed consent.²⁶ But even without knowing precisely what information a person must have to give informed consent, there are a few observations we can make. One is that how informed consent must be depends on how high the stakes are. For instance, it is much more important that you give informed consent to a surgeon to perform a medical procedure than to a hairdresser to give you a haircut; therefore, you need to know more about the medical procedure than about the haircut to give informed consent. When you give *irrevocable* consent to an action, the stakes are immediately higher than they would be for

²⁶ See, e.g., Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles of Bioethics* (Oxford University Press, 2008); Neil C. Manson and Onora O'Neill, *Rethinking Informed Consent in Bioethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Onora O'Neill, *Autonomy and Trust in Bioethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Onora O'Neill, "Some Limits of Informed Consent," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 29, no. 1 (2003): 4–7.

revocable consent to the same action. For a lighthearted example, consider shopping at a store with a generous return policy as opposed to one where all sales are final. When you buy a sweater at the first store, you may not feel like you have to think too much about the purchase; you could always change your mind. But if you buy a sweater at the second, you might put in extra effort to ensure it fits, read its care instructions, etc., since the stakes are higher. One might argue that the stakes of irrevocable consent are so high that it can never be sufficiently informed. For a person's irrevocable consent to be informed, it seems as though she would need information about all the future situations in which the relevant right will be waived and agree preemptively to cede her decision-making authority in all those situations. This is a tall order, to be sure, but perhaps not an impossible one. Suppose Jessica watches dozens of canyon swinging videos to get a sense of what it will feel like to do it. She speaks to friends who were glad that their canyon swinging partners pushed them off the cliff when they couldn't bring themselves to jump. Then, she says to Clayton, "You have permission to push me off the cliff no matter what." Even if Jessica cannot know exactly what canyon swinging is like, it seems plausible that she could know enough for her consent to be informed.

The problem here is that information about what canyon swinging is like is not the only information Jessica needs for her consent to be informed. Even if she gets to a point where there is nothing more she can learn about canyon swinging, she may not be at a point where there is nothing more she can learn about *herself* that is relevant to the moral validity of her consent.²⁷ To illustrate this point, suppose a designer offers you a dress to wear for a formal gala that will be held in a year's time. You try the dress on. You know everything there is to know about the dress: how it fits you, how you feel when you wear it, how well it photographs, etc. You are in an excellent position to agree to wear the dress right now. However, you are not necessarily in a good position to agree to wearing the dress, unaltered, in a year—not because you might learn something new about the dress, but because you might learn something new about *yourself*. In a year's time, you might have gained or lost weight, or become pregnant. Perhaps your taste will have changed so much that you no longer like the style of the dress. These are all considerations that are relevant to your authority to commit to wear the dress, and in light of them, you are not well-positioned to agree to wear the dress unaltered in a year *no matter what*.

We can use the same analysis to show why Jessica is not well-positioned to give irrevocable consent to be pushed off the cliff. I have argued that pain, fear, and anxiety can undermine one's capacity to consent, yet are emotions that we generally do not feel fully until the time of action approaches. Given our unpredictability—the ways our bodies,

²⁷ Thanks to Alida Liberman for suggesting that I elaborate on this and for providing the example that follows.

desires, values, goals, and emotions can change, sometimes in ways we do not expect, and sometimes suddenly, over a short period of time—it is difficult to say that we can be sufficiently informed about what our future selves will be like to give irrevocable consent.

The high standards for informed irrevocable consent reveal something important: unlike uninformed consent, irrevocable consent does not misfire and fail to generate permissions from the start. If you consent to surgery without sufficient information about what the procedure involves, you did not consent at all; your consent failed to meet a condition for moral validity. However, if you have sufficient information to give informed consent to an intervention, but insufficient information to give *irrevocable* consent to that intervention, your consent is morally valid until you revoke it.²⁸ Because the information available to you when you consent to an action is often different from the information available to you at the time of action, and because the information available to you at the time of action may be relevant to the moral validity of your consent, it makes sense that there are different standards for the information required to give informed consent to something now and to something later. When Jessica gave Clayton permission to push her before they ascended the cliff, she consented to being pushed off the cliff with the best information available to her at the time. However, her position at the time of action is importantly different from her position when she gave prior consent. At the time of action, she has additional information about how it feels for her to go canyon swinging that is relevant to the moral validity of her consent.

One might object to the argument from informed consent on the basis that it wrongly places the moral burden on Clayton, who is simply acting on wishes that Jessica had previously communicated to him. Why should he be blamed for doing exactly what Jessica asked him to? Sometimes, consent is primarily the responsibility of the consent-giver, not the consent-receiver. If Jessica's consent to be pushed off the cliff is uninformed, isn't that on her? Clayton may have a moral obligation to ensure Jessica's consent is not deceived or coerced, but there is some information relevant to her consent—namely, her feelings about canyon swinging—that only *she* can access. In some cases, providing information may be primarily the responsibility of the consent-receiver. For instance, in medical cases, physicians might be uniquely responsible for ensuring that the patient has access to all the information they need to give informed consent. But in other cases, the consent-receiver may have no obligation to be the one to provide that information. Jessica and Clayton's case seems like the latter kind.

I will address this objection in the following section, but for now, we can respond

²⁸ The claim I am making here is similar to one that Hallie Liberto makes about sexual promises. On Liberto's view, although promises with sexual content do not misfire, they obligate the promisee to release the promisor from the promise. Hallie Liberto, "The Problem with Sexual Promises," *Ethics* 127 (2017): 383–414.

by drawing a distinction between the permissibility of a person's actions and her praise- or blameworthiness for those actions. Proponents of the attitudinal view of consent—on which consent consists in a person's inner assent—use this distinction to explain why communication makes a difference to the morality of actions that require consent.²⁹ On the attitudinal view, your internal assent can make it permissible for me to hug you, but I could still be *blameworthy* for hugging you without having good reason to think that you had consented to my doing so since you didn't communicate your consent to me. Without endorsing the attitudinal view of consent, we can use the distinction between permissibility and blameworthiness to address the objection raised here. In cases where it is the consent-giver's responsibility to ensure her consent is sufficiently informed, yet she fails to do so, the consent she gives is not morally valid, and it is therefore impermissible for the consent-receiver to act on the consent. However, the consent-receiver may not be *blameworthy* for acting on her consent; he had good reason for thinking that she had consented, after all.

4 THE ARGUMENT FROM BODILY INTEGRITY

I have defended one argument against the possibility of irrevocable consent, on which irrevocable consent cannot be sufficiently informed to be morally valid. However, on the argument from informed consent, there is nothing about irrevocable consent *in particular* that makes it invalid. Rather, the invalidity of irrevocable consent is subsumed under the invalidity of uninformed consent. Even if irrevocable consent cannot be sufficiently informed, we might wonder whether there are independent grounds for thinking that consent cannot be irrevocable. In this section, I argue that consent's role in protecting our *bodily integrity*—the point of integration between our subjective experience and the rest of the objective world—explains why consent must be revocable.

When Jessica gives Clayton irrevocable consent to push her off the cliff, she is attempting to "bypass" her future self's control of the situation. The argument I now propose is rooted in the idea that certain attempts to bypass one's capacity for self-direction are problematic—specifically, when they compromise one's ability to protect one's bodily integrity. The idea that we cannot always bypass our capacity for self-direction might be met with resistance. Although it is certainly problematic to bypass *another* person's capacity for self-direction, it may be unclear what it even means to bypass *one's own* such capacity, let alone for it to be problematic. In this section, I begin by explaining what it means to have the authority to bypass one's capacity for self-direction, and then I argue

²⁹ See Larry Alexander, "The Ontology of Consent," *Analytic Philosophy* 55, no. 1 (2014): 102–113, and Hurd, "The Moral Magic of Consent."

that we lack the authority to do so when it denies our future selves the ability to protect our bodily integrity.

To understand the idea of bypassing one's capacity for self-direction, consider Derek Parfit's nobleman.³⁰ As a young man, the nobleman learns that later in his life, he will come into a large inheritance. He currently has socialist leanings, but suspects that, like most people, he will become more conservative as he grows older. To ensure his inheritance will go to the peasants, he signs a document that will automatically allocate it to them and gives his wife the sole authority to revoke the document. He then asks his wife to promise him that she will not, under any circumstances, revoke the document. He says to her, "I regard my ideals as essential to me. If I lose these ideals [...] I want you to regard your husband then, not as me, the man who asks you for this promise, but only as his corrupted later self."³¹

According to Parfit, when the nobleman asks his wife in middle age to revoke the document, she may plausibly regard herself as being committed to two different people. On one hand, she is committed to the young man she married and to whom she made the promise. If she were to revoke the document, she would be betraying him. On the other hand, she is committed to her husband, the man who is now asking her to revoke the document. One need not endorse a time-slice conception of personal identity to appreciate her dilemma. She need not regard her husband as numerically different from the man she married to see him as a different person in the *practical* sense.³² And insofar as the man she married is a different person, practically speaking, from the person she is married to now, she experiences a genuine conflict of loyalty.

Just as we might blame Jessica for asking Clayton to push her off the cliff no matter what, we might blame the nobleman for putting his wife into this position in the first place. Nietzsche thinks along these lines. On his view, to have the authority to make commitments, a person must be able to "stand security for her own future" and have "a real *memory of the will*."³³ When Nietzsche says we don't have the authority to make commitments when we are unsure about our futures, he is not saying that we lack the capacity to do so. A person who makes a commitment despite being unsure about his capacity to fulfill it has still made a commitment.³⁴ What Nietzsche points out is that

³⁰ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 1984), 327–329.

³¹ Parfit, 327.

³² Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 101.

³³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, cited in Christine Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 187, with emphasis included. Jennifer M. Morton makes a similar point when she argues that our capacity to make decisions for our future selves requires a shared "normative perspective": that we see the normative force of our reasons for making the commitment in the same way. Jennifer M. Morton, "Deliberating for Our Far Future Selves," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 16, no. 4 (2013): 809–828.

³⁴ As a point of comparison, an insincere promise is still a promise; despite the promisor's insincerity, she

there is a sense in which he lacks the *right* to bind his future self to the commitment. If the young nobleman had full authority to commit his future self to giving the inheritance to the peasants, his plea to his wife to revoke the document in middle age would not bear the normative weight it does; his wife would be bound to fulfill the promise she made to his young self. But his present plea *does* bear normative weight. We regard the wife as being committed to two different people; her normative reasons pull her toward different courses of action. As Christine Korsgaard put it, "if she approaches her husband as one person, she'll be making a mistake."³⁵ Generating obligations without full authority to do so is a way of playing fast and loose with that authority. When Jessica asks Clayton to push her off the cliff no matter what, she is similarly playing fast and loose with her ability to generate permissions. She puts Clayton in the difficult position of having to decide whether to betray his past girlfriend who consented to being pushed off the cliff or the one who now wishes to revoke that consent. Perhaps more importantly, however, Jessica puts her *future self* in a difficult position. In instructing Clayton to push her off the cliff no matter what, she silences her future self's attempts to protect herself by revoking consent.

One might object that Jessica's situation is unlike the nobleman's in an important way. Unlike the nobleman, Jessica anticipates that once she ascends the cliff, she will become irrational—that her judgment will become clouded by fear. This is precisely why she wants her consent to be irrevocable. On the other hand, the young nobleman anticipates a change in his values, not in his capacity for reason. Because of Jessica's irrationality, it might seem as though Clayton ought to prioritize Past, Rational Jessica's wish to be pushed off the cliff. I briefly addressed this objection in section two, when I argued that we cannot appeal to an agent's previous "soundness of mind" to justify acting on her prior consent in light of her present dissent because doing so is too morally risky. But I think there is a deeper reason why we ought not act on a person's prior consent in light of her present dissent, rooted in the tension that can arise between respecting a person's autonomously-formed preferences and respecting her bodily integrity.

In section two, I considered how our power to consent stems in part from our interest in protecting our autonomy: our capacity to determine how we act, in accordance with our genuine desires, free from external influence. I propose that our power to consent is closely related not only to our interest in protecting our autonomy, but also to protecting our bodily integrity: the point of integration between our subjective experience and the rest of the objective world. Unlike autonomy, which endows a privileged status upon attitudes that one endorses in a cool, calm, and collected state, even if one does not

has still imposed upon herself a moral obligation. Failing to fulfill the promise would wrong the promisee.
³⁵ C. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*, 188.

have those attitudes at a particular moment, bodily integrity pertains to *one's experience of one's body at a particular moment*.

To understand the distinction between bodily integrity and autonomy, we can consider the following, and sadly not uncommon scenario. Suppose a person values her life when she is in a "cool, calm, and collected" state. Perhaps she tells her family that if she were ever on the brink of suicide, she would want medical help, even if that meant committing her to a hospital against her will. Now, suppose she experiences a mental breakdown and her family involuntarily commits her to a hospital. She begs her family not to do this. Her pleas become so desperate and violent that the doctors have no choice but to lock her in a room by herself, where she continues in anguish to plead with them to release her.

On any account of autonomy, the patient is not acting autonomously. She is in a highly disturbed mental state that has undermined her capacity for self-governance; her pleas to her family and doctors to release her are made in spite of herself. Therefore, her family and doctors do not violate her autonomy by committing her to the hospital involuntarily. Their actions reflect their care for her and her autonomously-formed preferences; they want her to recover from the breakdown before she hurts herself. However, if you have ever been one of the family members or doctors in this scenario, you will know that it leaves an awful feeling. When someone begs you to refrain from doing something that you must do for her own good, it doesn't *feel* like you are respecting her. Indeed, the *more* desperate her pleas—the more she lacks control over her actions—the *less* it feels like you are respecting her. If a person's power to consent is grounded solely in her autonomy, then committing her against her will is merely unpleasant; the patient's pleas, while desperate and violent, are not utterances she has control over, but something like mere *sounds* she is making in a perturbed mental state.

To be clear, individuals in emotionally disturbed states who pose threats to themselves or to others should be taken care of, even if that means committing them to a hospital involuntarily. However, even if the patient's family and doctors acted rightly, all things considered, the awful feeling they are left with seems to have moral significance. Rather than mere unpleasantness, the awful feeling is something like *guilt*: a reactive attitude in response to a moral infraction.³⁶ Bernard Williams has argued that when we are faced with conflicting prima facie moral obligations, even if we act on the right one of them, all things considered, the others leave a "remainder" that even fully admirable moral agents often feel in the form of regret.³⁷ However, apt responses to moral remain-

³⁶ P.F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (Routledge, 2008), 1–28.

³⁷ Bernard Williams, "Ethical Consistency," in *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 166–186.

ders need not be limited to regret. Guilt is another response one might have to violating a prima facie obligation even though one has acted rightly, all things considered. It is not uncommon to feel guilty and for that guilt to be apt even though one has done nothing wrong. For example, suppose you and your spouse promise never to lie to one another, but protecting the well-being and privacy of a dear friend requires that you lie to your spouse occasionally for a set period of time. Any guilt you feel for lying to your spouse demonstrates your responsiveness to the requirements of your moral commitments and to the moral remainder left by your actions. The aptness of your guilt is reflected in the fact that it would not be inappropriate for you to apologize to your spouse for having lied to them, even though you did not act wrongly.³⁸ In the hospitalization scenario, the guilt experienced by the patient's family and doctors is responsive to the fact that they have wrongfully infringed upon the patient's bodily integrity, committing her to the hospital without consent, even though they did the right thing, all things considered. The feeling of anger that fills audiences who watch Clayton push Jessica off the cliff in the canyon swinging video is also more like a reactive attitude toward a perceived moral infraction than a mere feeling of unpleasantness. When viewers call Clayton a "monster," they are responding to the fact that he is unmoved by Jessica's pleas not to be pushed. This awful feeling is dampened with the knowledge that Jessica had previously asked Clayton to push her, but it doesn't entirely go away. Even if pushing Jessica off the cliff was the right thing to do, all things considered, pushing her despite her attempts to protect her bodily integrity by revoking consent leaves a moral remainder that calls for some response on Clayton's part.

There is something morally questionable about treating a perturbed person's pleas as mere sounds rather than as genuine appeals. When understood as reactive attitudes, the feeling of guilt the patient's family and doctors in the case above and the feelings of anger and horror viewers of the canyon swinging video experience provide evidence that we should not ignore the pleas of someone in a perturbed mental state even if they lack the capacity for autonomous choice. I propose that *bodily integrity* can explain why this is the case. When the patient begs her family and doctors not to commit her, and when Jessica begs Clayton not to push her off the cliff, they are protecting something morally significant: their bodily integrity. On my view, individuals should retain the capacity to protect their bodily integrity even if they cannot make autonomous choices and even if exercising that capacity would undermine the desires and values they identify with in a cool, calm, and collected state.

On some views, bodily integrity is simply a right that is guaranteed to a person in virtue of her autonomy. For instance, Martha Nussbaum has argued that a person's right

³⁸ Angela M. Smith, "On Being Responsible and Holding Responsible," *The Journal of Ethics* 11 (2007): 481.

to bodily integrity—to have the decisions she makes for her body treated as sovereign—is based on the idea that autonomous, rational agents’ choice-making abilities, including choices about their bodies, ought to be protected.³⁹ However, on other views, the right to bodily integrity is not merely the right to non-interference in decisions about one’s body, but the right to exclusive control over one’s body. According to Jonathan Herring and Jesse Wall, the right to bodily integrity should not be understood as protecting a person’s bodily autonomy, but as protecting “the point of integration between a person’s subjectivity and the remainder of the objective world.”⁴⁰ A person’s bodily integrity consists not only in her rationally-formed preferences and values for her body. If it did, then the body would be no more than a “necessary (but ultimately uninteresting) casing” for her mind.⁴¹ By incorporating the notion of subjectivity into our understanding of bodily integrity, we can explain why a person’s desires and dignity matter even if she is not in a sound state of mind, and why interference with bodily integrity requires further justification than interference with autonomy.

If the power to consent were grounded solely in a person’s autonomy, consent given in a cool, calm, and collected state to an action that will take place when the agent is later in a perturbed mental state could be irrevocable. Her prior consent represents her autonomously, rationally-formed interests, which would take priority over her present, irrational dissent. But if there is a notion of bodily integrity separate from autonomy, and if a person’s power to consent is grounded in part in her interest in protecting her bodily integrity, then she does not have the authority to give irrevocable consent. The perturbation she experiences is relevant to the fact that her body is the point of integration between her subjective experience and the rest of the world and that she experiences her body as being under threat. Her present dissent matters. And the guilt the patient’s family and doctors are left with after they involuntarily commit her to the hospital and the anger audiences feel toward Clayton for pushing Jessica off the cliff are responses to what they perceive as disrespect for bodily integrity.

Although bodily integrity and autonomy are distinct concepts, they are not necessarily unrelated to one another. What an autonomous agent consents to being done to her body will often coincide with her interest in protecting her bodily integrity. Even in a cool, calm, and collected state, we do not want to subject ourselves to painful or dehumanizing experiences. However, it is not uncommon for considerations of bodily

³⁹ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 78. For further discussion of Nussbaum’s conception of bodily integrity and its basis in rational, autonomous agency, see Mervi Patosalmi, “Bodily Integrity and Conceptions of Subjectivity,” *Hyppatia*, 2009, 127–141.

⁴⁰ Jonathan Herring and Jesse Wall, “The Nature and Significance of the Right to Bodily Integrity,” *Cambridge Law Journal* 76, no. 3 (2017): 576.

⁴¹ Herring and Wall, 577.

integrity and autonomy to conflict because violations of bodily integrity are precisely the kinds of interventions that can compromise a person's capacity to make autonomous choices. How can a person be expected to remain cool-headed—to act in ways that reflect what she truly values—when her bodily integrity is under threat? One can't be expected to think clearly and rationally when one's body is being violated. The idea that a person's body and not merely her autonomous agency must be respected may be hard to accept, especially for philosophers who, following Plato, assume that the body is subordinate to the rational mind, "an evil" that is "mingled with our souls," filling us with "passions, and desires, and fears, and all manner of phantoms" that impede our search for truth.⁴² But I hope that the examples and analysis I have offered demonstrate the need to integrate bodily integrity into our conversations about consent. Recognizing the distinction between bodily integrity and autonomy allows us to take subjective experiences of violation seriously.

4.1 Implications

My account of consent's role in protecting bodily integrity illuminates a few ideas worth mentioning. First, the account explains why individuals who are not full-blooded autonomous agents, such as children and individuals with dementia, should still retain general control over their bodies. Although a child's consent and dissent do not have the same moral significance as an adult's, children still have the right to exercise control over their bodies. Children generally lack the competence, understanding, and capacity for reason required to make autonomous decisions, but they are subjects who experience pain, fear, and anxiety inflicted by others through their bodies. If respect for autonomy were all that mattered in our interactions with other people's bodies, then physically violating a child would be wrong only because they cannot autonomously consent. But there is something morally objectionable to such a violation *beyond* the child's lack of autonomy, and it is that the child experiences their body being assaulted. If the power to consent stems not only from our interest in protecting our autonomy but also our bodily integrity, then children's consent should be taken seriously. Although they may lack the capacity to make autonomous choices, children ought to retain some control over what physical interventions they are subject to. Think, too, of why we feel strongly that we ought to disregard a person with late-stage dementia's previous advance directive for a course of treatment if she no longer wants that treatment. If a person signs an advance directive refusing life-saving treatment before her dementia progresses, but later decides that she wants to receive treatment, it is morally wrong to deny her the treatment and

⁴² Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. F. J. Church (The Liberal Arts Press, 1951), 66c.

let her die.⁴³ More forcefully, we can imagine a case where a person signs an advance directive before her dementia progresses to be euthanized if she becomes incompetent. It would be seriously morally wrong to administer euthanasia to this person if she later decides she wants to go on living. Bodily integrity gives us a principled basis for claiming that experiences of physical violations matter, so much so that they can eclipse considerations of autonomy and the wishes a person communicates when she is in a cool, calm, and collected state.

My point is not that respect for a person's bodily integrity should always dictate what counts as a permissible physical interaction with her, all things considered. Respect for bodily integrity does not make it impermissible to intervene when someone harms themselves for no good reason, even if they reject the intervention. We may, for instance, permissibly intervene in someone's suicide attempt without their consent, or force necessary medical treatment upon a young child who does not want to undergo it. Rather, my point is that considerations of bodily integrity and of autonomy can give rise to genuine normative conflicts. It is not straightforwardly permissible to force medical treatment upon a person in a perturbed mental state who does not consent, and even if it is permissible to do so all things considered in some particular instance, there are still normative reasons *not* to that factor into the moral calculus—namely, the absence of consent.

A second implication of the argument from bodily integrity worth mentioning is how it sheds light on the role *consenters* play in certain violations they experience. Clayton acted wrongly when he pushed Jessica off the cliff on the basis of her prior consent and ignored her present dissent. But, as I have said before, there is an important sense in which Jessica was playing fast and loose with her ability to generate permissions when she attempted to give irrevocable consent. This conclusion may appear to be victim-blaming. But it is possible for a person to be actively complicit in wrongs done unto her even though she is in another sense a victim of wrongdoing.⁴⁴

To illustrate this idea, we can compare Jessica and her active complicity to the protagonist of a short story by Kristen Roupenian, "Cat Person," that became hugely popular in 2017.⁴⁵ In the story, a twenty-year-old college student named Margot working at a movie theater goes on a date with a thirty-something customer, Robert. After seeing a movie, they go back to Robert's house, where Margot expects they will have sex. When they arrive at his house, Margot is repulsed by his body and wishes to leave, but thinks about how hard it would be "to stop what she had set in motion." She drinks some

⁴³ Dworkin, "Paternalism," 226.

⁴⁴ See Charlotte Knowles, "Beauvoir on Women's Complicity in Their Own Unfreedom," *Hypatia* 34, no. 2 (2019): 242–265.

⁴⁵ Kristen Roupenian, "Cat Person," *The New Yorker*, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person>.

whiskey to "bludgeon her resistance into submission." A disturbing sexual encounter follows, with Margot focusing at various points on Robert's ridiculous behavior, the sheer humiliation of the situation, but perhaps above all her own beauty and the pleasure she imagines Robert taking in it. The sole enjoyment she gets out of the encounter is her fantasy of how desirable she must be to Robert.

Although online responses to "Cat Person" suggest that most readers regard Margot as a victim of misogyny, Filipa Melo Lopes has argued that Margot is, to quote Simone de Beauvoir, "half-victim, half-accomplice": a victim of predatorial male sexual conduct and an accomplice to setting up and pursuing the interaction that led to that conduct.⁴⁶ According to Lopes, Margot instantiates Beauvoir's idea of the feminine narcissist, who wishes to be regarded by men and regards herself primarily as an object. Lopes writes:

Coercive patriarchal forces are real, and they do operate in our social context. Social customs and arrangements limit women's opportunities. Men reduce women to pornographic props and sentimental projections of their hopes and feelings. The threat of sexual violence is all too real. But, for Beauvoir, recognizing this is perfectly compatible with holding women responsible because the path to subordination is not always reducible to coercion. Narcissism is one way in which women embrace and even enjoy their role as the Other, actively participating in sustaining their own unfreedom.⁴⁷

Unlike Margot's, Jessica's case does not take place against a backdrop of structural injustice (though we may wonder whether Jessica's revocation of consent in the canyon swinging case would have been taken more seriously if her and Clayton's positions were swapped). But both cases provide us with insight into how victims can be complicit in wrongs done unto them. These cases urge us to exercise control over the circumstances of our interactions with others, to consider more closely the reasons we consent to others' behaviors, whether those reasons are personal (as in Jessica's case), structural (as in Margot's case), or some combination of the two.

5 CONCLUSION: ASKING FOR HELP

I have argued that prior consent and subsequent consent do not bear on the moral validity of present consent and therefore cannot ground irrevocable consent. I then presented two arguments that consent cannot be irrevocable: the argument from informed consent and the argument from bodily integrity. On the argument from informed consent, irrevocable consent cannot be sufficiently informed because we do not have access to information about how we will feel at the time of action that is relevant to the moral validity of our

⁴⁶ Filipa Melo Lopes, "Half Victim, Half Accomplice": Cat Person and Narcissism," *Ergo* 7 (2021): 726.

⁴⁷ Lopes, 719.

consent. On the argument from bodily integrity, consent cannot be irrevocable because we do not have the authority to deny our future selves the ability to protect our bodily integrity: the point of integration between our subjective experiences and the rest of the objective world. Because our power to consent is grounded not only in our interest in being autonomous but also in protecting our bodily integrity, the fact that a person is in a perturbed mental state and unable to make autonomous choices does not diminish her right to protect her bodily integrity by revoking consent.

To conclude, I want to consider one last objection to my view that I find especially evocative and gesture toward some responses to it, though I will leave full treatment of the objection for a future project. One worry one might have about my conclusion that consent must be revocable is its implication that we can never ask for help to do the things we want but cannot will ourselves to do. Jessica may not be able to will herself to jump off the cliff. But jumping is what she "really wants": in a cool, calm, and collected state, she values jumping. Can't we sometimes ask for that extra push (in Jessica's case, *literally* an extra push) to get what we want when our will isn't strong enough?

One response to this concern points to an idea I have already discussed, that when a wrong action has good consequences, we tend to forget that the action was wrong in the first place and are sometimes even grateful that it happened. Jessica can be glad that Clayton pushed her off the cliff; perhaps being pushed off the cliff is what she "really wants." But this does not change the fact that Clayton seriously wronged her by pushing her off the cliff after she revoked her consent. I suspect that we wrong others all the time when we act in their best interest and help them achieve their genuine, autonomously-formed goals. We push people past their comfort zones to get them to do what we think (or even *know*) they really want to do. Sometimes people are happy they were pushed, sometimes they are not; these subsequent attitudes do not change the moral status of the pushes themselves.

Second, it is worth noting that there is something undesirable about leaving the execution of our wills in others' hands. Imagine a person who cannot will herself to do any of the things she really wants to, and always relies on other people to "push" her to do them. There seems to be a sense in which she is failing as an agent, a sense in which her life is seriously deprived. She is like Harry Frankfurt's wanton, a slave of her passions, except that she delegates the work of achieving her "true" goals to others.⁴⁸ We may ask for an extra push when our will falls short, but perhaps we should not always want to ask in the first place. After all, what Jessica really wants is not to be pushed, but to *jump* off the cliff.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person."

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