

“I Love You,” “Don’t Worry About It”:
A Theory of Non-Deontic Normative Powers
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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. I call consent’s non-deontic analogue “allowance.” 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. That situation can be such that carrying on the meeting 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! we have the full hour.” 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 four atomic non-deontic powers that I call “allowance,” “assurance” (like promise), “pressure” (like command), and “withdrawal” (like revocation). I also defend the existence of more complex molecular powers, most importantly the power exercised in telling another “I love you.” In addition to an argument from cases, I make a bigger picture, theoretical argument: we can shape non-deontic norms by (re)shaping our relationships with others; if we can shape non-deontic norms indirectly in that way, then we can do so directly by our say so. The upshot is a 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. Many forms of sociality depend on a moral nexus of rights and duties, and our moral powers give us direct agency over that nexus, allowing us to shape it at will.

But the normative structure of our relationships isn’t just a matter of rights and duties. Deontic norms—those requiring, permitting, and forbidding behavior—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. If my friend is warrantedly disappointed in me, that doesn’t depend on her having an unmet *right* against me or on her being *wronged*. Our relationships are also struc-

tured by non-deontic norms, e.g., establishing standards of what is good but not required to do.¹

My claim is that we have powers that directly shape non-deontic norms by our say so. Just as promising can thereby make what was optional required, we can exercise what I'll call "non-deontic assurance" and thereby place ourselves under strong, directed, *non-deontic* normative pressure to do as we've said; while failing to do so would not thereby be made *wrong*, it would *disappoint*, *let down*, or *frustrate* the person we've assured. Just as we can consent and thereby render what was forbidden permissible, we can make "non-deontic allowance" and thereby make that which would have been disappointing, a let-down, or another non-deontic normative failure normatively neutral or welcome. Assurance and allowance change the non-deontic status of an action (e.g., from disappointing to neutral); put another way, their exercise generates or waives *reasons* to act that do not correspond to rights or duties but which are bound up in non-deontic normative relations.²

In addition to non-deontic allowance and assurance, we (sometimes) have the power to "pressure" others non-deontically, giving them greater (non-requiring) reason by our say so; request, one of the only non-deontic powers to receive sustained attention,³ is a special way of pressuring which constitutively presents its addressee with *discretion*; lastly, we (sometimes) have the power of "withdrawing"—eliminating a non-deontic consideration by, e.g., taking back a prior allowance or otherwise distancing oneself from another person. We can map the space of basic non-deontic powers⁴ as follows:

	My reason to ϕ	Another's reason to ϕ
Increasing reason to ϕ	Assurance	Pressure
Decreasing reason to ϕ	Withdrawal	Allowance

¹ It is a matter of ongoing, lively debate, how exactly to understand these norms, e.g., Driver (1992); Calhoun (2016); Martin (2013, 2019, 2021); Lewis (2018, 2022); Kukla (2021); Fricker (2022); Telech and Katz (2022); Darwall (2024), XXXX.

² They don't *merely* add or subtract reasons (Gläser, 2019); they change non-deontic normative relations. See §1.2.

³ See Enoch (2011); Lewis (2018); Gläser (2019); de Kenessey (2022); the latter two see request as deontic.

⁴ One way to think of these is as non-deontic powers with deontic analogues, namely (clockwise from top left) promise, command, consent, revocation. Another is to think of the items in the chart as genera with deontic and non-deontic species. See §6.

Just as contract is a molecular (deontic) power built out of the atoms of promise and consent, so do we also have molecular non-deontic powers, including that exercised in saying “I love you.” I’ll argue those three words have an essentially *performative* function, reshaping the non-deontic relations between speaker and addressee.

The phenomena I’m theorizing are ubiquitous features of everyday interpersonal life but more or less absent from the literature.⁵ It is taken for granted that powers are essentially deontic. Gary Watson’s representative definition of a power is the ability to “create and rescind normative *requirements* at will” (Watson 2009, p. 155, my emph.; see also, e.g., Shiffrin 2008; Owens 2012, 2014; Darwall 2013; Westlund 2013.) By contrast, I think we should understand powers as the ability to create, rescind or otherwise shape *normative relations* at will, where those relations can be non-deontic as well.

This neglect of the very possibility of non-deontic powers makes some sense, both sociologically and substantively. Much of the work on interpersonal normative relations is done by *deontologists* in works that are *about* deontic relations (e.g., Thompson 2006; Darwall 2006; Gilbert 2018; Wallace 2019; Zylberman 2021); the question of non-deontic relations, let alone powers over them, is often simply out of view.⁶ But there’s also a substantive reason to be skeptical of non-deontic powers. Promise and consent—the paradigmatic moral powers—are willful exercises of authority over what is right and wrong. By contrast, the defects evinced in violating non-deontic standards sound evaluative, e.g., acting *poorly*. Willful, authoritative control over *the right* is one thing; but we don’t have willful control over *the good*, nor is the good in any way connected to the kind of authority that is implicit in the exercise of powers (Darwall, 2013).⁷ And so, one might think, it is hard to see how there could be relational defect like acting *poorly*, over which one has some kind of willful control.

Countenancing non-deontic powers helps resist this kind of crude dualism on which

⁵ Request has a small literature, with some (Enoch, 2011; Lewis, 2018, 2022), but not all (Gläser, 2019; de Kenessey, 2022), treating it as nondeontic (see §3.2). I situate request within a general theory. Lance and Kukla (2009; 2013), whom I draw on and engage with throughout, offer (enormous) insight into the *pragmatics* of various performatives; my interest in interpersonal normative relations complements their defense a Brandomian pragmatics-centric approach to philosophy of language.

⁶ That 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—they feel the need to *make space* for the possibility of non-deontic relations—and succeed in doing so!

⁷ Thanks to Yuan Tian for discussion on this.

we have agency only over matters of right, leaving vast swaths of our interpersonal ethical lives—including much of what constitutes connections of love and intimacy—in some sense *out* of our control. The view on offer here sees the non-deontic dimensions of our interpersonal ethical life not as special phenomena to be fit alongside our moral picture, but *continuous* with deontic morality (see §6).⁸

In what follows, I develop four main lines of positive argument: first, a bottom-up argument from cases in which agents' change to the normative landscape is best understood as involving the exercise of a non-deontic power; second, a top-down, theoretical argument that because we can shape non-deontic norms we stand in by shaping our relationships (e.g., by becoming friends), we should expect that we have non-deontic powers; third, an ecumenical argument that leading explanations of *why* we have deontic powers likewise explain the existence of non-deontic powers; and fourth, the development and rejection of rival accounts to explain the core cases without appeal to non-deontic powers.

Before beginning in earnest, I need to request a bit of patience in two respects. First, the paper front-loads the positive arguments and delays consideration of views that resist positing non-deontic powers 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. The second request for patience stems from the paper's interwoven structure. The bottom up argument from cases needs to come first in order to get the thesis into view; but it is the second (relatively simple) top-down argument which is perhaps most convincing. So in what follows, I interweave these two lines of argument, bouncing back and forth a bit. I'll start by making a first pass, bottom-up case for non-deontic powers of allowance and assurance (§1); next, I turn to the top down, theoretical argument (§2); I then complete the bottom-up survey of cases involving other non-deontic powers, (§3), argue extant views of normative powers' foundations extend to non-deontic powers (§4), and develop and reject rival accounts (§5).

⁸ Cf. Murdoch (1970); Setiya (2014); Ebels-Duggan (2023); White (2025a); contra Darwall (2024), see XXXX.

1 Getting the Phenomena in View

I open with cases in which it looks like agents can make a normative change to their situation by their say so *even when* their say so neither creates nor waives (nor forfeits) any rights or duties or otherwise changes what the deontic status of the action at issue.

The cases (defeasibly!) motivate the positive proposal; they aren't meant to constitute a dispositive argument.

1.1 “Don't Worry About It”: Non-Deontic Allowance

Allowance is the non-deontic analogue of consent.

Suppose the two of us are colleagues but not close. I write asking for a meeting. We (explicitly) agree to set aside 2–3 PM. But by 2:30, I notice you are a bit harried—you mentioned this is an unexpectedly busy week, and 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 should I wrap things up early. Suppose (adjust the details as needed) that carrying on would be graceless, inattentive, suberogatory, or otherwise defective. Crucially, though, suppose it would not be wrong: I'm *entitled* to the full hour.

The key feature of the set-up is that there is a norm here that renders my carrying on normatively defective but not wrong.⁹ Why think it isn't *wrong*? Because you can't demand that we end early, and resentment on your part seems inapt (you agreed to an hour!). Why think it is nevertheless defective? For one, some impulse to apologize (or perhaps quasi-apologize) afterwards is intelligible (“I am sorry—I really shouldn't have kept you”). For another, while resentment is inapt, other reactive attitudes like feeling disappointed in or let down by me are not (Telech and Katz, 2022). Third, I have *reason* to let you off early, and that reason is intelligibly *directed* towards you. Third, most of all, we can straightforwardly evaluate my behavior with notions like *graceless*, or *inattentive* or (and this may be a bit tricky depending on one's view of etiquette¹⁰) *rude* (or maybe more felicitously: *a bit* rude).

⁹ You can understand that defect in lots of ways, n.i. Whether or not one believes in Driver's particular notion, it is 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).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Buss (1999).

Now 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 sincerely¹¹ respond, “oh please, don’t worry about it! We can chat the whole hour!” 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 business, I feel at ease and not under any pressure to cut the meeting short. So when you see me start to look a bit concerned, you pre-emptively say “please don’t worry about my schedule; we have a full hour.”

Either way, your say so changes the normative status of my carrying on: it’s no longer graceless. 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 *told* me not to worry about it. Imagine you complain to me “granted you had a right to carry on, but you shouldn’t have”; a decisive answer to that complaint is “you (sincerely) *said* not to worry about it!” This is akin to how consent functions as a basis for interpersonal justification in Dougherty (2021): if I try to complain that my invited guest is trespassing, he can respond “but you *said* I should come in!” (This is not to say that withdrawal, of consent or allowance, is not possible; it is, see §3.3.)

Here’s one last way into this kind of case: You’re saying “don’t worry about it” would be a simple exercise of consent if the case were such that you *did* have a right to cutting the meeting short. If, e.g., you got an emergency call, then it would not be graceless but wrong

¹¹ Set aside codes of etiquette with expected, quasi-sincere offers and expected refusal.

¹² You might think talk of “carrying on” is misleading; after all, my continuing the meeting after your invitation is not, in an important sense, doing *the same thing* as I would do if I carried on without your invitation. Maybe, then, it is incorrect to say that there is *one and the same action* with a *different normative status* before and after your say so. For my purposes, I am fine with carving things up such that the normative dimension bears on *what* the action is; note that the same phenomenon occur with cases of outright consent. My guest’s coming into my home after my invitation is a different action than trespassing. But for ease of exposition, I will talk of *the same action* having a different status; those who balk at this being literally right should instead understand the phenomenon as one in which an action which admits of a thin action-description is changed into another action which admits of the same thin description but a normatively different thicker description.

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. “Say so” might amount to a wordless gesture—a nod, a warm smile, etc.

for me to insist we chat the whole hour; but in this variant, you could *permit* me to stay via consent. My claim here is that you can exercise normative control over our interaction in much the same way *even when* you don't have 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 weaker. You can still *allow* me to stay even though you cannot *permit* me to stay (since I was already permitted).

1.2 The Non-Deontic

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

Here are four respects in which the change is non-deontic. (Which of these is more fundamental or merely an indication of something further doesn't concern matter for the argument.)

The first lies in the change in what reactive attitudes are warranted. Your say so doesn't change my behavior from resentable to non-resentable, but disappointing to non-disappointing. To more precisely emphasize the interpersonal nature of the disappointment, the change is from something in virtue of which you could be *disappointed in me* to no longer thus disappointing. 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 more generally that there is a special class of *deontic* attitudes, 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.¹⁴ Those are all rather *weighty* non-deontic attitudes;¹⁵ But many interpersonal reactive attitudes can be quite mild. I might, for instance, be mildly annoyed *with* my neighbor for using his lawn blower a bit too regularly, or feel the mildest, brief prick of annoyance *with* my colleague for his propensity to forget her cleaned dishes in the departmental kitchen's drying rack.¹⁶ These are the sort of interpersonal reactive attitudes,

¹⁴ On varieties of *hurt* as a reactive attitude, see Darwall 2024.

¹⁵ As Sam Scheffler put it in conversation, perhaps overstating the point slightly, it is easier to deal with the fact that one has wronged someone than the fact that one has *disappointed* someone.

¹⁶ Thanks to Miranda Fricker and Sam Scheffler for discussion on the wide *bandwidth* of reactive attitudes and normative relations encompassed by the non-deontic.

I submit, one can sometimes render unwarranted via allowance—one could intelligibly say in response to either mildly defective behavior “don’t worry about it!” and thereby make such feelings inapt.

The second concerns the normative status of the action. There was a change in the action, but not from forbidden to permitted (deontic categories), but disappointing to neutral or welcome (non-deontic categories). To use language less parasitic on the reactive attitude, the action changes from being graceless, 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 was in particular *between* you and me, as borne out in the special standing *you* have to bear reactive attitudes, the directness of the complaint or rebuke *you* can address *to me*, etc....

Third is a kind of structural difference in the *kind* of change being enacted. One key marker of the deontic as a family is that its core notions are not *gradable* (Berker, 2022); nothing can be more or less forbidden, more or less permissible, or more or less required.¹⁸ By contrast, the changes that you could enact with “don’t worry about it” are gradable: rudeness, gracelessness, imposingness—these normative properties come in degrees. Something can be more or less disappointing, frustrating, hurtful, etc.¹⁹ Suppose we vary how much time pressure you are under (and assume all the relevant normative features are common knowledge): the more pressure you are under, the more disappointing my act is, the more imposing, the more graceless, etc.

Fourth is a change not in the action but in the character of the interpersonal rela-

¹⁷ Thank Ariel Zylberman and Miranda Fricker for this suggestion.

¹⁸ 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. (Or as I prefer to put it: the reasons it issues can be less easily overridden by countervailing reasons.) But I don’t have *more duty* (or less) to see to my students’ needs than to see to my friends’; what I might have is a difference in the kinds of considerations that could override such a duty.

¹⁹ The gradability of fittingness categories is more complicated, see Berker for an overview (2022).

tion between us in virtue of which the action has its normative status. The picture is perhaps best understood on a kind of Hohfeldian model. Deontic powers waive and create rights and duties—first-order, bipolar normative relations. “Don’t worry about it” doesn’t waive a right, but it does waive a *non-deontic*, first-order, bipolar normative relation. Though it isn’t true that I *owed* it to you to leave, we stood in a normative nexus in virtue of which my not leaving was warranted disappointment/hurt/frustration/peevedness *with* me. What *exactly* is that non-deontic normative relation? 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?)²⁰, there is a growing literature on 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-deontic (2013, see also Telech and Katz 2022). Darwall argues that gratitude is likewise a non-deontic phenomenon, with a relation between between giver and beneficiary in virtue of which the latter *should* be grateful but does not *owe* gratitude (2019); more generally, he argues that forms of trust, love, and intimacy are “second personal relations of the heart” (2024).

Most of the recent attention on non-deontic interpersonal relations has been on such weighty non-deontic norms. Martin, Darwall, Telech, and Katz talk of disappointment, letting down, hurt feelings, remorse, and (non-moral) anger as a response to the infringement of non-deontic, normative relations. But as I suggested in speaking of the reactive attitudes, we can take a still wider view on the kinds of non-deontic norms that connect us. The normative relation between me and my neighbor in virtue of which he should be more judicious in his leaf blowing is not *that* big a deal; even less so, the normative relation between members of my department in virtue of which we should not let our dishes sit in the dishrack over night. There is a wide bandwidth of normative defect at play here. Sometimes, the full bandwidth can be found in a single relationship. Between two intimate friends abound many normative relations—they have special rights and duties with respect to one another, quite weighty non-deontic relations in virtue of which they would massively let each other down if infringed, very mild normative relations in virtue of which the smallest twinges of interpersonal annoyance or frustration would be warranted (e.g., for being slow to respond to a text), and everything in between.

²⁰ CITE Raz, Hart, Gilbert, Zylberman, Setiya.

1.3 The Ubiquity of Allowance

If I'm right that allowance is its own phenomenon, it is commonplace. I can tell my neighbor not to worry about his leaf blowing or other mildly irritating lawn-based fastidiousness; my friends can make allowance for my tardy texting. Or 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. While we can all find something to eat at our local mainstay, Pepe's, it's common knowledge that I dislike the place. But it's a big enough group that no one has a right against others to avoid the restaurant they dislike. If everyone else decides to go to Pepe's, it'll be a bit disappointing, but not (suppose) wrong. 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 ethically 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.

Afterwards, I'm headed to my car and you to the bus stop. We are enmeshed in conversation, but each feel the subtle tug in different directions as we start walking. I can subtly pull us towards my car—if I keep walking, you will follow. My doing so would be defective. But suppose you kindly *offer* "I'll walk you to your car"; by your leave, my car-ward journey is rendered acceptable.

Suppose there's a social norm of not needlessly sitting next to someone on the bus—you should try for one-seat-spacing if possible. Someone boards the bus with hesitant steps, looking a bit at sea, and 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 rude, or at least socially deviant, is now welcomed.²¹

Ubiquity is to be expected if non-deontic norms play a large roll in governing our

²¹ 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 quite revisionary 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. But on my view, allowing someone to sit next to you on a bus even when you don't have a right is totally successful—nothing invalid or non-valid about it.

interpersonal behavior; more on this in §2.

1.4 Assurance

Assurance is the non-deontic cousin of promise.²² My claim is that we can give ourselves strong interpersonal reasons that fall short of being duties.

Imagine I'm throwing a party. We are mere acquaintances, so as things stand, you won't wrong or disappoint me by not coming. (By contrast, if we were best friends, I might be warranted in being disappointed in you for 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 (to my anxiety) in a way that merely (descriptively) expecting that you will come does not. That all makes good sense and tracks the difference between descriptive and normative expectations.²³

But suppose you *cannot* responsibly promise and so should not—you're behind on grading, you're on call for a sick friend who might need you, or you've just been feeling pretty worn down. I submit that you can still make *some* normative difference: you might offer "I can't promise, but I hope to come!" You thereby give yourself more reason to come, warranting disappointment in you (though not resentment) if you don't. I think this is a form of assurance,²⁴ but not promise. (Like promise, non-deontic assurance might require uptake.)

You might worry this is a bit of a forced case—your say so explicitly situates itself as a not-quite-promise. That might invite seeing your offer as deviant promise-minus.²⁵ But imagine you just say, "I really hope to go to the party!" This looks like it could establish, directly, a Martinian normative hope. Having invited me to share in the hope in you that you will come, your non-attendance is rendered *disappointing*, something that *lets me down*, but is not wrongful.

At this point, one might worry that I am conflating two importantly different phenomena: disappointment *that* you didn't come and disappointment *in* you for not coming.

²² I'm not thrilled with the term "assurance." Suggestions very welcome! (Note: that last sentence was an instance of *allowance*.)

²³ CITE Wallace.

²⁴ If you hear "assurance" as essentially deontic, treat it as a stipulative term of art.

²⁵ Cf. Marušić (2017).

My argument requires that I, in particular, be disappointed *in* you—that is the relational reactive attitude whose newfound warrant would be evidence that your say so made a difference. Everyone, the skeptic of non-deontic powers included, can agree that your non-attendance warrants my being disappointed *that* you didn't come. Why think the relational phenomenology of being disappointed in you (or let down by you or hurt by you) is warranted by your not attending? Imagine we entered an exchange of interpersonal justification in which you challenged my negative feelings towards you “Wait, why are you disappointed? I *said* I couldn't promise,” I *can cite your say so* as a justification *to you* about why I am manifesting a negatively valenced attitude *towards you*. “Yes, you were clear it wasn't a promise; but you still invited me to hope that you would come; and you didn't!” That I can cite your say-so as a basis for my feelings towards you in an interpersonal exchange is evidence that something *relational* is afoot.

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 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 pseudo-promisor in mind.²⁶ 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. This kind of something is already present between intimates—even though its not wrong, for my partner or best friend not to show up to my hard-planned party can warrant disappointment in them. I am imagining that though we are not friends, you seek to give me something akin to what a friendship already provides: the kind of assurance that falls short of a binding commitment.

Another way to bring out the possibility of assurance is in terms of the *creation* of non-deontic normative relations. “I hope to go” does just that—it creates a new, non-normative relation between me and you whose content is your going to my party. We can think about other normative relations. Imagine I tell my spouse “I'll pick up some groceries on the way home”; I run out of time and drop the ball. Do I wrong her? Maybe—if

²⁶ So my argument is consistent with Marušić's.

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 of the resultant defect as *wrong* to understand that what I did was in some way *defective*—a bit disappointing, irritating, or annoying.²⁷ Indeed, we threaten a crudely moralistic picture of intimate relations if we think every exchange of this kind generates binding commitment. Some are skeptical of the appropriateness of *promise* in intimate contexts altogether, arguing that intimate and loving relations sit ill with the very notion of duties and claims.²⁸ I think that's overstated—by a lot!—but the idea that we can enter into normative relations which give us non-requiring reason in part because we want to keep *obligation* out of it seems quite right. One might *want* to give oneself reason to get groceries without summoning the quasi-judicial relations of right via *promise*; “I’ll grab them!” can do just that.

2 The Big Picture Argument

Before continuing with further examples, let's turn to a big-picture, theoretical argument.

Recall the contrast between two variants of the meeting case: in one, the context is such that it would be wrong for me to stay, and in the other it's merely disappointing. In both cases, you could tell me not to worry about it. One observation about this is that first personally, it feels like you are, in each case, doing more or less the same thing: making space for me to stay. That's not to say it feels exactly the same; but there is a continuity here that the skeptic of non-deontic powers needs to explain away. After all, she will think in the first case you consented, but in the second case you make no analogous normative difference. Likewise, the skeptic needs to explain away a felt continuity in assurance. I can *promise* my spouse I'll get the groceries on the way home by telling her I will; and in what feels like an interpersonal exchange that is continuous with that, I've argued I can non-deontically assure her I will without promising. The skeptic denies this.

This felt continuity isn't decisive in itself. But it brings out an explanatory challenge faced by the skeptic of my central thesis: granted that we can change (some) deontic relations at will, why can't we change (some) non-deontic relations as well? Why think only

²⁷ See also the possibility of creating relations of *faith* or *epistemic companionship* in Tian (2025, 2024)

²⁸ Marušić in conversation and in an in-progress work with Thi Nguyen.

one kind of interpersonal normative relation is subject to our say so?

Here's what, *prima facie*, seems like a good answer: because non-deontic standards are just not something we are in the business of actively shaping and reshaping; by contrast, we are in the business of shaping the deontic. Maybe that's because of heavy weight assumptions about the right and the good, where matters of *the will* only govern the former. But it needn't be. Whatever her underlying justification, the skeptic can maintain that we are just not in the business of exercising control over non-deontic standards.

The problem with this response is that last claim is clearly *false*; we are constantly in the business of intentionally exercising our agency over non-deontic standards by changing the *relationships* we stand in others. As cordial colleagues, we wouldn't have very strong reason to attend each other's house parties or to read each other's manuscripts; as intimate ones we would. And it is not controversial that we can *change* our relationship from the former sort of thing to the latter. Moreover, we can do so intentionally. I could (with your uptake) endeavor to foster a friendship with you in part because I want us to be closer, where *that closeness* consists in part in our having non-deontic normative relations with one another. I might want to be the kind of friends who should go to each others' parties and support each other's research. If talk of intentionally exercising our agency over a friendship seems odd to you,²⁹ imagine you are a young philosopher seeking to establish a mentor-mentee relationship with a senior peer. Why might you want this? In part so that the mentor *has more reason* to attend to your work, give you advice, etc. (Compare wanting to have someone on a dissertation committee in part so that they are obligated, barring exceptional circumstances, to support your research.) And you, with the would-be-mentor's uptake, can *change* your relationship intentionally so as to bring about that non-deontic shift.

If our relationships can make that kind of non-deontic difference, why not think that we could effect that kind of non-deontic change directly, i.e., by our say so? Imagine we both want to be such that you have greater reason to read my drafts, give me feedback, etc. If we can *become* mentor-and-mentee and thereby shift that norm (among others), why not think you can (with my uptake perhaps) directly assure me (without obliging yourself) that you will read a particular draft. It would be surprising if you had the ability to shape non-deontic norms *only wholesale*, as part of of a broad package of norms that

²⁹ Thanks to Selim Berker and Yuan Tian for pressing on this.

makes up a whole relationship. That would require some kind of explanation, and I don't see any good ones (especially in light of the later argument in §4 that leading accounts of the foundations of deontic powers extend naturally to non-deontic powers).

To put the point another way: part of what it is to be friends or close colleagues is to be subject to various non-deontic norms. How might we become friends? Roughly, by organically shaping our interpersonal attitudes, intentions, affections, and history into those that constitute friendship. One way we might do that is by inviting, taking up, and reciprocating hopes in one another that we will act in ways that manifest friendly regard. To directly invite me to hope that you will come to my party or read my work is, as it were, to effect *part* of the change constitutive of becoming friends. It's not, to be clear, to make us friends; but it is to shift friend-ward one *piece* of the rich set of interpersonal norms that, if they all shifted friend-ward together, would partially constitute our becoming friends.

This isn't to say that *any* norm that we can change as part of change in the thick relationship (as colleagues, mentor-mentee, etc.) between us can be changed via the exercise of a power. Nor is it to pretend that all these normative changes are ones the agent can do totally on her own; uptake on the part of the addressee may be required.

But what I am bringing out is a deep awkwardness in the denial of my thesis. The skeptic maintains that:

- a) we can change deontic standards by shaping our relationships (e.g., becoming friends incurs duties of friendship);
- b) we can change deontic standards piecemeal by our say so via promise and consent;
- c) we can change non-deontic standards by shaping our relationships (e.g., becoming friends incurs extra reason to go to the party and makes non-attendance warrant interpersonal disappointment)
- d) we cannot change non-deontic standards piecemeal by our say so via assurance and allowance.

(d) gets pressure in two directions, here. One might hold on to (d) by trying to claim we aren't in the business of changing non-deontic standards and relations. But (c) says

otherwise. We might be skeptical that our mere say so can do anything at all—but (b) says otherwise. And to make matters even worse, it looks like the interpersonal exchanges that feel very continuous cross the border between what the skeptic allows (c) and denies (d).

3 Other Powers

3.1 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 we're back to deciding where to get dinner. We all know that I don't like Pepe's, but I *push*: "I'm so tired of Pepe's." 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 *know* that I find Pepe's tiresome. Might there still be some effect in our deliberation from my articulating that forcefully? I (predictably) submit there is: I thereby ramp up the pressure on you not to get Pepe's. This is something we tangibly feel: others can *pressure us* to act in ways that we already know they wanted to without obligating us to or generating a duty.³⁰

That instance might feel objectionably *pushy*; I think we can easily fill out that example such that it is not out of place for me to so push. But here is another: 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."³¹ He had reason to avoid the self criticism. But I've just given him a kind of *interpersonal* reason to do so—he can now do so in part *for me*. 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

³⁰ While I don't want to put any special weight on this, it may be one of the first powers of which young children are liminally aware: they often *push* even when those they pressure *already know* what they want.

³¹ Thanks to Jorah Danenberg for suggesting "I'm trusting you" as an instance of pressure.

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* (perhaps only very mildly). (Cf. Tian’s rich discussion of offers of *interpersonal faith* in her (2025).)³²

What exact change does pressure enact? It generates a normative relation in virtue of which the addressee has (more) reason to do the content of the pressuring. Having pressured you, your nevertheless permissibly deciding not to is no longer neutral but disappointing, rude, graceless—interpersonally defective. Or if even absent my pressure, your action would be rude, disappointing, etc..., my pressure can make it *even more so*. (Recall that non-deontic norms are often *gradable*.)

Here is a funny case that highlights the significance of pressure. Imagine that in my class, I very purposefully do something I know the students dislike but which is for their benefit: short weekly reading quizzes that (just suppose) radically increase student engagement, despite their hating the quizzes. I tell them that I know the quizzes are annoying, but I explain that while I sympathize with their annoyance, I am making a thoughtful, pedagogical decision to do this because of how much it helps subsequent class discussion. Now suppose I offer a mid-semester course evaluation with the question “how do you think the class can be improved?” to which 70% of the students respond with some variant of “cut the quizzes!”

My carrying on with the quizzes has a different normative valence. True I (and suppose we all) *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—the students would be right, I think, to be frustrated with me. After all, I just *solicited* their feedback; I thereby *empowered* them to pressure me. If I am to carry on with the quizzes in light of their pressure, I should explain myself. My not doing so is not forbidden—I am, of course, within my rights to simply reject their suggestions; but that wouldn’t live up to the pedagogical ideal. Of course, they already *know* why I have the quizzes; but their pressure changes the normative situation; and if I am to continue with the quizzes, there is a kind of non-deontic trace effect. Having denied their pressure, I should acknowledge their pressure and (ide-

³² Strictly, I think Tian’s offers of interpersonal faith are not mere pressure but rather are molecular powers as discussed in §3.5 inasmuch as they involve both assurance and allowance.

ally) explain to them why, having heard and considered it, I am staying 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 you're not ready to navigate the upshot of *pressure*, you shouldn't empower others to pressure you. In this case, I think the normative *risk* of empowering one's students to exert pressure you know you'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.

3.2 Request, a Kind of Pressure

Requests are a special kind of pressure.

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, institute deontic changes. Maybe accepting a request inevitably results in a (deontic) commitment to do the thing requested (though I doubt it).³³

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 (2011; 2018; 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?” Provided I'm being sincere and transparent,³⁴ my request *explicitly* makes room for you to decline. I give you *some* kind of reason without binding you. 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., “Pepe's is *really tiresome*”), requests constitutively *defer* to the discretion of their addressee (e.g., “could we not do Pepe's?”). Request just is pressure which constitutively acknowledges in its very act the discretion of the addressee to decline. Or as the terms of this essay would have it: requests are forms of pressure which

³³ de Kenessey (2022); Gläser (2019).

³⁴ Sometimes norms of etiquette require that command be issued in the guise of request, e.g., in the UK.

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.

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.

3.3 Withdrawal

There are two salient opportunities for withdrawal. The simplest is an analogue to revoicing consent. Sometimes, though not always,³⁵ consent can be withdrawn. So, too, for allowance.

Recall the situation in which you are pressed for time and told me not to worry about it. It is easy to imagine you changing your mind; “look, I’m really sorry, but the day really does seem to be getting out of control; perhaps I do need to go.” Or similarly, imagine I say “look, on second thought, I really can’t stand Pepe’s; let’s not.”³⁶ By our say so, we undo a prior allowance.

A more interesting kind of withdrawal comes when instead of retracting a prior, explicit allowance, one simply *puts relational distance* between oneself and another. Imagine a friend drops a hint that he’d really like to unload his latest emotional drama onto me, and I demur; “look, I’d rather not get into it.” That’s a way of rendering his sharing *unwelcome*. One can also withdraw in a request-like way, preserving some discretion on the part of the addressee, e.g., “I’d rather not get into it, *if* that’s OK.” If sincere, the “if” preserves normative space for the addressee to refuse to give uptake to the withdrawal. One can imagine him pressing on “no no, I *really do* have to share this with you.”

Withdrawal of this sort—relationship-distancing—can be one-off. Maybe my friend *can* share his drama tomorrow, just not now. It can also be more permanent (especially if

³⁵ The fact that sexual consent can always be withdrawn often obscures the impossibility of withdrawing in other contexts. When I consent to a student taking a course that requires permission, my institution does not allow me to undo that; that is a case in which institutionally allotted powers of consent cannot be withdrawn.

³⁶ In some such cases, like this one, the withdrawal might not just undo an allowance to ϕ but pressure the addressee to $\neg\phi$.

repeated), effecting a broader shift in the relationship in which it is made less intimate.³⁷

3.4 “I love you”

Often, what look like declaratives are in fact performatives in context: “I will go to the party” can function to promise my addressee I will go.³⁸ Similarly, “I love you” is often not a declarative by which one merely asserts a proposition about oneself, but instead a performative whereby one exercises a normative power. 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 (perhaps subject to an uptake requirement). “I love you” exercises a power which shifts the love-involving (non-deontic) norms we stand in with one another.

Is it a problem for my claim that we say “I love you” even *after* what seems like the relevant change has occurred? Hold that thought. 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 is to *give you* my heart (assurance) and let you into mine in turn (allowance), inviting you to reciprocate in turn. To give you my heart is not a deontic matter—I don’t thereby give you a right to my love, attention, care, or emotional openness. To be sure, 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 typically constitute a *promise*—or even if it does, that’s not *all* it does. One way to see this is to note that the *main* thing “I love you” seeks to do in one’s normative situation is to forge some kind of heart-to-heart connection. It is to assure you of my love and to allow into my life in turn. But it’s not clear that you can *have* a right to my love—that might be a conceptual or metaphysical impossibility (Sidewick 1874/1962, Darwall 2018; 2024).³⁹

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

³⁷ Cf. White (2022).

³⁸ CITE: Add cites to Austin, Searle, etc. here if not sooner.

³⁹ Pace Liao (2015).

heart to you. I (apologetically) cut things off. Do you have a right against my doing so? No. Is my doing so normatively defective?⁴⁰ Yes; I let you down. To withdraw my heart just after telling you that I love you can seriously disappoint you. This is all possible even if it is common ground between us that there was no *promise* of ongoing love. My heart's closure falls short of a non-deontic interpersonal norm.

In addition to assuring, "I love you" also *allows* you further into my life. Imagine we are in the earlier stages of a friendship. You see that I'm making some poor decisions, but you don't feel it's your place to raise this with me yet. That would register to both of us (let's just stipulate) as intrusive or overstepping but not wrong. But imagine that I tell you that I love you as a friend; where yesterday you're telling me that my new girlfriend is trouble would *overstep*, it is now the kind of thing *you may do* given our newly realized intimacy.⁴¹ Imagine I complained of your overstepping; you could respond, "but yesterday you said you loved me and I said the same back. Intimate friends can (and should!) tell hard truths."

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.⁴²

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 perform the role of a power after all but rather more like a report of ongoing feelings and care? No.

To defuse the worry, first consider (deontic) promise; it is commonplace to *reassure* another of one's promises.⁴³ Having *promised* 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). 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 performatives. 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 and reassure the non-deontic

⁴⁰ Cf. White (2025a).

⁴¹ Cf. White (2022).

⁴² Cf. Céline Dion [here](#).

⁴³ Cf. Dannenberg (2019).

norms of love. They are a recurrent pledge of non-deontic allegiance to one's beloved, and thereby to the norms constitutive of one's loving relationship with them—a regular way of assuring and allowing a heart-to-heart connection.⁴⁴

In addition to serving as an important example, “I love you” strengthens the top down argument of §2. To deny that we have non-deontic powers while allowing that we can shape our non-deontic situation by (re)forming relationships relies on a very awkward distinction: holding (a) that “I love you” doesn't change the normative landscape by one's say so,⁴⁵ but (b) that forming a loving relationship can change norms. That's slicing the baloney mighty thin—the *way in which* we form loving relationships is often (though not always) with the help of our explicit say so. The normative power of our words is part of what *makes* the relationship between us change.

3.5 Other Relationship-Shifting Powers

The power exercised via “I love you” is species of a genus of relationship-shifting powers.⁴⁶ While not as common, sometimes friendships blossom with an explicit “let's be friends!”—itself a way of saying “I love you” in a more reserved key. (The establishment of a loving relationship or friendship, of course, requires more than the exercise of a normative power—would that it were otherwise! Actual relationships require uptake of the attempt to shift norms as well as, crucially, shifts in one another's attitudes. The performative does not do all the work, just some.)

Imagine in a slightly different case that we are colleagues in a department with a norm against popping one's head in others' doors 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 “Let's be the sort of the people who pop in and chat throughout the day. What do you think?” That offer, when accepted,

⁴⁴ Another possibility is worth considering: maybe daily “I love you”s or pledges of allegiance do not re-assure or re-commit but serve to *express* the commitment that they first enacted. This picture might still see “I love you” and “I pledge allegiance” as first and foremost—both temporally and conceptually—performatives, but which derivatively have a quotidian expressive (non-performative) sense. I resist this on the grounds that pledges of allegiance and daily “I love you”s seem to me to *do* something and not merely express what was done before.

⁴⁵ Perhaps subject to an uptake condition.

⁴⁶ What Lance and Kukla (somewhat unfortunately) label “pleas” (2013). Such performatives are *not* always pleading.

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).

Likewise 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 the non-deontic norms that constitute it. Whereas before a failure on my part to check in with her was defective, it’s now fine. I also thereby *allow* forms of behavior that would otherwise have been defective; if she doesn’t respond to my attempt to reconnect, that’s fine on her part—after all, I *said* we were over. “I hate you” or “F—off!” can serve much the same effect.⁴⁷

4 Shared Foundations: From Deontic to Non-Deontic Powers

Many leading views of the foundations of deontic powers naturally extend to non-deontic powers. If that’s right, it constitutes an independent basis for countenancing non-deontic powers. Of course not everyone believes in normative powers, and those that do have quite different views about *what* deontic powers really are. But at least among the believers, we can remain fairly ecumenical about in-house disputes—these debates matter enormously, but *however* they shake out, the right theory of non-deontic powers can follow suit. Indeed, that non-deontic powers can so seamlessly fit into any foundational account (at least inasmuch as that account is generally plausible) is significant in and of itself—it suggests deep continuity between deontic and non-deontic powers.

I will make my case for deontic foundations’ extension at a fairly high level of abstraction to emphasize breadth over depth.⁴⁸ In doing so, I do not endorse any of these

⁴⁷ Thanks to Sam Scheffler for suggesting “I hate you” as a case.

⁴⁸ I omit explicit discussion of Enoch’s and Chang’s views. Enoch’s view is designed to accommodate request, which he sees as a non-deontic power (2011). His basic picture is that there are fundamental normative facts that say that *when* someone makes requests of a certain kind, that results in a reason (with all kinds of interesting, interpersonal features) being generated (cf. Lewis 2018). If true, we can imagine that non-natural, normative reality also contains various fundamental norms about what happens when someone gives assurance, makes allowance and other powers. (Cf. Manson (2016) for an Enochian view of consent that would serve as the deontic analogue). Chang’s defense of normative powers is likewise not essentially deontic (2020). She argues that when world-given reasons are on a par, we can make further, parity-breaking practical 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; Chang’s more general metaethical picture

approach—nor is it 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 to argue that *lots* of leading views are such that *if* right, vindicate non-deontic powers as well.

I briefly sketch my own, novel, account of foundations in §4.4.

4.1 Conventionalism

Hume’s account of promise and contract is foundational to the study of normative powers. As he puts it 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)

How, then, can we promise? Eliding many of the details, Hume’s basic story is by now a familiar one: because we constructed an artificial convention of promising. On conventionalist stories, the existence of a convention of acting in accordance with normative powers gives us reason to accord with the changes that promise, consent, and the like purport to effect. As Hume’s particular version of the story goes, the social convention fosters the kinds of sympathetic responses which, on the Humean picture, make it the case that we have reason to abide by the norms of the practice. The key maneuver is an appeal to a social convention—we made a convention and the fact that we made it (along along with some story about how we get practical reasons out of it—for Hume it’ll be about the sentiments), grounds the normative efficacy of powers like promise, consent, and command.

This kind of story will extend to non-deontic powers inasmuch as we have also constructed practices of allowance, assurance, telling others “I love you,” etc. The above argument for the ubiquity of non-deontic powers is an argument that we *in fact* have a robust practice of making allowances to others. And, as befits a Humean virtue-theoretic account, those of us so socialized *do in fact* disapprove of those who fail to accord with such often yields non-requiring practical reasons.

practices—flouting non-deontic norms and the attempts to reshape them via allowance and assurance warrants negative moral sentiments. Though I have not been speaking Hume’s own sentimentalist language, my talk of “disappointment” in another’s behavior could be recast into Humean machinery.⁴⁹

Sentimentalist conventionalism isn’t the only way to go. Consider the kind of account typified by the Rawls of “Two Concepts” (1955). We could make an appeal to *constitutive* rules as follows: we are participants in practices of allowing, assuring, pressuring, etc., the question “granted that she made an allowance, is it nevertheless defective to ϕ ?” is already answered by the constitutive rules of the practice which define “allowance.” Or consider Rawls’s explicit theory of promising, which appeals both to an extant practice and a moral principle (Fair Play) that establishes when and why the norms of the practice apply: when one has voluntarily enters a mutually beneficial cooperative scheme—like a practice of promising—one ought to abide by the rules of the practice (Rawls, 1964, 1971; Hart, 1955). We can imagine an extension: when one benefits from the mutually beneficial practice of assuring, allowing, pressuring, and withdrawing, one should not free ride on the norms of the practice. We’d need a *non-deontic principle* here, i.e., one that issues not only in *requirements* to follow the norms of a practice but in some non-deontic pressure not to free ride on non-deontic practices. But without yet arguing for such a principle, one can see how the view would be developed. The key takeaway is that views of powers which appeal to a practice *plus* some moral principle explaining when the constitutive norms of the practice apply can extend to practices of non-deontic powers.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ More carefully, *if* Humean virtue theory can succeed in accounting for interpersonal ethical phenomena, then we should be able to recast talk of *disappointment in* another into Humean terms. (I in fact doubt Hume’s account can accommodate essentially relational sentiments. But that’s besides the point.)

⁵⁰ 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. 5). If Valentini’s account works for deontic norms, it

4.2 Interests-Based Accounts

A related account of normative powers, found in Raz and especially Owens, claims that we have normative powers *because it is in our interests* to have such powers (Owens, 2014).⁵¹ 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.⁵²

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. Two of the arguments above can be recast into this exact shape. Consider, first, allowance. If I am a considerate, aware interlocutor, I might notice that I have some strong reason to end the meeting short. It would be in my interest to carry on, but I don't want to impose; you might very well have an interest in making space for me *for my sake*. We would be worse off if we were *stuck* in the situation in which the normative facts intransigently forced us to cut things short or suffer the normative defect of my rudeness. Because it is *better* for us that you have the ability to make space for me, we do. So, too, with your assurance you'll come to my party. It is in my interest to have *some* assurance that you'll come (it'll soothe my anxiety); though you can't responsibly promise, you have an interest in doing so for my sake. It would be a shame if we were stuck; but because our interests are better served by your having that interest, you can assure. It serves our interest in intimacy to be able to create non-obliging norms of love, attention, and care.

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.”

⁵¹ CITE Raz, “Normative Powers.”

⁵² Owens does *not* think every exercise of a power needs to be in the agent's interest or in anyone else's. There are *harmless* violations of promissory duties. But he thinks that deontic powers' normative efficacy stems from the ability of the powers in general to promote human interests.

4.3 The Preconditions of Good Relationships (A Transcendental Argument)

Seanna Shiffrin's defense of the power of promise and consent is in some respect similar (2008). She thinks we must have powers of consent and promise because without such powers, we wouldn't be able to have relationships which were morally acceptable. Why? Because the facts of life often put us in positions of profoundly asymmetric dynamics in which we are rendered vulnerable to one another—so vulnerable that minimal moral decency requires that we be able to promise our way *out* of that asymmetry.

In a too-quick restatement of Shiffrin's example, imagine I will only take a job that requires me to move to a new city if you also take the job. I must decide today. You will finalize your decision in a week. Right now, you intend to move; but you might change your mind after my decision. Might I just decide to move knowing that you currently intend to? That would leave me vulnerable to your changing your mind. Shiffrin argues at length that if that is the best we can do, our relationship suffers from an unacceptable power imbalance; I am vulnerable to you, I am *unable* to relate to you as a free and equal person. We must, she argues, have the ability to even out the normative relation that we stand in. You can do so by promising me you'll move. If you are bound to move, I am no longer problematically vulnerable.

I have not said anywhere near enough to make the argument convincing. But suppose something of this transcendental schema succeeds. 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 Shiffrin, x is the power to promise and consent, and y , minimally decent moral relationships. To extend this kind of argument, we say x is the power to assure, allow, pressure (including request), and withdraw; and y is something like ethically rich relationships. Consider *request*. Any interpersonal relationship shorn of the ability to request would be an ethical disaster—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. If Shiffrin is right that we need promise, we need request. I'm not sure that's a good argument; but I am claiming that *if* it's a good argument for deontic powers, it's a good argument for non-deontic powers.

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 (see §2).

4.4 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.

My 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. 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 is the scope of behavior subject to command (in the US Army, a lot, but not everything!). 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. They can request and pressure me about things which other students cannot (e.g., to read their thesis); and their pressure and requests issue in stronger reasons (e.g., to meet outside of office hours).

And just like part of what it is to be a general versus a lieutenant is to have a more expansive scope of one's power of command, part of what it is to be my *advisee* versus my mere *student* is to have more expansive scope of one's powers. 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 the relata but the further powers that they endow their relata with.⁵³ Friends can make allowances that advisors or mere colleagues cannot; that they *can do so* is constitutive of their intimacy.

Moreover, some intimate relationships *bar* the use of certain normative 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 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; a 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.

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 (e.g., she lacks scope for making allowance since so much is already, by the lights of the relationship, allowed; she cannot withdraw). So like any plausible appeal to norms of a relationship or practice, this

⁵³ 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.

story will rely on some *background* account of how relationship's norms can successfully generate reasons for agent's to act—and, moreover when and why *bad* relationships fail to generate normativity. One such account is the aforementioned from Valentini (2024): it's when the norms are not too costly, authentically adopted, and morally permissible. Another 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.)

Whether this particular account succeeds, some such story must. Our relationships and roles do give us reasons—sometimes, but not always.⁵⁴

Recall that in §2, I noted the commonly accepted thought that part of what constitutes various interpersonal relationships are the norms, deontic and otherwise, that govern the relata. Part of what it is to be my students' teacher is that I have all kinds of reasons to do things for them, some corresponding to deontic norms, some to non-deontic norms. That we are connected by these norms is part of what defines our relationship. My claim in this section is like that but goes further by extending the picture to second order norms, i.e., powers. It's not just that I always have some reason to see to my students' academic and emotional well being and that that norm is constitutive of our relationship; it is a further constitutive norm of our relationship *that they can pressure me* in various ways.

5 Rejecting Rival Accounts

5.1 Purely Epistemic Reason-Giving

One way of resisting my claim that we have non-deontic powers is to argue that the phenomena at issue doesn't involve the use of powers at all. They might all be instances of what Enoch helpfully calls “purely epistemic reason-giving” (2011). On this view, “don't worry about it” and “I love you,” reveal preferences/feelings, and it is these revealed

⁵⁴ Cf. Wells (2025); Thompson (2008).

states that do the normative work. Perhaps assurance is just a matter of giving evidence about the future, 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 (like that of deciding on dinner) where the underlying preferences/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 regularly makes allowance of your time. Nevertheless, your actually saying “don’t worry about it” makes a difference. Likewise, 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.

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 therapeutic 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 (often even) 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*. If I take your saying “don’t worry about it” as just 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).

Moreover, this reductive account cannot explain how my say so can make a difference even when the underlying preferences/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!”)⁵⁵

Similarly, suppose that I don’t really have whatever feelings the declarative/revelatory account of “I love you” claims the phrase expresses. After earnest, sincere self-reflection, however, I *incorrectly* think I do have those feelings,⁵⁶ 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,⁵⁷ you can *also* be disappointed in me for something in the present: my now not opening my heart to you. Really put yourself in the shoes of someone who was in this way mistakenly misled—is what *hurts* most, the basis for some kind of interpersonal rupture that calls for some kind of (quasi-)apology *merely* that I misspoke? Or that, having misspoken, I don’t love you?

5.2 Very Minor Deontic Shifts

A second line of resistance agrees 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.

⁵⁵ Cf. Bolinger (2019); Dougherty (2021); Goodin (2024) on consent. Another optional argument: you could even tell me not to worry about it *as a way* to get me to stop the meeting because you prefer to stop. Imagine I am a real 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 say in order to satisfy your preference I leave. Cf. Owens’s argument that consent doesn’t constitutively involve a preference that the addressee do the consented thing by way of cases in which A permits B to come to a party to get B (who would only come if it counts as party-crashing) to stay away (2012; 2014).

⁵⁶ This view would obviously hold love is not luminous—that’s why it can be so hard to say! It’s hard to know.

⁵⁷ Feelings are relevant to a performative understanding of “I love you” as felicity conditions, especially in romantic contexts.

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. CITE GERT)

More generally, non-deontic changes cannot be understood as minor deontic changes. To use on an example from Lance and Kukla, suppose I tell (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 *conditionally* promises, 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.⁵⁸

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*.⁵⁹ An imperfect duty of charity isn’t a duty to do any particular thing

⁵⁸ Cf. Marušić (2017).

⁵⁹ Though cf. Herman (2022) SAY MORE About how this doesn’t fix it.

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, 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 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.⁶⁰ 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

⁶⁰ 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!*"

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.⁶¹ By 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* 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: Non-deontic powers? Or just powers?

In closing, recall I promised a two-fold payoff. One was the appreciation of an under-theorized family of normative phenomena. Whether or not I'm correct in the details, I hope to have made the case that there is a systematic family of normative powers that exhibit the kind of systematicity that calls for normative theorizing and which illuminates aspects of our interpersonal relations with others.

The second was that the account on offer has the potential to shed light on the place of the deontic in interpersonal life. With some awkwardness, I have insisted on a sharp break between deontic and non-deontic powers in order to make the case that there *really*

⁶¹ Cf. Martin (2019).

is something afoot that isn't merely the shadow of promise, consent, and command. But stepping back, one different way of putting the view is just that we have normative powers of assurance, allowance, pressure, and withdrawal that come in deontic and non-deontic flavors. There aren't so much *non-deontic* powers as there are simply normative powers, which contrary to popular understanding can operate on non-deontic norms as well as on deontic ones. The difference isn't so much at the level of the power as in *what they operate on*; or put slightly differently, there are four basic powers which come in deontic and non-deontic flavors.

One reason to prefer this way of describing things is that the line between the deontic and non-deontic can be blurry. I went out of my way in giving the above cases to *force* a non-deontic reading. You *cannot* reasonably promise you'll come to the party; you *clearly committed* to the hour long meeting so have no right to waive when you tell me not to worry. But things are often a fair bit fuzzier. 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. This is the way of thinking that likewise thinks a lot rides on the question of whether my behavior is *merely disappointing* or *resentable*, i.e., merely interpersonally defective or outright wrong. Sometimes, this matters a great deal. Some accountability practices need *sharp lines* to distinguish when forms of serious sanction are appropriate. But in our interpersonal life, the boundary between these can seem to matter 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 his behavior, while indeed problematic, isn't exactly *wrong*.⁶²

So on another way of thinking of things, the boundaries, while occasionally sharpened by necessity, are sometimes fuzzy. 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, there-

⁶² Cf. Darwall on trying to justify hurtful behavior (2024).

fore, 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, our doing so results in sharp, deontic distinctions; sometimes it's a bit fuzzy.

This picture doesn't downplay the importance or specialness of the deontic. But it does resist there being a bright line, instead seeing deontic and non-deontic phenomena as on a continuum. This picture is by no means entailed by the above account of non-deontic powers. But this picture does more or less require that we have powers over the nondeontic. But if that account is right, it is a natural fit.

In any case, what I suggest in closing is that our interpersonal ethical life—the normative structure of our relations with others—exists on a continuum, and the powers that we use to navigate are not limited to a narrow part of it.

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