

If It's Wrong to Steal Your Wallet...

I've been thinking more about Brian Leiter's ethical trap. (Caveat: I'm quoting Leiter's questions from memory, so his exact wording will slightly vary).

During our debate, he repeatedly asked the audience:

"Suppose I threaten to shoot you unless you do what I want. Are you free?"

At least one person in the audience dodged the question, but everyone knew "No" was the correct answer.

This then led straight to Leiter's next question:

"Suppose I threaten to starve you unless you do what I want. Are you free?"

Leiter's point: Threatening workers with starvation is precisely what employers do to make employees do what they want! How then is this any worse than threatening them with a gun?

In my original critique I replied:

[T]here is a vast moral difference between getting you to do what I want by threatening to take away something to which you are morally entitled (e.g., your life) and getting you to do what I want by threatening to take away something to which you are not morally entitled (e.g. my assistance).

On reflection, though, I could have explained this answer much more effectively. Consider this line of questioning:

"Is it wrong to steal someone's wallet?"

Yes, duh.

"So is it wrong to steal someone's boyfriend?"

Normally not, right? So what's the difference? Simple: You are morally entitled to your wallet, but you are *not* morally entitled to your boyfriend! The rightful owner of your boyfriend, after all, is himself. This is true even though many people suffer far more over a lost boyfriend than a lost wallet.

Deeper point: The language of “*stealing* a boyfriend,” though metaphorically compelling, is ethically confusing. Why? Because it makes it sound like you are the boyfriend’s legitimate owner.

Similarly, the language of “threatening to starve a person” is metaphorically compelling but ethically confusing. Why? Because it makes it sound like the person is the legitimate owner of someone *else’s* food. Taking the food you grew and refusing to share the food / grew have radically different moral status even when they have the same physical effect.

To be fair, you could say, “The employer who fires a lazy worker has a right to do so, but he still deprives the worker of his freedom.” My reply: “freedom” is a highly moralized concept. Meaning: When moralists invoke the concept of freedom, they’re implicit making claims about rights. Logically speaking, “The First Amendment protects the religious freedom of Muslims” and “The First Amendment deprives Americans of the freedom to ban Islam” are equivalent. But when you say the former, you implicitly affirm the individual’s right to worship as they please; and when you say the former, you implicitly deny this right.