

Wronging Oneself

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Earlier today, without asking permission, I took a bike belonging to someone in my neighborhood and rode it to work. I later noticed that this same person, who works in my office, was looking tired. So I pinched their arm, opened their mouth, and poured hot coffee inside. As if that weren't enough, I took some cash from their wallet to buy my lunch, and I spent my break thumbing through their private emails, firing off a few replies.

Before you reach for any moral sanctions: this “neighbor” of mine was me.

There is something wonderfully elusive about wronging oneself. We are each just as important as anyone else, objectively speaking, and yet we need not worry when the limbs we pinch and the dollars we spend belong to *us*. So many things can be done to oneself without any moral problem, even though doing the same to others would wrong them, violating their moral rights.

This is a striking fact. Why *aren't* we constantly violating our own rights? The standard answer is that there is nothing there to violate: we do not have the same rights against ourselves that we do against others; our moral relation to ourselves is somehow *sui generis*. The radical alternative—never defended in print—is that we do have rights against ourselves, as we do against any other, but we waive them in the course of making decisions. Pinching my own arm is not like pinching a stranger out of the blue. It is like pinching someone else's arm with their consent. No one is wronged because there is no unwilling victim.

I am here to defend this alternative view, and more broadly, the conception of moral rights as *Self-Other Symmetric*: we have the same basic rights against ourselves as against anybody else.

To many, this will seem like an uphill battle. Not only is the Self-Other Symmetry widely dismissed: the very idea of a right against oneself, which I call a “reflexive right,” is often said to be

“paradoxical” (O’Neill 2001: 428) or “absurd” (Hill 1973: 87).¹ For some, the problem is that morality is only about how we treat other people, not ourselves (a view defended by Baier 1958 and Finlay 2007). Others say, more specifically, that it makes no sense to *claim* a right against oneself (Hart 1955: 181; Pogge 2002: 62; Steiner 2013: 240, fn. 21; Haase 2014a, 2014b: 131).² The most infamous problem, however, is that reflexive rights do not seem to be *binding*. “Bindingness” is supposed to be essential to any right. Your bodily rights against me, for example, bind me by making it wrong for me to pinch your arm. I am “bound” in the sense that I cannot get out of the right’s grip, since only you, as the holder of the right, have the power to waive it. Now suppose you have a right against yourself. As the holder of the right, can’t you waive it whenever you like? But then how could it bind you?

I am not here to convert the skeptic of self-regarding morality.³ Nor do I think we need a new solution to the problem of insufficient bindingness, or as it is known, the “Paradox of Self-Release.”⁴ My topic is an opposite paradox: that reflexive rights might bind us *too often*. The Self-Other Symmetry implies a shocking number of reflexive rights, threatening an explosion of self-wrongings, even when it comes to actions that are intuitively permissible. I do not just mean simple

¹ A number of prominent writers dismiss the Self-Other Symmetry as intrinsically implausible; see, for example, Thomson 1990: 42; Jones 1999: 94; Kamm 2007: 235, 241; and Cholbi 2013: 111.

² If someone else has your money, you can demand it back or even sue them; but if your money is in your own wallet, you would not get a lawyer involved. For a more sympathetic take on enforcing reflexive rights, see Gilbert 2018: 184.

³ For defenses of self-regarding morality, see Eisenberg 1968; Denis 1997, 2001; Schofield 2013, 2021b; and Kanygina 2018.

⁴ Marcus Singer (1959), in the classic statement of the Paradox, argues that duties to oneself are incoherent because they imply reflexive rights, which imply the impossible power to waive one’s own duties. One response is to concede that waivable duties to oneself are impossible, while defending unwaivable duties to oneself (Wick 1960: 161; Paton 1990; Denis 1997: 335; Hills 2003: 135; Schofield 2013, 2019, 2020, 2021). Recently, some writers have favored a bolder proposal, arguing that waivable duties to oneself are coherent: they bind *until* they are waived (Rosati 2011: 128–31; Kanygina 2018; Muñoz 2020, 2021; Schaab 2021). In what follows, I presuppose this bolder move; this paper does not argue that self-release is possible, but rather asks when it happens and why it matters. For more discussion of the Paradox of Self-Release, see Hill 1991; Habib 2009; Cholbi 2015; Schofield 2021a, 2021b: Chapter 2.

self-harms like the arm-pinching mentioned above, which can be dealt with by treating self-harm like harm to a consenting other. I have in mind thornier variations where consent is somehow lacking, either because it is inarticulate (§4), invalid (§§5-7), or plain inadequate (§8). In such cases, we seem to violate others' rights but not our own. These cases are mostly familiar; Slote (1976) and Stocker (1984) presented many of them as counterexamples in their classic objections to the Self-Other Symmetry. But these objections have been overshadowed by the Paradox of Self-Release, and so they have gone unanswered until now.

I hope to convince you that, the closer we look, the less decisive the “counterexamples” are, and the more illuminating the Self-Other Symmetry becomes, shedding much-needed light on a range of tricky issues, from unspoken consent to unintentional harm to unwaivable rights.

1. What is a right?

Before we get to rights against oneself, we face the more basic question of what rights are in general. There is no easy answer. Every theory of rights is controversial, and “right” is notoriously polysemous. Thankfully, the debate over the Self-Other Symmetry is theory-neutral and focused on a single kind of right, known as a “claim right”—a right held by someone against someone. All we need is a working concept of this sort of right: something thin enough to skirt controversy, but thick enough to know what our topic is. This concept can be spelled out in two principles.

First, rights are a matter of what we owe. I have a right against you that you not pinch my arm if, and only if, you owe a duty or obligation to me not to pinch it.⁵ Now, “duty” and

⁵ This is Hohfeld's (1919) equivalence of duties with “rights in the strictest sense,” i.e. claim rights (as opposed to powers, privileges, and immunities; see Thomson 1990: Chapter 1). This use of “rights” is broad; contrast it with Wallace's (2019) use of “rights” to refer to legal claims, as well as Feinberg's (1970) concept of a right as a valid claim. I won't define “duty,” but I will say that I have in mind “juridical” duties that imply corresponding rights (setting aside Wick's (1960) “non-juridical” duties). This paper is about the rights that imply duties and the duties that imply rights.

“obligation” might be misleading; they tend to connote laws and institutional roles. One thinks of jury duty and fiduciary obligations. But we are talking about moral obligations, which can be informal: we owe each other basic respect and debts of gratitude. These debts aren’t meant to be enforced by law, but they are still things owed, and that puts them in the realm of rights.

Second, unlike divine commands and intrinsic values, rights are typically under our voluntary control. In particular, rights can normally be waived by the consent of the right-holder. If I give you permission to pinch my arm, you may go ahead; I can no longer reasonably resent you for doing it, just as I cannot demand an apology from the dentist whom I allow to drill my teeth. Rights thus offer a flexible kind of moral protection; one may lean on them or give them up. They are constraints under one’s control.

In this paper, when I talk about rights, I am just talking about obligations under the voluntary control of the person to whom they are owed.⁶ The typical case is one in which a person can choose whether to waive their rights by choosing whether to consent. (We will consider atypical cases later.) Now we are ready for the key question: are rights Self-Other Symmetric?

2. The Real Symmetry

On a Self-Other Symmetric view, we have the same rights against ourselves as against others; the self/other difference by itself does not affect who has which rights against whom. Reflexive rights

⁶ The main theories of rights are interest theories (Raz 1986), will theories (Hart 1955, Steiner 2013), and Gilbert’s (2018) joint commitment theory. The distinctive feature of interest theories is that they allow for unwaivable rights, since one cannot simply decide that something will or will not be in one’s interests. On this basis, Sumner (1987: 211) argues that only the interest theory can allow for reflexive rights. (He rules out waivable rights against oneself, invoking the Paradox of Self-Release.) Gilbert accepts reflexive rights (2018: 184), but does not discuss Symmetry. My arguments below do not rely on any particular theory. A partial exception is §8, where I say that I am inclined to accept unwaivable rights, which are anathema to will theories and Gilbert’s theory. But unwaivable rights are not essential to my argument, and if they do not exist, that is all the better for Symmetry: the cases in §8 are no longer a problem. My thanks to a referee for helpful comments here.)

are not fundamentally different from the rest.

As one starts to think about examples, however, rights may seem *obviously* Self-Other Asymmetric. Most rights appear to be held against everybody but oneself. To return to an example from earlier, if I painfully pinch your arm out of the blue, I violate your right not to have your arms pinched; pinching my own arm, however, is no violation. It is senseless. I should not do it. But it does not violate a right.⁷

Does this really establish a Self-Other Asymmetry? To be sure, it proves:

The Bogus “Self-Other Asymmetry”

In some possible scenario S, I would violate your rights by φ -ing you, even though in some possible scenario S*, I would not violate my own rights by φ -ing myself.

But everyone agrees with this “Asymmetry.” Clearly, your rights *in one case* could constrain me less than my rights constrain me *in another case*. The cases might be different.

To illustrate: suppose you are severely allergic to lavender, and I am not. I violate your rights against harm if I spray some lavender oil in the air as you walk by. But I do not violate any rights by spraying lavender around myself when I am alone; the spray, to me, is harmless. Spraying you violates a right whereas spraying myself does not. Obviously, this is not a Self-Other Asymmetry in the sense that philosophers care about. The only asymmetry here is between those who are allergic and those who are not.

To establish a bona fide Self-Other Asymmetry, we cannot just throw out any two contrasting cases. We need a *minimal pair*: two cases where the only relevant difference between what I do to myself and what I do to you is the difference between self and other; all else is equalized (see

⁷ It is easy to think of other examples. Stocker’s is putting a hand in a fire (1976: 210). Slote (1984: 183) and Pettit (1986: 409) discuss killing for the greater good. (See also Sider 1993; Prichard 2002: 10, fn. 11.) My case is most like Stocker’s, but what I say will apply to the other cases just as well.

Sider 1993). There is no difference in the patient's desires or allergies, nor any difference in the kind of harm that might result from what the agent does. If there is a moral difference in a minimal pair, there is only one possible explanation: the Self-Other Asymmetry.

To prove an Asymmetry, by the way, it is not enough to establish the *absence* of a minimal pair, by showing that there is some action that wrongs others when done to them but which cannot be done to oneself. There are plenty of problematic actions like this. I cannot override my own will (Parry 2017: 358–59), steal my own property (Haase 2014a: 365), or cut myself in line. Doing such things to oneself would entail an impossible combination (both getting ahead and behind in line, losing and gaining property, being willing and not willing). That is why everyone should embrace:

The Asymmetry of Possibilities

For some S: I would violate your rights by φ -ing you in S, but there is no possible S* in which I φ myself.

This is fully consistent with the Self-Other Symmetry. The point of Symmetry is not that every wrong can be done to oneself. Symmetry only says that *if* we can do something to ourselves, *then* doing so is morally like doing the same thing to others.

The real contradictory of the Self-Other Symmetry is:

The Self-Other Asymmetry

For some minimal pair S and S*: I would violate your rights by φ -ing you in S, but I would not violate my own rights by φ -ing myself in S*.

The claim here, defended by Stocker (1976) and Slote (1984), is that there is a fundamental difference between reflexive and interpersonal rights: some actions wrong others when done to them, but do not wrong oneself when done to oneself, *even if there is no other relevant difference between the*

two actions. Reflexive rights *as such* are less restrictive. (We could also imagine an opposite Asymmetry, where reflexive rights are more restrictive—but since no one argues for this, I set it aside.)

Now back to the arm-pinchings: a sudden pinch from me violates your rights but not my own. Is this a minimal pair proving an Asymmetry, or are the cases just poorly equalized? Clearly, they are not equalized; one case lacks *consent*. When I pinch my own arm, the person being pinched is an active participant, not an unwilling victim; as Slote puts the idea, there is consent “implicit in actions we do to ourselves” (1984: 190). When I pinch you out of the blue, consent is not implied. And indeed the moral difference vanishes once we equalize the cases into a minimal pair. Suppose, with your consent, I painfully pinch your arm. It is senseless. I should not do it. But it does not violate a right. So it is just like pinching myself. Equalizing the cases thus erases the difference. It seems, in Slote’s words, that the freedom to do things to oneself “is not a deep feature of morality but rather derivative from and justifiable in terms of the moral importance of consent” (1984: 191).

That is the state-of-the-art Self-Other Symmetry: we have the same basic moral rights against ourselves as against others, but it is (normally) harder to wrong oneself, since we (normally) consent to whatever we do.

3. Symmetry’s Virtues

In a moment, we will consider some abnormal cases that are supposed to be counterexamples to Symmetry. But let me first explain why I think Symmetry is worth defending. Strange as the view may sound, it has three distinct virtues, which should not be overlooked.

First, Symmetry makes strong and clear *predictions*. Just as a good scientific theory makes testable predictions, a good moral theory makes predictions that can be tested against our intuitions about examples. If the theory’s predictions are trivial or too wishy-washy to evaluate, that is a mark against the theory. Symmetry definitely does not have this problem. Symmetry predicts that any

action that wrongs another would, other things equal, wrong oneself (and vice versa). Critics might not find this prediction plausible, but they will be glad that it is easy to test.

Symmetry is also *principled*. It forces us to explain wronging oneself using only principles that apply in the case of wronging others—familiar principles about rights, decisions, and consent. For example, we explain why I may pinch my arm by saying that deciding on the pinch is like consenting to it, and consent waives rights. Symmetry will not let us simply say that the self is special.⁸ It will not even let us reserve a special lightweight sense of ‘wronging’ to describe self-wronging (Hill 1973: 87). If wronging others violates a right, so does wronging oneself.⁹

Finally, Symmetry is favored by Occam’s Razor: it is *parsimonious*. This may seem counterintuitive. The Asymmetric view commits us only to interpersonal rights, whereas the Symmetric view commits us to interpersonal rights *and* reflexive rights—a strictly bigger commitment. Wouldn’t Occam want us to shave off the extras? No! The parsimonious theory is not the one with the slimmer stock of rights; it is the one with fewer fundamental distinctions. (In the words of David Lewis (1973: 87), there is “no presumption whatever in favor of quantitative parsimony.”) We would not say that a theory of rights is more parsimonious because it gives no one rights against Justin Bieber. Such a theory raises a question: why not Justin? If the only answer is,

⁸ “The self is simply special” is essentially the view of Michael Slote, who finds the Self-Other Asymmetry intuitive, but is admirably forthright about the “difficulty of motivating” it (1984: 192). For Slote, the Asymmetry is “not easy to account for” (*ibid.*: 191), because typically “the strength of obligation weakens as one gets further from the agent,” and yet there is “no direct obligation” when it comes to one’s own interests and projects (*ibid.*: 185). Slote’s view is, in my sense, not “principled,” because it bottoms out in an unsatisfying appeal to the moral specialness of self, rather than appealing to an independently motivated principle, like the principle that willing victims are not wronged. I leave open the possibility that some versions of the Asymmetry are more principled.

⁹ Some philosophers think you “wrong” me only when you infringe my rights (or infringe them wrongly) (Thomson 1990: 52; Owens 2012: 46; Anscombe 1990: 152; see also Bentham on “offense” (1843: 3:159)). Others, like Cornell (2014, 2015), think there are special cases where you can wrong me while infringing only the rights of another (suppose you steal my bodyguard’s weapon, infringing only his rights, but leaving me defenseless), or while infringing no rights at all (perhaps by having demeaning thoughts about me). We do not need to wade into this debate, since the cases in this paper are not special like Cornell’s (there are, e.g., no harms to third parties).

“Because he’s *Justin*” (similar celebrities are not exempt), the theory has a fundamental Justin/non-Justin distinction. That makes it *less* parsimonious. Now consider the Asymmetric answer as to why I lack rights against [Author]: “Because that person is *me*.” Again: less parsimonious. A fundamental Self-Other Asymmetry reduces the total number of rights, but bloats basic distinctions.

The Self-Other Symmetric view thus has several things going for it: predictions, principles, parsimony. So why isn’t anyone tempted? Why are Symmetry and self-consent dismissed in footnotes while the Self-Other Asymmetry is treated as a *fait accompli*?¹⁰

The problem is not that the appeal to self-consent is unknown; the move has been understood for decades.¹¹ Nor are people merely wary of reflexive rights; some are, but even those who are not remain skeptical of Symmetry. These skeptics, such as Stocker (1976) and Slote (1984), are mainly concerned with the problem of *counterexamples*: minimal pairs where the Symmetric view seems to entail that we wrong ourselves by doing things that are intuitively innocent. The key cases involve silent consent, impaired decisions, and unwaivable rights. Let us consider these in turn.

4. Waiving, consenting, deciding

The problem of silent self-consent can be illustrated with an example.

I have a right that you not pour hot coffee in my mouth. On a Self-Other Symmetric view, I must also have that same right against myself. And yet, I just drank some piping hot coffee, and my right went untrampled. Somehow I must have waived it. How?

¹⁰ For example: “The presence or lack of consent seems to have little to do with the self-other asymmetry” (Portmore 2003: 311, fn. 16).

¹¹ Stocker writes: “It could be said that it is as wrong to cause oneself pain as it is to cause someone else pain, but that in agent-regarding cases, patients waive their right not to be caused pain” (1976: 213, see also 211). Slote writes: “If I harm myself or avoid a benefit, I presumably do this willingly, whereas the agent whom I refuse to benefit does not consent to this neglect (and when she does there is nothing wrong with what I do)” (1984: 190–91). Pettit notes that “one can consent to one’s own deprivation, while the other is not allowed the chance to consent to this” (1986: 410). Wallace (2019: 258, fn. 10) suggests that one can “authorize” oneself via a “voluntary choice.”

The stock answer is self-consent: by deciding to drink the coffee, I consent to having it poured in my mouth. This sounds almost right, but there is something off about it. When we consent to others, typically we express our will in datable and observable acts: handshakes, thumbs-up, nods, the “OK,” clicking “I agree,” saying “Go ahead.” My barista would be concerned if I started doing these things before my morning cappuccino. It would not help to inform her that I do not want to violate my rights.

Here is the problem, then. Just as I may permissibly do plenty of things to a consenting other, I may do plenty of things to myself. But in the solo case, I can enjoy these permissions even when there is no observable event of “giving consent.” How am I able to waive my rights in total silence?

On the “mental state” view of consent, the answer is easy. Consent is just a state of mind, perhaps a desire or intention, which can be present even if it is never communicated.¹² I might intend for you to ride my bike even if I forget to give you permission; you might want me to see the inside of your flat even if you never extend the invitation. These can be thought of as unexpressed states of consent, on the mental state view—and the same is true of my intention to drink my coffee. My state of mind, however hidden, counts as consent, and that is why it waives my right. That said, I do not want to take this easy way out. I am sympathetic to the “behavior view,” on which hidden willingness is not enough: consent requires an observable expression.¹³ The expression can be subtle and contextual (a knowing nod) or painfully explicit (a tedious contract). Still: no expression, no consent. This view is anathema to the idea that silent inner decisions count as

¹² Some mental state theorists say consenting is intending (e.g. Hurd 1996: 131); some say that it is deciding that one has no moral complaint (e.g. Alexander 1996, 2014); some leave open what kind of mental state consent is (e.g. Husak 2006). See Bolinger 2019: 181, fn. 3 for a helpful overview.

¹³ On one kind of behavior view, behavior is sufficient for consent (see e.g. Sherwin 1996: 209–31, Cowart 2004); on other versions, inner willingness is also necessary (see e.g. Dougherty 2015). Bolinger (2019: 182) calls these performative and hybrid views, respectively.

consenting to oneself.

What now? Consent requires behavior (on this view), but clearly I do not have to behave like a consentor to permissibly drink my coffee. I violate no rights by drinking straightaway. One dubious solution would be to insist that the drinking must involve some subtle, barely perceptible “behavior.” (Like mumbling “Mm, coffee.”) But I think there is a deeper (and less desperate) reply: consent is not essential to the waiving of rights. Even if I do not quite *consent* to the coffee-drinking, it is enough that the drinking was my *decision*.

Here is the rough idea. When all relevant parties decide together on an action, they waive their rights against each other that the action not be done. Suitably qualified, this principle is hard to deny. If we decide together that you will house sit for me, how could you violate my rights by entering the house? If a community unanimously decides to have quiet hours start at 10pm, whose rights could be violated by a noisy party that ends at 9pm?

We can call this rough idea:

The Decision Principle

If B has a right against A that A not φ , and A and B make the decision that A will φ , then this decision waives B’s right against A that A not φ .

This offers a sufficient condition, not a necessary condition, for rights waivers. The principle says that decisions are enough to waive rights; it does not say that every rights waiver must constitute a decision, or that every decision that waives rights must involve all relevant parties. (Perhaps B’s willingness is enough on its own to waive B’s rights against A.)¹⁴

Given the Decision Principle, we could explain how I waive my rights in silence. I have a right against myself that I not pour coffee into my mouth. But when I decide to drink, the agent and

¹⁴ My thanks to a referee for helping me to clarify these points.

patient are both parties to that decision, so the right is waived. It is like the case where you and I decide that I will pour some coffee into your mouth (perhaps your hands are injured). The common factor is that everyone involved makes a decision; the solo decision is just the special case where I am both the agent and the patient.

The Decision Principle, however, is not quite right; it needs some tweaks. For one thing, decisions can be invalid, as when they are coerced, uninformed, etc. Invalid decisions do not waive rights. Second, some rights may be unwaivable, so that no decision can waive them. Third, some philosophers, notably Margaret Gilbert (2018), think that when A and B are different people, their decisions must be *unified* if they are to waive rights; it is not enough for A and B to decide separately that A will φ .¹⁵ But we can revise the Decision Principle. The result is:

Unity

If B has a waivable right against A that A not φ , and A and B make the unified, valid decision that A will φ , then this decision waives B's right against A that A not φ .

Unity is the real reason, I think, why it is fine to do things to oneself without “consent.” When I decide to drink coffee, everyone involved is party to that decision; the decision is unified and valid; and my right against having coffee poured into my mouth is a waivable right.

With Unity, we can thus solve the problem of silent self-consent. I do not *need* audible consent when I am doing things to myself; simply making decisions is enough. Of course, everyone can agree that there is a difference between the silent, subtle ways in which we authorize ourselves to act and the expressions of consent by which we authorize others. But there is a deeper common

¹⁵ Unity may need further tweaks. For example, one might believe that there are such things as “spontaneous” actions that are intentional though not preceded by any decision. If so, we could revise Unity to say: waivable rights against φ -ing are waived when everyone involved validly, intentionally φ s (and if there are multiple agents, they must φ together).

core, as captured by Unity, and this is all that Symmetry needs to explain why I can pour coffee into my mouth without perceptibly consenting to myself.

Unity, however, raises a new problem: silent interpersonal consent. What if I make a valid, unified decision with someone else to pour coffee into *their* mouth, but they never express their consent? Symmetry and Unity entail that this should be morally fine; it is just like drinking my own coffee, other things being equal. This prediction might seem shocking. Is it really true that you may intrude on someone else's body without their consent? That might sound outrageous, especially for more intimate sorts of intrusions. But it turns out that leading scholars of sexual consent have already argued, for reasons independent of the Self-Other Symmetry, that expressing consent is not always necessary for, and may even be inimical to, good sex (MacKinnon 2016; Palmer 2017; Gardner 2018; see also Chadha 2020: 621 on the Joint Action Premise and cf. Kukla 2018 on sexual negotiation). These scholars are not advocating sex against anyone's will. They are just denying that consent is the only way, or the ideal way, to establish willingness.

Gardner, for example, thinks that consent is unnecessary during a "team activity," in which the participants do not just act separately in parallel, but with "an intention that all have jointly" (2018: 54). In an ideal tango, you do not need to ask your partner for permission before each twirl. The fact that you are mutually engaged in the dance, responsive to each other's movements and in touch with each other's wants, is enough. Similarly, in ideal sex, Gardner thinks you need not ask or grant consent; the activity is a matter of "teamwork," not one's acquiescence to another's proposal. Gardner's take on teamwork is plausible, and it nicely parallels my view of solo choices. Lovers and dancers in perfect sync do not need observable consent to waive their rights any more than I need self-consent to permissibly drink my coffee. A tango involves teamwork; the drinking happens solo; but in both cases, nobody is wronged, because there is no disunity between the decision of the patient and the decision of the agent. The dancers' decisions are unified by virtue of their teamwork.

My decision is unified simply because I am both the patient and the agent.

If consent is a mental state, the problems of silent consent are easy: I consent to drinking by intending (desiring, etc.) to drink, and I consent to being twirled by intending that you twirl me. It is only if we accept the behavior view that silent consent is problematic in the first place. But if we do accept the behavior view, that does not mean we should reject Symmetry; we should instead reject the dogma that consent is the only way to waive rights. Teamwork, or more neutrally, unified decision, can be enough for a waiver, and it works just as well for a “team” of one.¹⁶

5. Invalidity

We now have a solution to the problems of silent consent: rights can be waived by a valid, unified decision. So far, we have only considered idealized cases, where decisions are clearly sufficient. But there are two further kinds of cases where decisions might not succeed in waiving rights, and which have been thought to be deep and decisive counterexamples to Symmetry (Stocker 1976, Slote 1984). These are the cases of invalidity and unwaivability.

We start with invalidity. A decision is *invalid* when it is incompetent, involuntary, or ill-informed in a way that undercuts its power to waive rights.¹⁷ Here is the problem for Symmetry. What if we make invalid decisions about what to do to ourselves? Then, it seems, we should end up violating our own rights—just as if we were messing with another person without their valid consent. Symmetry’s critics say that this is an intolerable implication.

Let us see if they are right.

¹⁶ Also interesting is that other speech acts seem to waive rights. For example, if I command the private to scrub my shoes, it is a stretch to say that I “consent” to the scrubbing, but I do waive my right not to have my shoes touched. (We might still wish to say that the scrubbing is “consensual,” or at least, that it isn’t non-consensual; see Chadha 2020: 621, fn. 8.)

¹⁷ These are the standard conditions for invalid consent in bioethics (Faden and Beauchamp 1986: 155; Miller and Wertheimer 2009: 80–1) and law (Faden and Beauchamp 1986: 38). I say “decision,” not “consent,” in light of issues in §4. I set aside voluntariness (but see fns. 18 and 19, below).

6. Incompetence

Some agents are incompetent because they are cognitively immature; others are temporarily not of sound mind. One source of incompetence, in particular, is thought to make trouble for the Self-Other Symmetry: *intoxication*.

Clearly, intoxication due to alcohol and other drugs can invalidate consent (or more generally, decisions). This seems to yield Self-Other Asymmetric minimal pairs straightaway. The most striking example—one often raised in conversation [Redacted], though never in print—is sex. There is an ongoing campaign across universities to persuade students that it is seriously wrong to have sex with drunk people even with their (apparent) consent. There is not, to my knowledge, any campaign against drunken masturbation (except perhaps at very religious universities, where spirits and self-pleasure are frowned upon in any combination). Intoxicated sex acts do not appear to wrong anyone in the “intrapersonal case.”

Does this prove a Self-Other Asymmetry? I am surprised that so many think so—as if there could be no difference between sex and masturbation besides the sheer number of participants.

Consider, to take just one example, a stereotypical case of drunk, invalid consent to heterosexual sex. A young man meets a young woman at a party; the man wants sex, whereas the woman does not; the woman drinks as the man cajoles her into going home with him; the woman then consents to things that she would not have consented to while sober, and which she later sincerely and painfully regrets. There is a lingering psychological harm, as well as problematic pressure during the encounter itself. It seems that the man wrongs his partner despite her consent. And yet, it seems strange to suggest that anyone is wronged in the typical “intrapersonal case.”

This is a problem for Symmetry only if it is a minimal pair, and it is a minimal pair only if all else is held equal besides the self/other difference. But the cases differ in at least three further respects: pressure, regret, and harmony.

There is an element of coercive pressure in the man's behavior towards the woman: he tries to get her to do something she does not want to do. It is not possible, however, to literally coerce oneself at a single moment.¹⁸ Unless one is psychologically fragmented, one cannot both want and not want the very same thing at the very same time.¹⁹ Second, the woman in the example comes to painfully regret what happened, as she comes to see her choice as compromised. When people dismiss the idea that it could be immoral to do things to oneself while drunk, they are probably assuming that one has no such regrets, and that there is no lasting psychological harm.

Third, and most important, notice that when people do things to themselves, the agent and patient act in a kind of harmony. They want the same things; their beliefs and desires are common knowledge; and above all, if the patient decides it's time to stop, the agent stops. This harmony is often missing in joint actions. But it is a sure thing when I am *both* the agent and patient. I know, more or less, what I want and what I believe, and I know that I know these things, and so on. If I decide to stop, I stop. None of this is true in the case of the drunk man and woman, which is why the man's actions are likely to cause harm, and part of why they seem problematic. The situation is utterly different when a couple acts in harmony. Imagine a couple blissfully drunk on the night of their honeymoon. They want the same things; their beliefs and desires are common knowledge; and if either party decides it's time to stop, they both stop. No one is harmed. In this case, I think it is far from obvious that the couple are wronging each other and violating each other's rights by having sex, even if they are quite drunk. Intoxication creates an incapacity to consent, but that incapacity is less likely to invalidate when two agents are harmlessly in harmony, as we are with ourselves.

¹⁸ If self-coercion is impossible, we have another Asymmetry of Possibilities, as opposed to a genuine Asymmetry. But as a referee points out, there may be a perfectly coherent sense in which I can "coerce" myself if we use "coerce" in a looser sense that does not require the agent to be fully willing and the patient fully unwilling at the same time. (On diachronic coercion, see fn. 19, below.)

¹⁹ Kagan (1989: 213) makes this point in a similar context. But see Parfit's (1984: 327–28) "Russian nobleman" example, where an agent seems to wrong himself by forcing his future self to act as his past self prefers. Schofield (2013: 506; 2021b: 72–3, 99) provides an illuminating discussion.

In stereotypical cases, intoxicated sex is morally problematic in a way that self-touching simply is not. This is just a fact. But I do not think that, in order to explain this fact, we must resort to a Self-Other Asymmetry. There is a better explanation: compared with one's relation to a stranger, one's relation to oneself is more harmonious, and there is no comparable threat of coercion and regret.

7. Ignorance

Next, we turn to decisions made in ignorance. Since the Nuremberg Trials, it has become a truism that we wrong people when we harm them, or mess with their bodies, without their informed consent. But, Stocker thinks, I do not wrong myself when I make uninformed decisions.

Consider:

[E]ven if because of ignorance nothing happens which can be taken as waiving a right, causing oneself pain is not wrong. (1976: 213)

(I assume that Stocker means ignorance of important non-moral facts, like the fact that a certain drug causes kidney damage.) Does Symmetry really entail that you wrong yourself, and deserve blame, when you harm yourself out of ignorance?

The question is not as simple as Stocker's passage suggests. When agents act in ignorance, we have to distinguish three notions of wrongness.²⁰ An act is wrong in the *fact-relative sense* if it is wrong in light of the facts about the agent's situation; wrong in the *belief-relative sense* if it is wrong in light of the agent's beliefs about the facts; and wrong in the *evidence-relative sense* if it is wrong in light of what the agent's evidence tells her about the facts.

²⁰ What follows is Parfit's (2011: Chapter 7) take on the classic distinction between objective and subjective moral judgments (on which, see e.g. Ross 1939: 146–47; Thomson 1990: 172–73; Muñoz and Spencer 2021).

Let me illustrate with a spin on an earlier example. Suppose you have just developed a nasty allergy to lavender and no one knows it. I then make the reasonable mistake of pouring some lavender oil into our diffuser to freshen up the room. This act is wrong in the fact-relative sense, since it will in fact harm you. But it would not be wrong in any other sense, since I believe on the basis of my evidence that lavender oil will not harm anyone. Belief- and evidence-relative wrongness will be sensitive to my reasonable ignorance; fact-relative wrongness will not.

Now, is it more wrong, in any of these senses, to unwittingly harm others than it is to unwittingly harm oneself? I do not see why this should be true. Suppose *you* pour lavender oil into our diffuser, unaware of your new allergy. This seems just like my act: wrong relative to the facts, but not relative to your beliefs and evidence. It may sound extreme to say that you do something wrong here even in the fact-relative sense. But that is not as extreme as it sounds. The act is still permissible in both of the other senses, and it is excused by your ignorance. There is no need to add that the act is *also* permissible relative to the facts.²¹

So much for reasonable mistakes: they are excusably wrong relative to the facts but permissible in the other two senses. They are not straightforward wrongings, in the sense that they do not involve a blameworthy violation of rights. But what about *unreasonable* mistakes, like negligent harms? Stocker does not discuss them, but they deserve a closer look.

Consider a twist on our last example: it is common knowledge between us that you have a serious lavender allergy, and yet, irresponsibly (though not maliciously), I activate the diffuser, forgetting your condition for the moment. This sort of harm feels morally worse than an innocent mistake; I have at best a weak excuse for my negligence. The explanation for the worseness, I think, is that my act is now wrong in the *evidence-relative sense*: it is wrong given the beliefs I *ought* to have.

²¹ One might doubt that fact-relative wrongness is even a genuine kind of wrongness. Muñoz and Spencer (2021), for example, argue that fact-relative obligations are not normative in the sense of being an authoritative guide to action.

Moreover, your act is wrong in the same way if *you* carelessly trigger your own allergy, and you have the same grounds to blame yourself.

Negligent self-harm is our first straightforward case of wronging oneself, our first case of violating one's own rights in a blameworthy way. The negligent self-harmer fails to waive their rights; infringes them wrongly (in both the fact- and evidence-relative senses); and does so with no valid excuse.²² We might say the same about other ways of harming oneself due to ignorance of, or inattention to, the non-moral facts, such as letting oneself drift into an unhealthy addiction.

We started from Stocker's claim that cases of factual ignorance prove a Self-Other Asymmetry. But, on reflection, it seems that the cases actually line up with what Symmetry predicts. Negligent self-harm *is* problematic, and self-harm due to reasonable mistakes is at worst a gray area. Symmetry's predictions are plausible. By contrast, Asymmetric views do not make strong, plausible predictions about these cases. The view that there are no reflexive rights predicts, implausibly, that negligent self-harm is morally fine. The view that reflexive rights are *sui generis* must be supplemented with other claims if it is to make any predictions at all.²³

There is, however, a third and final kind of ignorance we should discuss: ignorance of *moral* facts. In a pivotal paper, Thomas Hill, Jr. (1973) argues that we can display a lack of self-respect ourselves when acting in ignorance of our moral rights.

Consider Hill's example of the Deferential Wife, who is "utterly devoted to serving her husband. She buys the clothes *he* prefers, invites the guests *he* wants to entertain, and makes love

²² It is an interesting question whether negligent harms are wrong in the belief-relative sense. Certainly, in some cases of negligence, like the ones I have considered, the agent does not occurrently believe that they are doing anything harmful. But in other cases, we might instead prefer to say that the agent is merely not paying attention to harms they might cause.

²³ The view that we have *unwaivable* rights against self-harm does make predictions, but they are absurd; this view would say that it is wrong, rather than supererogatory, to harm oneself for the greater good. (A supererogatory act is one "beyond the call of duty.")

whenever *he* is in the mood” (1973: 89).²⁴ The wife enthusiastically consents to her husband without being threatened, deceived, or physically harmed; she may also know full well what she is choosing to consent to.²⁵ And yet, Hill thinks, the wife’s consent is morally defective because she does not realize that the choice is really hers to make. Servile agents like the Deferential Wife fail “to acknowledge fully [their] own moral status” because they do not “fully understand what [their] rights are” and “how they can be waived” (1973: 93–4). If you do not know that you are allowed to say “no,” saying “yes” does not have the same validity.

Hill is clearly on to something here. The Deferential Wife, it seems, is wronged not just by her husband, but by herself.²⁶ That said, it is not clear that Hill himself can (or would) say that the wife wrongs herself.²⁷ “The servile person does not, strictly speaking, violate his own rights,” on Hill’s view (1973: 93). But paradigmatic wrongings *do* violate rights. So what makes the Deferential Wife’s decisions count as wrongings?

²⁴ Hill also discusses the Uncle Tom, who is “an extremely deferential” Black man, and the Self-Deprecator, whose “shame and self-contempt make him content to be the instrument of others” (1973: 88).

²⁵ At least, this is true for one way of filling out the example. Hill considers other possibilities:

The Deferential Wife *says* that she understands her rights vis-à-vis her husband, but what she fails to appreciate is that her consent to serve him is a valid waiver of her rights only under certain conditions. If her consent is coerced, say, by the lack of viable options for women in her society, then her consent is worth little. If socially fostered ignorance of her own talents and alternatives is responsible for her consent, then her consent should not count as a fully legitimate waiver of her right to equal consideration within the marriage. (1973: 94)

The passage then continues with the possibility that I explore in the text: that the wife consents only because she thinks, falsely, that consenting is morally obligatory. Later he considers what it would mean if the wife remained deferential even after curing her moral ignorance (1973: 95–7).

²⁶ Marcia Baron agrees: she thinks the Deferential Wife violates a duty to herself “not to be servile” (1985: 394). We might soften this by saying that the Deferential Wife’s self-wronging is “less grave,” because her decisions are *partially valid*; see Dougherty (2021), who draws on Conly 2007, on partially valid consent.

²⁷ Rather than talking in terms of wrongings and violations, as I would, Hill describes a servile character using terms like “defective” (1973: 87), “objectionable” (95), and “morally undesirable” (94). (Cf. Hill 1991: 148–150, which sympathetically considers the claim that one could have promissory rights against oneself.)

Symmetry provides an answer—it can not only accommodate but *explain* what is going on in Hill’s example. It is a truism that consent can be invalid when the consentor does not know their rights; more generally, decisions can be invalid when the decider is morally ignorant. The Deferential Wife is making decisions about her life that are marred by exactly this kind of ignorance. She does not know that she can say “no.” For example, when the wife consents to and engages in sex acts only because she thinks that she is obligated to do so, her consent does not properly waive her rights. Because of this, Symmetry would predict that the Deferential Wife infringes her own bodily rights. This is the result that we wanted: she wrongs herself. To put this in terms of “infringing rights” may sound a bit exaggerated. But remember, infringements do not have to be blameworthy. Maybe someone else is to blame for the gaps in the wife’s knowledge. The only cases where she herself *might* deserve blame are those where she “should have known better” (Hill 1973: 95), but instead was complicit in her own brainwashing.

Stocker cites a case of factual ignorance as a counterexample to the Self-Other Symmetry. I have argued that, on reflection, Symmetry actually fits Stocker’s case, and it gives a principled, unified take on several varieties of action under ignorance. When agents harm themselves due to non-culpable ignorance of fact, they act wrongly only in the fact-relative sense, though they are not blameworthy because their ignorance is an excuse. If they should have known better, they wrong themselves *and* deserve blame. Much the same is true in cases of moral ignorance. If I do not realize that I am allowed to say “no,” and do things to myself anyway, I can infringe my own rights. The act is blameworthy if I should have known better, but otherwise, my ignorance is an excuse.

8. Unwaivability

For our final category of would-be counterexamples, we turn to rights that cannot be erased even by the soberest and savviest agents: unwaivable rights.

A right is unwaivable, in a certain context, if it cannot be suspended, in that context, by the right holder's decision—not even a decision that is competent, informed, and voluntary. No matter how ideal the consent, it seems that I violate a right if I kill or torture an innocent person for no good reason (Rosati 2011). Consenting to slavery does not waive your rights against your “master.” (At least, not according to liberals inspired by Mill 1859: 300.)

Unwaivable rights give rise to a final kind of hard case for Symmetry. The first to notice this problem was (I think) Michael Slote.²⁸ But since his discussion is ambiguous, I will use a pair of examples from Carl Elliott. Suppose a patient offers to give up his heart for a transplant, and Elliott must decide whether to operate:

...the puzzle is why I, for instance, might have the dual intuitions that in this case it is morally praiseworthy for a person to offer to donate his heart, and that it would be morally wrong for me to assist him. (Elliott 1992: 1–2; cf. Stocker 1976: 213)²⁹

On Elliott's view, if the donor could somehow transplant his own heart, killing himself in the process, that would be fine, but he cannot authorize a surgeon to perform the transplant, even with

²⁸ Slote writes:

If someone irrationally asks me to harm or kill him, it will presumably be irrational and wrong of me to kill him, more wrong at any rate than if I irrationally choose to kill myself; yet the consent seems equal in the two cases. (1984: 191)

This passage is open to interpretation. What does “irrational” mean? If Slote is just saying that the choices are *unreasonable*, he must be thinking of the case as one of unwaivable rights, much like Elliott's. If, on the other hand, Slote is thinking of “irrationality” as something more like *insanity*, he must be thinking of waivable rights, which the incompetent consentor fails to waive. I suspect that Slote has unwaivability in mind, since he emphasizes the irrationality of the decision, not the agent.²⁹ Often in bioethics the focus is on cases where the patient's decision to die is not for the benefit of others, but for her own benefit or perceived benefit. Our arguments should easily extend to such cases, which include “voluntary euthanasia” (killings carried out by one's doctor) as well as “physician-assisted suicide” (killings carried out by oneself, with help from one's doctor). For an overview of the ethics of voluntary euthanasia, see Young 2020.

competent and informed consent. The right is present in the duo case, absent in the solo case.

Is this the killer pair? I agree with Elliott that it may be wrong to take a patient's life to save someone else, whereas it is not wrong to give one's own life for the same purpose. But his cases are not a minimal pair. There are other relevant differences, besides whether the surgeon *is* the donor, that make a difference.

The crucial difference is that it is often much harder to discern somebody *else's* mental states (see Young 2020, §4.2). To be authorized to do something as drastic as taking someone's heart, the surgeon would need to be extremely confident that the donor is sincerely willing and of sound mind. But the surgeon does not enjoy the same easy access to the donor's mind that the donor himself enjoys. Even if the donor is in fact competent, informed, and sincerely willing, it will be harder for the surgeon to be sure. This is especially true when lives are on the line. The very fact that a donor is proposing extreme self-sacrifice is a reason to wonder if they truly appreciate the stakes.

When I try to control for these factors, my own intuition is that a patient could, in principle, validly authorize a surgeon to perform the transplant. The right to keep one's heart is not essentially unwaivable, whether the right is held against oneself or others. That said, the right might not be waivable in a context where infringing it would be a grave error. What if the donor's surgery is lethal torture and the benefits to the recipient are minor? Suppose I volunteer my healthy heart to help a stranger suffering from a mild arrhythmia. Even if my consent is voluntary, competent, and informed, the surgeon who obliges me is a murderer. Both actions violate a right: the surgeon wrongs me, and I wrong myself.

You might disagree with me about this case, or more generally about where to draw the line between waivable and unwaivable rights. Maybe you think that we can never waive our rights to life (see Rosati 2011: 130); maybe you think that we can waive any rights we want, in principle. That is all fine. We can disagree about where the line is drawn while still agreeing on the Self-Other

Symmetry, so long as you think that rights against others and rights against oneself are *equally* waivable. And there is some pressure, whatever else you believe, to believe in equality here. If you think it is always wrong to kill an innocent other, why not extend the view to suicide? If you think that it is never wrong to end one's own life (ignoring effects on others), why not extend the view to killing a consenting other?³⁰

There is indeed something puzzling about the Self-Other *Asymmetric* view of unwaivable rights. If I may kill myself, but you may not kill me even with my consent, then I am authorized to do things to myself that I cannot possibly authorize others to do on my behalf, no matter how much I would like to. Why should that be? How could my own authority, vis-à-vis myself, outstrip that which I can lend to cooperating others? Authority is not a liquid that gets diluted as it spreads. Whenever I can't authorize you as effectively as I can myself, there must be some reason why, something like a language barrier, a lack of trust, or a dead cell phone battery. But these reasons are of course *contingent*. To support the Self-Other Asymmetry, we would need a reason why other-authorizing is *essentially* harder—that is, harder even in minimal pairs, where knowing the other is just as easy as knowing oneself. I have not been able to find such a reason.

The Symmetric view, thankfully, obviates the search. Symmetry needs only one mechanism, decisions, by which I can authorize either myself or someone else. My powers of authority will be equal either way, if all else is equal. My authority ends where unwaivability begins.

9. Further Cases: Privacy and Promising

We have now dealt with the main supposed counterexamples to the Self-Other Symmetry.³¹ In these

³⁰ Hills (2003: 135–38) argues for unwaivable duties not to cause grave, pointless harms, but she does not accept Symmetry; she rejects waivable duties to oneself (2003: 133).

³¹ Slote has one last pair of cases. He says: (1) I may endure a big pain to spare you a small one, and yet (2) I may not spare myself a small pain rather than spare you a big one, since “you will presumably not consent” to this (1984: 191). But this is no minimal pair: only in (1) is the big pain

cases, Symmetry gives not only plausible verdicts, but powerful explanations, pointing us towards a deeper link between the ways of wronging oneself. The examples at first may seem unrelated. What could unite servility, negligence, extreme altruism, and drunken decisions? Symmetry's answer is that they all involve failures to waive one's rights. Some failures can be blamed on the invalidity of one's decisions; others may be due to the inherent unwaivability of one's rights. Either way, there is nothing mysterious here. We do not need to complicate our theory of rights with ad hoc postulations or one-off exceptions. We can just take our best views of rights in general and apply them—carefully, with an open mind and attention to detail—to the case of rights against oneself.

The realm of rights, however, is a large domain, extending well beyond the sorts of rights discussed above, which mostly involve harms and bodily intrusions. What does Symmetry say about other rights? For instance, do we have a reflexive right that we keep promises to ourselves? What about a right that we not invade our own privacy? A Symmetric view of these (very important) issues might seem absurd. But we can make sense of them in a Symmetric way with the same conceptual tools we have been using this whole time.

Consider three issues raised by privacy. First, there seems to be something silly about a privacy right against oneself, if the right forbids actions that simply make no sense in the reflexive case: eavesdropping, stalking, and so on. But this does not prove a Self-Other Asymmetry. It is another Asymmetry of Possibilities. I cannot eavesdrop on my own monologues. I cannot stalk myself by walking in a circle. If an action can only be done to others, not to oneself, that is the absence of a minimal pair, not the presence of a minimal pair with a moral difference. To prove an Asymmetry, we would have to show that (1) I can eavesdrop on myself, (2) eavesdropping on others

suffered willingly. Stocker says, relatedly, “even if a person asks us to cause him or her pain, it may be wrong for us to do so. And here, at least as much has been done to waive the right against us as we do *vis-à-vis* ourselves when we deliberately cause ourselves pain” (Stocker 1976: 213). But if the pain is puny, what's wrong with inflicting it on a willing other? If it's huge, why is self-infliction fine?

would wrong them, but (3) eavesdropping on myself, even holding all else equal, would not wrong myself.

Second, on some views, privacy rights do not involve special acts like eavesdropping, but more generic actions like looking at someone's body or reading from their diary, which can be done either to oneself or to another (see Thomson 1975). Here there is no Asymmetry of Possibilities. To be sure, it would be ludicrous if one could violate a right just by looking at oneself or one's things. But a Symmetric view can easily explain why: one is not the unwilling target of one's own gaze. (What about accidental glimpses of oneself? They are no more wrong than perfectly harmless accidental glimpses of somebody else.)

Finally, what if some privacy rights *cannot* be waived? A view of this type has been defended by Anita Allen (2013, 2016), who argues that we have unwaivable duties to ourselves to protect our own privacy; she discusses examples like uploading the sequencing of one's genome (2013: 847). If Allen is right, one can wrong oneself by oversharing private information. But that is no problem for Symmetry, since, on views like Allen's, one can also wrong a consenting other by oversharing *their* information.

Privacy rights seem to be no problem for Symmetry. The same is true, I think, of the rights that come from promises.

As with privacy rights, a promissory right against oneself seems strange because it seems impossible to violate. The first problem is that the act of self-promising may itself be incoherent. Binding promises (on some views) involve a behavioral back-and-forth: a promisor offers to do something, a promisee accepts, and as a result, the promisor is bound.³² This back-and-forth does not make much sense when the promisor *is* the promisee. Making offers to oneself can seem absurd

³² Not everyone thinks that promises must be taken up by the promisee in order to be binding, but Thomson (1990: 297-301) and Gilbert (2018: Chapter 6.3) argue for the necessity of uptake.

in the same way as verbally giving oneself permission.³³ But if self-promising is simply absurd, that is no Self-Other Asymmetry; it is an Asymmetry of Possibilities. It is not that promise-breaking is wrong when done to others and fine when done to oneself; it *cannot* be done to oneself.

But suppose self-promising is possible, or at least, that one can do something *close* to self-promising, like making a resolution.³⁴ A second problem is that such acts arguably cannot give rise to reflexive *rights*. The worry is that such rights would not be binding, since one could waive them at will. For example, if I promise myself to start a garden, and I sour on the idea, I can simply undo that promise. (Indeed, given Unity (§4), my reflexive right will be waived so long as I validly decide not to garden; I do not have to look myself in the eye and say “You are released.”) But this is not a new problem for Symmetry. It is just a special instance of the Paradox of Self-Release, which, in my view, has been adequately treated in recent work.³⁵ It is perfectly coherent to say that a self-promise binds until the moment of release (see Rosati 2011: 134-35); it is like a promise made to an accommodating other, who is happy to release you whenever you like (see Muñoz 2020: 699).

Finally, what about unwaivable promissory rights? Do they pose a problem for Symmetry? It is controversial whether promises can be unwaivable, but consider an example from Hill:

Suppose A promises B to give B no hard drugs no matter what B says. A and B, let us say, agree that the promise is for all time, not just for a momentary period of stress. It seems that B cannot release A, under any circumstances, for if A takes what B says as a release A will violate the original promise. (1991: 147)

³³ Haase (2014a: 365) expresses his skepticism with a question: “Now, suppose I venture to promise myself to cut my hair on Monday. Can I refuse to accept the offered promise?”

³⁴ One way that self-promising might be possible, despite requiring some kind of back-and-forth, is if agents are psychologically fragmented; see e.g. Larmore 2021: 56, but cf. Hill 1991: 144.

³⁵ See the citations in fn. 4, above. For arguments in favor of genuine promises to oneself, see Hill 1991; Habib 2009; Rosati 2011; and Fruh 2014 (cf. Singer 1959; Hills 2003; and Haase 2014a).

Since A's promise includes, in effect, a pledge not to accept B's release of A, it seems that B gains an unwaivable right against A in this context.³⁶ But this is no problem for Symmetry, since a self-promise could *also* include a pledge not to accept release. If B promises himself not to use hard drugs next week no matter what he decides later, then B seems unable to self-release, and so he acquires an unwaivable reflexive right.³⁷

We have only scratched the surface, but by now, you should have a sense of how to analyze new cases in a Symmetric way.³⁸ When dealing with a right that *seems* Asymmetric, the first thing to ask is whether this is a genuine Self-Other Asymmetry (a minimal pair with a moral difference) or just an Asymmetry of Possibilities (the absence of a minimal pair). Next, make sure the pair really is minimal, by equalizing factors like harm and willingness. Finally, take a closer look at the apparent moral difference; you may find that it has dissolved. This procedure is not meant to be an algorithm for moral discovery. There is no such algorithm. All I can offer is a survival guide for the defender of Symmetry who wants to venture deeper into the realm of rights.

³⁶ Singer (1963) contends that such a promise really would be waivable, as it is really two promises in one: (1) a promise not to give B the drugs, and (2) a promise not to waive the first promise. A can simply waive the second promise first. Nor would it help to have a third promise not to waive the second; indeed, no finite set of such further promises would be enough. But Hill argues that we can resist Singer's reinterpretation of the promise. Instead of two promises in one, we can think of A's promise as a single pledge with a special content: "to refuse-to-give-B-drugs-no-matter-what-B-says" (1991: 147-48). I take no stand on this debate; my point in the text is just that Hill's view is consistent with Symmetry.

³⁷ Rosati argues that one cannot be released from a promise, whether to oneself or to another, unless one has undergone a change of mind; it is essential that "one has freely thought about the matter and now decides differently for what one takes to be a good reason" (2011: 135; see also Hill 1991). A self-promise, on Rosati's view, is not essentially unwaivable, but it cannot be waived willy-nilly. I am inclined to agree. If one has self-promised not to smoke cigarettes (say), one wrongs oneself by smoking *without having had the right kind of change of mind*. As I interpret Rosati, her point is that such a decision to smoke would be invalid. This is no problem for Symmetry, however, since Rosati thinks the same is true in the two-person case (2011: 135). Suppose A promises B not to smoke, then the two of them decide, with no change of mind, that A will smoke a pack. Rosati thinks A wrongs B.

³⁸ Another clarification: I have not tried to show that all practical reasons, or even all moral reasons, are Self-Other Symmetric; this view shares Symmetry's virtues (§3), but is much more controversial. My thanks to a referee for helpful comments.

10. Conclusion

The Self-Other Symmetric view of rights is almost universally dismissed. Some say it is incoherent; others say it is coherently ridiculous, demanding that we treat ourselves like non-consenting others, on pain of wronging ourselves.

I have argued that Symmetry does not have this ridiculous implication. The view does imply that we have many reflexive rights. Moving limbs, pouring coffee in our mouths, pinching arms—we have rights against everyone, including ourselves, that they not do these things to us. But that does not make these actions inevitably wrong. We waive rights against ourselves simply by making decisions; that is why it is harder to wrong oneself than an unwilling other. What I do to myself is, from a moral point of view, more like what I do to a willing other, someone who has decided with me what shall be done.

Still, even when you are just making decisions about your own body, a waiver is not always guaranteed. In non-ideal cases, where decisions are invalid or rights are unwaivable, we can infringe our own rights and wrong ourselves. When is a self-regarding decision invalid? What happens when we act without self-authorization? Here is where Symmetry shines. We can reuse what we already know about wronging other people, since the limits of what we may do to ourselves *just are* the limits of what we may do to a relevantly similar other: someone who is a “teammate” to us, as we are to ourselves.

This gives Symmetry an explanatory edge over its rivals. One kind of Asymmetric view is that we never wrong ourselves (Singer 1959)—but this view struggles to explain our moral revulsion to extreme or negligent self-harms. Another view, my main target in this paper, has it that duties to self are fundamentally inexplicable in other terms (Hill 1973: 87)—but this leaves us wondering *why* self-wronging happens when it does. Symmetry’s answer to this question is principled and elegant. We wrong ourselves when our decisions fail to waive reflexive rights.

The Self-Other Symmetry remains, undoubtedly, strange. There is something almost Lovecraftian about the idea that so many moral rights lurk just below the surface of ordinary life. And yet, on reflection, these rights don't seem to entail any perverse prohibitions; instead, they underpin the things we already believed about the freedom to use and even damage one's own body within reasonable limits. To understand the special elusiveness of wronging oneself, we might be better off without the specialness of selves.³⁹

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