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Expressive Action, Meaning, and a New Threat to Deliberative Autonomy

ABSTRACT: *This article identifies a novel threat to* deliberative autonomy*—a kind of control one has over one's deliberative process—arising from the way agents express themselves through action. Drawing on T.M. Scanlon's account of an action's meaning, we argue that many actions bear expressive significance in virtue of the motivating reasons behind them. Because deliberative autonomy partly consists in one's ability to shape a meaningful life through control over such expressions, we have a moral interest in maintaining opportunities for expressive action. We show that these opportunities can be undermined by well-meaning interventions that change the justificatory context in which others act, thereby altering the possible meanings their actions can bear. This has a surprising upshot. We sometimes act wrongly in giving someone new reasons to do what they were going to do anyway. We conclude with some brief thoughts about what this possibility means for individual morality as well as for political philosophy.*

KEYWORDS: meaning, autonomy, deliberation, reasons

1. Introduction

Our capacity to navigate the space of reasons[1]—by identifying, assessing, comparing, being motivated by them, and maybe even creating them (Behrends 2015; Chang 2020; Davia 2023)—matters to us. Accordingly, an important part of moral life is taking care not to unjustifiably interfere with others' use of their agential powers. In normal circumstances, it's wrong to physically constrain someone so that she cannot carry out her plans, or to mislead her in order to undermine her ability to assess reasons relevant to her choices. But this requirement manifests in more subtle ways too. Even when we have not taken away another person's means or opportunity to reason about what to do, many philosophers have thought that we can nonetheless go wrong by being too involved in that process. For example, some have argued that giving advice can be intrusive (Tsai 2014; Davis 2017) or can deprive others of opportunities for self-discovery (Akhlaghi 2023). Similarly, others claim that making requests, even when their content is reasonable, can violate a presumption in favor of giving others an opportunity to act on their own (Laskowski and Silver 2022). Even our expectations for others can risk undermining their agency (Basu 2023).

In short, there's a lot of philosophical interest in the idea that we owe others some deliberative space. Our aim in this article is to identify a further dimension of this

[1] We have justifying reasons in mind here. For a helpful taxonomy of senses of "reason," see Schroeder (2007).

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requirement. Specifically, we'll argue that when one gives another new reasons to do something, one sometimes changes the expressive significance of another's actions, and that this too can be an unjustified undermining of autonomy. We think this phenomenon is a familiar feature of everyday life. So, explaining what it is and how it can undermine autonomy helps to illuminate some moral risks in actions that might otherwise seem innocuous.

We'll begin by making some observations about the way we use actions to communicate things about our motivations and relationships. Then, we'll introduce the idea of "deliberative autonomy," which we'll use as a term of art to refer to one having the space to reason things out on one's own. We'll use the idea of deliberative autonomy to situate a claim that agents have reason to care about their opportunities for expressive action. If that's right, interfering with those opportunities can sometimes be unduly intrusive. Finally, we'll identify one potentially surprising way that it's possible to interfere with someone's opportunities for expressive action. Sometimes the expressive significance of our actions depends on the way they reveal our motivating reasons. When that's true, providing others with new reasons to do things can deprive them of opportunities to express the reasons they already had. We'll close by discussing both how we might proceed when we're acting in ways that are likely to shape others' expressive options and how what we've said can inform larger political conversations.

2. Meaning in Language and Action

This section lays the groundwork for what is to come by first highlighting two points about the linguistic communication of meaning—that is, our attempts to convey our thoughts through words. First, whether we're understood often matters to us. Second, our ability to communicate meaning via any particular locution is dependent on various social conditions; context determines what we can communicate. Highlighting how these points play out in a more familiar context will make it easier to see how the same factors are at play in expressive *action*.[2]

We take it as uncontroversial that being able to make ourselves understood matters. Suppose, for instance, that you tell a friend, "I'm fine," intending to downplay a minor inconvenience, but your friend misinterprets this as a sign of deeper distress. This reaction might be frustrating. There are higher-stakes cases as well. Some feminist scholars argue that in patriarchal societies, norms, expectations, and power dynamics make it difficult for women to express dissent through the locution "no." In Rae Langton's canonical articulation of this idea, "Some speech acts are *unspeakable* for women in some contexts: although the appropriate words can be uttered, those utterances fail to count as the actions they were intended to be" (1993: 299). This feminist critique highlights a key point for our argument: because much can be at stake in being understood, causing someone to be misunderstood has moral risks. There is a general presumption in favor of preserving the conditions for others' communicative integrity.

[2] When we talk of "action," we just mean to be picking out ways of communicating apart from the use of words. If one were laboring under the yoke of maximal perspicuity, one could call such actions "nonlinguistic actions." We don't mean to deny that using words is a kind of action too.

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The second point we aim to highlight in this section is that what one is able to communicate depends on various social factors; communicative possibilities are shaped by the context in which they occur. Two aspects of the relationship between social context and communicative efficacy are particularly important for our argument. First, communication depends on reciprocity. This point, combined with the previous—that it matters to us that we can communicate effectively—generates communicative obligations on each of us, which opens up space for specifically communicative wrongs. Investigating such wrongs has been an important project in social epistemology (Fricker 2007; Dotson 2011).

Second, what one can express through language depends on what is taken as presupposed by the relevant discursive community. David Miller illustrates this point with the historical transformation of the term "condescension." In an era when deference to social superiors was widely accepted, a high-status individual who "condescended" to speak as an equal with an inferior was seen as virtuous—it was "amiable to forgo deference that you can rightfully claim" (1997: 233). Today, however, "condescension" carries a strongly negative connotation. Since contemporary social norms reject the legitimacy of inherited social superiority, to describe someone as condescending is to condemn them for wrongly assuming a status they do not rightfully possess. The very possibility of using "condescending" as a term of condemnation, then, depends on the broader social context—specifically, on the extent to which an egalitarian ethos permeates society.

In this article, we explore some implications these points have for the way we express ourselves through our actions, rather than our words. As a first step, notice that some kinds of actions—things like waving hello or giving a thumbs up—work more or less the same way speech acts do. Both of our points about linguistic meaning apply here. It can hurt to be misunderstood, e.g., when your wave reads as awkward rather than enthusiastic. And what you can do with these actions depends on the local context. In a community where waving hello isn't a widely adopted practice, you can't expect your wave to be interpreted as a greeting.

The set of actions that work in exactly this linguistic-like way is fairly narrow, but the set of expressive actions *simpliciter* is significantly wider. Many actions serve a communicative function, even when they don't do so in the same way that linguistic expressions do. Suppose that you have been invited over to an acquaintance's home for dinner. You'd like to express your gratitude for the meal and for the opportunity to begin to move from acquaintances to friends. One way to express your gratitude would be to say something, perhaps "I appreciate the opportunity to spend time together." Another way would be to do something, perhaps bringing a gift. The latter option works by being an observable consequence of the attitudes you intend to express. In the parlance of creative writing, the gift shows rather than tells.

Both of our observations about linguistic meaning apply to these kinds of actions as well. Just as with linguistic expression, there are emotional stakes. It'd hurt, for instance, if your acquaintance interpreted your gift as an ostentatious display of wealth rather than an act of gratitude. Similarly, to invoke the ideal of communicative reciprocity, if your host is relentlessly cynical, you may struggle to express your intended meaning no matter what action you take. And, just as with linguistic expression, the context matters. In a community where bringing a gift is the

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default expectation whenever you visit someone's home, bringing one isn't evidence of gratitude (or at least, not reliable evidence) (Raz 1988: 349). To make your attitude observable in that kind of case, you'd have to do something else.

We can be more precise about how these "show rather than tell" actions work by introducing distinctions from metaethics and philosophy of action. When discussing reasons for action, it's common to distinguish at least three categories: "justifying reasons" that rationally count in favor of acting, "motivating reasons" that move an agent to act, and other kinds of explanatory reasons which do not make reference to one's deliberative processes. Markovits (2014: 1) illustrates the difference like this. Suppose that Alessandra snaps at Beth. From a third-person point of view, we might explain this by noting that Alessandra hasn't had enough sleep lately. That might on some level be the correct explanation, but it's not how things seem to Alessandra first-personally; that's not what moved her to snap at Beth. In other words, it was not Alessandra's motivating reason. Suppose further that what moved Alessandra was Beth's being late for their meeting. Even if so, lateness might not actually count in favor of Alessandra's snapping. This case illustrates that motivating reasons, justifying reasons, and other kinds of psychological explanation can come apart, but of course, they don't have to. When things go well for us as agents, we're motivated to act by the same considerations that justify acting.

T.M. Scanlon (2010) uses this distinction among senses of reason to pick out what he calls the "meaning" of an agent's action. Scanlon notes that there are cases in which someone acts permissibly yet still seems criticizable. For example, bringing a gift for your host is morally permissible, but if you bring the gift to flaunt your wealth, that nonetheless indicates something morally criticizable about you. By distinguishing questions about permissibility and blameworthiness on the one hand from questions about an action's meaning on the other, he hopes to defend the coherence of saying that there are actions that are subject to moral criticism on the basis of their meaning but are nonetheless not morally blameworthy.[3]

On Scanlon's view, the meaning of an agent's action is determined by the motivating reasons that led that agent to do it. For example, if you invite someone to a party and are motivated by a desire to make friends, your action says something different than had you extended the same invitation in hopes that your guest would bring some expensive champagne. Of course, we often act from more than one motivating reason, and Scanlon's account of meaning accommodates this complexity. Acting on the basis of two different motivating reasons can mean something different than acting on either reason alone. To borrow his example, suppose that you have promised to meet a friend for lunch and that you enjoy seeing this friend. You take each reason as sufficient to show up at the restaurant, but acting on *both* is important here. If you were to show up *only* because you want to, your action would manifest a lack of respect for your friend's time. If, instead, you were to

[3] Note that Scanlon's broader aims with respect to moral responsibility are separable from his account of an action's meaning. He might be right about how actions communicate motivating reasons, while being wrong that there are actions that are morally permissible but nonetheless morally criticizable in virtue of their meaning. We think Scanlon's account of an action's meaning is on to something, but we don't make a claim one way or the other about the broader theory of moral responsibility he uses that account to defend.

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show up *only* because you promised, your action would manifest a lack of interest in your friendship.[4]

This kind of meaning often matters to us. Your dinner host cares whether you bring a gift to express gratitude or to flaunt your wealth. Notably, we also care about the Scanlonian meaning of our own actions. If you feel gratitude, you might want an opportunity to express it in action. That we care about the meaning of our own actions is an unsurprising upshot of the points we made above about linguistic meaning. Just as being understood matters to us in the case of linguistic meaning, it matters to us when we're expressing ourselves through Scanlonian meaning as well.

We think Scanlon's account is a useful model for thinking about how "show rather than tell" actions work, and what distinguishes them from actions that express something in a way that's more closely analogous to linguistic meaning. So, going forward, we'll use the idea of Scanlonian meaning as a way of picking out an action's capacity to express something about the agent that performs it by making manifest her motivating reasons. In relying on Scanlon in this way, though, we don't mean to suggest that his view necessarily captures all of the ways that an action might have a communicative meaning. On that point, we're ecumenical. What we'll go on to say applies no matter what range of ways you think an action can have a meaning, so long as the way Scanlon identifies is one of them.

3. Deliberative Autonomy

This article is about a particular threat to deliberative autonomy that concerns expressive actions. In the previous section, we introduced the type of expressive actions we're interested in; in this section, we'll say more about deliberative autonomy.

David Enoch (2022) has helpfully elucidated a two-part view of autonomy, wherein autonomy is instantiated in the dual properties of non-alienation and sovereignty.[5] One accomplishes non-alienation when one's life is shaped by one's deepest commitments and values. One has sovereignty when one's considered judgment settles what will happen. Both components are ineliminable, irreducible,

[4] Scanlon introduces this case to show how his account handles situations where agents have more than one motivating reason. It's helpful to note, though, that it also illustrates how it's possible on his view for an action to have a meaning that's different from the one an agent expects or intends. In short, that's because Scanlonian meaning is also a function of what *doesn't* motivate us. For example, if you get up early to mow your lawn, you may intend to get everything in order for your backyard barbecue, but in doing so you may also express your indifference to the fact that your neighbors are trying to sleep. Even though Scanlon's account makes meaning a function of our motivating reasons, what we are motivated to *do* might come apart from what we are motivated to *express*. As a result, Scanlon's view makes room for actions to have an accidental or unintended meaning.

[5] We utilize Enoch's conception of autonomy because we think it's plausible as an articulation of the core concept, which, we take it, essentially involves "the capacity to be one's own person, to live one's life according to reasons and motives that are taken as one's own and not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces" (Christman 2025). We believe Enoch's view is helpful for illustrating our points, but we don't think anything we say depends on accepting the details of it. What we say should apply to other ways of spelling out this conceptual core. We're confident about this because Enoch's strategy is specifically geared toward capturing what's intuitively plausible in other, competing accounts of autonomy. So, if your intuitions are more on the *autonomy-as-non-alienation* side or more on the *autonomy-as-sovereignty* side, you can still buy what we have to say.

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and essential elements of a truly autonomous life. Think first of one who possesses sovereignty, but not non-alienation. We might imagine a case where one is stuck at the bottom of a pit with no means of escape and just enough food and water to survive. There is no question who is calling the shots here. The problem for autonomy is that one can make no choice which will cause one's life to reflect one's values and commitments. One can make no meaningful relationships, produce no great music, and pursue no novel experiences. One reigns supreme over a kingdom of dirt. Now think of one whose life exhibits non-alienation but lacks sovereignty. Their life is filled with just the kind of achievements, relationships, and pursuits required to give reality to their values, but suppose this only comes about because they are subject to a paternalistic state which determines what they can do, with whom, and when. Such a life, as experientially rich as it may be, is not truly autonomous.

Following Enoch's later development of his account, we might complicate the above story.[6] These two components of autonomy, though independent, are connected in a crucial sense. The truly autonomous life is one whose shape is determined by one's values *because* one's choices made it so. This understanding of autonomy lends itself to regarding autonomy as an achievement. Those who succeed in living an autonomous life are admirable in the way that, to borrow a metaphor, a skilled archer hitting a bullseye is admirable. The archer both hits the bullseye and is skilled, but their feat is admirable precisely because their skill *caused* the arrow to hit the bullseye. The autonomous person both has a life shaped by their values and is the final arbiter of what they do, but their life is especially valuable due to the connection between those two things—their life is a reflection of their values *because* they are sovereign over their choices.

With this picture of autonomy *simpliciter* in mind, we can explicate the notion of "deliberative autonomy" at the center of this article. Deliberative autonomy is a matter of one having the deliberative space required to live an autonomous life as just described. The distinctive importance of *deliberative* space becomes clearer when we notice that a *choice* or *decision* is an essentially deliberative activity. An action will not be of the type which matters to the value of autonomy if it is not the result of one's own deliberative process. That is what the case of the paternalistic government above shows. It follows, then, that one cannot shape their life through their choices (in the required way) if they do not also maintain a level of control over their deliberative process *itself*, the very mechanism by which choices are made. Failures of such control are central to the literature on free will and responsibility. Think of a case where Tina is brainwashed by mad scientists to deliberate in an excessively egoistic fashion (Pereboom 2014). Most believe that if Tina acts wrongly in such a case, the brainwashing is exculpatory *just because* she did not have sufficient control over her deliberation to count as autonomous. Taking all this together, we get a picture of autonomy which builds on Enoch's and looks as follows: the autonomous life reflects

[6] This development of Enoch's view was presented in a talk titled "A (Somewhat) Unified Theory of Flawed Consent" given at UC Berkeley in March 2025. Given that this is unpublished work, we make no claim that Enoch endorses or would fully agree to our interpretation of his thought. We cite him to make clear that this is inspired by thoughts outside of ourselves.

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particular values and commitments *because* of the choices made by the one living it, and the deliberative mechanisms by which one made said choices were sufficiently independent of interference. Without the security of this final clause, there is a perpetual worry that one's choices are not one's *own* choices at all, but merely a reflection of another's interference into one's deliberation.

How does this connect to what we said about Scanlonian expressions in the previous section? The intuitive thought is that a primary way in which we shape our lives is through the meaning of our actions. The meaning of our actions, taken together and spread out over time, in large part determines the range of coherent narratives we can tell ourselves about our lives. They make a difference to what kind of person we can conceive of ourselves as being and what kind of person others can reasonably believe us to be. Given this, we'll want some control over the expressive opportunities available to us.

There are at least three ways in which having such control might be constitutive of an autonomous life, each way corresponding to one of the elements detailed above (non-alienation, sovereignty, and their causal connection). First, expressive control can implicate non-alienation. This is easy to see if you imagine an extreme case where you are simply unable to express intended meanings through your actions. Suppose you are a visitor in a faraway land, oblivious to local customs and cultural norms. This is the social equivalent of life at the bottom of a hole. Second, sometimes such control is a requirement for sovereignty. Though meanings are social and cannot be solipsistically determined, there is still a sense in which an autonomous life depends on your ability to settle the matter regarding what you express through your actions. This is part of what is so valuable about a socially recognized lexicon of meanings. Once all the relevant persons are on the same page, so to speak, it is sufficiently within your control in normal conditions to determine what you express through your behaviors. Lastly, this kind of control affects the causal connection between non-alienation and sovereignty. Remember, the fully autonomous life is the life reflective of one's deep commitments and values *because* one was the final authority regarding the decisions one made. But plausibly, the sense of "because" used here must involve a deeper kind of connection than mere causality. To see this, think again of the case of the archer. Suppose the archer is set to miss their shot, however, right before they release a fan says, "You're the best!" This jars the archer, and this slight jerk causes them to release at a different angle and hit the bullseye. We might give a causal explanation of this case by saying that the archer hit the bullseye *because* they are skilled, for if they weren't skilled the fan would not have yelled at them. But clearly this is not the kind of connection that renders the achievement especially valuable. The skill doesn't play the *right* causal role in the result. Similarly for autonomy, it is not good enough that we make decisions which, by some causal mechanism or other, achieve non-alienation. Rather, our decisions have to play the *right* role; the life we build has to, in some sense, be the one we were actually attempting to build. This matters because it shows the importance of expressive opportunities and control to deliberative autonomy. If one cannot control the meaning of the actions which make up their life, then *however* their life ends up looking, their choices will not share the correct causal connection to what they end up expressing.

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If something like this is right, then our interest in having autonomy implies an interest in having a sufficiently good range of opportunities for expressive action. But what kind of range, and what's sufficiently good? We cannot offer a full answer here. Nonetheless, we can offer a sense of the type of cases where our interest in opportunities for expressive action might be particularly acute.

At a high level of description, our idea is that performing actions with a particular Scanlonian meaning can contribute to making those actions meaning*ful*. An action is meaningful, as we understand it here, when it enjoys a distinctive significance in virtue of its connection to long-term projects, identity-constituting properties, important relationships, and so on. For example, your delivery of a home cooked meal to a sick friend might take on special significance for them as an expression of your care. It can also happen that your action takes on this significance for you, the person doing it. You might relish the opportunity to make your grandmother's particular spin on Jewish deli-style chicken soup—the one she always made when someone in the family was sick—seeing making it on this occasion as a way of honoring that part of your heritage. This parallels the way an object can be meaningful, as when a gift from a friend takes on special significance for you as a representation of that friendship.

From both directions—an action's meaningfulness for others and for the performing agent—the meaningfulness of the action depends in part[7] on its Scanlonian meaning. What makes the meal delivery meaningful is that it's an expression of care, and what makes it an expression of care is that care motivated you to do it. Had your friend ordered delivery, the arrival of the delivery person wouldn't be an expression of care, and so wouldn't be the kind of thing that could come to represent being cared for.

To sum up: we have argued that being understood matters to us, that some actions express a distinctive kind of meaning by illustrating our motivating reasons, and that sometimes that form of expression can make an action particularly meaningful. With those points in mind, it's time to return to the other uncontroversial point about linguistic meaning that we started with: what we can express depends on the context. This point, we'll argue, has an underappreciated upshot when applied to Scanlonian meaning, one that reveals a distinctive threat to deliberative autonomy.

4. A New Threat to Deliberative Autonomy

Our capacity to express ourselves depends in part on what other people will take our expressions to mean. So, if you are in a position to change the context of someone's expression, you can prevent her from being understood. In the case of linguistic expression, there is relatively little that any of us could do individually and in a short amount of time to change the context which determines how a locution is understood. However, in the case of Scanlonian meaning, the relevant context can be much more under individuals' control. We explore that difference in this section.

[7] We don't mean to suggest that Scanlonian meaning is the only thing that could make an action particularly meaningful. It's enough for our purposes that sometimes Scanlonian meaning does this; we happily grant that other things can too.

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Ultimately, we think the phenomenon we're concerned with here is familiar, but to focus attention it'll help to start with a cartoonishly outlandish case. Consider:

> **Bad Parents**
> Sasha is a high school student whose parents provide her with an allowance in return for helping with household chores. Sasha appreciates having the spending money, but she views this arrangement as uncomfortably transactional. She is willing to do her part around the house independently of whether she's paid for it. Sasha's parents are ethical egoists who think that one's only moral obligation is to promote one's own well-being, and they view altruistic impulses as the mark of a sucker. So, they see Sasha's growing interest in fairness and reciprocity as a worrisome development. They decide that whenever they suspect that Sasha has decided to do a particular chore without being told to, they will assign her that chore so that she does not have the opportunity to act solely on her altruistic impulse.

Obviously, there's a lot in this scenario that is bad for Sasha. Most obviously, her parents are deliberately undermining her. What's important for our purposes, though, is the way that undermining works. By assigning Sasha to do what she would have done anyway, Sasha's parents ensure that when Sasha helps out, she is never doing so solely out of generosity. Of course, Sasha can still be generous, but she is robbed of an opportunity to manifest her generosity in her actions, or at least to manifest it in the same way she could if being helpful were her sole motivating reason. So, if one were to tally up the things that are bad for Sasha in this scenario, one would not stop at her parents' underhanded scheming. In addition, one would include her loss of an opportunity to do something with a particular meaning that she cares about being able to express, something which is *meaningful* to her.

This particular bad-making feature of the situation is reproduced in more realistic cases. Now consider:

> **Dish Duty**
> Sasha is a high school student whose parents provide her with an allowance in return for helping with household chores. Sasha appreciates having the spending money, but she views this arrangement as uncomfortably transactional. She is willing to do her part around the house independently of whether she's paid for it. One day during dinner, Sasha resolves to do the dishes. Dish duty typically goes to her brother, but he's been having a rough week and Sasha knows he'll appreciate the favor. Unfortunately, before Sasha has a chance to do the dishes, her parents assign that chore to her. They've been frustrated with her brother's habit of leaving the sponge in the sink and would rather Sasha take over than have to remind her brother about the sponge again tonight.

Much about this situation is better for Sasha than in **Bad Parents**. But even though her parents are well-meaning and could not have known that she'd resolved to do her

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brother this favor, their assignment of dish duty nonetheless puts Sasha in a position where doing the dishes no longer has the same meaning. Even if she knows her parents did so accidentally, Sasha might reasonably regret not having the opportunity to do the dishes solely out of generosity (or not being able to successfully express generosity in her dish-doing). Of course, to point out that there is this bad-making feature of her parents' actions in **Dish Duty** is not to say that Sasha's parents wrong her all-things-considered. Nonetheless, it's interesting and important that ordinary actions can have this cost.

We think that what happens in both **Bad Parents** and **Dish Duty** is that Sasha suffers a loss to her deliberative autonomy. Her parents change her context such that they remove an opportunity for her to express herself in a particular way. Specifically, we think the loss works like this. Sasha's parents' chore assignment gives her a new *justifying* reason to do the dishes: something like "this is my chore" or "my parents told me to do this" is now part of what counts in favor of doing the dishes. Now that this new justifying reason is on the scene, Sasha's possible set of *motivating* reasons changes as well. She might act only on the reasons she originally took to justify doing the dishes, only on her reasons to do her chores, or on a combination of the two. But given this change in the available motivating reasons, her action cannot have the same Scanlonian meaning it did before. If Sasha acts only on the reasons she had previously taken to justify doing the dishes, she is now conspicuously not acting on her reasons to do her chores. So, what would have been an action that manifests generosity to her brother now manifests indifference to her parents' authority. This has the very same structure as the case discussed earlier, where attending lunch with your friend only because you want to manifests indifference to your promissory obligations. So, it's no longer possible for Sasha's action to have the meaning it would have had prior to getting assigned chore duty. To return to our example of bringing a gift when you're invited to dinner, it's as if on the way to your acquaintance's home, the local customs change so that gift-giving is now the default.

These cases illustrate that our ability to communicate Scanlonian meaning is vulnerable to a type of interference that other kinds of communication are not. Sasha can still communicate in words and she can still communicate with actions that have a conventionally recognized, linguistic-like meaning (she might give her brother a hug). These kinds of communication don't run through her motivating reasons. In contrast, Scanlonian meaning does run through our motivating reasons, and our possible set of motivating reasons is affected by what justifying reasons there are, so our ability to communicate with Scanlonian meaning is vulnerable to others' ability to change the circumstances of our decision in ways that change the justifying reasons we're confronted with.

There is a potential worry about our explanation of what's going on in **Dish Duty** that needs to be addressed before moving forward. Why can't Sasha just act from her previous motivations? It may seem possible that, despite her new justifying reason, she could still act from the very same motivations. This may be, but it doesn't follow that Sasha's action can have the same meaning as before. Recall Scanlon's lunch with a friend: the meaning of one's actions is not determined *only* by what motivates them, but also by what *doesn't* motivate them. Before her parents assigned her dishes,

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failing to act from a sense of duty would have no expressive significance to Sasha, as she was not duty-bound to do dishes. However, now, if she is to avoid manifesting rejection of her parents' authority, she *must* act from duty.

One might grant this but note that Sasha may still be able to act from duty *and* generosity. Wouldn't that have a close enough meaning to acting from generosity alone? We offer three responses. First, even if Sasha can maintain the self-facing expressive function of her action (*she* still knows she was being generous), she now has a more difficult time preserving the intended other-facing function. After all, absent additional explanation, Sasha's brother and parents will assume she is doing the dishes because she was told to. She might overcome this by telling her family, "Just so you know, I was going to do the dishes anyway!" but this risks coming across as objectionable moral score-keeping. At the very least, the change in Sasha's context has created an interpretive burden.

Second, we sometimes care about the "purity" of intentions. For an extreme case, suppose your partner tells you "I married you for two reasons. First, I love you. And second, right before I met you, I flipped a coin and told myself I'd get married to the next person I see if it comes up heads, which it did!" In this case, your partner's decision to marry you was overdetermined, but you might wish that your partner married you *only* for love, or, at least, that had they not loved you they wouldn't have married you. But you lose this counterfactual dependence in both the marriage and Sasha cases of mixed motivation.

Lastly, we shouldn't take for granted that Sasha *can* still act out of generosity after her chore assignment. Generosity still counts in favor of doing dishes, but it might not motivate Sasha in the same way. What motivates us is not voluntaristically chosen (Audi 2021; Ross 1930).[8] Nor are one's motivations set by a post-hoc explanation of what *might* have driven one to act. Instead, an action's meaning is determined by the considerations which, in fact, moved the agent to action. It appears possible that the injunction from Sasha's parents may, as a matter of pure psychological contingency, motivate her in her dishwashing. Insofar as this new motivation swamps or boxes out her previous motivation, then the meaning of her action is affected. It's easier to see how this might happen if one ratchets up the stakes. Suppose that the context of Sasha's action was changed not because of chore duty but because a burglar broke into her home and told her, "If you do not wash the dishes immediately, I will kill you and your family." Sure, it is *possible* for Sasha to act from multiple motivations; she might act so as to save her family's lives *and* to express generosity towards her brother. However, we contend that such a motivational profile is unlikely. More likely, Sasha will simply find herself compelled to wash the dishes because of the threat. It is obvious that **Dish Duty** is far less dramatic than the example just given. However, if one concedes that great stakes might significantly shift motivations, then it seems at least plausible to think smaller stakes might shift motivations to *some* degree. And that is all that is required for affecting an action's meaning.

[8] For the purposes of this article, we assume this popular and plausible position. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that this is a matter of continued debate. For a defense of the view that motivations can be voluntaristically chosen in *some* sense, see Achs (2020) and Keeling (2023).

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None of this logically entails that Sasha is any worse off because of her parents' demand. She might successfully explain her prior motivations without coming across as petty. Perhaps her case is not one where purity of motivation matters, either to her or her family. And, lastly, maybe she is psychologically constituted such that her new reasons do not overshadow her desire to act from generosity. All of this is possible. But the opposite is possible too. And so, if one accepts that expressive meaning is something we should care about, then this gives us a reason to be careful when changing the context of another's expressive actions.

So far in this section, we've identified an under-discussed threat to deliberative autonomy. One might reasonably wonder, though, whether it's a *big* threat. After all, it might not be a big deal to Sasha whether she can express generosity on this particular occasion, or whether she does so by way of Scanlonian meaning or some other means. Whether this loss really matters depends on how we fill in the details of the cases, and we chose to leave them open for the sake of focusing attention on the mechanism by which the loss takes place. Nonetheless, we think that this threat to deliberative autonomy is sometimes quite significant. That's because, as we argued earlier, sometimes our ability to express a particular Scanlonian meaning is what makes an action meaningful.

To help articulate why losing the opportunity to express certain parts of ourselves in action might be important, we turn to Mill. While propounding the value of the free exchange of ideas, Mill notices the risk that our beliefs can get isolated from our day-to-day reasoning, thereby diminishing something about us as agents. In his words:

> "To what an extent doctrines intrinsically fitted to make the deepest impression upon the mind may remain in it as dead beliefs, without being ever realized in the imagination, the feelings, or the understanding, is exemplified by the manner in which the majority of believers hold the doctrines of Christianity […] All Christians believe that the blessed are the poor and humble, and those who are ill-used by the world; that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven; that they should judge not, lest they be judged […] But in the sense of that living belief which regulates conduct, they believe these doctrines just up to the point to which it is usual to act upon them […] They have an habitual respect for the sound of them, but no feeling which spreads from the words to the things signified, and forces the mind to take them in, and make them conform to the formula. Whenever conduct is concerned, they look round for Mr. A and B to direct them how far to go in obeying Christ" (Mill 2015: 42-3).[9]

[9] Obviously, one might disagree with Mill about what exactly the moral commitments involved in being a Christian are, or how to adjudicate cases where those commitments conflict with one's other commitments. One might also disagree with Mill's estimate about how common it is for religious beliefs to float free of everyday decision making in the way he describes. Our point in drawing on Mill here isn't about Christianity *per se*; rather it's about his observation that beliefs and values can end up isolated from our actual reasoning processes.

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In the larger context of Mill's argument, this risk is meant to illustrate a way things go wrong in the absence of regularly encountering good faith intellectual disagreement. By being put in a position to entertain doubts about one's core beliefs, or by defending them in conversation with others, one is more likely to feel the force of those beliefs because one has appreciated the arguments for them. This, Mill thinks, makes them less likely to end up isolated from the rest of our practical reasoning. But encountering disagreement is only one way to maintain a belief's efficacy in our practical reasoning. Plausibly, another way to maintain a belief's power in our minds is to seek out opportunities to act so as to express that belief. Saying "I am my brother's keeper" doesn't necessarily direct one's attention to what follows from that in the same way that taking care of one's brothers does. So, if we are concerned to avoid ending up in the situation Mill describes—wherein our commitments are impotent vis-à-vis our actual choices—then we'd be well-served *both* by regularly encountering good faith disagreement and by regularly encountering situations where we act intentionally on reasons that flow from our ideals. Our moral commitments and personal ideals risk becoming untethered from our agency unless we employ them in thought and action.

Seana Shiffrin (2004) makes a similar point in an argument for providing religious accommodations. She notes that one role formal protections for religious practices can play is ensuring that people have opportunities to make religious decisions on religious grounds. For example, suppose that Aditi is considering whether to fast as part of a celebration of Navaratri. Her family values their Hindu identity, but since going away to college Aditi has felt herself feeling more ambivalent about her religious commitments. If Aditi's university has a religious accommodation policy, then Aditi can make this decision just based on her assessment of whether she still identifies as Hindu and what she thinks follows from that commitment. In contrast, if there is no accommodation policy, then other considerations might swamp Aditi's reflection on religious questions. For instance, Aditi might decide not to fast because doing so helps ensure that she'll be feeling her best at the time of an exam. We think our observations about expressive actions help to explain why something would be lost without the accommodation policy. A decision not to fast that had to balance Aditi's introspection about who she is with pragmatic considerations about preparation for her exam wouldn't be as meaningful to her. And as with Mill's worry, the force of this observation doesn't seem to depend on the fact that Aditi is resolving a religious question. If Allyson is deciding whether to fast as part of a political protest, then one might hope for her that she has the opportunity to decide this based on the way she sorts out her political ideals. Similarly for other kinds of commitments that are important to who we are.

Notice that the situation Aditi and Allyson are in parallels Sasha's situation in **Dish Duty**. Their courses' exam schedules change the justifying reasons in a way that has downstream effects on their motivating reasons, which in turn changes the possible meanings of their actions, and thereby affects those actions' meaningfulness to them. So, taken together, Mill's and Shiffrin's points suggest that our interest in the meaning of our actions can be morally weighty. We have reason to seek out or create

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our own opportunities for expressive action and to avoid gratuitous limitations of others' like opportunities. Doing so helps preserve the meaningfulness of our actions and thereby our lives.

5. Implications for Individual Morality

Our argument has had a lot of moving pieces, so let's take stock. Our ability to express ourselves matters. So, we have (*pro tanto*, defeasible) reason not to interfere with others' ability to do so. Sometimes, we express ourselves by performing actions that reveal our motivating reasons. That kind of expression can be particularly meaningful, to us and to others. Like other kinds of expression, our ability to express ourselves in this way depends on context. Often, though, the kind of context relevant to those expressive actions is sensitive to changes in what justifying reasons are available to us. As a result, our reasons not to interfere with others' ability to express themselves extend to being careful not to interfere with the context of their expressive action. This will often mean arranging things so that certain kinds of decisions can be made by focusing on reasons of a certain type (e.g., when religious accommodation policies protect the meaningfulness of actions based on religious reasons).

One might worry that awareness of this fact will be morally paralyzing. Interactions whereby we change the reasons relevant to someone's choices are ubiquitous. As we've argued, this means we frequently risk costs to others' deliberative autonomy. By pointing out these costs, however, we don't mean to suggest that we should let fear permeate all of our social interactions, policing every request, recommendation, or demand, lest we inadvertently rob another of an expressive opportunity. We mean only to suggest there is a level of care owed when engaging with others in ways which are apt to affect their expressive options; we should tread carefully when trekking through the space of reasons. An analogy with giving advice is illuminating here. Giving unsolicited advice can go wrong, e.g., by being unwanted, intrusive, or condescending. But, it needn't follow that we should never offer advice unless we're asked. Instead, we should develop a sensitivity to the ways unsolicited advice can go wrong and be careful when we're tempted to offer it. We think the same is true about actions that risk undermining the meaning or meaningfulness of others' actions. Indeed, one goal of this article is to draw attention to the need for further theorizing about what being appropriately sensitive to this possibility requires.

In the spirit of starting that conversation, we offer some initial thoughts about when it's particularly important to preserve the kinds of expressive opportunities with which we've been concerned. First, opportunities to express something are more important when they are thinner on the ground. Suppose that when you go out to dinner with your parents, they always pay. Against that background, you have fewer opportunities to express reciprocal care. So, your other opportunities to do so take on greater importance. Second, having an opportunity to express something *by revealing your motivating reasons* takes on extra importance when other ways of expressing it are less effective. For example, suppose that in your linguistic community, people routinely say "let's catch up

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sometime" when they run into old acquaintances, whether they actually want to do so or not. If you want to communicate a sincere desire to reconnect, you'll be better served by Scanlonian meaning than linguistic meaning. So, it's particularly important that you have opportunities to do things that could express that desire. Third, the importance of having an expressive opportunity scales with the importance of what is being expressed. It's important to have opportunities to tell your loved ones that you love them; it's less important to have opportunities to inform them of what you had for breakfast. By "importance" here, we mean to be ecumenical between objective conceptions of what's important—fill in your favorite account of the good—and subjective conceptions. Communicating your love for your loved ones might be important because such relationships are a central part of a good life, because your relationships with them are central to your sense of who you are, or—plausibly—both.

With this sense of when it's particularly important to protect expressive opportunities, we're better able to think through when to be wary of interference with expressive options. As we noted above, accommodations for religious practice serve to protect opportunities to express religious commitments. This makes sense in light of our second and third observations above: religious commitments are the kind of thing it's easy to say and so more informative to show, and they're often central to people's self-conceptions. That these kinds of things can be anticipated in advance suggests one further principle about how we should navigate cases where what we do might constrain others' expressive options. Interference is worse when it's more foreseeable. It's one thing if Sasha's desires are news to her parents; it's another if they know she's been on the lookout for opportunities to express her generosity. When they know such opportunities are important to Sasha, there's more of an onus on them to take care to preserve them.

6. Political Implications

In this article, we have focused primarily on cases where one person's actions change the expressive opportunities for another person. That's no accident: we think that susceptibility to this kind of interference is one distinctive feature of expressive action. The context that determines what we can express through words typically involves social facts (like what a linguistic token means around here), while the context that determines what we can express through Scanlonian meaning is often a person-level fact (like whether Sasha has been assigned chore duty). This disanalogy between linguistic expression and expression in action is what gives rise to the moral questions we discussed in the previous section. Nonetheless, we think that systemic features of a society, like the political or economic system in which we live, can also shape what we can express through our actions. We turn our attention to those kinds of cases here, and the ways our arguments in this article might help to illuminate larger, ongoing projects in philosophy. None of what follows is meant as an endorsement of any particular view. Our goal here is just to show that what we've argued has the virtue of fecundity.

First, there is a critique of capitalism, going at least as far back as Marx, that capitalist production infects our motivations and thereby impoverishes

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our lives.[10] In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx laments that under capitalism our fundamental life-activity of productively transforming the external world presents itself to us "merely as a *means* of satisfying a need—the need to maintain [...] physical existence" (1978: 75-6). "Life itself", he continues, "appears only *as a means to life*" (76). In contrast, what would it be for us to produce in a way consistent with our humanity? He states that such a mode of production would be one wherein we affirm ourselves by doing work that directly satisfies the "*human* need" of another (1994: 95). In particularly romantic prose, Marx writes that in working under ideal conditions he would "be felt by you as a complement of your own being, as a necessary part of yourself, and so would know myself to be confirmed in your thought and in your love" (1994: 96).

Of course, much here hangs on Marx's perfectionistic conception of the human good, but one can extract a core which is less robust in its commitments. At least usually, a central good in a human life is engaging in purposeful, productive activity. This activity is especially meaningful when one engages in it to make a difference in one's community—to help others, i.e., to serve "a *human* need." But under capitalist production and a distribution of goods mediated through an impersonal market economy, it becomes quite difficult for us to produce in this way. Or, to bring it around to this article, it becomes quite difficult to engage in productive activity *with this motivation*. We tend to see our working life as a necessary evil, required to do other things that actually bring us fulfillment, or just a way of keeping a roof over our heads. And in this way, what might be an especially meaningful human activity becomes "merely a *means*." If one finds this plausible, then it looks like one can fruitfully employ our analysis here to give additional content to Marx's critique of capitalist society. Capitalism, the thought would go, systematically shifts our justifying reasons for working, and, in doing so, alters our motivating reasons for engaging in productive activity. This, in turn, makes our lives less meaningful.

A second, and related, application concerns questions about the moral limits of markets. Authors like Debra Satz (2012) and Michael Sandel (2013) have argued that the sale of certain goods like organs, sex, and political power has problematic social implications. Our analysis here is well-suited to play a role in explaining why this might be. There are two possible ways one could incorporate what we say into such an argument. First, a society wherein sex, for instance, is sold on a large scale may engender attitudes and norms which change the social meaning of sexual activity from a significant form of connection to something more transactional. Second, such a social context may affect the motivations of those engaging in sexual activity. Each of these might plausibly be seen as a loss of expressive options.

Again, we note that in this article we have not argued for this particular critique of capitalism or these particular views about the moral limits of markets. Our aim in this section isn't to endorse anything specific; rather, we aim to show that the arguments earlier in this article can inform those debates by helping to identify what's at stake.

[10] We'd like to thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging us to consider applying our arguments to this line of thought.

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7. Conclusion

In this article, we've observed that we often express ourselves by revealing our motivating reasons through our actions, and we've noted that opportunities to do this are distinctively fragile. This fragility means that there is a dimension to moral life that's easy to overlook: the way our actions can subtly shape the landscape of reasons available to others, and in doing so, shape the meaning their own actions can bear. When we alter that landscape—deliberately or inadvertently—we sometimes affect not just what others do, but who they are able to be in doing it. Respect for persons, then, calls not only for recognizing others' capacity for autonomous choice, but also for a certain care in preserving their capacity to express themselves through those choices. Attending to this often-invisible background of social interaction is part of what it means to take seriously the idea that we are creatures for whom being understood is a vital good. We owe it to one another to help keep the conditions of that understanding intact.[11]

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