

What Makes Exploitation Wrongful?

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I. INTRODUCTION

Exploitation is among the most basic ways in which people can wrong one another. Despite this, there is still no consensus on what makes it wrongful. Various philosophical accounts have been proposed, yet all of them seem to disappoint in one of two ways. They either capture some clearly wrongful instances of exploitation but fail to appreciate others. Or else they capture all wrongful exploitation but equally condemn some actions not plausibly described as wrongful. In other words, existing analyses of exploitation either under-produce or over-produce what seem to be the required moral judgments.

Nonetheless, each of the existing accounts does seem to get something right. For this reason, there is continuing disagreement concerning what makes exploitation distinctively wrongful. Indeed, the literature appears to have reached an impasse, with some tempted to abandon the search for a unified explanation. Perhaps, what makes exploitation as an act type distinctively wrongful admits of a plurality of explanations.¹

As I see it, however, this suggestion is mistaken. We should not accept a pluralist account of the central wrong-making feature of exploitation. The reason is that a compelling unified account is available after all. The account that I will articulate starts with the same basic concept of exploitation as every other account in the literature. This is the moralized concept of wrongly taking unfair advantage of others. However, my account reduces what makes this act type distinctively wrongful to a single con-

¹ For this suggestion, see Risse and Wollner (2013, 214): “We embrace an ecumenical approach: different conceptions capture independent concerns that nonetheless all fall under the concept of exploitation. There are multiple ways of taking unfair advantage and correspondingly many reasons why it is wrong”. See also chapter 5 of Risse and Wollner (2019).

ception without remainder: to wit, we exploit people when we fail to reciprocate appropriately for the benefits we receive from others, however directly or indirectly.

A pluralist account may seem to have the advantage of better illuminating when a given act of exploitation is especially wrongful (that is to say, when the act in question exhibits a greater number of exploitation's allegedly-many wrong-making features). My elaboration of the reciprocity account will show that this is not really an advantage. The reason is that the reciprocity account has no trouble explaining when a given act of exploitation is especially wrongful. Nor does it struggle to explain other relevant considered judgments. Instead, once it is properly understood, the reciprocity account of exploitation can be shown to capture the force of every other conception to which theorists of exploitation have been attracted, without inheriting their problems. This advantage holds even against the best and most comprehensive alternative conception currently on offer, the domination conception of exploitation elaborated by Nicholas Vrousalis (2023). Or so I shall argue.

II. TWO WAYS OF CONCEIVING REQUIREMENTS OF RECIPROCITY

My central question in this paper is what makes exploitation wrongful. In answer to this question, I will argue that to exploit people is to fail to reciprocate appropriately. Here is the argument for this thesis stated in a nutshell. The moralized concept of exploitation—wrongly taking advantage of others—can be reduced to a single conception of its central wrong-making feature, without remainder. That is because, once it is properly understood, the failure of reciprocity conception contains the essential content of every other conception to which theorists of exploitation have ever been attracted. Moreover, when properly understood, the reciprocity conception has none of the implausible implications that have been alleged against it. Accordingly, it is a failure to reciprocate appropriately, and not the violation of other moral standards, that best explains what makes the act type of exploitation distinctively wrongful.

The line of reasoning that leads to this conclusion starts by distinguishing two conceptions of reciprocity. The first conception, prevalent in the literature on exploitation, is

Reciprocity as (mere) mutual advantage. Cooperative interaction that is in some way beneficial or productive of a surplus

ought to leave everyone who is party to it better off, relative to a baseline of no cooperation.

For reasons that have been stressed by others, this conception cannot plausibly form the core of an account of what makes exploitation wrongful. Most importantly, whenever a person is in danger or otherwise in desperate need of others' help, there will often be numerous ways of extracting grossly disproportionate benefits from her in return for the help she needs. Moreover, interacting with her in such a patently exploitative way will often leave her better off than if she had simply been abandoned to her fate. And yet, the mutually beneficial nature of such transactions does not make them any less exploitative or wrong. Hence a failure to honor reciprocity conceived as mere mutual advantage cannot plausibly account for the wrongful nature of many paradigmatic instances of exploitation.²

There is, however, another distinct conception of reciprocity, which has been mostly overlooked in the philosophical literature on exploitation. This is the conception of

Reciprocity as mutual advantage relative to an appropriate benchmark. Productive cooperative activity ought to benefit everyone relative to an *appropriate* benchmark, as given by the claims that people have independently of the demand for reciprocity.

To illustrate this idea, consider the conception of reciprocity articulated by Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (1999). For Rawls, the relevant benchmark, relative to which social cooperation productive of a surplus must be mutually beneficial, is an *equal* share of the primary goods of social life. That is to say, mutual advantage above the benchmark of equality is both necessary and sufficient to avoid failures of reciprocity. Why is this the case, according to Rawls? It is because in Rawls' theory of justice as fairness, persons are assumed to have a prior, free-standing, and reciprocity-*independent* claim to be considered equals: in particular, equal citizens and equal participants in social cooperation. What this means is that, in arranging productive cooperation, no one has a prior claim to benefit more than others from the rules that ultimately enable it. In light of this prior independent claim to equality, the appropriate benchmark relative to

² This outcome should not be surprising. A conception of reciprocity as mere mutual advantage is congenial even to the egoist. It is therefore unlikely that this conception will turn out to be fundamental to any important part of morality or justice.

which productive cooperation must be mutually beneficial in order to avoid violating reciprocity is an equal distribution of the primary goods of social life. It is precisely this benchmark that is expressed in Rawls' difference principle, which he therefore rightly calls a principle of reciprocity appropriate for a democratic society (2001, 61–65).

However, other accounts of the appropriate benchmark for a conception of reciprocity are also possible, some less and others more egalitarian than the difference principle. The point I wish to make here is simply this. Any plausible conception of reciprocity will take for granted that productive cooperation must be mutually beneficial relative to an appropriate benchmark, as given by the other claims that people have independently of their claim to reciprocity. Whether these claims are understood to be claims to certain (for example, equal) shares, or claims to certain forms of help, or claims to something else will depend on the given context, as well as on the content of our wider moral theory.

With this distinction in hand, I will now argue that a moralized conception of exploitation as *failure of reciprocity, given an appropriate benchmark* will no longer under-produce or over-produce judgments of wrongful exploitation. If I am right about this, then there is a single unified account of the distinctive wrong of exploitation.

III. THE EXPLANATORY POWER OF AN APPROPRIATE RECIPROCITY CONCEPTION

According to critics of the reciprocity conception of exploitation, the absence of reciprocity cannot suffice to make an action or practice an instance of wrongful exploitation because the absence of reciprocity is central to various innocuous social practices. For one thing, note the critics, failures of reciprocity are arguably essential to acts of gift-giving. Yet it seems false to say that accepting a gift without offering one in return is always objectionably exploitative. Similarly, redistributive taxation sometimes assists people who are thoroughly helpless and cannot reciprocate. And yet it would be a mistake to deem redistributive taxation exploitative for this reason. Critics conclude that the reciprocity account of exploitation must be wrong because it is over-inclusive.

This inference is mistaken. It follows only from an implausible conception of reciprocity as mere mutual advantage. However, if exploitation is failure of reciprocity as I have defined it, then neither unreciprocated redistributive taxation nor the practice of gift-giving need be exploitative.

To see this, begin with gift-giving. 1. When a proper gift is made, there is only a unilateral *transfer*—not cooperation productive of a *surplus*. 2.

Moreover, if it really is, morally-speaking, a *gift*, as opposed to something *owed*, then, in the context, there are no relevant background claims defining the benchmark against which everyone *must* benefit, on pain of failing to satisfy a moral requirement. 3. Of course, a gift can *create* a debt, or obligation to reciprocate, *if* it creates a surplus—for example, a fertile relationship of trust or sympathy—from which both parties can benefit in the future. However, in that case, the gift is no longer *simply* a gift. 4. So, I conclude, when the situation is one entirely of gift, the standard of reciprocity does not apply. But, when the situation goes beyond gift to the case of something owed in the context of continuous productive interaction over time, it is the idea of reciprocity relative to an appropriate benchmark that ultimately explains why.

The case of unreciprocated compelled assistance through the tax system is simpler. 1. In a just society, able persons have free-standing and enforceable duties to help those who could not survive without the labor of others. These duties hold quite independently of anyone's claims to reciprocity. So, when a just society deploys redistributive taxation to help people who cannot help themselves, it merely institutionalizes a duty of assistance that holds on other grounds. 2. At the same time, if a recipient of social assistance truly *cannot* reciprocate, then it is not the case that she is morally *required* to do so. Ought implies can, after all. So, once again, the demands of reciprocity do not apply, and the failure to reciprocate is neither here nor there.

Let me now continue with this line of reasoning to explain why the reciprocity conception, when properly understood, does not *under-produce* judgments of wrongful exploitation. On the contrary, I will argue that the reciprocity conception contains the essential content of every other conception to which theorists of exploitation have been attracted: namely, exploitation as failure of beneficence and/or a duty not to harm,³ exploitation as instrumentalizing vulnerability,⁴ exploitation as involuntary or forced transfer,⁵ exploitation as distributive injustice,⁶ exploitation as rights violation,⁷ and finally, exploitation as failure of respect, and, in particular, as 'dividend of servitude' or form of domination.⁸

³ For a defense, see Buchanan (1984). For a comprehensive discussion of all of these views, see Vrousalis (2023, 11–34 and 66–90).

⁴ For variants of this view, see Goodin (1985) and Wood (1995).

⁵ For examples, see Reiman (1987) and Peffer (1990).

⁶ See for example Roemer (1985) and Reiff (2013).

⁷ See for example Steiner (1984).

⁸ Vrousalis (2023, 11–34 and 66–90).

Exploitation as failure of beneficence

Consider first the idea that what makes exploitation wrongful is a failure of the duty of beneficence. 1. The reciprocity conception contains the (relevant) content of this conception because to engage in mutually beneficial conduct with others, relative to an appropriate baseline, is, *eo ipso*, to *benefit* them. 2. At the same time, when a duty of beneficence is *also* in play—for example, in the standard Rescue Case⁹—then, on the exploitation-as-failure-of-reciprocity conception, we can criticize your exploitative conduct toward a disaster victim for not one but two reasons. First, you haven't done your duty to help a person in need. In addition, however, you have exploited a person by failing to appropriately reciprocate for the interaction-generated benefits that *you* received. Accordingly, there is no reason to replace the reciprocity account with the beneficence view.

Exploitation as instrumentalizing vulnerability

For a similar reason, we should reject the idea that what makes exploitation wrongful is the mere fact of making use of other people's vulnerability. After all, towing broken cars or performing surgery for a living is not in general impermissible.¹⁰ What matters is whether all parties benefit from the service, relative to a baseline of how they ought to have been treated prior to any further cooperative interaction productive of a surplus.

Exploitation as harming others opportunistically

What about the idea that exploitation is, rather than a failure to reciprocate, a matter of opportunistically harming people? The first thing to note is that it is far from clear that every opportunistic way of setting back another person's interests is morally objectionable. For example, it may sometimes be permissible to invent a sports technology that can outcompete one's rivals only to require payment from its would-be users later. However, the second thing to note is that it is the reciprocity conception that explains why such a judgment is correct, if and when it is: namely, because the benchmark giving the set of claims relative to which people must be made better off does not include the claim not to be outcompeted

⁹ "Pit—*A* and *B* are alone in the desert. *A* finds *B* lying in the bottom of a pit. *A* offers *B* costless rescue, on condition that *B* works for *A* for \$1/day for the rest of her life. *B* accepts" (Vrousalis 2023, 15).

¹⁰ Arneson (2016, 10). For discussion, see Vrousalis (2023, 81–82).

in the relevant domain. When that is so, creating and exchanging useful things for compensation need not be objectionably exploitative.

Exploitation as violation of distributive justice

What about the idea that what makes exploitation wrongful is the violation of a patterned principle of distributive justice? 1. Once again, the reciprocity conception contains the essential content of this conception. For the benchmark against which productive cooperation must leave everyone better off on the reciprocity conception can be *given* partly by a patterned idea of distributive justice. Recall for instance the conception of reciprocity embodied in Rawls' difference principle. According to one formulation of this principle, mutual advantage above the benchmark of distributive equality is both necessary and sufficient to avoid failures of reciprocity.

2. At the same time, the reciprocity conception succeeds where the distributive justice conception fails. For it is perhaps true that—at t_1 —the hard-working Ant, who has collected ample resources for the winter, is not unjustly better off than the happy-go-lucky Grasshopper who spent the summer living carefree. However, when in light of Grasshopper's vulnerability, Ant entices Grasshopper into productive cooperation on highly skewed terms at t_2 , then, depending on the wider truth about distributive justice, Grasshopper may well have a claim to be viewed as an equal participant to that *subsequent* cooperation. In addition, in sufficiently dire circumstances, Grasshopper may have a claim to be assisted in some material way prior to and independently of this forward-looking, reciprocity-related claim. If so, then Grasshopper *can* be exploited, just as long as his cooperative venture with Ant leaves him no better off relative to the benchmark of how he should have been treated prior to being inducted into productive cooperation at t_2 . I conclude that, when properly understood, the reciprocity conception of exploitation explains everything captured by the idea of exploitation as distributive injustice and more.

Exploitation as failure of respect

What about the idea that exploitation is at bottom a failure of respect? Here, we ought to distinguish treating people with respect or 'being respectful'—which is merely one of the claims that people can have on us—and respecting or honoring people's moral claims, whatever these are. However, if we understand the idea of exploitation-as-failure-of-respect in the latter, more capacious terms, then the reciprocity conception that

I have outlined in this paper will capture the central thrust of this abstract idea, too. After all, to exploit someone on the reciprocity conception is to fail to respect their moral claim a) to benefit from productive cooperation, b) relative to an appropriate benchmark as given by their reciprocity-independent claims. Moreover, if we replace the word 'claims' with the word 'rights' in the sentence immediately above, then a similar conclusion will apply to the notion that what makes exploitation wrongful is the violation of people's rights, whatever these are. In short, the reciprocity conception contains the central thrust of this abstract idea as well as the abstract idea that exploitation is a failure of respect.

Now, theorists of exploitation have been attracted to two other conceptions that are closely connected: exploitation as involuntary or forced transfer, and exploitation as the product of servitude or domination. What makes these conceptions especially interesting is that they can likewise claim to capture the thrust of various competing ideas. Thus, people who force others to work for them, or make them their servants, typically also harm their victims opportunistically, fail to provide them morally required assistance, take advantage of their victim's vulnerability, fail to benefit their victim's appropriately, and fail to respect the moral claims and rights of others. Notwithstanding these observations, I believe that these conceptions fail to capture the central wrong-making feature of exploitation, and for the same basic reasons.

Exploitation as forced transfer

To see this, consider first the idea of exploitation as involuntary or forced transfer. All around the world, millions of workers have been left with no reasonable alternative but to accept a needlessly dangerous job in exchange for appallingly low wages. These workers all surely count as exploited. Moreover, it does not matter who or what made it case that they have no acceptable alternative to laboring under these conditions. Perhaps it was the callous indifference of the so-called welfare state, or perhaps it was an unscrupulous sweatshop owner using violent threats or worse. Either way, countless workers around the world are forced to serve the will of some employer or another, on pain of failing to meet their own and their dependents' basic needs. And yet it would be a mistake to infer that workers are exploited *just because* they are forced to do so.

1. After all, as I have already mentioned, it is not in general impermissible for a society to ask every able adult person to contribute their time and effort to meeting the set of social tasks that are properly regarded as

shared responsibilities—tasks such as educating the young, treating the sick, caring for the elderly, and so on. Moreover, since every able person has a fundamental interest in being free to choose from a range of occupations, it can be appropriate for the state to implement this contributory duty indirectly, through the design of the tax system, redistributive institutions, and other elements of the basic structure that will together determine the labor allocation choices that will realistically be left open to people. In evaluating a society's economic structure, then, the central question is not whether anyone will ever be made to contribute to any social purpose whatsoever, nor whether anyone will ever be left with no reasonable alternative but to contribute. Instead, the question is whether in making provision for meeting the properly shared tasks of citizenship and apportioning fairly the burdens of discharging these responsibilities, the basic economic and social structure a) gives due weight to the free-standing claims of able persons as well as the claims of people who need the labor of others, b) while also ensuring that everyone benefits appropriately from mutually productive cooperation over and above this baseline. In short, it is not the case that having to contribute is sufficient for being a victim of exploitation.

2. However, being forced to contribute disproportionately is also not necessary for exploitation. To see this, one need only think of exploitative intimate relationships. With enough selflessness, stubborn loyalty, and blind love that goes unrequited, a person can be led to take on the lion's share of the emotional labor and financial cost of maintaining an intimate relationship *simply* by falling for an unfeeling partner who knowingly takes advantage of them for this very purpose. To exploit such a selfless loving person, no one needs to be *forced* to do anything, if what this means is lacking any reasonable alternative. All that is necessary is that the caring person come to care deeply about the uncaring person, and that this attitude is not manifestly and appropriately reciprocated. I suggest that only the reciprocity conception can make sense of this—perhaps the most common and most hurtful—form of interpersonal exploitation.

Exploitation as domination

Consider finally the view that exploitation is a form of servitude or domination. On Vrousalis' original articulation, domination consists in the unilateral direction of another person's purposive activity or labor, and is, for this reason, *pro tanto* wrongful. On this view, exploitation is best understood as a dividend of servitude, consisting of the unreciprocated

labor that results when the exploitative desires of a dominator are actualized. Can this conception better capture the reality of exploitative intimate relationships? I suggest that the answer is ‘no’, because the view is subject to a dilemma that is unlikely to be resolved.

To see the dilemma, consider once more the exploited, deeply caring person and ask the following question. Must it be true of every such person that her will is ‘unilaterally directed’ by the partner that she cares for? Or is it possible to take advantage of a person’s love and selfless character without ever *making* her do anything? It seems to me that this is eminently possible.¹¹ Intimate exploitation does not require unilaterally directing the selfless partner. On the contrary, all that is required is a) letting her act on *her* loving generous desires b) while also failing ever to reciprocate appropriately.

If this is right, however, then the domination account faces a dilemma. It can admit that the loving labors of an exploited party to an intimate relationship need not be unilaterally directed by her selfish partner. But in that case, it will have failed to capture one of the paradigmatic forms of interpersonal exploitation. Alternatively, the account can be revised to say that *whenever* a person wants and labors for the approval of someone else, their purposive activity should be seen as ‘unilaterally directed’ by an alien will, at least until a procedure is established to allocate the approval through an appropriately omni-lateral will. In this case, however, an implication of the account will be that exploitation and servitude are omnipresent in human life, and likely to be permanently so.

The explanatory power of the reciprocity account

As I see it, there is a better account of exploitation, with similar explanatory power and none of the revisionary implications. On this account, to exploit someone is to fail to reciprocate appropriately. Meanwhile, forcing someone into a productive cooperative exchange, or dominating them, is one standard *means* of exploiting them. Indeed, on the reciprocity account, it is possible to say considerably more than this. Namely, the presence of power and vulnerability is very often what makes exploitation-as-

¹¹ It is of course true that some exploitative intimate relationships are built on forms of domination. However, the question facing the defender of the domination account of exploitation is whether every possible exploitative relationship must be like this. After all, on the domination account, unless a person’s will is unilaterally directed by her selfish partner, she cannot be exploited. (*Pace Vrousalis (2023)*, when “Werther and Charlotte effectively agree that Charlotte be impoverished and Werther be enriched” (18), it is not the case that Charlotte can be said to be exploited *if* exploitation requires unilateral direction of another person’s will.)

failure-of-reciprocity possible. Moreover, exercising unaccountable power over people in a successful effort to exploit them constitutes a failure of respect in part *because* it is exploitative. And yet, people can count as exploited even if they are not forced to participate in their own exploitation, and even if they are not dominated—just in case they do not benefit from productive cooperative activity relative to an appropriate benchmark setting out how they should be treated independently of the demands of reciprocity.

IV. THE REAL BUT LIMITED SIGNIFICANCE OF EXPLOITATION

Let me now summarize what I think follows from these observations. First, it is not the case that there is a variety of ways in which exploitation can be wrong. On the contrary, the distinctive wrongness of this act type consists in the failure to reciprocate appropriately.

However, this is not to say particular *acts* that are exploitative cannot be wrong in several different ways. For example, if I get you to work in my sweatshop at gunpoint, then this act is wrong, and it is wrong for several reasons. One reason is that I fail to help you—when really I should. Another reason is that I wrongly force you to work for me—when I shouldn't force you to do anything. A third reason is that, by forcing you to work for me, I exploit you, because I benefit from our productive cooperation at your expense, relative to an appropriate benchmark defined by all of your other claims.

And yet, even though the act of getting you to work in my sweatshop at gunpoint can be, and indeed is, especially wrongful, it can be especially wrongful other than because it is (especially) exploitative: perhaps I pay you just below an equal share of the proceeds of our labor. This particular act will then be especially wrongful for other reasons—in this case, because it involves placing particularly obscene restrictions on your liberty. Its wrongness as an instance of exploitation will be, by contrast, comparatively modest.

More generally, many seriously-wrongful exploitative acts—from robbing people at gunpoint to holding wages down by threatening capital flight—are simultaneously act tokens of several distinct wrongful act types. Such acts can therefore be doubly or triply wrongful for reasons besides the fact that they are exploitative. For instance, such acts can exploit by means of wrongly threatening the use of deadly force, or exploit while dominating workers when they ought to have been given a vote. In

such cases, the exploitative acts at issue are seriously wrongful for a plurality of reasons. Accordingly, there is no need to say that every action that is exploitative is wrongful only or even primarily because it is exploitative. Nor should we say that actually existing capitalism is unjust only or primarily because it is exploitative.¹² Economic structures that are rightly characterized as exploitative can simultaneously be even more seriously unjust for other reasons.

Having said this, it is perfectly appropriate to focus on identifying modes of exploitation when evaluating existing and possible economic systems. After all, as I have argued in this essay, economic systems that enable exploitation thereby countenance some people wrongly taking unfair advantage of other people's labor. Moreover, economic systems such as slavery, feudalism, and capitalism typically enable exploitation by making workers dependent on socially much more privileged actors. Thus, it will normally also be appropriate to focus on how institutionalized relations of dependence facilitate exploitation understood as unreciprocated labor flow. Indeed, in performing such analyses, theorists of domination can even help themselves to the reciprocity conception of what makes structurally mediated exploitation wrongful: to wit, the social failure to institutionalize appropriate relations of reciprocity. The one thing that theorists of domination ought not to say, however, is that exploitation is wrongful because it is always and everywhere a form of servitude. For servitude is distinct from and goes beyond the central wrong of exploitation.

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¹² The subtitle of Vrousalis' *Exploitation as Domination is What Makes Capitalism Unjust*. The book argues that exploitation (conceived as domination) is what makes capitalism unjust.

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