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ARTICLES

Cratics, Control, and Moral Reality: Toward a Praxeological Ethics of Coercive Orders

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The first two cratics articles (Taghizadegan and Otto 2015, 2016) extended praxeology beyond catallactics: Market exchange studies action induced by offers; cratics studies action induced by threats. The previous articles' proposal exposed a fault line: The line between offer and threat cannot rest on whether refusal is costless, since many declined offers forgo a valued opportunity; nor can it be drawn by importing a finished ethical theory into the first step of classification. This article sets cratics on firmer ground by separating three layers that the original formulation compressed into a single definition. The first layer is formal praxeology: Actors use promises of goods and bads to alter the conduct of others. The second is institutional: Control, title, recognized baselines, law, and legitimacy decide which claims over means an order treats as rightful or expected. The third is ethical: Only an account of human nature, property, responsibility, and full humanity can judge whether a cratic intervention is justified. David F. Reid's (2018) control-based critique is accepted as a necessary correction to the first layer, though not a substitute for the other two. Control is indispensable to the structure of threat; rightful control is an institutional and ethical question that no attention to factual control will settle. The reward is a theory of coercive orders in which legitimacy economizes on enacted violence, yielding both genuine peace and the standing possibility of hidden domination. Liberalism, rightly understood, does not aim to minimize all coercion. Its target is narrower and harder to see: the unjust cratic kind of coercion.

Economics became rigorous by narrowing its attention. It did not set out to explain every human motive, every duty, and every social bond at once. In the Austrian tradition, it concentrated on purposeful action under scarcity and, within that field, above all on catallactics: interpersonal exchange by means of offers. The narrowing was fruitful: It yielded a theory of prices, capital, money, interest, entrepreneurship, and market coordination without first having to settle anthropology, theology, political philosophy, or moral psychology.

The price of that success was an asymmetry. Peaceful exchange received a precise vocabulary; violence, threat, command, and domination did not. They entered the analysis mostly as disturbances of the market order, as ethical failures, or as political facts to be deplored and then bracketed. Yet for most of recorded history, and for much of the history of modern institutional life, human action has not been coordinated by offers alone. It has been

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coordinated by command, by fear, by force, by the memory of force, and by the standing expectation that force will follow if certain lines are crossed. An economics that describes only the half of social life conducted through attraction leaves the half conducted via threat to moralists and to power.

The two earlier articles on the praxeology of coercion were meant to repair this asymmetry. "Praxeology of Coercion: Catallactics vs. Cratics" (Taghizadegan and Otto 2015) introduced cratics as the study of threat-based interpersonal action. "The Praxeology of Coercion: A New Theory of Violence Cycles" (Taghizadegan and Otto 2016) drew an analogy between monetary cycles and violence cycles: As uncovered promises of payment can generate booms and busts in the monetary sphere, uncovered or overextended threats can generate similar cycles in the sphere of power. The ambition behind both articles was not a theory of crime or of government, but a systematic extension of praxeology to the negative side of interpersonal action.

The governing intuition holds. A man can induce the action of another by promising to improve his situation or by promising to worsen it. Offers and threats are not identical, yet they are structurally comparable. A backed offer rests on the ability to deliver a good; a backed threat rests on the ability to impose or withhold a bad. Wealth, on this reading, is the capacity to make credible promises of value; power is the capacity to make credible promises of damage. In a developed society, both become liquid. Money makes offers broadly transferable across persons, ends, and times. Organized force, law, bureaucracy, reputation, and legitimacy make threats broadly transferable in the same way.

Why Cratics Needs a Third Step

The original formulation (Taghizadegan and Otto 2015) carried unresolved problems. First, it defined a catallactic offer as an initiative that can be refused without cost, and a cratic initiative as one that cannot (300–301). In ordinary language, this captures something real. "I will give you money for your watch" and "Your money or your life" do seem to differ precisely in that the first initiative can be refused while the second cannot be refused without an imposed loss. David F. Reid's (2018) objection is decisive against the surface formula, but the objection requires a qualification. Reid, observing that declining an offer can also carry a cost, so that cost cannot draw the line between offer and threat, proposed control over means in its place. Not every refused proposal forgoes utility: An offer of something the recipient does not value may have no opportunity cost at all. The defect is logical rather than universal. Costless refusal was proposed as a necessary feature of every offer, yet many ordinary offers present a valued improvement. The buyer who declines a desirable house and the patient who declines useful treatment may forgo genuine utility without having been threatened. One such counterexample is enough. A forgone gain and an imposed deterioration are not the same thing, and "cost" is too coarse a measure to mark the difference.

A second problem lies one step deeper. Robert Nozick's (1969) analysis and Hillel Steiner's (1975) account show that distinguishing offers from threats presupposes a baseline. That baseline need not be moralized. It may be the statistically normal or predicted course of events, an institutionally recognized expectation, or a standard of rightful treatment. The danger for praxeology is therefore not baseline reasoning as such. It is leaving the baseline unstated or letting a contested moral baseline decide the first formal classification. In that case cratics ceases to be an extension of praxeology and becomes a conclusion of political philosophy wearing praxeological dress. The task is to assign different baselines to the layers where they do legitimate work rather than try to make one baseline settle them all.

The pressure is not merely hypothetical. Dawid Megger and Igor Wysocki's (2022) recent reconstruction of coercion for Austrian economics presses on the same bruise from another side. They reject definitions of voluntary exchange that quietly assume libertarian property rights, and they propose a nonmoralized, intention-based account of coercion rooted in speech act theory. Their warning is well taken: If cratics simply repeats the old language of costless refusal, it inherits the old objection. But if coercion is reduced to the coercer's intention alone, the opposite danger opens. The structure of threat involves intention, and it also involves control over means, expected bads, recognized claims, and the institutional setting in which the recipient reads what is at stake. Intention is necessary for the communicative act. It is not yet a theory of coercive order.

The remedy is not to abandon cratics but to take apart the question the single definition had fused. The offer-threat line was asked to do three jobs at once: to describe an action, to locate it in an order of recognized claims, and to pronounce on its justice. Each job belongs to a different layer.

The first is the formal praxeological layer. Here action is described in terms of ends, means, preferences, uncertainty, promises, expectations, backing, bluffing, goods, and bads. An actor seeks to alter another's conduct by changing the consequences the other expects from it, whether through a promised benefit or a promised harm. This layer stays thin, descriptive, and faithful to subjective value theory; it may speak of control as a fact and as a belief, but never as a right.

The second is the institutional layer. Here we ask which actor controls which means, which control is recognized, which claims are stabilized by law or custom, and which baselines an order treats as normal. Reid's (2018) category of control belongs partly here and partly to the formal layer, and it explains why a single surface grammar can be an offer in one setting and a threat in another. The moment we ask whether a control claim is rightful, the analysis has already left praxeology for the legal and moral order.

The third is the ethical layer. Here we ask whether a given act of control, threat, punishment, defense, taxation, or resistance is justified. Subjective preference cannot answer this. The answer requires an account of human nature, sociality, embodiment, will, property, responsibility, and human flourishing. The guiding question is whether an objective ethics can be developed without surrendering the methodological insight of subjective value theory. The position defended here is that subjective value theory is an epistemic method and not a metaphysical denial of objective value. Praxeology can show how human beings act under their own valuations; it cannot, by itself, decide what they ought to value or whose claims they ought to respect. An ethics of human action, in turn, cannot ignore the praxeological structure of choice, scarcity, and interpersonal inducement that it proposes to judge.

What follows from the three layers is a revised cratics. The old shorthand, which called a threat an offer that cannot be refused, misleads at the decisive point. A threat is an attempt to induce action by making an expected bad conditional on noncompliance, often through interference with means the recipient controls. Coercive orders, in turn, are not measured by the volume of violence they enact. They are orders in which credible threats, often institutionalized and legitimized, shape action at scale. Legitimacy is therefore ambivalent: It can reduce actual violence by making threats credible without repeated enforcement, and it can hide violence by turning domination into ordinary expectation.

This article is a bridge rather than a complete ethical treatise. It argues that cratics grows scientifically stronger when it accepts the control critique and ethically more serious when it stops confusing praxeological classification with moral judgment.

Reconstructing Cratics

The starting point is Misesian: Human action is purposeful behavior (Mises 1940, 1949). The actor is dissatisfied with an expected state of affairs, imagines a preferable one, and employs means under uncertainty to approach it. Economic value is not a property resting in objects but the actor's appraisal of a thing, service, or action as relevant to his ends. Carl Menger's (1871) theory of goods made this precise: A thing becomes a good where there is a human need, a causal relation between the thing and the satisfaction of that need, knowledge of the relation, and command over the thing. Marginal utility then explains why units of a good are ranked by their contribution to the actor's marginal ends.

The same structure runs in the negative. Human beings do not only pursue goods; they avoid bads. A bad, praxeologically, is not an object harmful in itself but a thing, event, or action the actor expects to move him away from a state he prefers. Injury, imprisonment, humiliation, the loss of property or standing, the suffering of those one loves: Any of these can function as a bad once it

enters the actor's ranking as a state to be avoided. Bodily violence is the most obvious case and for that reason the easiest to mistake for the whole, but the negative side of action is wider than the fist.

Interpersonal action begins when one actor treats another's action as a means. In catallactics, *A* induces *B* by offering a good: *A* promises to transfer or perform something *B* is expected to prefer to his next-best alternative. In cratics, *A* induces *B* by threatening a bad: *A* promises to impose, prolong, or withhold relief from something *B* is expected to prefer to avoid. Both forms point to the future; both turn on expectation; both can be sincere or deceptive, backed or unbacked. The symmetry is real, and it drives the whole analogy.

However, it should not be overdrawn. Catallactic and cratic action are neither morally nor empirically equivalent. An offer needs the recipient to see a gain in compliance; a threat needs him to see a loss in refusal. The one works through the attraction of an improvement, the other through the fear of a deterioration. Both can be rational from the initiator's side, and they build different social worlds out of the same human material.

Several analogies from the earlier articles survive and deserve a more careful restatement.

The first is backing. A promise is backed when the promisor can and will deliver what he promises. The buyer's money backs his offer; the seller's inventory backs his. The robber's weapon, his accomplices, his reputation, or his office back his threat. An unbacked offer made knowingly is fraud; an unbacked threat is a bluff. The pathologies of catallactics and of cratics are themselves mirror images.

The second analogy is the direction of testing, which the earlier articles noticed but did not exploit. An offer is tested by acceptance: If I offer to pay and the seller accepts, my capacity to pay becomes visible; if he refuses, my backing may stay untested. A threat is tested by refusal: If the victim complies, the threat stays potential; if he refuses, the threat-maker must either impose the bad or stand exposed as a bluffer. This asymmetry is the hinge of the whole cratic theory of power. It is why an order can rest on very little enacted violence. The more reliably threats are accepted, the less often they must be carried out, and the cheaper the order becomes to run.

The third analogy is the contrast between wealth and power as capacities. Wealth is the expected ability to make backed offers, power the expected ability to make backed threats. Money raises the liquidity of wealth, since it can be offered to many people, for many ends, at many times. Organized coercive capacity raises the liquidity of power the same way: It can be aimed at many subjects, for many commands, over a long time horizon. A single strong man holds illiquid power. A bureaucracy with police, courts, prisons, taxes, files, and legitimacy holds liquid power, and can spend it without lifting a hand.

The fourth analogy is the cycle. Where power promises are extended past their backing, a violence cycle analogous to a credit cycle appears. The analogy to fractional-reserve banking is inexact and worth stating with care. A bank can issue more immediate claims than it can redeem so long as not all claimants demand redemption at once. A ruler, gang, cartel, or state can issue more threats than it can enforce so long as not all subjects test enforcement at once. The disanalogy lies in the trigger: A bank run needs only claimants who each want to be paid; a run on power needs refusers who each risk being punished first. Power is overextended when compliance rests on expectations that simultaneous refusal would falsify. The visible order looks most stable precisely where no one wishes to be the first to test it. The expected harm to the first refuser may be high enough that sequential testing never begins, even where the order could not punish everyone. A run on power may therefore require coordination or simultaneous refusal; weak backing does not expose itself. Let enough actors doubt the backing together, and a run becomes possible. The monetary side of this analogy is developed in Taghizadegan and Otto (2016).

This much already suggests a theory of social order, and a warning against a common measurement error. Peace is not the same condition everywhere. It may mean that interaction is overwhelmingly catallactic. It may also mean that cratic claims have become so credible, so routine, or so legitimate that enacted violence is rare. A prison is quiet, and so is an occupied country, and so is a commercial republic; the quiet means something different in each, and the difference is exactly what an event count cannot discern.

Modernity tends to measure violence by events: homicides, assaults, wars, riots, executions. The measures are indispensable, and the findings are real. Steven Pinker's (2012) history of declining violence, Manuel Eisner's (2001) work on the long fall of European homicide, and the broader literature on state formation, manners, and self-control document genuine civilizing processes. Still, counting enacted violence misses the stock of credible threats that keeps some societies peaceful. A monopoly of force can reduce private violence, but it does so by centralizing threat capacity rather than dissolving it. Whether that exchange is an improvement depends on the justice of the order, the limits on its threats, and the alternatives it displaced. Cratics begins, then, with a formal observation: Much of social coordination runs through expected bads. Cratics does not end there, however, and the rest of the work is to say where it goes.

Nozick, Steiner, and Reid: Baselines, Cost, and Control

Robert Nozick's (1969) "Coercion" remains the central analytic treatment of the problem. Nozick separates coercion from constraint and force. In his core case, *P* announces an unwelcome consequence if *Q* acts, *P* intends to deter *Q*, and *Q* refrains partly for that reason. Coercion in this narrow sense is successful and reason sensitive. A believed bluff can coerce without making

Q unfree; physical prevention can make *Q* unfree without working through choice. Cratics distinguishes the proposal, its backing, and its success, and also studies bluffs, rejected threats, and standing threat systems.

Nozick also makes the offer-threat distinction depend on a baseline described as the normal, natural, or expected course of events. What will probably happen, what an institution has taught a person to expect, and what that person is entitled to expect may diverge. A predictive or statistical baseline compares the proposal with the likely course in its absence; an institutional baseline compares it with recognized expectations; a moral baseline asks what rightful treatment requires. Cratics rejects not baselines but baseline monism: No unnamed benchmark should perform descriptive, institutional, and ethical work at once.

Steiner (1975) sharpens the formal complication. Relative to a normal or predicted course, or baseline, an offer raises the recipient above it if accepted and leaves him at it if refused; a threat leaves him below it upon compliance and even worse off upon refusal. A "throffer" combines the branches: Acceptance raises the recipient above the baseline, while refusal lowers him below it. Steiner's example promises a reward for compliance and death for noncompliance. Formally it is a compound inducement containing both a promised good and a threatened bad. The analyst should record both branches rather than force a choice between offer and threat; institutional and ethical analysis can then ask whether the threatened counteraction is recognized or rightful.

Against this background, David F. Reid's (2018) "A Firmer Footing for Cratics" supplies the most important direct critique of the first article (Taghizadegan and Otto 2015). His cost objection should be stated narrowly: It is not true that every refused offer has an opportunity cost; a valueless proposal may be declined without giving up utility. But the original definition made costless refusal necessary for an offer, and many unmistakable offers fail that test. Declining a good job, a desirable house, or useful treatment may forgo a valued improvement without surrendering anything already held. Those cases are enough to defeat the criterion. Opportunity cost is too wide to distinguish a forgone gain from an imposed deterioration.

Reid's second objection concerns norms. If only certain imposed costs count, a baseline is needed to say which. The mistake would be to move immediately from that observation to a libertarian allocation of titles. As Nozick's (1969) cases show, the formal comparison can employ a predictive baseline without rights already having been settled. Recognized expectations belong to the institutional layer, and rightful expectations to ethics. Reid's pincer remains useful, but its conclusion is not that every baseline is moralized. It is that cost alone cannot draw the line and that each baseline must be identified before it is used.

Megger and Wysocki (2022) restate the risk of rights-smuggling in contemporary Austrian terms. Their intention-based account keeps the analysis close to acting persons: A threat is an intentional proposal, not an unfortunate background condition. Cratics can accept this correction without reducing coercion to intention. Intention explains the speech act, expected loss explains the induced action, and explicit baselines and control locate the announced counteraction without silently deciding whether it is just.

Reid's own solution is control of means. Every action implies control: An actor must command some means, beginning with his own body, in order to act at all. Voluntary exchange occurs when each party begins with control over some means and transfers it because he prefers what the other controls. A threat occurs when the recipient controls the relevant means and the threat-maker offers not to seize, damage, or interfere with that control if the recipient transfers control over something else.

The paradigm of robbery shows the move. The victim controls his money and his body; the robber controls his own body and perhaps a weapon. The robber prefers the victim's money to harming him, but prefers harming him to receiving nothing—or wants the victim to believe so. The victim prefers his bodily integrity to his money. The robber's proposal is therefore: Hand over control of the money, or I interfere with your control of your body. The initial locus of control, and not the magnitude of the cost, marks the threat off from the offer.

This is a real advance, and it does its hardest work against the cost objection. It explains why ordinary bargaining is not a threat merely because refusal is costly. The seller who asks a high price controls the house; the buyer does not. However badly the buyer wants it, the seller's refusal to transfer it without payment touches nothing the buyer controls. The buyer is disappointed, not coerced. The same logic sorts the mirror case: A man who threatens to harm himself unless another complies threatens means he controls, namely his own body, not means the other controls. That may be manipulative, tragic, or vicious, and its praxeological structure is not that of robbery.

Reid's solution cannot carry the whole load, though, unless it too admits the layers. Control as a fact is praxeological; rightful control is not. A thief factually controls stolen goods. A state factually controls a territory. A slaveholder factually controls the body and labor of a slave. An occupying army factually controls the roads and the ports. If the offer-threat distinction rests on factual control alone, then a ransom demand after a successful kidnapping becomes a voluntary exchange, since the kidnapper now controls the captive. Reid sees the difficulty and treats ransom as a hybrid of expropriation and exchange. That is right as far as it goes, and it is also a confession: Time, history, and title cannot be kept out, because it is the prior seizure that makes the later "exchange" a continuation of the threat.

The deeper point is that actors do not perceive bare physical control. They act inside recognized control orders. A man leaves his car on the street because he expects locks, law, police, neighbors, insurance, and shared habit to preserve his control of it. A tenant controls an apartment in one sense and the landlord in another; a shareholder controls a firm in one sense and its managers in another; a citizen controls his body in one sense, and the state claims authority over his permitted movements in another. Modern control is layered, mediated, and institutional all the way down. To read its baseline off physical possession is to mistake the snapshot for the legal title.

So Reid's category has to be taken in and held within limits. Control is necessary for the analysis of threats, because threats concern the seizure, destruction, or conditional preservation of means. But factual possession does not determine every relevant baseline. The formal comparison can use the predicted course and factual control; a claim about authorized control requires institutional recognition. Once recognition is contested, the analysis has to separate the social fact of recognition from the moral question of rightful recognition. The revised theory therefore keeps three questions apart that the cost criterion and the bare control criterion both ran together.

Who can in fact direct the use of the means? That is factual control. Whom does the relevant order treat as authorized to direct it? That is recognized control. Who ought to have that authority? That is rightful control. Praxeology can analyze factual control and beliefs about control. Institutional analysis can describe recognized control. Only ethics can judge rightful control. Most of the confusions in the literature come from collapsing the three into one.

Taxation illustrates the discipline. Factually, the taxpayer controls some income or property before payment, and the state threatens penalties if he withholds it. In the formal cratic sense, taxation contains a threat: Pay, or face fines, seizure, or imprisonment. Institutionally, the state's claim may be recognized through law, custom, the forms of consent, or mere resignation. Ethically, whether the claim is justified remains contested, and the cratic structure settles none of this. Legal punishment runs the same course. The convict controls his body; the court orders confinement; the act is formally cratic, institutionally authorized, and ethically defensible only if it answers prior unjust coercion, restores a right, protects victims, or satisfies proportional justice. Private self-defense closes the series and shows what is at stake. The aggressor controls his body and his weapon; the defender threatens or uses force to stop him. This is cratic action against cratic action, and it would be absurd to call self-defense the moral equal of aggression merely because both employ force. Here the imprecision of the old liberal slogan becomes visible. The aim was never to minimize coercion as such. It is to minimize the unjust cratic kind and to leave defensive coercion to its work.

Reid's critique thus pushes cratics toward maturity. It forbids the lazy definition and shows where the real work lies. What it does not do, and does not claim to do, is remove the need for ethics. It clarifies the point at which ethics must enter, and that is service enough.

The Three-Layer Model

The layers of the model can now be elaborated in order.

The Praxeological Layer

At the praxeological layer, the analyst brackets moral judgment and asks only how action is structured. The categories are actor, end, means, preference, time, uncertainty, expectation, control, promise, backing, and response.

It helps to set the methodological ambition soberly. Alexander Linsbichler's (2024) reassessment of Murray Rothbard's apriorism is a useful corrective here: Rothbard (1951, 946) himself listed war, games, and an "unknown" remainder among the underdeveloped branches of praxeology, and cratics belongs to that remainder. Cratics should not, however, repeat the most brittle version of extreme apriorism. Its formal propositions are not historical omniscience. They are a grammar for interpreting action under specified boundary conditions. The temptation is to pronounce on historical orders from the armchair: The state is coercive, coercion is discoordinating, therefore the conclusion follows. That is not enough. Whether a given order is stable, whether a given threat is believed, whether legitimacy will hold, and whether resistance will cascade remain thymological and historical questions. Cratics becomes more scientific, not less, when it refuses to make its formal layer carry the empirical burden.

An interpersonal inducement occurs when *A* tries to make *B*'s action serve *A*'s end by altering the situation *B* expects. *A* may do so by promising a good or by threatening a bad. Good and bad here are subjective in the sense required by action: *B* appraises the prospect as improving or worsening his expected state. *A* need not grasp *B*'s full value scale; he needs only enough practical reading of it to expect the inducement to bite.

An offer is an inducement in which *A* proposes to transfer, perform, or refrain in a way that would give *B* control over a good *A* controls or can produce. If *B* refuses, *A* does not thereby touch *B*'s prior control over *B*'s own means. If the proposed good matters to *B*, *B*'s refusal forgoes that opportunity; if it does not, no utility need be forgone. In neither case does the refusal itself remove a means *B* held.

A threat is an inducement in which *A* makes *B*'s continued control over some means conditional on compliance or commits himself to impose a bad in response to *B*'s noncompliance. *A*'s counteraction places *B* below the relevant predictive baseline and may interfere with *B*'s body, property, standing, liberty,

or associates. The means in question may be ones *B* factually controls, believes he controls, or is institutionally recognized as controlling. The action structure remains distinct from the higher judgment of the control claim. A threat is backed if *A* can and will carry it out under the stated conditions, and unbacked if he cannot or will not. Where the same proposal promises a good upon compliance and adds a bad upon refusal, it is Steiner's (1975) compound throffer.

The definition is a deliberate disjunction, and the second limb is not a special case of the first.[1] Interference with means the recipient controls is the paradigm of threat, and it is where the control critique does its sharpest work; it is also where the later institutional analysis of seizure, title, and recognized possession applies. But a threat can also reach a bad the recipient does not control at all. A man does not control his reputation, which lives in the beliefs of others, yet the threat to ruin it is plainly cratic; nor does he control the safety of those he loves, yet a threat against them coerces him as surely as a knife at his own throat. What unifies these cases with robbery is not control but the bad: The threat-maker makes compliance the price of averting a state the recipient ranks as worse. Control names the central case and anchors the institutional questions of rightful possession; the foundational praxeological concept remains the conditional imposition of a bad, of which the seizure of controlled means is the clearest but not the only form.

The intention-based account of Megger and Wysocki (2022) fits this layer once it is read as a condition of threat communication rather than as the whole analysis. A negligent act may endanger an actor, and a structural condition may leave him desperate, but a threat in the strict cratic sense commits the threat-maker to an unwelcome counteraction in the event of noncompliance. That commitment matters because it turns a background risk into an interpersonal instrument. The object of the commitment matters as well. "Pay me, or I sell my house to someone else" and "Pay me, or I burn your house down" may both be intentional attempts to influence conduct. The second plainly adds a counteraction against the recipient's means, while the first must be compared with what the seller would otherwise do. Intention identifies a proposal addressed to a particular recipient; a conditional bad relative to the predictive baseline identifies its cratic limb; control anchors the central class and the later questions of possession and title. A rescue price, a low wage, a refusal to sell, and a blackmail demand part company on this combination rather than on intention or rightfulness alone.

Following Nozick's (1969) narrower usage, coercion is successful when an understood threat materially shapes *B*'s action. Actual backing is not required if *B* believes a bluff. Cratics studies the wider structure of threat-based action,

1 I owe this clarification to Marc-Felix Otto (personal communication, June 5, 2026).

including threats that are rejected, disbelieved, or never tested within a standing order. In a coerced choice, *B* does not stop acting. He still chooses, and his choice still reveals a preference. This resolves a recurring Austrian tension over demonstrated preference. Rothbard (1956) built welfare economics on the doctrine that choice demonstrates preference, and so voluntary exchange demonstrates mutual gain. The coerced man's compliance is genuine action and genuine preference, but it is preference over a choice set the threat has altered. It is not evidence of the mutual gain that voluntary exchange demonstrates. What coercion removes is not the will but the catallactic setting in which a revealed preference would warrant the conclusion that both parties gain. The demonstrated-preference doctrine is preserved exactly by restricting it to the setting in which it was true.

The Institutional Layer

At the institutional layer, we ask which control relations an order stabilizes. Human beings rarely act in a world of isolated physical possession. They act within families, firms, tribes, churches, markets, states, gangs, customary orders, and legal systems, and these orders fix expectations: who may enter a house; who may collect a debt; who may punish, command, exclude, tax, inherit, adjudicate, or bear arms.

Institutions economize on conflict by making some control claims predictable, and they economize on violence by making some threats credible without constant enforcement. A traffic fine works not because every driver is stopped at every moment, but because enough drivers expect that they could be. A tax system works not because every taxpayer is surrounded by armed men, but because the chain from form to reminder to audit to court to seizure is credible enough to be obeyed at the first link. A criminal gang runs the same machinery on a smaller scale, and so, with gentler sanctions, do a school, a monastery, an army, and a household.

A dyadic uncertainty runs underneath the whole institutional layer.[2] No actor can be sure that his counterparty draws the line between rightful and wrongful control where he draws it. He must therefore estimate the other's propensity to coercion—the other's willingness to override the control he takes to be his—and that estimate is an economic quantity. It sets what he spends on locks, guards, insurance, verification, and contracts, and at the limit it decides whether he deals with a given party at all, since declining to interact is the cheapest security there is. Shared norms of rightful control are valuable precisely because they shrink this uncertainty. Where a community converges on one distinction between threat and exchange, each member can expect the others to read his control as he does; trust rises, and the resources sunk into private defense fall, at least inside the community. The institutions of the

2 I owe this observation to David F. Reid (personal communication, June 2, 2026).

second layer do not only stabilize claims from above; they economize on the estimate of each other's violence that strangers would otherwise have to make one encounter at a time.

Legitimacy lives at this layer, and it is not the same as justice. Legitimacy is the belief, habit, or acceptance that makes a command appear normal or rightful to those who bear it and to relevant onlookers. It lowers the cost of enforcement. A legitimate order needs less visible violence; a discredited one must spend more coercion to obtain the same compliance. Legitimacy is, in this exact sense, a form of cratic capital.

Hannah Arendt (1970) saw part of this when she set power apart from violence, locating power in concerted action and consent, and treating violence as merely instrumental. Cratics keeps her observation and changes the vocabulary. What she calls power often includes legitimacy-backed command capacity: It is not violence, yet it rests on credible threat, so the absence of visible violence does not prove the absence of cratic structure beneath it. Arendt (53, 56) is right that violence can destroy power once legitimacy fails. Cratics says why. Enacted violence tests and consumes the very backing that previously let command stay merely potential, which is why regimes that must shoot to be obeyed are already poorer in cratic capital than they look.

The legitimacy discount has a source, and it is moral. Alan Fiske and Tage Rai (2015) show that most violent acts are morally motivated in the eyes of those who commit them: People hurt and kill not in spite of morality but because they believe morality demands it. Threats are rarely sustained by naked appetite. They are embedded in narratives of honor, security, revenge, salvation, nation, and progress, and cratic capital grows strongest exactly where the threat-maker can present domination as duty. Johan Galtung's (1990) "cultural violence" names the same machinery from the side of the symbols that authorize harm. The category earns its place only while it stays tied to threat, control, and bads; cut loose from them, it swells until every hierarchy and every moral judgment counts as violence, and the word explains nothing. Kept tied, it identifies the cheapest coercion of all: the kind the coerced help to administer.

The word "capital" must be handled with care because the analogy is both the point and the danger. Cratic capital is not capital in the catallactic sense of produced means allocated by monetary calculation; it is accumulated capacity for credible command: a reputation for enforcement, trained personnel, weapons, files, legal forms, and the habituated obedience that lets a uniform do the work of a regiment. It resembles capital because it is durable, costly to build, liable to depreciate when abused, and capable of overextension. It is cratic because its whole function is to support coordination by threat rather than by offer.

Time horizon governs how cratic capital is spent, which is the real content of Mancur Olson's (1993) contrast between the roving and the stationary bandit. The settled ruler predates less than the raider because he invests in durable cratic capital and lowers the immediate extraction rate to preserve the future tax base. The arrangement can improve conditions relative to chaos, and it establishes no justice by doing so. A well-managed farm is better for the cattle than a raid. It is not for that reason an association of equals.

Violence cycles come into focus here. A coercive order can expand its claims while enforcement stays rare, and the resulting compliance is read, by rulers and subjects alike, as proof of deep backing. The order issues more commands. While they stay within accepted limits, legitimacy may even grow. When they outrun recognized right, practical capacity, or moral credibility, fragility accumulates out of sight. A shock, a scandal, a war, a fiscal crisis, or a single conspicuous refusal can then reveal that many threats were thinner than anyone had assumed, and compliance that looked like bedrock collapses at once.

This refines rather than rejects the insight of Douglass North et al. (2009, 2012) that controlling violence is central to social order. Limited-access orders manage violence by distributing rents among the men who could deploy it; open-access orders reduce the need for private violence by depersonalizing organizations, rights, and competition. Both still rest on cratic structures, and the same depersonalization that tames the warlord can incubate the administrator as recognized control drifts away from rightful control. The question is never whether violence exists, but how threat capacity is distributed, limited, legitimized, priced, and corrected.

A terminological caution belongs here, and Juan Diego Peña Gil (2022) states it well. If power is defined broadly as the capacity to produce effects, or even as an actor's capacity to direct his environment toward his ends, then every action involves power and the concept loses the sharpness cratics needs. If power over persons is identified only with predation, one misses peaceful influence, teaching, persuasion, and trade. The way out is not to make "power" do all the work. Cratics needs a narrower object: threat-backed command capacity. That narrower use preserves Peña Gil's reminder that not all interpersonal influence is coercive, while keeping the Misesian and Rothbardian insight that the state, insofar as it governs through an apparatus of compulsion, institutionalizes a specific kind of power over persons.

Charles Tilly's (1990) connection between coercion, capital, and European state formation gains precision on the same terms, and cratics supplies its microfoundation. State formation can be read as the long process by which political entrepreneurs converted scattered, illiquid violence into liquid and legitimate cratic capital. Taxation funded armies; armies protected the taxation; courts and administration regularized the extraction; national myth and citizenship turned imposed claims into recognized obligations. Power had to be

financed before it could be projected, which is why coercion and capital grow together. Frederic Lane's (1958) analysis of organized violence supplies the missing price: Rulers and city-states sold protection and collected a protection rent, and the line between protection and extortion was set by the going rate and the available alternatives rather than by any difference in form. The orders so built often suppressed local feuds and private predation. They also created an unprecedented capacity for total war and mass mobilization, which is the standing reminder that pacifying the inside and arming the outside are the same achievement seen from two directions.

The Ethical Layer

At the ethical layer, we ask what ought to be controlled, by whom, and to what end. Observed preference cannot answer. Subjective value theory explains how actors appraise means against ends; it does not show that all ends are equally good, and it does not show that because a man values domination, domination is valid.

The trouble can be stated in one line: Subjective value theory is constantly mistaken for value subjectivism, and to confuse the two is a category mistake. The subjective theory of economic value is an epistemic and explanatory method. It holds that the economic value of goods must be understood through the actor's appraisal, not through intrinsic labor content or physical properties. Nothing in that method entails that there is nothing objectively good for human beings, no natural law, or no difference between flourishing and degradation. The economist's proper humility about measuring utility has been quietly inflated into a metaphysical claim that no one needs and that the evidence does not support.

The alternative is developed through eudaimonia, human nature, embodiment, spirit, free will, sociality, property, and full humanity. Praxeology can say that every actor acts because he expects to better his condition. Ethics asks whether the betterment is real, whether the end suits human flourishing, and whether the means respect the being of other persons. The thief acts for an expected good, and theft is not thereby good. The tyrant acts for order, glory, security, or pleasure, and tyranny is not thereby good. The expected good of the agent is the beginning of the analysis, never the end of it.

The ethical bridge is the standing of the other person. Human beings are not detachable preference lists. They are embodied, rational, social, responsible beings who recognize themselves in one another. To wrong another is not merely to rearrange external goods; it damages the order of recognition within which one's own claims to personhood and property make any sense at all. Reciprocity, the Golden Rule, natural law, and Kantian universality each point at this structure from a different side, and each gropes toward the same fact: A claim that cannot be coherently extended to the one you wrong is not a claim you can coherently make for yourself.

This fact gives cratics its ethical grammar. A cratic act is not unjust simply because it is cratic in form. A parent who pulls a child back from the road, a victim who resists an aggressor, a court that punishes a murderer, and a community that defends itself against invasion all employ threat or force. Their moral standing turns on whether the coercion answers, prevents, or constitutes a violation of rightful control and human good. Form is a poor guide to the verdict, which is why two centuries of liberal argument that locate freedom in the mere absence of force have kept reaching the wrong verdicts.

The errors of false liberalism are symmetrical, and both sides are sincere. One side condemns all coercion as such and thereby loses the means to defend right against aggression. The other side declares institutional coercion noncoercive whenever it is legal, democratic, therapeutic, or progressive and thereby loses the means to see domination once it wears a uniform. Neither side is dishonest; each has stopped at form and mistaken its preferred form for the substance. Liberalism in the serious sense seeks an order in which unjust cratic coercion is minimized, justified defensive coercion is constrained, and catallactic or genuinely communal relations displace domination wherever they can.

The same three layers also apply to catallactic action. Catallactic action is formal, institutional, and ethical in exactly the same way, and the offer can fail the higher layers as surely as the threat can. The sale of stolen goods between thieves is catallactic in form, since each prefers what the other holds and parts with his own means without a threat; recognized and rightful control recharacterize such an exchange at once, because neither party holds rightfully what he purports to convey, and the voluntary surface rests on a prior seizure. A voluntary exchange is therefore no more self-justifying than a peaceful order is. Form establishes that an action is catallactic; whether the catallaxy is also rightful is the same question, asked of the bright half of social life, that cratics asks of the dark.

Testing the Model

A theory of cratics proves itself on hard cases. The following are the cases on which the old cost criterion and the bare control criterion each break, and on which the three-layer model holds.

The Godfather Offer

"I will make him an offer he cannot refuse" is funny because it abuses the grammar of offers. The proposal is formally cratic if refusal triggers interference with means the recipient controls: his body, his livelihood, his life. Whether he technically has a choice is beside the point; he has one, and he can take the consequence. What marks the case is that the initiator has inserted a threatened bad into the choice set where an offer would have inserted a good.

High Prices and Hard Bargaining

A seller who demands a steep price for a house, for food, for medicine, or for labor may be exploiting urgency, scarcity, or desperation, and the transaction may raise sharp questions of charity, virtue, monopoly, or institutional injustice. It is not thereby cratic in form. The seller controls the good; refusal leaves the buyer without something he wants but touches the buyer's prior control of nothing. Cratic elements enter only where the seller created the danger, blocked the alternatives, or used force to monopolize access, and they enter through those prior acts, not through the price. This is what preserves catallactics as a science. Without it, every asymmetry of bargaining power reads as latent coercion, and market analysis dissolves into moralized suspicion. With this distinction, the ethical question about a steep price is asked at the right layer, not smuggled into the definition of exchange.

Blackmail

Blackmail exposes the mistake of letting a rightful-claim baseline decide the formal layer. Consider Nozick's (1969) case in which *A* possesses damaging information about *B* and says, "Pay me, or I reveal it." A predictive baseline first asks what *A* would probably have done without the demand. If *A* would have disclosed the information anyway, payment purchases a change from that expected course and the proposal resembles an offer of silence. If *A* would not have disclosed it except in order to use it as leverage, *A* has deliberately added disclosure as the bad attached to refusal and the proposal has a cratic structure. A statistical baseline may be uncertain, so some cases resist a unique binary classification until the counterfactual and the relevant time span are specified.

Factual control of the information does not settle the matter, since a threat may consist in an act the threat-maker controls. Nor does a right to speak automatically convert the demand into an offer; rightfulness judges the act but does not describe why it was placed in *B*'s choice set. Fraud, breach of confidence, trespass, or violated trust in obtaining the information is a distinct prior wrong. It bears on the institutional and ethical judgment of the whole sequence, but it should not be used to redefine the later proposal by fiat. Blackmail therefore requires the analyst to state the action unit and to keep predictive, recognized, and rightful baselines separate. Nozick leaves the final coercion question open; layered cratics should display the same genuine difficulty rather than hide it in a moralized formal category.

Threats of Self-Harm

When *A* says, "Do this, or I harm myself," he threatens a bad *B* may desperately wish to avert. But *A* threatens means *A* controls—his own body—and not means *B* controls. Formally this is not robbery, but it is cratic when *A* makes self-harm conditional on *B*'s noncompliance and *B* regards that harm as a bad.

It takes a hostage through another's love. The three-layer model distinguishes this action structure from the institutional and ethical judgment of the conduct.

Taxation

Taxation is formally cratic because nonpayment triggers penalties backed by force. Institutionally it is normalized and legalized. Ethically it may be defended as a necessary contribution, condemned as expropriation, or judged case by case. Denying its cratic form gains nothing and costs clarity. The live question is whether the cratic claim is rightful, limited, proportional, consented to in any meaningful sense, and constrained by a legal order that is itself just. To answer it one must move up the layers, not redescribe the bottom one.

Criminal Punishment

Punishment, too, is formally cratic: The convict is threatened with confinement, fines, or worse. It may yet be justified as a response to prior unjust cratic acts, which is why the slogan "Coercion is bad" is too crude to govern a legal order. A legal order that cannot coerce aggressors abandons victims to private power; a legal order that coerces past right becomes a predator with paperwork. The ethical layer distinguishes justified coercion against aggressors from coercion that violates rightful control.

State Peace and Hidden Domination

Modern states often reduce interpersonal violence, and Pinker (2012), Eisner (2001), Tilly (1990), North et al. (2009), and Scheidel (2017) can each be read as documenting a face of that transformation. Walter Scheidel's (2017) account is the sharpest reminder that the relation between violence and order is not linear: Across recorded history it is mass violence, not peaceful reform, that has most reliably compressed inequality, so that the pacified order and the unequal order have tended to arrive together. Cratics asks the question an event count cannot: How much enacted violence has been replaced by accepted threat? A low-homicide society with heavy bureaucratic domination is not peaceful in the same sense as a low-homicide society with secure property, little predation, and wide voluntary cooperation. The visible decline of violence has to be read together with the invisible stock of credible coercive claims that made the decline possible.

Civil War and the Run on Power

Stathis Kalyvas (2006) shows that violence in civil war is selective, local, informational, and strategic rather than a simple overflow of hatred. Cratics adds the mechanism. Civil war often begins when the monopoly of threat is tested and found thinner than assumed: Competing actors discover that the old order's threats were less backed than they looked, while new threat entrepreneurs set about building local cratic capital of their own. Violence rises less because animosity rises than because the price of testing the old threats

has fallen and the expected backing of the old claims has collapsed. It is, in the vocabulary of the second article (Taghizadegan and Otto 2016), a run on power.

New Concepts for a Research Program

The third step in cratics suggests a small vocabulary for the work ahead.

Cratic Capital

Cratic capital is accumulated capacity to make credible threats at a lower marginal enforcement cost. It is built over time out of weapons, trained personnel, prisons, files, fiscal machinery, legal doctrine, reputation, and habituated obedience, and it can be invested, wasted, inherited, seized, or destroyed. It depreciates fastest when its threats are overused, exposed as bluffs, or morally discredited, which is to say that it is consumed by the very enactment that proves it real.

Threat Liquidity

Threat liquidity is the ease with which cratic capacity can be applied across persons, places, times, and commands. A personal vendetta is illiquid. A mafia network is more liquid. A modern administrative state is highly liquid. Digital surveillance and automated penalties can raise threat liquidity by an order of magnitude while raising threat legitimacy not at all, which is one reason the two may now be coming apart.

Legitimacy Discount

Legitimacy lowers the enforcement cost of threats, and the more legitimate a command appears, the less visible coercion it needs. Call the resulting saving a legitimacy discount. A tax, a draft, a school rule, or a court order backed by legitimacy is enforced more cheaply than the same demand seen as naked predation. The discount is morally ambivalent in exactly the way legitimacy is: It can underwrite a just order or subsidize an unjust one, and one cannot tell which is happening from the size of the discount alone.

Violence Reserve Ratio

The violence reserve ratio sets outstanding cratic claims against actual enforcement capacity. A ruler whose subjects rarely resist can carry many claims on little enacted force; let many resist at once, and the reserve is tested. The idea extends the violence-cycle analogy without reducing politics to banking. The structural claim is modest: Untested promises and untested threats can both expand well past their backing, and both expansions look like strength until the day they are tested together.

Cratic Malinvestment

Cratic malinvestment occurs when an order builds command structures that work under conditions of compliance but cannot survive moral, fiscal, or practical stress. Overcriminalization, administrative overreach, military commitments past the public's willingness to bear them, and ideological control systems that manufacture obedience while dissolving the trust on which obedience rested are candidates. The pattern is the cratic counterpart of the boom-time project that pencils out only at the interest rate that cannot last.

Defensive Cratics

Defensive cratics is threat or force used to stop, deter, punish, or remedy unjust cratic aggression, and it has to be held apart from aggressive cratics. That the distinction is ethical, not formal, is the whole burden of this article. A liberal theory that cannot draw this distinction becomes pacifist in practice and hands the field to whoever is least scrupulous about force.

Implications for Liberalism and Ethics

"Freedom from coercion" is an attractive slogan and an incomplete one. No human order eliminates every constraint, sanction, defensive threat, parental restraint, legal punishment, and emergency command. The serious question is which coercions violate rightful control and which defend it, and the phrase cannot even pose that question.

Friedrich Hayek (1960) defined freedom as the absence of coercion by the arbitrary will of another, and the definition is better than a crude absence of all interference because it points toward rule-bound limits on power. Arbitrariness is not the only enemy of freedom, though. A nonarbitrary order can be stable, predictable, and oppressive; slavery, caste, and totalitarian legality have all been rule-bound. The ethical standard must therefore reach past the form of the rule to the rightful domain of human agency, embodiment, property, association, and conscience that the rule is supposed to serve.

Rothbard's (1982) natural-rights approach names aggression against person and property as the core violation, and its strength is its clarity. Its weakness, when stated too fast, is that it seems to derive a whole legal order from self-ownership without grounding ownership, responsibility, and recognition deeply enough to bear the weight. The emphasis on full humanity supplies that ground. Property is also a convention for reducing conflict, but it is more: the extension of human agency into the world, the sphere in which a person acts, plans, remembers, and answers for what he has done. To violate rightful property is to attack the standing room of action itself, which is why the violation wrongs the person and not merely his inventory.

Ludwig von Mises's (1949) utilitarian liberalism sidesteps metaphysical controversy by arguing for social cooperation as the means to widely shared ends, and its strength is its sobriety. Its weakness is the man who prefers domination, glory, revenge, or ideological purity to peace and prosperity. Praxeology can show that such a man acts toward those ends; it cannot show that he ought not to act so. Ethics must enter at exactly that point, and the refusal to let it enter is not neutrality but evasion.

The relation between subjective valuation and objective ethics is therefore the center of the matter rather than a side issue. The subjective theory of value teaches a real humility: We cannot read another's value scale off our own, we cannot sum psychic magnitudes into social welfare, and we cannot replace lived choice with expert valuation. That humility is not relativism, and the slide from the one to the other is the confusion this article has tried to arrest. Moral realism concerns the truth about human flourishing, not the economist's ability to measure utility, and the two can no more contradict each other than a thermometer can refute a virtue.

The alignment of recognized control with rightful control is an institutional question, and its answer is not decided in advance by the label on the institution. Bruce Benson's (1998) work on private criminal justice and Walter Block's (2004) reconstruction of Adolf Reinach and Rothbard guard against the statist shortcut, and this guarding is necessary: One cannot equate law with state coercion or justice with public monopoly without settling by definition a question that ought to be argued. Private, customary, polycentric, and communal orders sometimes align recognized with rightful control better than centralized states, and sometimes they fail through feud, cartel, capture, and private tyranny. The form does not decide; the alignment does.

An ethics fit to stand beside cratics begins from a few propositions the praxeological analysis has already forced into view. Human beings act under scarcity and uncertainty, as embodied persons rather than detachable preference lists, and they recognize themselves in other acting persons. Because they act, they require spheres of control within which to act responsibly, and wrongful coercion injures victim and aggressor alike by attacking the order of mutual recognition that makes any rightful action possible. Law is justified insofar as it protects rightful control and restores order after a violation; it turns predatory the moment it converts institutional recognition into a mask for unjust cratic claims. None of these propositions follows from preference, and none contradicts what praxeology says about preference. They are the conditions under which the analysis of action becomes an analysis of human action.

The proper liberal target, then, is unjust cratic coercion. A society with no defensive coercion is not free; it is undefended. A society that counts every legal command as justified is not free either; it is administered. Freedom lives in the narrow country between the two, and keeping its borders is the work of ethics, not of form.

Conclusion: From the Study of Violence to the Study of Coercive Order

Cratics began as the mirror image of catallactics; that formulation was useful but incomplete. Offers and threats are structurally comparable, since both are future-oriented interpersonal inducements, yet they differ in their relation to control, to bads, and to moral order. The old criterion of costless rejection caught an intuition but could not survive as a definition. Reid's control critique corrects it by identifying interference with the recipient's control over means as the central case of threat, and the correction in turn has to be set inside a layered theory: Factual control is praxeological, recognized control is institutional, rightful control is ethical.

The layering lets cratics avoid two opposite errors that have dogged the whole field. It avoids norm smuggling, the error of building a contested moral theory into the first formal distinction. It avoids empty formalism, the error of pretending that coercion can be understood without an explicit point of comparison. Praxeology may use a predictive or statistical baseline to identify the branches of a proposal. Institutional theory supplies recognized expectations and explains how threats harden into stable orders. Ethics supplies the baseline of rightful treatment and judges whether those orders deserve obedience or resistance. Each layer does work the others cannot, and most confusion begins when one baseline is asked to do the work of all three.

The implication that matters most is that violence has to be studied not only where it appears but where it has become potential. Modern orders often reduce visible violence by raising the credibility and legitimacy of their threats; this can be a civilizing achievement or a concealment, and frequently it is both at once. A peaceful order is not necessarily a free one, a coercive order is not necessarily an unjust one, and a legal order is not necessarily a rightful one. Those three nonequivalences are the reason cratics is needed: Each names a gap that the celebration of declining violence has trained us not to see.

The next step is historical and comparative. The theory should be tested against state formation, mafia orders, prisons, military discipline, taxation, revolutions, civil wars, colonial rule, private security, digital enforcement, and ideological regimes, and regarding each it should ask where catallactic coordination displaces cratic coordination, where cratic coordination protects catallactic coordination, and where cratic coordination feeds on catallactic coordination as a parasite feeds on a host.

The deepest question stays ethical. If subjective valuation is the epistemic key to human action, and objective ethics the key to human flourishing, then a praxeological ethics of violence must hold both keys at once. Human beings choose subjectively, and they do not become good by whatever they choose. They act for ends, though not every end perfects their humanity. They require control over means, though not every control they obtain is rightful. They can live under threats, though only some threats defend the conditions of a fully human life.

Cratics, fully developed, is the science of the dark side of social coordination. Its purpose is neither to glorify power nor to deny the achievements of order. Its purpose is to make visible the structure by which human beings are moved through fear, so that the moral and institutional work of limiting unjust fear can begin with clearer sight.

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