



Extortions, Threats To Self-Harm, and Resistance

Ten-Herng Lai¹

Received: 21 June 2025 / Accepted: 16 January 2026
© The Author(s) 2026

Abstract

Resisters sometimes threaten self-harm to make demands. When the demands are unmet and the resisters carry through the threat, are their targets responsible for the self-imposed harm? Such scenarios are structurally similar to self-threatening extortions – where in paradigm cases of the latter, the targets often bear no responsibility for the self-imposed harm. People are generally responsible for taking care of their own well-being and interests when they can do so without unreasonable costs and barriers, and a mere threat cannot transfer one’s self-responsibility to others. In the context of resistance against injustice, however, the unjust background conditions can constitute unreasonable costs and barriers. Moreover, the targets may have pre-existing duties to realise the content of what was demanded. In such scenarios, the targets can bear responsibility for the self-imposed harm. Refusing to give in to the threats can furthermore indicate the oppressor’s unwillingness to engage in moral dialogue.

Keywords Extortion · Resistance · Protest · Self-responsibility · Moral dialogue

1 Introduction

Suppose this person, Jones, approaches you and issues a credible threat: Give him \$20 or he will kill himself. Assuming the absence of mental impairment or mental health issues, some would be inclined to say that we are permitted to refuse the demands of such self-threatening extortion. Robert Huseby and Sigurd Lindstad’s recent paper (2024) gives an intuitively plausible diagnosis: “there is a presumption in favor of self-responsibility to take care of one’s own welfare or interests” (8), and without any good justification, Jones cannot impose this responsibility on others. If Jones were to carry through the threat and kill himself, you do not bear the moral responsibility for his death, as he could have easily taken good care of his own life by simply not killing himself.

✉ Ten-Herng Lai
laitenherng@gmail.com

¹ Law and Philosophy, The Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Stirling, Stirling, United Kingdom

I think this sounds correct. Yet, in the context of resistance, threats to self-harm are not uncommon. Consider this historical example. In 1989, the 38-year-long martial law in Taiwan had only been lifted for two years, and the country was still under the “Temporary Provisions against the Communist Rebellion” that granted the government legal power to arbitrarily crack down on political dissent. Cheng Nan-jung (sometimes translated as Deng Nylon or Nan-jung Deng), was charged with insurrection for publishing Hsu Shih-kai’s “Draft for a Taiwan Republic Constitution.” In resistance, Cheng locked himself in the magazine office where he worked as editor of the *Freedom Era Weekly* and threatened to burn the office down with himself in it should the police attempt to forcefully arrest him. When Hou Yu-ih (sometimes translated as Hou You-yi), the head of the police forces sent to arrest him, decided to break into the office, Cheng carried out the threat (Semduka 2022). Hou “went on to have a successful police and political career” (134) and later expressed that he “would do it again if [he] had to” and has “no regrets at all” (Lo, 2024).

The aim of this paper is to unpack how we can take self-responsibility seriously, yet at the same time accommodate the above and similar acts of resistance. Resistance, after all, often takes place under highly unjust conditions. Such conditions can make it infeasible for would-be resisters to properly safeguard their own fundamental rights or core interests, to the extent that the threat to self-harm would not be disproportionate. Moreover, sometimes the targets of the threats have pre-existing duties to fulfil what was demanded. In such cases, I contend, the targets can bear responsibility for the harm and death of self-threatening resisters.

Two notes before proceeding. First, sometimes it is permissible and even desirable that resistance impose necessary costs or harm on parties responsible for injustice (Lai and Lim 2023). Yet, when such options are infeasible, or when the resisters, for practical or conscientious reasons, refuse to resort to violence, resistance that involves self-harm can be a serious option for the oppressed. The following discussion focuses on such scenarios. Second, sometimes the nature of injustice can create a duty to resist (Delmas 2018; Lim 2024), and such duties can require people to bear significant costs. Whether such duties can require would-be resisters to engage in self-threatening resistance is a tricky but separate issue from whether the targets of resistance bear the responsibility of the harm. The paper focuses on the latter.

2 The Self-Responsibility Account

Let’s start again with the intuition that in the case of Jones’ self-threatening extortion, you are not responsible for his self-imposed harm. We can probably safely say that this intuition is widely shared insofar as we know that Jones does not suffer from any mental issues or other hardships (Frick 2016). Moreover, for our following discussion, we can proceed as if this general intuition about typical cases of self-threatening extortion is largely correct; otherwise, there wouldn’t be a puzzle regarding the difference in verdicts between typical cases of self-threatening extortion and self-threatening resistance. The task now is to spell out why Jones is the only responsible party, while in cases of resistance, the targets of the threat can bear responsibility.

So why aren’t you responsible for Jones? Huseby and Lindstad (2024) propose the following diagnosis, which I will now call the *self-responsibility principle*:

It is only when a person faces (a sufficient level of) costs and obstacles in taking care of themselves that departures from self-responsibility can be justified (7).

The basic idea is that we are free and capable agents, and without very good justification, we cannot transfer the responsibility of taking care of our own well-being onto others. The key, then, is what qualifies. Accordingly, there are three relevant factors:

- (i) the costs and obstacles to a person to take care of their own interests,
- (ii) the extent of the harm that may befall them, and.
- (iii) the costs to other people of helping them avoid that harm (7).

When (i) is nonexistent, the other considerations are rendered mute. This gives us a simple diagnosis. Jones could have easily chosen to refrain from shooting himself without any costs whatsoever. In contrast, should Jones be under incapacitating mental health conditions or suffer from desperation, the obstacles to taking care of himself are significant. In such scenarios, we have reason to seriously consider giving in to the threats. When the harm to Jones is significant (ii), and the costs for you are trivial (iii), you may bear responsibility.

Compare this to cases where the costs to you are high (iii). Now, you will have more discretion to refuse to be extorted. If, instead of \$20, Jones were to extort something more, e.g. to maim you or kill you, you can easily refuse without bearing responsibility. Similarly, regarding (ii), should Jones threaten to pluck out a few strands of his own hair, it would be justified for you to walk away and laugh.

The self-responsibility principle is superior to explanations appealing to extortionists having full control over issuing the harm and appealing to culpability. To see this, simply consider a standard case of a hostage situation. If Jones were threatening to shoot an innocent third party, even if Jones could have easily not carried through the threat, and even if Jones were fully culpable, you may still bear responsibility for the death of the hostage.

So far, so good.

3 What About Resistance?

Resistance often occurs in highly unjust situations. These unjust situations are relevant to the three factors of the self-responsibility principle: unjust conditions created by oppressors can make it costly for resisters to not carry through the threat. To illustrate, let's now return to the case of Cheng Nan-jung. I contend that Hou Yu-ih and the Kuomintang (KMT) Government he served bear significant responsibility for Cheng's death in insisting on attempting to forcefully arrest Cheng. To see this, let's see how the three factors come into play.

First, consider (i), the costs and obstacles to taking care of oneself. It is indeed the case that Cheng could have decided not to light the fire at the very last moment. That being said, the alternative to death was not overly pleasant. He faced arrest by an authoritarian government known to disregard human rights. The decade prior to Cheng's death was dotted with the murders of several dissenters: in 1980, when Lin Yi-hsiung, a leader of the democratisation movement in Taiwan, was under arrest for his activism, his mother and two of his daughters were murdered, and his eldest daughter was left severely injured in his house, despite the house being under tight police surveillance (Chao 1990). Chen Wen-chen, an

assistant professor of statistics at Carnegie Mellon University who financially supported political dissenters, was arrested when he was visiting family in Taiwan in 1981. He was interrogated and presumably tortured for 12 hours, and subsequently murdered (Smykla 2021). Henry Liu, a prominent critic of the KMT dictatorship and its leader Chiang Ching-kuo, was assassinated in his home in California by gang members associated with the KMT government in 1984 (Cheung-Miaw 2021). The prospects of walking away unscathed after arrest weren't particularly good. Moreover, even if one could avoid being tortured or murdered, there is still the background condition of oppression, where basic liberties were systematically repressed under the KMT rule.

On (ii), the harm to the resister is simple: Burning to one's death is painful, and, well, consists of one's death.

Merely combining (i) and (ii), however, may be insufficient to fully explain why the targets of the threat hold no legitimate complaint against being the targets of the threat, so let's now turn to (iii), the costs to others, and in this case, the costs to Hou Yu-ih himself and the costs to the KMT dictatorship. When asked why he decided to forcefully break into the office when other options, such as stalling to see if Cheng would voluntarily surrender, were being considered – as revealed by later declassified documents – Hou stated that he was “just following orders” without answering why he *chose* the option that would foreseeably lead to the worst outcome (Cheng, 2022). Here, we can only speculate. It is possible that Hou made a tactical error or that he believed that the use of force would benefit his career. If he genuinely had had the option to de-escalate but chose otherwise, he would have violated stringent moral duties (using force without a just cause or resorting to unnecessary force). As for the KMT Dictatorship, the whole point of the resistance was to demand democratisation, cessation of human rights violations, and respect for the basic freedoms of people – in this particular context, democratic rights, freedom of assembly, and freedom of speech. Not only are these rights things governments have independent compelling moral reasons to safeguard in the first place, they are also legally written into the constitution that the KMT Dictatorship purports to uphold.

Indeed, the pre-existing duties of the purported “victims” of extortion play a significant role in the distribution of responsibility for the self-imposed harm. The threats of self-harm in resistance are often a demand that the targets of resistance fulfil their pre-existing duties. If those duties were already well fulfilled, resistance would not have been called for in the first place. In Cheng's case, if the KMT Government had democratised and upheld human rights, there would be no crackdown on free speech, no charge of insurrection, and no arrest that could be the target of resistance. The purported victims were in fact the oppressors who created the problem.

Such facts are relevant to determining the costs to others, and here, the purported “victims,” i.e. the oppressors. Giving up opportunities to be promoted as a high-ranking police officer is unpleasant, but in an unjust regime, it is dubious whether this can form the basis of a legitimate complaint, especially if one's occupational duties involve perpetrating injustice. It is also hard for oppressors to give up oppression. Being amongst the privileged feels good, and some may prefer killing oneself (Miller 1974: 189) or even others (Sabl 2001: 324) over giving up one's special social position. Yet, this is again not a cost one can reasonably appeal to make a legitimate complaint. One has no claim to whatever gains that come from oppressing others. Rather, oppressing others may give the oppressors a duty of restitution and require them to give up much more than what they have gained through oppression

(Delmas 2014). So overall, if the costs the targets of resistance would have to bear to avoid the threat from realising were merely costs associated with fulfilling pre-existing duties, they are not grounds for making a legitimate complaint, and should be discounted when evaluating the weightiness of factor (iii).

Knowing this would help us better understand an additional moral feature of this type of resistance. The “threats” can be interpreted as an act that puts the targets into a position where they have to engage in moral reasoning. The targets have to consider “is it morally acceptable to let these resisters suffer?” This pressure is applied with the hope of triggering their moral reasoning on a broader issue: “is it morally acceptable to continue business as usual?” In our current case, the relevant questions would be, for the police, “is forceful arrest the correct tactic when de-escalation is feasible?” Or, for the government, “is the continual violation of democratic norms and human rights morally acceptable?” In engaging with the moral capacity of their targets, instead of threatening to impose harm, the resisters are displaying the willingness to engage in dialogue and respect for their targets (see also Lai 2025).

4 Conclusion

The self-responsibility account has the repertoire to accommodate certain cases where resisters threaten self-harm. The targets can bear responsibility should they refuse to give in to the threats, when the alternative to resistance is to risk significant unjust suffering on the part of the resisters that is often brought about by the target, when the threatened harm is severe, and, perhaps most importantly, when the targets of resistance have stringent pre-existing duties to fulfill what was demanded and thus have no independent claim against bearing the costs. Here, I would like to highlight a particular moral wrongdoing: the resisters, instead of resorting to physical force against the oppressors, took the trouble to morally engage with them. Yet the oppressors refused to enter the moral dialogue. Such moral wrongdoings may give credit to the belief that there is less reason to hold onto the liberal hope, as Sabl (2001) discusses it, that these particular oppressors possess the sense of justice that makes future cooperation and social harmony feasible.

There are further potential applications of the self-responsibility account to other acts of resistance involving self-harm. Here, I will gesture at what the diagnoses should look like without giving each the paper-length treatment they deserve, where the determining factor is whether the targets have relevant pre-existing duties.

First, asylum seekers intercepted by UK coastguards mid-journey sometimes threaten to sabotage their own boats if the coastguards refuse to drag the asylum seekers’ boats to UK territory. Insofar as the UK has failed to properly fulfil its duty to take in sufficient refugees – a duty that is most likely particularly stringent because the UK was deeply implicated in crises that render people vulnerable – the potential drowning of the asylum seekers would be on the UK.

Second, Anders Breivik, a Norwegian far-right extremist who was convicted of mass murder and terrorism, threatened to go on a hunger strike and starve himself to death if prison authorities didn’t improve his prison conditions. Demands included granting him access to a more advanced gaming console, adult entertainment, and a sofa. Assuming that the prison authorities had no pre-existing duties to grant him such treatment, if Breivik had

chosen to actually go on a hunger strike, the deterioration of his health would be on himself alone (though there may be independent reasons to not let him die). Breivik could take care of himself as well as any other Norwegian prisoner.

Cheng Nan-jung was once a philosophy undergraduate but was unable to graduate due to refusing to take the mandatory propaganda course “Sun Yat-sen Thought.” And here, I would like to end with the following quote from Cheng:

The KMT cannot arrest me; it can only take my dead body. There is insurmountable hate between the Taiwanese and the Chinese Mainlanders; yet, we must resolve the hate. Without independence, Taiwan cannot democratise. (My translation.)

Acknowledgements Thanks to Rowan Craft, Chong-Ming Lim, and the two anonymous reviewers for insightful feedback.

Author contributions This article is the sole work of the author.

Funding The Open Access of this paper is supported by the University of Stirling.

Data Availability N/A.

Declarations

Ethical approval N/A.

Informed consent N/A.

Statement regarding research involving human participants and/or animals N/A.

Competing interests The Publication of this paper increases the subjective well-being of the author.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article’s Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article’s Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Chao G (1990) Exorcising ghosts: Taiwan’s 2–28 incident of 1947. *UCLA Pac Basin Law J* 8:368
- Cheng CY (2022) 13 Sep Zheng Nan-rong nuer pu dangnian you 3 jubu fang an, zhiyi Hou you-yi weihe cai qianglie fangshi? [Cheng Nan-Rong’s daughter reveals that there were 3 arrest options, questions Hou Yu-ih why the most forceful one?]. *Liberty Times*. <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/breakingnews/4056657> Accessed 1 October 2025
- Cheung-Miaw C (2021) The boundaries of democracy: transnational political murders in the Reagan era. *Pac Hist Rev* 90(4):508–536
- Delmas C (2014) Political resistance: a matter of fairness. *Law Philos* 33(4):465–488
- Delmas C (2018) A duty to resist: When disobedience should be uncivil. Oxford University Press
- Frick J (2016) What we owe to hypocrites: contractualism and the Speaker-Relativity of justification. *Philos Public Aff* 44(4):223–265

- Huseby R, Lindstad S (2024) Self-threatening extortionists constitute a problem for utilitarians, not contractualists. *Ethical Theory Moral Pract.* <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-024-10457-w>
- Lai TH, Lim CM (2023) Environmental activism and the fairness of costs argument for uncivil disobedience. *J Am Philos Assoc* 9(3):490–509
- Lai TH (2025) Sit-ins, blockades, and lock-ons: do protesters commit moral blackmail? *Analysis*, anae095
- Lim CM (2024) Clarifying our duties to resist. *Inquiry* 67(9):3527–3546
- Lo K (2024) 11 Jan Taiwan election 2024: KMT presidential hopeful Hou Yu-ih's bid as future leader weighed down by party's past. *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3247981/taiwan-elections-kmt-presidential-hopefuls-bid-future-leader-weighed-down-party-s-past> Accessed 1 October 2025
- Miller R (1974) Rawls and Marxism. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, pp 167–191
- Sabl A (2001) Looking forward to justice: Rawlsian civil disobedience and its Non-Rawlsian lessons. *J Polit Philos* 9(3):307–330
- Semduka P (2022) Taiwanese identity—a done deal? Understanding the contemporary consolidation of Taiwanese identity. *Ethnologia Actualis* 22(1):121–144
- Smykla ML (2021) The tragedy—and legacy—of Chen Wen-chen. *Significance* 18(6):36–37

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.