

**Book Review**

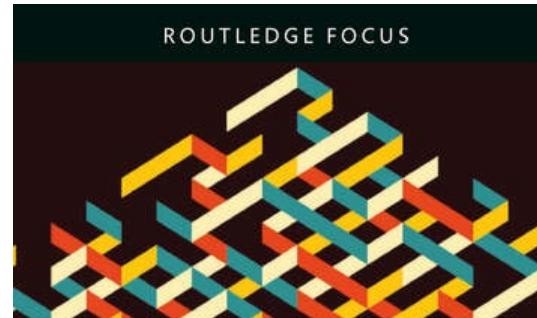
**Moral Blackmail: Coercion, Responsibility, and Global Justice**  
(By Ben Colburn)

A Review by  
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**Title:** Moral Blackmail: Coercion, Responsibility, and Global Justice  
**Series:** Routledge Focus on Philosophy  
**Author:** Ben Colburn  
**Publisher:** Routledge  
**Year:** 2025  
**No. of pages:** 71 pages  
**ISBN:** 9781032195254 Hardcover \$46.98.

*Front Cover Source:*  
<https://www.routledge.com/Moral-Blackmail-Coercion-Responsibility-and-Global-Justice/Colburn/p/book/9781032195254>



**Moral Blackmail**  
Coercion, Responsibility, and  
Global Justice



It is advisable for a worried individual to seek guidance on moral decisions from another individual who possesses a wealth of knowledge and experience in the field of ethics. This is done to assist in the relief of moral constraints. This approach to consideration presupposes that the advice is derived from personal experience with the evaluation of moral considerations. But what if the presentation and persuasion of moral considerations are used to present an answer to a moral problem by implying that the answer is the one that should be believed in the absence of a better alternative? How should such an action be viewed? Ben Colburn, the author of the book I am reviewing, suggests that such an action should be referred to as moral blackmail. In other words, when someone forces the other one to do something with the reason

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that all the other options are morally undesirable, this is called moral blackmail (Colburn, 2025).

In Chapter 1, Colburn makes a clear distinction between coercion and compulsion. Compulsion is the act of using force against another person to make that person do something that she cannot resist. Thus, compulsion is the act of forcing the victim to do something for which the victim is not to be held accountable. This is different from coercion. A clear example that Colburn gives is when a criminal threatens a person to give him her wallet, or he will kill her. The person's decision to give the wallet to the criminal is a decision that has been made. The decision is based on a limitation of choices that the criminal knows his victim will make. However, we would not make a claim that the victim herself is truly responsible for her decision to give away the wallet. Colburn points out from this analogy that limiting moral choices by suggesting to the victim that it is impossible to choose another path because it is morally unacceptable. It is this nature of coercion that makes the actions that result from the decisions of the coerced person not completely voluntary (*pp. 4-8*).

Next, in Chapter 2, Colburn worries that there might be an argument from the other side that if a moral demand must have a force that compels the agent to do something, then the occurrence of such a moral force must also be moral blackmail. If this argument is correct, Colburn's own line of reasoning would be untenable. But Colburn counters by arguing that the individual's moral choice to act as required and desired by the morality is seen as an action that the individual will see as a well-thought-out reason and willingly doing, not as a moral coercion. However, moral blackmail limits the rational path to the blackmailer's choice to act and also coerces the individual into thinking that he or she is the one making the decision even though he or she feels deep down that he or she is not really willing to do so. Thus, the impossibility of choosing to act in other ways is not the same thing that determines whether the force of moral requirement and the coercion of moral blackmail are truly the same thing (*pp. 14-17*).

In Chapters 3 and 4, Colburn argues that there are two kinds of responsibility to consider, namely explanatory responsibility (*pp. 22-30*) and evaluative responsibility (*pp. 31-40*). This distinction is based on the idea that responsibility is viewed in terms of its functional use as explanatory and evaluative. However, Colburn's main goal is to show that a single unified view of the substance of responsibility would be logically incomplete. He therefore proposes that a solution to this problem is to adopt a pluralist view of responsibility. This would ultimately provide a more successful understanding of what is called collective rationality. In the first form, when thinking of the justification that an individual should be held responsible for the

individual's actions, we usually think of a detailed description of the process from initiating the action to the outcome that led to a certain judgment. That is what responsibility means in terms of being explanatory. When such a description is complete, the individual must accept some normative evaluation. This latter is what is understood as evaluative responsibility (*pp. 23-24*). Colburn makes an important point that for an individual to be responsible for something, it has traditionally been viewed as the person who produced the action directly. However, the new idea should take into account that there are many factors that play a "crucial role" in the relationship between the factors that bring about the outcome (*p. 26*).

Furthermore, once the consequences of an action have been established, evaluative responsibility is considered in conjunction with what are considered "normative upshots," which are pluralistic in nature. This is because the actor is involved in a variety of states of affairs (*p.36*). This is because the individual agent is involved in a variety of states of affairs. The moral coercion that arises makes it possible to distinguish between two forms of responsibility more explicit. Colburn points out that cases of moral blackmail that differ in their states of affairs may allow some cases to retain explanatory responsibility without the other form of responsibility. But in other cases, the consideration of the form of responsibility may take a different form. Therefore, accepting pluralism in the first place would allow the issue to be considered more discretely rather than inconclusively (*pp. 37-39*).

From the moral issues raised, Colburn then applies them to political philosophy by addressing the issue of intergenerational justice in relation to climate justice in Chapter 5. He considers that the burden of climate change on the part of future generations, by claiming that the current generation cannot solve the problem, to be a form of moral blackmail. This is because doing so will force future generations to choose a narrower range of options that they may find themselves forced to finally choose against their will (*pp. 46-49*). Issues related to global justice, whether food justice or climate justice, are urgently needed to be addressed in Chapter 6. However, when it comes to the ideal solution that requires the cooperation of all parties, another problem can also be considered. Namely, the problem is that those who are capable of seriously solving these problems may be called upon to take direct responsibility for solving them. Those capable will instead be seen as having the duty to be diligent and sincere in solving these problems tirelessly. Those who are less capable will only be able to cooperate partially, while the view that those who are more capable must be expected to take more responsibility is more appropriate. Such a situation cannot be considered that everyone involved is going to have to take full collective responsibility. The situation of the search for

global justice therefore has the issue of moral blackmail embedded in it because it has the characteristic of narrowing and limiting the choices of what is morally appropriate (*pp. 51-58*).

There have been some previous works that have mentioned the term moral blackmail but in a different way. Terrance C. McConnell points out that moral blackmail involves situations where we are made to look guilty for doing or not doing something when we were not in the situation to make the decision in the first place (McConnell, 1981: 544 - 545). Some article argues that it is tacitly accepted socially that women have a social role in the family, and that the performance of that role within the framework of societal moral expectations seems necessary (Keller, 2016). However, Colburn's book is more thorough in its examination of the question of moral blackmail, both in terms of moral philosophy and in terms of political philosophy of justice.

A crucial point in Colburn's argument is that the act of moral blackmail is characterized by coercion. The blackmailer is forcing a limited set of moral choices. Furthermore, other possible moral choices are made to appear as less legitimate than the choices that are framed. The limitation of moral choices, such that a person makes a moral choice based on the belief that it is the most rational choice he can make, shows that it is not a truly informed decision. Being forced to choose and to take responsibility for the choices he makes is an illusion that distracts from the idea that he has the full integrity to choose and to take responsibility without coercion. But since these are moral blackmails in the first place, the coercion does exist.

However, if there is some debate on these issues, the argument can be made in the form of at least two differences. Here, let us assume that there are two men, Mark and Paul, who represent each case in the consideration of responsibility. Mark may simply expect that there are morally justifiable options for deciding to act in a certain way, and Paul may expect that he must have some experts who consider a range of feasible options for him before making decision. Mark may see that once he has made a choice, he accepts full responsibility for it, because he willingly accepts responsibility for the decision. Paul may see that the experts who were telling him the moral choices must have elaborated all judgments before he made the decision. The difference is that Mark is responsible for his actions, while Paul sees the experts who told him the moral choices as responsible for not being truly knowledgeable enough to see all the possible sides of the information. Therefore, I see Colburn's thesis on moral blackmail as more closely related to the latter. Even if Mark later learns that moral blackmail has occurred, may willingly and fully assume responsibility. Colburn's view is therefore limited, and his analysis of the appropriateness of responsibility is to some extent inadequate. Colburn, however, would argue that it is instead Mark's conception of responsibility that should not be

considered valid because it would be unjust to hold him accountable for not having received sufficient information from someone who deliberately did not provide him with sufficient information. But it could also be argued that Mark himself would have been aware from the beginning that if he had been required to devise his own moral choices, he would not have been sufficiently knowledgeable. The responsibility for his own decision to be based on the expertise he had chosen is, in a sense, legitimate.

The fact that future generations have fewer options in determining the best course of action for themselves at any given time is exactly what Colburn said that it is a form of moral blackmail. However, the gradual depletion of natural resources on earth will lead to future generations being forced to view certain survival strategies as the best option, with no other alternatives. If we consider the naturalistic way of thinking about the earth that will no longer be conducive to comfortable living for living beings, it brings up another issue in Colburn's line of thought. If such catastrophic situation is irresistible, then blaming humanity in any one generation might become a difficult accusation to make fully meaningful. This point could be seen as another part of the problem for Colburn's reasoning. His ideas in this book suggest that voluntary actions and moral responsibility may not necessarily go hand in hand. It can be questioned as to whether the consideration of environmental justice issues from the very beginning is truly rooted in ethical debates.

Overall, I find the writing in this book to be very concise, coherent, and easy to understand. The points Colburn makes for the reader are arranged with great care and are clearly crafted with precision. This is because the issue of moral blackmail, which he has been explaining throughout, is quite new to the unfamiliar conceptualization. However, Colburn made it understandable. Therefore, this book is found to be highly suitable for learners and academics in the fields of ethics and political philosophy.

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