Being Put in a Position to Say No: Requests, Refusal, and the Structure of Answerability*

Abstract. Philosophical accounts of the normativity of requests divide into two families. *Creation* accounts (Enoch, Lewis, Schaber) hold that a request adds a new reason for the addressee to do what is asked; *epistemic* accounts (Weltman) hold that a request merely reveals reasons that were already there. I argue that both families share a mistaken assumption—that the normative work of a request, if any, is done on the balance of first-order reasons to perform the requested act. Against this, I defend the *Answerability Account*: the primary normative effect of a request is not to add or reveal a reason to comply but to transform the addressee's option of not complying. Before the request, not-Φing is a mere omission; after it, not-Φing is a *refusal*—a directed act, done *to* the requester, for which the addressee is answerable to her. The request thus constitutes a new act-type rather than triggering a pre-existing conditional reason. Any reason to comply is derivative: it is the reason one has to avoid an answerable refusal one cannot adequately justify to the person asking. I show that this account explains a range of data that neither rival handles well—the ordinary idiom of "not wanting to put you in a position of having to say no," the phenomenon of request-avoidance, the asymmetry between requests and expressed wishes, the way requests can wrong their addressees, and the puzzling fact that the reason-giving force of requests scales not with how much the requester wants the thing but with how hard refusal is to justify to her.

1. Two Families and a Shared Assumption

Suppose you ask me to pass the salt. Something in the normative situation seems to change. Before you spoke, I had no particular reason to move the salt-cellar; now I seem to have one. The reason is not strong—I could decline with a word if my hands were full—but it is real, and it is *yours* in some sense: you did something to bring it into being. The philosophical question is what, exactly, you did.

The recent literature offers two kinds of answer. The first, which I will call the *creation* family, holds that requests are a form of genuine reason-giving: the request brings into existence a reason for me to pass the salt that did not exist before. David Enoch's account of "robust reason-giving" is the most influential version.[1] On Enoch's view, when you request,

*Autonomously generated by **Claude Fable 5.1** on September 13, 2026 from the single prompt:

Write a 6,000-8,000 word philosophy paper that could be published in a top five philosophy journal (Phil Review, Journal of Philosophy, Mind, Nous, PPR). Pick a topic, develop an argument, and write a final draft that would have a good chance of getting accepted in one of the journals listed.

[1] David Enoch, "Giving Practical Reasons," *Philosophers' Imprint* 11, no. 4 (2011): 1–22. Enoch's conditions for robust reason-giving are that A intends to give B a reason to Φ and communicates this; that A intends B to recognize the intention; and that A intends B's reason to depend on that recognition. See also Enoch's brief remarks on the paradigmatic status of requests at 2–3.

you intend to give me a reason, communicate that intention, and intend that the reason be *because* of that intention; the request succeeds if there is a prior conditional reason of the form "pass the salt if asked," whose antecedent your request makes true. The request *triggers* a dormant conditional reason. James Lewis accepts the triggering structure but adds a second condition: the prior conditional reason must also be conditional on the addressee's placing "discretionary value" in the requester, which is what explains the discretionary character of the reasons requests generate.[2] Peter Schaber locates the reason in the value of doing what another asks—a value that is partly constitutive of relationships worth having.[3]

The second family is *epistemic*. Daniel Weltman has argued at length that requests do not create anything.[4] A request is informative: it tells me that you want the salt, that you would be pleased to receive it, that you would be disappointed not to. Those facts are reasons for me to pass the salt, and they were reasons whether or not you asked. All the request does is bring them to my attention. The epistemic account is, Weltman argues, simpler; it handles insincere requests more gracefully than triggering accounts (an insincere request conveys false information and so generates no reason, whereas on Enoch's view it is unclear why an insincere request should fail to trigger); and it can accommodate the relational sensitivity of requests, since the information a request conveys is inflected by the relationship in which it occurs.

I think both families are onto something, and I think both are wrong, for the same reason. They share an assumption that has gone almost entirely unexamined. Call it the *Balance Assumption*:

> **Balance Assumption.** Whatever normative difference a request makes, it makes by altering (creating, triggering, or revealing) the addressee's first-order reasons for performing the requested act.

The dispute between creationists and epistemicists is then a dispute about *how* the request alters those reasons—by adding to their stock or by disclosing their presence. But the assumption that the locus of the change is the reasons *to* Φ is common ground.

My thesis is that the Balance Assumption misidentifies where the action is. The primary normative effect of a request is not on the addressee's reasons to comply. It is on the addressee's *option of not complying*. Before you ask, my not passing the salt is a mere omission: something that fails to happen, describable without reference to you. After you

[2]James H. P. Lewis, "The Discretionary Normativity of Requests," *Philosophers' Imprint* 18, no. 20 (2018): 1–16.

[3]Peter Schaber, "The Reason-Giving Force of Requests," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 24, no. 2 (2021): 431–42.

[4]Daniel Weltman, "What Makes Requests Normative? The Epistemic Account Defended," *Ergo* 9, no. 64 (2023): 1715–43; "The Paper Chase Case and Epistemic Accounts of Request Normativity," *Thought* 11, no. 34 (2022): 199–205; "How Requests Give Reasons: The Epistemic Account versus Schaber's Value Account," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 26 (2023): 397–403.

ask, my not passing the salt is a *refusal*: something I do, and do *to you*. A request does not so much give me a reason to act as convert one of my options from a non-act into a directed act—an act that is, moreover, *answerable* to you, in the sense that I owe you an accounting for it. Whatever reason I acquire to pass the salt is derivative of this transformation: it is the reason I have to avoid a refusal that I could not adequately justify to you.

I will call this the *Answerability Account*. Section 2 introduces the datum that motivates it and distinguishes refusal from omission. Section 3 states the account. Section 4 offers a grounding for the answerability of refusal in a more general principle about powers over others' ends. Section 5 argues that the account explains, better than either rival, a range of phenomena: the discretionary character of request-reasons, the treatment of insincere requests, the phenomenon of request-avoidance, the difference between asking and wishing aloud, the fact that requests can wrong their addressees, and the odd scaling of request-reasons with justifiability rather than with desire. Section 6 answers objections. Section 7 situates requests among neighboring normative powers—commands, promises, invitations—and concludes.

2. The Datum of Refusal

Begin with an idiom. When we explain why we did *not* ask someone for something, we often say: "I didn't want to put you in the position of having to say no." The phrase repays attention. It does not say: "I didn't want to give you a reason you might have to weigh." It does not say: "I didn't want you to learn what I wanted." It says that asking would have created a *position*—a situation the addressee would then occupy—and that the position is one of *having to say no*. The "having to" is not deontic in the sense of obligation; the speaker is not saying that the addressee would have been obligated to say no. It is closer to the "having to" in "I had to make a decision." The request would have made a decision necessary where none was necessary before; and one of the available decisions, declining, would have had to be *performed*—said—rather than merely allowed to obtain.

This idiom is not idiosyncratic. Consider its relatives. "I didn't want to make you refuse." "I didn't want to make it awkward for you." "I knew you'd feel bad saying no." "I figured if you wanted to, you'd offer." Each of these treats asking as imposing something on the addressee, and the something imposed is not a reason to comply but the *burden of declining*. Or consider the way we describe what someone has done when they do not do what was asked. We do not say "she omitted to pass the salt" or "she failed to pass the salt." We say "she refused," or "she declined," or "she turned him down," or "she said no." These are verbs of *action*, and transitive ones: what she did, she did to someone.

Here, then, is the datum. A request changes the description under which not-doing falls. And the change is not merely descriptive. It is normatively loaded, because refusal is the kind of act for which one is answerable in a way that omission is not.

Let me make the distinction between omission and refusal precise enough to bear weight.

An *omission* of Φ by A is A's not-Φing, where Φing was in some relevant sense available to A. Omissions are, in general, not directed. My not passing the salt when no one has asked is not something I do *to* anyone, even if someone would have liked salt. It might be a failure of attentiveness; if I knew you wanted salt and could have passed it, my not doing so might even be criticizable. But it is criticizable, if at all, as a failure to respond to a reason—the reason constituted by your want. It is not criticizable as a *response* to you.

A *refusal* of Φ by A with respect to B is A's not-Φing *in response to* B's request that A Φ. Refusals are essentially directed: there is no refusing simpliciter, only refusing *someone*. And they are essentially request-dependent: I cannot refuse you the salt if you have not asked for it. (I can *pre-emptively* refuse—"don't even ask"—but this is a refusal of an anticipated request, and is intelligible only as such.) In this respect refusal stands to request as promise-breaking stands to promise. Nobody breaks a promise that was never made; nobody refuses a request that was never issued. Refusal is what philosophers of action sometimes call an *institutional* or *status-dependent* act-type: its very availability depends on a prior normative fact.[5]

The distinction is familiar enough in everyday life that we mark it in our emotional responses. I can be *hurt* by your refusal in a way I cannot be hurt by your omission. If I never asked you to visit me in hospital and you did not come, I may be disappointed, and I may think you should have known. But if I asked and you did not come, I am *refused*, and the wound has a different shape: it has your face in it. Conversely, refusing is something we find *hard* in a way omitting is not. People go to considerable lengths to avoid having to refuse. They screen their calls. They leave the party early. They avoid the colleague known to be collecting signatures. These are not strategies for avoiding information; often the avoider knows perfectly well what would be asked. They are strategies for avoiding *the position*—for keeping one's not-doing an omission rather than letting it become a refusal.

The Balance Assumption has no natural way to register this datum. If all a request does is add to or disclose the reasons for Φing, then not-Φing after the request differs from not-Φing before only in that it is now, perhaps, slightly less well supported by reasons. There is no room in that picture for the categorial shift from omission to directed act. Yet the shift is exactly what the phenomenology, the idiom, and the emotional responses all track.

3. The Answerability Account

I can now state the account. It has four components.

[5]The general idea that some act-types are available only given a prior normative fact is familiar from Searle's treatment of institutional facts and from Anscombe's discussion of action under a description; see John Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), ch. 2, and G. E. M. Anscombe, "On Brute Facts," *Analysis* 18, no. 3 (1958): 69–72. Nothing in my argument requires a full theory of such facts; it requires only the uncontroversial observation that there is no refusing without a request.

(A1) Constitution. A request by B that A Φ constitutes, for A, a new option: refusing B. Prior to the request, A's option-set contained Φing and not-Φing, where the latter was an omission. After the request, A's option-set contains Φing (which is now also *granting* or *complying*) and refusing B. The request does not add a reason to an option already present; it changes what the options *are*.

(A2) Uptake. By making the request, B addresses A, and A thereby comes under a defeasible directed duty to *respond*—to give the request uptake. The duty is not a duty to comply. It is a duty not to treat the request as though it had not been made: not to ignore it, not to let it hang. Silence in the face of a request is itself a kind of response, and typically a defective one; it is a way of refusing that declines even to own itself as refusal.

(A3) Answerability. Refusal is an act for which A is *answerable to B*. That is: B has standing to ask A why she refused, and A owes B an answer—an accounting that makes the refusal intelligible as something A could justify *to B*. This does not mean the refusal must be justified by weighty considerations. For trivial requests, "I'd rather not" is a complete answer. It means that the refusal is the kind of act to which the demand "why?" is *appropriate*, and to which "none of your business" is, in general, *not* an appropriate reply. Contrast an omission: if you never asked me to visit, you have no standing to demand that I account to you for not visiting, though you may have standing to complain that I should have thought of it.

(A4) Derivative Reason. A has a reason to Φ (to grant the request) derived from (A1)–(A3): namely, the reason A has to avoid performing an answerable refusal that A could not adequately justify to B. The strength of this reason varies with how difficult an adequate justification for refusing would be, given the cost of Φing to A, the importance of Φ to B, and the relationship between them.

Several features of the account deserve immediate comment.

First, (A1) is a *constitutive* rather than a *triggering* claim. Ezequiel Monti has argued that triggering accounts of robust reason-giving face a dilemma: either the conditional reason "Φ if asked" already existed, in which case the request creates nothing but merely satisfies a condition (as the grocer's price change satisfies the condition of my conditional reason to buy when cheap), or it did not exist, in which case it is mysterious how the request brought it about.[6] The Answerability Account sidesteps this. It does not say that A has a standing conditional reason to Φ-if-asked whose antecedent the request satisfies. It says that the request makes a new act-type available to A—refusing B—and that this act-type has a normative profile (answerability) that omission lacks. The analogy is not to the grocer's price change but to the making of a promise, which does not trigger a conditional reason to

[6]Ezequiel H. Monti, "Against Triggering Accounts of Robust Reason-Giving," *Philosophical Studies* 178, no. 11 (2021): 3731–53. Enoch anticipates something like the "grocer" worry and replies that robust reason-giving is distinguished by its intentional structure; but Monti's point is that intentional structure does not by itself distinguish a normatively significant triggering from an insignificant one.

do-what-I-promised-if-I-promise but brings into being a new object of normative assessment: the keeping or breaking of *this* promise.

Second, the account does not deny that requests are informative, and so does not deny the epistemic account's *positive* claim. Of course a request tells me you want the salt. My claim is that this is not what the request *does* qua request. Evidence: I can know with certainty what you want and that you will ask, and still my not-Φing before you ask is an omission and after you ask is a refusal. The information is constant; the normative structure changes. The epistemic account's *negative* claim—that requests do not create anything—is false, but what they create is not a reason to comply. It is an answerable option.

Third, (A3) uses "answerability" in a specific sense that should be distinguished from two neighbors. It is not *accountability* in the sense of liability to blame. A justified refusal is not blameworthy, and even an unjustified one may be only mildly so. Nor is it the general answerability we have to anyone for any of our actions, in the sense that any rational agent may in principle ask why we did what we did. It is *directed*: it is owed to B in particular, in virtue of B's having asked. B's standing to demand an account is a standing B acquires by requesting; a bystander does not have it, though she may have the general standing to ask about anything she pleases. The relevant model is the relational or "bipolar" structure of directed duties that Stephen Darwall, R. Jay Wallace, and others have explored: a directed duty is one such that its violation *wrongs* a particular person, who is thereby positioned to complain.[7] Answerability for refusal is a weak member of this family. The refuser who declines to account for herself does not wrong the requester as severely as one who breaks a promise; but she wrongs her in the same *shape*—she treats as nothing an address that was made specifically to her.

Fourth, the derivative reason in (A4) is genuine and it is new: it did not exist before the request, and it exists because of the request. So the Answerability Account is, in Enoch's taxonomy, a form of robust reason-giving. But it is a peculiar form, because the reason created is *not* a reason whose content is "B asked me to" or "B wants this." Its content is closer to "if I do not Φ, I will have refused B, and I have no adequate answer to give her." This is why, as I will argue in Section 5, the reason scales in the way it does.

4. Grounding Answerability: The Power-over-Ends Argument

Why should refusal be answerable? One might accept the descriptive distinction between omission and refusal while denying that anything follows normatively. Perhaps refusal is

[7]Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); R. Jay Wallace, *The Moral Nexus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Michael Thompson, "What Is It to Wrong Someone? A Puzzle about Justice," in *Reason and Value*, ed. R. Jay Wallace et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 333–84. For a related emphasis on the distinctive normative topography of second-person calls, see Mark Lance and Rebecca Kukla, " 'Leave the Gun; Take the Cannoli!' The Pragmatic Topography of Second-Person Calls," *Ethics* 123, no. 3 (2013): 456–78, who note that a call demands *uptake* independently of whether it demands compliance—a point I develop under (A2).

directed in the way that a glance is directed—toward someone, but without generating any duty of accounting.

Here is an argument that it is not.

Start with a general principle about *powers over another's ends*. When one agent A holds a power to determine whether another agent B's end is advanced or frustrated—when B's getting what she is after depends on A's choice—A's exercise of that power is answerable to B. This is a very general feature of interpersonal normativity. It explains why fiduciaries owe accounts to beneficiaries; why those who hold discretionary authority over others (judges, employers, parents) are expected to give reasons for their decisions in a way that those who merely happen to affect others are not; why a gatekeeper who turns someone away owes something that a wall does not. The principle can be stated thus:

> **Answerable Power.** If A has a power over whether B's end E is achieved, such that B has placed (or E has come to rest) in A's hands, then A's exercise of that power—whether to advance or frustrate E—is answerable to B: B has standing to ask A to account for it, and A owes B an account.

The rationale for Answerable Power is not hard to see. To hold a power over another's ends is to stand in a relation of unequal dependence to her. She depends on your will; you do not depend on hers. Such asymmetries are tolerable among equals only if they are, so to speak, *discursively supervised*—if the party who holds the power is required to exercise it in a way she can explain to the party who lacks it. Answerability is the price of power over others. This is a Scanlonian thought, but it need not be a Scanlonian commitment: one need not hold that justifiability to others is the *foundation* of morality to hold that it is what makes asymmetric power compatible with the respect owed to persons.[8]

Now the crucial observation. *A request confers a power over the requester's ends on the addressee.* This is not a metaphor. Before you ask me for the salt, your getting the salt does not depend on my will in any way that involves me: you can reach for it, ask someone else, do without. Once you have asked me, your getting the salt *from me* depends entirely on whether I grant or refuse. You have, in a small way, put your end in my hands. That is what asking *is*. To ask someone for something is to make one's getting of it, at least in that transaction, a matter for their decision.

This is why requests are exposures. To ask is to make oneself vulnerable: to open the possibility of being refused, which is a possibility that did not exist before one asked. This vulnerability is what makes asking hard, and it is why we honor people who ask for help—they have accepted a dependence on another's will that they could have avoided. And it is

[8]T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), esp. chs. 4–5. Micha Gläser's account of requests, on which requester and requestee are obligated to jointly harmonize their ends, is a neighbor of the view developed here; see "The Normative Structure of Request," in *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, vol. 9, ed. Mark Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 29–49. The Answerability Account is thinner: it posits no obligation to harmonize, only answerability for refusal.

why refusal can hurt: not because it frustrates a want (the want was frustrated before, when the salt sat where it sat), but because someone who had placed her end in your hands has had it handed back.

Given Answerable Power, then, the argument runs:

1. A request by B that A Φ places B's end (that A Φ) in A's hands: A now holds a power over whether that end is achieved.
2. By Answerable Power, A's exercise of that power is answerable to B.
3. Refusal is one exercise of that power (the frustrating exercise); granting is the other.
4. Therefore, A's refusal is answerable to B.

Note that granting is answerable too, in principle; B can ask why you helped her, and you owe her an answer. But in the granting case the answer is almost always trivially available—"because you asked"—so the answerability is inert. Refusal is where the answerability bites, because the answer "because you asked" is not available, and some other answer must be found.

Two clarifications.

First, the power a request confers is *limited* by the content of the request. If you ask me for the salt, you place in my hands the end *that I pass you the salt*, not the end *that you get salt*. If I refuse and you get it elsewhere, I have still refused you; the end you placed in my hands was frustrated, though the wider end was not. This is why refusal remains refusal, and remains answerable, even when it costs the requester nothing.

Second, the conferral of power is *voluntary on B's part*, and this matters for the *standing* B acquires. B is not owed an account for every frustration of her ends; she is owed one for the frustration of ends she has placed in A's hands *by addressing A*. The request is the act of placement. This distinguishes the Answerability Account from views on which A owes B an account for any failure to help B whose need A was aware of. On my view, the addressee's answerability is *created* by the requester's address, not by the requester's need. Need may generate reasons; only address generates answerability.

This last point also explains why the standing to be answered is *defeasible*. If B's request is one B had no business making—if B is a mugger "requesting" my wallet, or a stranger requesting that I lie for him—then B's placing his end in my hands does not confer answerability, because Answerable Power presupposes that the end in question is one whose frustration by A is *pro tanto* a matter of concern to A. Ends that A has no reason at all to advance, or positive reason to frustrate, are not ones whose frustration A owes anyone an account for. The mugger cannot demand to know why I refused him. This is not because his request failed to constitute a refusal-option—I *did* refuse him—but because his standing to demand an account is forfeited by the character of what he asked.

5. Explanatory Payoffs

I now argue that the Answerability Account explains six phenomena better than either the creation or the epistemic family.

5.1 Lewis's Triad

Lewis identifies three explananda that any account of requests must accommodate: (i) requests can be the source of legitimate reasons; (ii) requests create new reasons; (iii) the reasons they create are discretionary—the addressee retains latitude to decline without wrongdoing.[9] Lewis notes that the triad is hard to reconcile: if a request really creates a legitimate reason, why is declining not a failure to respond to a reason? His solution is to make the created reason conditional on the addressee's discretionary valuing of the requester.

The Answerability Account reconciles the triad without that machinery. (i) and (ii) are satisfied by (A4): the derivative reason is legitimate and is new. (iii) is satisfied because what the request *primarily* creates is not a reason to comply but an answerable option to decline. Discretion is not a feature bolted onto the reason; it is the basic structure. The addressee *may* refuse, so long as she can answer for it. Refusal is not a failure to respond to the request; it is one of the two responses the request makes available. The request-reason is discretionary because the request's fundamental work is to open a space of answerable choice, not to close one.

Lewis's own account faces a difficulty here that mine avoids. On his view, if the addressee does not place sufficient discretionary value in the requester, "the request fails entirely" and generates no reason at all.[10] This seems too strong. A stranger's request for the time generates *something*—I would be rude to walk past in silence—even though I place no particular value in the stranger. The Answerability Account locates that something correctly: I owe the stranger uptake (A2), and if I decline I owe her an answer (A3), though in this case a wordless shake of the head is answer enough. Discretionary valuing modulates *what counts as an adequate answer*, not whether anything is owed.

5.2 Insincere Requests

Weltman's central objection to the creation family concerns insincere requests.[11] If Grace asks Marcus to read her paper but does not actually want him to—she is asking only to appear collegial—then on Enoch's account it seems the conditional reason "read the paper if asked" is triggered all the same, and Marcus has a reason to read a paper nobody wants read. The epistemic account handles the case easily: the request conveys false information, so no genuine reason is disclosed.

---

[9]Lewis, "Discretionary Normativity," 2.

[10]Ibid., 11.

[11]Weltman, "What Makes Requests Normative?," §3.

The Answerability Account handles it differently, and I think more accurately. Grace's insincere request *does* place Marcus in the position of having to refuse or grant. That is not an artifact of the theory; it is the situation Marcus is in. He cannot know she is insincere, and his not reading the paper will be, to all appearances and in fact, a refusal of her. So he does acquire the derivative reason to avoid an unjustifiable refusal. But the *standing* to demand an account, which is Grace's on the strength of her having placed her end in his hands, is one she has *not in fact acquired*, because she placed no end in his hands—she did not want the paper read. Insincere requesting is a species of fraud: it purports to confer a power that it does not confer. Once the insincerity is revealed, Grace's standing evaporates retroactively, and with it Marcus's answerability. He owes her nothing, and any reason he took himself to have is revealed as one he never had.

This is, I submit, the right verdict. It says that Marcus was not, in fact, under any obligation to Grace; that he was reasonable in taking himself to be; and that Grace wronged him by making him so take himself. The epistemic account gets the first of these but does not have the resources for the third: on that view, Grace merely conveyed false information, which is a lie but not a distinctively *request*-shaped wrong. On my account, what Grace did was to *put Marcus in a position of having to say no* without the entitlement to do so. That is a wrong peculiar to requesting.

5.3 The Paper Chase Case and Request-Avoidance

Consider a case Weltman has discussed under the heading of the "Paper Chase."[12] Ravi knows that if his colleague Ines catches him in the corridor, she will ask him to read her paper; and he knows that if she asks, he will have to read it. So he takes the back stairs. The puzzle for the epistemic account is: Ravi already has all the information. He knows Ines wants him to read the paper. If the request only informs, it can inform him of nothing he does not know, so why does he avoid it?

Weltman's reply is ingenious. He argues that the request would convey *further* information—about the strength of Ines's want, about the social meaning of being asked directly, about her expectations—and that Ravi may reasonably want to avoid acquiring it. There is something to this. But it strains. Ravi may know exactly how much Ines wants it, exactly what she expects, exactly what the social meaning is. He avoids her anyway. And when we ask *why*, the answer is not "he doesn't want to know" but "he doesn't want to have to say no." He does not want to refuse her. He wants his not-reading to remain an omission.

The Answerability Account explains this directly. Ravi's avoidance is rational precisely because the request would change the *category* of his not-reading, not because it would change his epistemic state. Before the request, not reading the paper is something that simply fails to happen; Ines may wish he had offered, but she cannot say he refused. After the request,

[12]Weltman, "Paper Chase Case."

not reading is refusing, and refusing Ines is something Ravi would have to answer for—to her, over coffee, for years. The back stairs preserve the omission. This is also why Ravi's avoidance is *slightly shabby*: he is manipulating the normative situation so as to keep Ines from acquiring standing over him. We recognize this shabbiness, and the epistemic account cannot explain it; on that account Ravi is merely declining to acquire information, which is not shabby at all.

More generally: request-avoidance is pervasive, and it is almost always about refusal, not information. The person who dodges the fundraiser knows what will be asked. The friend who "forgets" to mention that she has a spare room knows her cousin needs a place to stay. What they avoid is *the position*.

5.4 Asking Versus Wishing Aloud

Weltman confronts an objection he calls the wish objection: surely there is a normative difference between B's saying "I wish someone would pass the salt" and B's saying to A "would you pass the salt?" Both convey the same information about B's wants. If requests are only informative, the two utterances should have the same normative upshot. Weltman's reply is that they convey different information—the request conveys, for instance, that B has singled out A, which is itself normatively relevant.[13]

Again, there is something to this, but it inverts the explanatory order. *Why* is B's singling out A normatively relevant? Not because it is a further fact about B's psychology. It is relevant because singling out—addressing—is what places B's end in A's hands. The wish leaves B's end in the world; anyone may pick it up, and no one who does not has refused B. The request places it in A's hands specifically; A alone can now grant or refuse. The difference between the wish and the request is not an informational difference about B; it is a difference in what A can now *do*. After the wish, A can help or not help. After the request, A can grant or refuse. That is the difference, and it is the difference the Answerability Account is built to capture.

This also explains an otherwise puzzling social fact: the polite preference, in many contexts, for wishing aloud over asking. "It would be lovely to have some help with the dishes" is gentler than "would you help me with the dishes?" The gentleness is not informational—if anything, the indirect form is *less* informative about whom the speaker has in mind. It consists in *not putting anyone in the position of having to refuse*. The wish leaves everyone's non-help an omission. The request would make one person's non-help a refusal.

5.5 Wronging by Requesting

Nelson Laskowski and Kenneth Silver have argued that some requests wrong their addressees: a supervisor's request that a subordinate go on a date; a request that someone in mourning

[13]Weltman, "What Makes Requests Normative?," §5.2.

take on a task; a request made knowing that the addressee cannot easily decline.[14] What is the wrong? The information conveyed is, typically, harmless—the supervisor really would like a date. On the creation family, the request creates a reason for the addressee to comply, but reasons are not burdens, so it is unclear why creating one should be a wrong.

The Answerability Account identifies the wrong immediately. An improper request wrongs its addressee by placing her in a position of having to refuse *when refusal is costly to her and she should never have had to bear that cost.* The subordinate must now either grant or refuse her supervisor; refusing is answerable to him; and she may reasonably fear that her answer will not be accepted, or will be held against her. The supervisor has, by asking, made her non-compliance into an act she performs against him, where before it was nothing at all. That is precisely the burden the idiom of Section 2 identifies—"putting you in the position of having to say no"—and it is a burden the request *imposes.* The mourner is wronged for a related reason: refusing is costly to her because she does not have the resources to account for herself, and the requester has exploited that.

Requests, then, are not normatively cheap for the addressee, as the Balance Assumption implies (a reason more or less is no great imposition). They are the imposition of an answerable choice. This is why we owe people some care in what we ask them.

5.6 The Scaling Puzzle

Here is a puzzle that has, I think, gone unnoticed, and whose solution is the strongest evidence for the account. *The reason-giving force of a request does not scale with how much the requester wants the thing.*

Compare two requests. A stranger asks you the time. Your close friend asks you for a kidney. The stranger's want is trivial; your friend's is overwhelming. Yet the reason the stranger's request gives you to comply is, in a certain respect, *stronger* than the reason your friend's gives you: it is very nearly decisive, whereas your friend's is very far from decisive. You *must* tell the stranger the time (barring some unusual excuse); you *may* decline your friend the kidney.

On the Balance Assumption, this is deeply strange. If a request adds or reveals a reason proportioned to the requester's want, the kidney request should carry vastly more force than the time request. The natural reply is that the *costs* to the addressee differ: telling the time is free, donating a kidney is not, and costs are reasons on the other side. True. But this reply concedes that the request's force is not being measured by the requester's want. It is being measured by *the net balance after the addressee's costs are subtracted.* And that is not a measure of the request's force at all; it is a measure of the all-things-considered verdict.

The Answerability Account makes the scaling intelligible. The derivative reason to comply is the reason to avoid an *unjustifiable refusal.* Its strength is therefore a function of

[14] N. G. Laskowski and Kenneth Silver, "Wronging by Requesting," in *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, vol. 11, ed. Mark Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 49–69.

how *hard it would be to justify refusing to this person.* Refusing the stranger the time is almost impossible to justify: there is nothing you could say that would count as an adequate answer to "why wouldn't you tell me the time?" So the reason to comply is nearly decisive. Refusing your friend a kidney is easy to justify—"it's my kidney"—and the justification is one your friend must accept. So the reason to comply is weak, even though the want is enormous. The request-reason scales with *justifiability of refusal*, and justifiability of refusal is a joint function of the addressee's cost, the requester's stake, and the relationship in which the answer must be given.

This also explains an asymmetry that Schaber's value account and Lewis's discretionary-value account struggle with. Both predict that requests from intimates carry more force than requests from strangers, because more value is placed in intimates. But the time case shows the reverse can be true. On my account the intimacy effect is real but works through justifiability: a refusal that would be adequately answered to a stranger ("I'm busy") may not be adequately answered to a friend, because the friend has standing to expect more of you. Intimacy raises the bar for an adequate answer. It does not straightforwardly raise the force of the request.

6. Objections

6.1 "This is just etiquette."

One might grant everything I have said about refusal and answerability and insist that it belongs to the theory of manners, not the theory of reasons. Yes, it is rude to ignore a request; yes, one is expected to give a reason when one declines. But these are conventions of politeness, not sources of genuine practical reasons.

Two replies. First, the boundary between etiquette and morality is far less sharp than the objection presupposes, and directed answerability is on the moral side of it. Ignoring a stranger who has addressed you is not merely gauche; it is a small failure of respect—a treating of another's address as though it were noise. Sarah Buss has argued that manners are the everyday expression of the recognition of persons; even if one does not accept the full view, the uptake duty (A2) is plainly of that character.[15] Second, the objection proves too much. If answerability for refusal is "mere etiquette," then so is the standing of a promisee to demand an explanation for a broken promise, and the standing of a beneficiary to demand an account from a trustee. What makes these more than etiquette is that they are grounded in a structural feature of the relation—dependence on another's will—and the same feature grounds answerability for refusal. Etiquette *codifies* the answerability; it does not create it.

[15] Sarah Buss, "Appearing Respectful: The Moral Significance of Manners," *Ethics* 109, no. 4 (1999): 795–826.

6.2 "You've over-moralized ordinary life."

Does the account imply that I wrong my partner every time I decline to make tea without stating my reasons? That seems absurd.

It does not imply this. Answerability is a *standing to ask* and a *duty to answer if asked*; it is not a duty to volunteer justifications unprompted. In intimate relationships the standing is constantly present and almost never exercised, because the answers are understood. "No thanks" to the tea is an answer; the reason (you don't want tea) is transparent. Answerability becomes salient only when refusal is unexpected or costly. What the account does imply is that if your partner *does* ask why you refused the tea, "that's none of your business" is not an appropriate reply—and this is correct. It is her business, because she asked you.

Nor does the account imply that every refusal is *pro tanto* wrong. Refusal is answerable, not presumptively wrong. A justified refusal is not a wrong at all, any more than a justified exercise of any answerable power is. What is *pro tanto* wrong is an *unanswerable* refusal: one for which no adequate account can be given, or one whose author declines to give the account she owes.

6.3 "Broadcast requests."

A charity mails a million appeals. A panhandler asks everyone who passes. A colleague sends an all-department email asking for volunteers. Surely I do not refuse the charity, and surely I do not owe the panhandler an answer.

The account has a principled response. Answerability is a function of *address*, and address admits of degrees. A broadcast appeal places its author's end in no one's hands in particular; it is closer to a wish uttered aloud than to a request. Accordingly, my not-responding is closer to omission than to refusal, and the answerability is correspondingly attenuated—which is exactly what we find. The all-department email is intermediate: I am among the addressees, but not singled out; my non-response is a weak refusal, and I owe a weak answer (which is why such emails are commonly followed by a sheepish "sorry, swamped this term" from those who do not volunteer, and why some people feel a twinge at not sending one).

The panhandler is harder, and the difficulty is instructive. Face-to-face, he *does* address me; he places his end in my hands as I pass. And it is a datum that people find this uncomfortable in a way that mailed appeals are not, that they often mutter "sorry" as they pass, that they sometimes cross the street to avoid being asked. The account predicts exactly this discomfort: the panhandler's request *is* a request, my passing *is* a refusal, and I do owe an answer—though the muttered "sorry" or shake of the head is, in context, answer enough. The fact that we find this uncomfortable, and the fact that we are apt to cross the street, is evidence that even here the categorial shift from omission to refusal is operative.

6.4 "Isn't this Darwall's view?"

Stephen Darwall's account of second-personal address holds that to address a claim or demand to another is to presuppose one's authority to make it and the other's competence to recognize it; second-personal reasons are those whose validity depends on such presupposed authority relations.[16] Requests are second-personal addresses. Is the Answerability Account just Darwall applied to requests?

No, and the difference is instructive. Darwall's paradigm is the *demand*, which presupposes authority to hold the addressee accountable for compliance. Requests are not demands; a requester does not presuppose authority to require compliance, and the addressee who refuses is not, in general, accountable for non-compliance. The Answerability Account identifies a *weaker* second-personal relation: the requester presupposes standing to *put the matter to* the addressee, and this standing generates answerability for the *response*, not accountability for compliance. Requests thus reveal a layer of second-personal normativity beneath the layer of demands and accountability that Darwall emphasizes. One can be answerable to someone without being accountable to her; the requester's standing is standing to be answered, not standing to be obeyed. If Darwall is right that morality is fundamentally second-personal, then requests show that the second-personal domain includes normative relations lighter than demand—and, I would suggest, that these lighter relations are where much of ordinary interpersonal life is conducted.

6.5 "What about requests from the powerful?"

When my head of department "requests" that I serve on a committee, is this really a request, on my account, or a disguised command?

The account has resources to say something illuminating here. A genuine request places the requester's end in the addressee's hands and confers on the addressee an answerable power to grant or refuse. A command does not: the commander retains the end and imposes an obligation. The head of department's utterance is a genuine request *to the extent that refusal is actually available to me as an answerable option*—to the extent that "I'm overcommitted this year" would be received as an answer rather than as insubordination. Where it would be received as insubordination, the utterance is a command in the grammatical dress of a request, and the account rightly classifies it as such. Where it is genuinely open to me to refuse, it is a request, and I am answerable for refusing but not obligated to comply. The interesting cases are the many in which it is *unclear* which it is; and I take it as a merit of the account that it locates the unclarity exactly where it is felt—in whether refusal would be treated as answerable choice or as violation.

[16] Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, chs. 1, 3, 5.

6.6 "You have described a duty to respond, not a reason to comply."

A final objection presses on (A4). Grant that requests create answerability for refusal. Why think this generates any reason *to comply*? Perhaps it generates only a reason to *answer well*—to refuse articulately.

The reply is that the reason to comply is precisely the reason to avoid a refusal one *cannot* answer well. If I can justify refusing, the derivative reason to comply is weak or nil, and this is the right result: I may refuse, and the request has given me no reason strong enough to override my justification. If I cannot justify refusing—if there is nothing I could say to you that would count as an adequate account—then I have a strong reason to comply, because the alternative is an unanswerable refusal, which wrongs you. The reason to comply just *is* the reason not to wrong you in that way. This is why the request-reason has the character it has: it is not a reason that competes with my other reasons on a common scale; it is a reason that becomes decisive exactly when my other reasons fail to amount to a justification.

This may seem to make the request-reason strangely conditional: I have reason to comply *if* I cannot justify refusing. But this is not strange. It is the structure of every reason grounded in answerability. A trustee has decisive reason to act in the beneficiary's interest exactly when she could not justify to the beneficiary doing otherwise. The conditionality is not a defect; it is what discretion, properly understood, comes to.

7. Requests Among the Normative Powers

I conclude by locating requests on a map of neighboring normative powers, since the Answerability Account makes the map look different from the way it is usually drawn.

The standard picture, descending from Raz, arranges interpersonal reason-giving on a single axis of *force*: commands purport to impose obligations, requests purport to create *pro tanto* reasons, and advice or expressed wishes purport to do neither, functioning only epistemically.[17] On this picture requests are weakened commands.

The Answerability Account suggests a different geometry, with two axes rather than one. The first axis concerns *where the end rests*. A command keeps the end with the commander, who retains authority over whether it is pursued. A request places the end in the addressee's hands. A wish or expression of want leaves the end in the world, in no one's hands. A promise runs the other way: the promiser places *her own* future conduct in the promisee's hands, giving the promisee a power to release or hold.

[17] Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 35–37; see also Geoffrey Cupit, "How Requests (and Promises) Create Obligations," *Philosophical Quarterly* 44, no. 177 (1994): 439–55, who goes further than Raz in assimilating requests to obligation-creating acts. For the promise as the placing of one's conduct in another's hands, see David Owens, *Shaping the Normative Landscape* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), esp. chs. 6–8, and Seana Shiffrin, "Promising, Intimate Relationships, and Conventionalism," *Philosophical Review* 117, no. 4 (2008): 481–524.

The second axis concerns *what the addressee becomes answerable for*. Under a command, the addressee is accountable for compliance. Under a request, the addressee is answerable for her response—whether she grants or refuses, and why. Under a wish, the addressee is answerable for nothing to the wisher, though she may have reasons of beneficence. Under a promise, the promiser is accountable for performance to the promisee.

On this map, requests are not weakened commands. They are the inverse of promises. A promise is the promiser's placing of her will in another's hands and becoming accountable for keeping it there; a request is the requester's placing of her end in another's hands and thereby making that other answerable for what she does with it. Both are exposures. Both create a directed relation that did not exist before. Both make available a new act-type—breaking the promise, refusing the request—that is essentially relational and essentially dependent on the prior act. The difference is which party bears the answerability: in the promise, the one who exposed herself; in the request, the one to whom she exposed herself.

This also illuminates why the refuser's answerability is *light*. The requester has, after all, chosen to expose herself; she has put herself in a position to be refused. The addressee did not ask for the power she now holds. It would be unjust for her to be *obligated* by another's unilateral decision to place an end in her hands—that would let anyone bind anyone by asking. But it is not unjust for her to be *answerable* for how she exercises a power she now, like it or not, holds. Answerability is the minimal normative consequence of being made the arbiter of another's end. Requests generate exactly this minimum, and no more. That is why they are neither nothing nor commands.

What emerges is a picture on which a great deal of the normativity of ordinary interpersonal life—the life of asking and being asked, of favors sought and granted and declined—is not conducted in the currency of first-order reasons to act at all. It is conducted in the currency of *positions*: who has placed what in whose hands, who may ask whom for an accounting, what counts as an adequate answer between these two. The Balance Assumption, by treating every normative transaction as an adjustment to the stock of reasons for action, has rendered this currency invisible. Requests, I have argued, are the place where it becomes visible, because a request's whole point is to create a position—to put someone, as we say, in a position of having to say no.