How Requests Create Reasons

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Abstract

By issuing requests of one another, we seem to wield what is, on reflection, a remarkable power: to create reasons at will. But how can requesters give us reasons to do what they want, even when they stand in no relation of authority over us? And what would be lost if we saw requests as communicating the existence of pre-existing reasons, rather than creating new ones?

I propose that a request for an act creates a reason when and because treating the request as a reason would help the addressee to better comply with a duty to perform such acts. I show that this view explains how requests create reasons, why requesting is valuable, and how the reasons created by requests depend on antecedent considerations. I argue, further, that it clarifies the discretionary nature of the reasons created by requests, gives a unified account of how requests create reasons among intimates and strangers, and reveals important forms of unfairness that result from requests.

Introduction

You are not required to stop and aid every stranger lost in the subway. When you see one, you might cite your discretion to defer assistance for later, thinking to yourself, "I will help the next time I see someone in their shoes." But this thought rings hollow when the lost stranger *requests* your guidance. Your normative situation has changed, and you must now give a reason for not helping in this particular case, or else provide assistance. Requesters have what is, on reflection, a remarkable power: to create reasons at will.

This power is puzzling. How can requesters just *decide* to create reasons, which depend not only on the content of the request, but on the simple fact that a request was made? Promises and commands raise similar questions, but requests are especially striking, because—unlike promises—they exercise unilateral control over *the addressee's* reasons and—unlike commands—requests exercise this control without invoking any relation of authority that would justify it. The power to create reasons by uttering a few special words is, as Hume says, "one of the most mysterious and incomprehensible operations that can possibly be imagin'd." (1739, 3.2.5.14)

But what value would be lost if we saw requests as devices for communicating the existence of pre-existing reasons, rather than creating new ones? After all, we are often put off by requests from those who lack good independent reasons for making them (Gläser 2019, pp. 36, 39–42), and such requests often fail to create reasons—imagine someone asking that you commit murder, or that you fly abroad to retrieve a toothbrush they forgot on vacation. Such cases suggest that our reasons to grant requests are explained, at least in part, by independent considerations. What is the point of requesting, beyond reminding the addressee of these considerations? In addition to a basic question about how requests create reasons, we face related questions about why requesting is valuable, and how exactly the reasons created by requests depend on considerations that are already in play.

To answer these questions, I begin with a prominent line of thought, on which requesters exercise a *normative power*: an ability to control a normative condition at will (Owens 2012; Lewis 2018; Schaber 2021; Khokhar 2022; Raz 2022). On this view, we have reasons to grant requests because doing so realizes the value of the requester's control over our normative circumstances. This value belongs to the practice of requesting *generally*, and only derivatively to particular requests, which explains why requests *as such* generate reasons (Raz 2022, pp. 167-8, 172).

The challenge in pulling off this view is to identify a value that can explain both how requests create reasons *and* how these reasons depend on antecedent considerations. I argue that requests are valuable because they improve compliance with *imperfect duties*—duties that grant us significant discretion to decide how to comply. Consider our imperfect duty of mutual aid, which grants each of us some discretion to decide exactly when and whom we help. Practically any time we come across a stranger in need of assistance, we can think to ourselves that we will help next time. We are correspondingly liable to fall short of our imperfect duty of mutual aid, by repeatedly citing our discretion to defer compliance. It is valuable for you to accept that the lost stranger's request provides

you with a reason, because doing so improves your compliance with your imperfect duty. Indeed, faced with this reason, you can no longer cite your generic interest in discretion, but must now provide assistance, or else give a reason for not complying in this particular case. Just as religious and other taxes improve compliance with imperfect duties of charity, by establishing regular times and recipients for donations (Buchanan 1987, pp. 569-70, Scheffler 2010, pp. 292-4), requests improve compliance with imperfect duties of mutual aid.

Generalizing from this example, I propose the *Imperfect Duty Account*: requests create reasons when and because (1) the requestee is under an independent duty to perform acts of the kind requested, and (2) treating the request as a reason would be valuable, since it would better enable the requestee to comply with this duty, while granting the requester control over their dependence on others. Thus, on my view, a request that a person commit murder does not create a reason, because we have no imperfect duties to commit murder. More generally, requests create reasons by exercising a normative power, and this power is justified by the value of improved compliance with imperfect duties, so these duties must be in place for requests to create reasons. In this way, my view explains at once how requests create new reasons, why requesting is valuable, and how the reasons created by requests depend on antecedent considerations.

My view has several further selling points. I will argue that helps to explain the sense in which the reasons created by requests are discretionary, gives a unified account of how requests create reasons among intimates and strangers, and reveals important forms of unfairness that result from requests. Further, my view leads to an illuminating contrast with Raz's (1988) influential view of commands. On Raz's view, a command creates a duty when and because compliance with the command improves the addressee's responsiveness to the reasons that apply to them already. Whereas commands create duties by summarizing antecedent reasons, requests create reasons by specifying antecedent duties.

1 The Imperfect Duty Account

A normative power is an ability to control a normative condition at will. To illustrate, suppose I ask for your help, and you comply because you know an onlooker will think highly of you (Enoch 2011, pp. 14-5). Although you act on a reason created by my request, this reason depends not directly on my will, but on the onlooker's esteem. I adopt the widespread view that requests create reasons *at will* only when they communicate and execute a certain intention, for example an intention to hereby create a reason (Owens 2012, p. 1); to give the requestee a reason which depends on their recognition of this intention (Raz 1975, p. 103; Enoch 2011, p. 15; Enoch 2014; Lewis 2018, p. 10); or to motivate the addressee to do the act in question (Hanser 2015, p. 102; McMyler 2017, p.79; though see Frick and Viehoff 2023, pp. 945-7).

I propose that requests exercise a normative power by serving the value of improved compliance with imperfect duties. According to the *Imperfect Duty Account*, a request creates a reason when and because:

(1) the requestee has an imperfect duty to perform the kind of act requested, and the requester is a potential beneficiary of this duty, whose interests partly explain why the duty is owed; and

(2a) treating the request as a reason would mitigate the requestee's deliberative and motivational problems associated with this duty, while

(2b) granting the requester control over their dependence on others and associated reasons of reciprocity.

The power to create reasons by requesting is valuable for both parties involved.[1] For request*ees*, this power provides valuable guidance in deliberation about imperfect duties. For request*ers*, this power improves compliance with imperfect duties, while granting

[1] For simplicity, I restrict attention to requests on one's own behalf.

requesters control over their dependence on others and associated reasons of reciprocity. These values justify the Imperfect Duty Account.[2] I will first describe the relevant notion of an imperfect duty and then explain the account.

Imperfect duties are simply those that grant us significant discretion to decide exactly when and how to comply.[3] Such duties are, I submit, a basic feature of both common-sense morality and non-consequentialist moral theorizing. Consider our imperfect duties to express kindness to strangers, to perform community service, to respect nature, to donate to charities, to engage in civic discourse, to develop and share our talents, and to exercise due care (Herman 2021, Ch. 3). Each of us enjoys some discretion in deciding exactly when and how we will live up to these duties. Of course, almost any duty involves discretion, in the sense that there are multiple ways of fulfilling it: I can fulfill my promise to return your book using my right hand, or my left one (Stocker 1967, pp. 507-11). But unlike most promissory obligations, imperfect duties grant us discretion in a deeper sense: the options they leave open differ significantly in the kinds and amounts of value that they realize (Wallace 2019a, p. 51). I can be kind to strangers by cooking meals for a local shelter, or by advocating for safer street design after witnessing an accident, even when these acts differ significantly in the kinds and amounts of value that they realize.

The discretion associated with imperfect duties is valuable, because it lends expressive significance to compliance (Wallace 2019a, p. 62), gives each of us some elbow room to pursue the projects and relationships that lend our lives meaning (Saunders, Slater, and Sticker 2023, pp. 5-6), and appropriately registers that many of our duties apply to us as members of larger groups (Schroeder 2014, pp. 17-25). For example, there is plausibly room for discretion in determining how one will donate to charities. This discretion grants our donations important expressive significance, given that there are a number of

[2]This is a view of the value that justifies the power to request, which is largely neutral on what requests are and what they communicate. I discuss the latter in §1.1.

[3]This is a stipulative definition, not a substantive claim. Imperfect duties are sometimes instead defined in a more technical way, which ties them to Kantian views of morality (Rainbolt 2000). A utilitarian who denies that there are imperfect duties could happily accept the Imperfect Duty Account as an explanation of why requests do not create reasons.

similarly effective charities addressing importantly different problems. This discretion also protects individuals' freedom to live their own lives, while appropriately registering that supporting the efforts of effective charities is a shared responsibility, not that of a lone individual (Dietz 2019; Wallace 2019a, pp. 63-4, 70).

However, the discretion associated with imperfect duties makes them *deliberatively inconclusive*: there is usually no decisive rational pressure to comply in a particular case, because the imperfect duty may not require benefiting a particular person at a particular time. If you see a stranger looking confusedly at a map in the subway, you can comply with the imperfect duty of mutual aid by offering your help. But you can also refrain from helping, and instead help out another stranger later.

This leads to a *deliberative problem*: imperfect duties provide us with little deliberative guidance, insofar as they do not require benefiting any particular person at any particular time. This in turn creates a *motivational problem*: compliance with imperfect duties is standardly both optional and burdensome, so we are liable in each case to defer compliance to a later time (Scheffler 2010, pp. 292-4; see also Tenenbaum and Raffman 2012, pp. 99-100). In this way, the deliberative inconclusiveness of imperfect duties makes us liable to systematically fall short of them.

Imperfect duties provide reasons for conformity in each case, but they are reasons that the agent standardly has the discretion to set aside. Action on the basis of these reasons is not required, even when there are no countervailing considerations.[4] By contrast, the reason provided by a request plays a non-optional role in deliberation, by *weighing in favor of a requirement* to do what is requested: if this reason is the only consideration in play, you should respond to it by doing the relevant action.

Because they weigh in favor of requirements to do what is requested, the reasons created by requests mitigate the deliberative and motivational problems associated with our

[4]I remain neutral here on when exactly this discretion arises. Raz (1999) argues that it arises when the relevant options are of incommensurable value. Gert (2003) argues that discretion arises when reasons justify these options without requiring them. Portmore (2012) argues that it arises when different options fit into larger courses of action which equally achieve the same valuable end.

imperfect duties. Indeed, when a request is made, the question of whether to comply with the imperfect duty no longer depends purely on the agent's discretion and the content of the duty, which might not require benefiting any particular person at any particular time. Instead, compliance now depends on whether the reason provided by the request is stronger than the other reasons in play. Even if the reason is outweighed, it anchors deliberation: it must be outweighed by considerations applying to this particular case. The requester cannot simply cite their generic interest in discretion to defer compliance with imperfect duties, but must have a further reason to exercise that discretion on this occasion. In these ways, the reason provided by a request simplifies deliberation about imperfect duties, thereby mitigating the deliberative problem.

As a result, the reason created by a request also mitigates the motivational problem: when an agent's reasons not to comply in a particular case are significantly less weighty than the reason created by the request, there is a perfectly clear motivational route via this reason to the conclusion that they ought to comply. The requestee would wrong the requester by ignoring this reason and the request that creates it (Goldberg 2020).

Notice that if a sincere request merely communicated the existence of an imperfect duty without creating a reason, it would not address the relevant deliberative or motivational problems: it would just remind the requestee of them. Thus my view is incompatible with what I will call *epistemicism*, the view that requests do not create new reasons in any systematic way, but rather call attention to reasons that exist already (Laskowski and Silver 2021, pp. 61-2; Weltman 2022a; Weltman 2022b; Weltman 2023).[5]

My view correctly implies that self-requests do not create reasons. For self-requests do not mitigate the relevant deliberative and motivational problems, but only push them one step back. Instead of "Shall I comply with my imperfect duty?", the agent would face the question, "Shall I request compliance of myself?". The same deliberative and motiva-

[5]On the objection that epistemicism cannot explain why it is felicitous (e.g.) to tell a friend that one wants help moving but won't ask for it, see Schaber (2021, pp. 434, 463–4) and Weltman (2022, pp. 1733-6; 2023, pp. 398-9). On the objection that epistemicism cannot make sense of efforts to avoid a request, see Weltman (2022a).

tional problems would persist, since the agent has the discretion to choose whether they issue a request, and would be correspondingly liable to defer the request (and compliance) for later.

To be sure, there are other possible means of mitigating the relevant deliberative and motivational problems. Perhaps you have special reasons to help intimates, or those who are regularly in close proximity to you. These reasons mitigate the relevant problems, but the solutions they provide are costly: if a beneficiary of an imperfect duty is in need, they cannot always go out and make some new friends, or keep themselves near to someone who can help. Requesting is often easier: you just say a few words. As I now explain, these alternative solutions are also costly because they leave beneficiaries of imperfect duties without any means of controlling, on a case-by-case basis, when they depend on others.[6]

Receiving someone's help, after all, is a way of depending on them. Because this relationship of dependence creates reasons of reciprocity and can affect a person's ability to see themselves as autonomous (Herman 2012, p. 406, 2021, pp. 18-22), we have an interest in deciding when and whether we enter into it. The normative power of requesting answers this interest: because a normative power is an ability to control a normative condition at will, the normative power of requesting makes our dependence on others contingent on our will (and their willing acceptance of our request). Thus this power does not just serve the interests of *requestees*, by mitigating deliberative and motivational problems associated with imperfect duties. It also serves the interests of *requesters*, by ensuring greater compliance with imperfect duties, and by granting requesters control over their relationships of dependence and associated reasons of reciprocity.[7]

[6]Compare Viehoff's (2025) suggestion that commands provide a low-cost means of controlling actions.

[7]Cupit's (1994) view of requests appeals to reciprocity in a different way. On this view, a request creates a reason because we have reasons of reciprocity not to disappoint others by betraying the trust they place in us by requesting. I won't press the point, but it is worth flagging a circularity concern. On this view, requests create reasons to avoid the disappointment that comes with not granting them. But the relevant reason is a reason to regret having been a *fitting* disappointment to another, and perhaps disappointment is fitting only when the requester had the standing to request, and thus to create a reason by requesting.

Now, one might question whether it is really a problem that our imperfect duties are deliberatively inconclusive. It is *valuable* for people to be uncertain about their imperfect duties, and for people to take responsibility for living up to them without the prompting or guidance of others. Deliberative inconclusiveness is not a problem to be mitigated: it just reflects our discretion, which is part of the point of imperfect duties.

However, it is one thing to say that the discretion of imperfect duties is valuable, and another to say that it does not introduce moral hazards which can be mitigated by requests. It is crucial that requests mitigate these hazards while respecting the valuable discretion associated with imperfect duties. The requestee remains free to turn down the request by citing a reason for exercising their discretion on this particular occasion. Further, if the reason created by the request is not weighty enough to tip the scales in favor of the act requested, the requestee retains full discretion to decide how they will comply with the relevant duty.

To further clarify the Imperfect Duty Account, I'll first circumscribe the requests it is meant to explain, and then contrast it with Raz's view of commands and with an alternative view of how requests create reasons.

1.1 Two Kinds of Requests

Many requests are difficult to distinguish from commands, demands, or expressions of desires. When your boss asks for a report, they are issuing a polite *command*. When a swimmer asks a lifeguard to save their drowning friend, they are issuing a *demand*, by informing the lifeguard of a duty of rescue. When a friend says that they would love some chocolate, they might be merely *expressing a desire*. Such cases suggest that requests do not exercise normative powers, or do not exercise them in a distinctive way, which sets them apart from other forms of second-personal address.

For discussion of an analogous circularity worry for assurance-based accounts of promissory obligation, see Scanlon (1998, pp. 307-8) and Kolodny and Wallace (2003, pp. 131-6).

To make sense of such cases, we need to distinguish wide and narrow senses of requesting. When a surgeon says to an assistant "Give me a scalpel, please," they issue a command, but it would be perfectly felicitous to describe the situation by saying that the surgeon asked for a scalpel, or indeed that they requested it. We often use "requesting" in a *wide* sense to refer to any act that can be described as asking. In this sense, many commands, demands, entreaties, pleas, exhortations, invitations, and expressions of wishes or desires would also count as requests.

That said, we are often careful to distinguish requests from these other kinds of acts, as when someone says that they are not *telling* you to do something, but rather *merely asking* you to do it. My claim is that requesting in this *narrower* sense can be distinguished from other kinds of asking in terms of a normative power to create reasons. The swimmer who asks the lifeguard to save their drowning friend is requesting in the wide sense, but not in the narrow sense; they are issuing a politely phrased demand.

The Imperfect Duty Account is neutral on what, if anything, unifies requests in the wide sense. Some acts which are only requests in the wide sense might motivate the view I called epistemicism about requests, on which requests merely communicate prior reasons (Weltman 2022, pp. 1715-7). Alternatively, requests might be proposals in joint practical deliberation (de Kenessey 2022, pp. 892, 895–9), just as assertions are proposals to update the common ground of a conversation (Stalnaker 1987). Or perhaps requests simply express the requesters' desire that another be motivated to some degree to do an act (Searle 1969, pp. 62, 66). Some linguists hold, relatedly, that a request is an utterance with directive force, which communicates content that is not ruled in or out by the common ground (Ruytenbeek, Ostashchenko, and Kissne 2017, p. 47).[8]

[8]This content is explicitly introduced by direct requests, which are typically imperatives, deontically modalized declaratives, or performative clauses (Ruytenbeek 2019, pp. 46-7), e.g. "Close the window," "You must/have to close the window," or "I'm asking you to close the window." Indirect requests instead communicate the relevant content by implicature (Ruytenbeek 2019, pp. 79-82). Among indirect requests, theorists further distinguish "on the record" and "off the record" requests (Blum-Kulka 1987, pp. 141-2). On the record indirect requests are often modal interrogatives and make the speaker responsible for their request (Blum-Kulka 1987, pp. 140), in the sense that they cannot plausibly deny having issued a request (Camp 2018, pp. 47-52). For example (Aikhenvald 2010, p. 258): "Can/can't/could/couldn't you close

However, these views do not straightforwardly distinguish requests from commands, demands, entreaties, pleas, exhortations, invitations, or expressions of wishes or desires. The appeal to normative powers is explanatorily powerful, because it ties together requests in the more narrow sense, by citing a value that explains how they create reasons.

While I accept that requesting is a normative power, I want to be clear that I reject some controversial claims that are often associated with this view. It is often claimed that the value that explains normative powers is non-instrumental (Owens 2012, Ch. 1), or that it attaches to their possession as such (Raz 2022, pp. 175-6, Bruno 2022, p. 3222). I will not invoke these claims, which are sometimes rejected as mysterious or unexplanatory (Wallace 2019b, pp. 165-7). Normative powers can be justified by their instrumental value. Indeed, it might be valuable for me to be able to create reasons for you, not because this control over your *normative situation* is valuable to me *in itself*, but because the resulting control over *your deliberation and action* is a generally effective means to *other values*, like autonomy or friendship (Viehoff 2025b). According to *instrumentalism*, the relevant further value is desire-satisfaction: the practice of requesting is valuable insofar as it helps people to get what they have reason to want (Schaber 2021, pp. 434-7). However, there is good reason to be skeptical that we have reasons to satisfy people's desires, whatever they happen to be (Pettit and Smith 1990; Darwall 2001, pp. 136-9). I propose instead that requests create reasons because they thereby mitigate deliberative and motivational problems associated with our imperfect duties, while granting requesters control over their dependence on others and associated reasons of reciprocity.

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the window?", "Is it possible to close the window?", "Will/won't/would/wouldn't you (mind/like to/care to/be so kind as to) close the window?", "Must you leave the window open?". Off the record indirect requests are typically declaratives that indicate the speaker's preferences about the situation or the very act of requesting (Macaulay 1996), or so-called "suggestory requests" (Blum-Kulka 1987, p. 133): "It's cold in here.", "If you could close the window, I'd be very grateful.", "I wonder whether you would mind closing the window.", "I'd like to ask you to open the window.", "How about closing the window?", "Why not close the window?', "Why don't you close the window?"

1.2 Requests and Commands

It is natural enough to suggest that requests are distinguished from commands by the fact that the reasons created by requests are discretionary. But what does this suggestion amount to? Requests are sometimes said to be discretionary insofar as they create mere *pro tanto* reasons, rather than obligations (Raz 2009, pp. 14-5; Lance and Kukla 2013, p. 460; Lewis 2018, p. 11). But sincere requests often create obligations, as when a friend asks for your help moving, and you could easily assist them. Indeed, on some views, requests *generally* create obligations (Cupit 1994, Gläser 2019, pp. 33-5, Khokhar 2022, pp. 8-10). Alternatively, some propose that the reasons created by requests are discretionary insofar as we have the discretion to choose whom to value as an intimate, and requests among intimates create reasons only because intimates value each other (Lewis 2018, pp. 12-14). But as I'll later explain, I want to make room for the idea that requests can create reasons among perfect strangers, who share no concrete, particular valuable relationships.

The appeal to imperfect duties provides a distinct, complementary explanation. The reason created by a request is partly explained by an antecedent imperfect duty, which grants the requestee a degree of discretion in deciding how to live up to it. While this reason will weigh in favor of a requirement to do the act requested, the requestee remains free to cite a reason for exercising their discretion on this particular occasion. Further, if this reason is outweighed, the requestee retains their discretion to decide how they will comply with the relevant imperfect duty. In all of these ways, the reason created by a request is discretionary.

To illustrate the contrast with commands, consider Raz's (1988) *Service Conception* of authority, on which an addressee has a defeasible duty to comply with an authority's justified command, because in accepting that they have such a duty, the addressee would generally comply better with reasons that apply to them independently. A justified command will provide decisive judgment on a range of practical reasons, for example relating

to study habits, finance, or emergency preparedness. By providing a summary judgment of these reasons, a command delivers a verdict regarding what the addressee should do, which is meant to pre-empt the addressee's own judgment (Raz 1988, pp. 57-62).[9]

By contrast, in applying an antecedent imperfect duty to the case at hand, a request need only provide the addressee with a reason, because requests and commands address distinct deliberative problems. Whereas commands aim to settle the deliberative question of what to do with respect to a range of reasons, requests merely lend deliberative clarity to an otherwise inconclusive imperfect duty, and need not thereby pre-empt the addressee's own judgment about the other reasons in play. In a slogan: whereas commands create duties by summarizing antecedent reasons, requests create reasons by specifying antecedent duties.

My view of requests dovetails with Raz's account of commands, suggesting a unified view of these normative powers: requests and commands serve us by mitigating the deliberative problems posed by our reasons and duties. However, there are two important differences between Raz's view of commands and my view of requests. First, Raz believes that the power to command is justified primarily by its deliberative value for the *addressee*: it exists only because the addressee will comply better with their independent reasons by treating the command as authoritative. By contrast, the power to request is justified only partly by its deliberative value for the addressee. This power is also justified by its value for *those who wield it*: it increases compliance with imperfect duties and gives requesters control over their dependence on others and associated reasons of reciprocity.

Second, for Raz, the antecedent considerations summarized by a command are simply reasons, which are not necessarily tied to any (e.g. democratic) relationship between the commander and those subject to their authority. This leads to a worry that Raz implausibly bestows legitimacy on deeply unjust *de facto* authorities (Christiano 2004, p. 278). As Estlund (2007, p. 118) puts it, "If a petulant child of a brutal dictator whimsically tells

[9]Raz (1988, pp. 48-51) proposes that it is valuable for commands to summarize reasons because they thereby break ties among reasons and resolve prisoner's dilemmas and coordination problems.

the minister to leave the palace, and the dictator will unleash brutality on the masses out of anger if the minister [fails to comply], then the child's command has created a moral requirement to [comply]." The child's command might wield *de facto* authority, in the sense that it results in a genuine duty for the minister to leave, but the child's command should not count as legitimate, seeing as they have no right to control others' actions in the way that they do. On one way of elaborating this worry, Raz's view cannot explain legitimate authority, because it does not sufficiently constrain the relationship between the issuer and recipient of the command. By contrast, on the view I favor, the antecedent consideration specified by a request is not a set of reasons unrelated to the requester, but rather an imperfect duty, which constitutes a normative relationship between the requester and requestee.[10]

1.3 Requests and Relationships

According to a view I will call *relationalism*, requests create reasons by way of the value that requesters and requestees place in their relationship (Lewis 2018). Accounts of how requests create reasons often focus exclusively on requests when the prospect of a valuable intimate relation or interaction is available (Owens 2012, p.161; Lewis 2018; Khokhar 2022). On one way of elaborating relationalism, requests among strangers merely communicate the existence of pre-existing reasons (cf. Schaber 2021, p. 436).

A comprehensive assessment of relationalism lies beyond the scope of this paper, but here I want to register two reservations I have about the relationalist idea that requests

[10] A single directive might simultaneously create a duty in the way described by the Service Conception and create a reason in the way described by the Imperfect Duty Account. For example, perhaps when a state directs its citizens to pay taxes, it thereby summarizes antecedent reasons applying to them, while also helping citizens to better comply with an imperfect duty of charity towards fellow citizens. Some object that Raz's view cannot make sense of cases in which an authority's directive is binding, even though they are mistaken (cf. Tadros 2020, p. 76). A similar worry applies to the Imperfect Duty Account: if a neighbor mistakenly believes that you borrowed their ladder last month and asks you to help them move a heavy table in turn, perhaps their request creates a reason, even though they are mistaken about the antecedent imperfect duty of gratitude. One response appeals to uncertainty: an addressee is not always in a position to know whether the relevant commander or requester is mistaken; perhaps lifting the table falls under a duty of mutual aid, if not one of gratitude. For discussion, see Viehoff (2025a).

only create reasons by way of the value of concrete, particular relationships. First, requests among strangers really do seem to create reasons—consider a stranger asking that you give them directions, lend them your phone to make a call, take their photo, let them pet your dog, or share your table in a crowded coffee shop. Such requests seem to create reasons, even if the stranger is not your neighbor, your fellow citizen, or related to you in some other particular way.

In response to such cases, one might say that *simply by issuing a request*, the requester creates a valuable relationship of trust. The requester trusts the requestee to give their request due consideration, and the value of this relationship of trust would then create a reason to grant the request. But this seems to me to stretch the notion of a valuable relationship beyond its natural limits. It also gets the order of explanation the wrong way around. We trust that others will respond to the reasons created by our requests: the reasons explain our trust. So this trust is not well-positioned to explain the reasons created by requests, on pain of circularity.

Second, the appeal to the value of relationships does not explain how exactly we get from the value of a relationship to our reasons to grant particular requests. How do we distinguish the requests that create reasons and the ones that don't? Consider a friend's request that you poke someone or do a little dance for their entertainment. Such requests occur against the backdrop of a valuable relationship, but even among friends, requests seem to create reasons only when they call on antecedent imperfect duties. The appeal to imperfect duties nicely explains this, but relationalism seems less predictive.

It is striking that sincere requests seem to track imperfect duties. For example, the cases of requests among strangers which I just described plausibly fall under an imperfect duty of expressing kindness to strangers, and a friend asking for help moving is plausibly calling on a duty of mutual aid. Without elaboration, relationalism leaves it mysterious why requests among strangers and intimates alike should track imperfect duties in these ways. By contrast, on the view developed here, requests create reasons among

strangers and intimates in the same way, namely by mitigating deliberative and motivational problems associated with our imperfect duties. However, we have more (and more demanding) imperfect duties with respect to our intimates than we do with respect to strangers. For this reason, we can ask more of intimates than we can of strangers.

2 Asking Too Much

Now, I'll address the concern that the Imperfect Duty Account licenses too many requests. We can distinguish three ways of spelling out this concern.[11] First, it might be objected that this account implies that any potential beneficiary of an imperfect duty can create a reason by requesting any act that counts towards its satisfaction. This implication would be implausible: if someone asks that you risk your life to save a child from an oncoming train, or that you dedicate your career to humanitarian work, they do not seem to create a new reason for you to do so.

In reply: it does not follow from the fact that an act *counts toward* the satisfaction of an imperfect duty, in the sense that doing the act now would grant the agent greater discretion not to comply with the duty later, that this type of act is also *required* by the relevant duty. This is because the act in question might be supererogatory. Supererogatory acts often express good will towards others, and thereby count towards the satisfaction of an imperfect duty of kindness, mutual aid, or beneficence. (If you jump onto the tracks to save a child, perhaps you've done your fair share of kindness to strangers for the day.) But supererogatory acts do not fall within the scope of what these duties require, and requests for these acts need not create reasons.[12]

[11] My view implies that requests for wrong acts can create reasons only if (somehow) such acts fall under imperfect duties. Regarding the analogous view of promising, on which promises to do what is independently wrongful may nonetheless be binding, see Shiffrin (2011) and Owens (2016).

[12] Many cases are difficult to place, because they toe the line between supererogation and compliance with an imperfect duty. Ultimately, the scope of our powers to request depend on the scope of our imperfect duties. If we have a general imperfect duty to do favors for others (Benziman 2023, pp. 302-5; cf. Scanlon 2008, Ch. 3), or if all supererogatory acts fall under imperfect duties (Hale 1991), many potential beneficiaries will possess the power to create reasons by requesting. Otherwise, the power to create reasons

Second, it might be objected that even requests for acts that are *required* by imperfect duties can fail to create reasons. Suppose a stranger requests that you spend five minutes looking for trash on your next hike. Even if this act falls under an imperfect duty of respect for nature, it seems odd to say that this request creates a reason.

In reply: our duty to respect nature might not be owed to anyone, or owed only to ourselves. The Imperfect Duty Account applies only when the requester's interests partly explain why there is an imperfect duty to perform acts of the kind requested. If our duty to respect nature is not explained by individuals' interests, but rather by the impersonal value of nature, then my account implies that others lack the standing to request compliance with this duty on their own behalf, and requests for compliance will not usually create reasons.[13]

Finally, it could be argued that the Imperfect Duty Account is too permissive in a different way: it might license unfair requests. If the power to request is unfair and thus highly disvaluable, and normative powers are justified by their value, this poses a problem for the idea that requests exercise a normative power.

It may seem unfair that requests create reasons, because *morally arbitrary factors*, like personality quirks, influence who issues requests and who accepts them. But even if a fact is morally arbitrary, in the sense that there is no moral reason that explains why it is true, it does not follow that the fact is morally arbitrary in the further sense that it is morally irrelevant to what one ought to do (Nozick 1974, pp. 213-6). For example, the intimate relations that give us special reasons to care for those dear to us are largely arbitrary: they are explained by causal laws, not moral ones. But it does not follow that our intimate relations are morally irrelevant to what we ought to do. Quirks of personality influence who issues or accepts requests, but that does not in itself make requesting as a practice

by requesting is more limited.

[13]One might argue that imperfect duties in general are owed to no one and thus come with a problem of *accountability*, which requests mitigate by creating reasons. I do not make this argument, because imperfect duties might be modeled as duties to do one's fair share, owed directly to each potential beneficiary (Murphy 2000; Wallace 2019a), and because requests might not always create the directed duties that are thought by some to underlie relations of interpersonal accountability (Darwall 2006; Wallace 2019b).

unfair. After all, personality quirks also influence who makes or accepts promises, but it does not follow that the practice of promising is unfair.

Still, even if it is not in general unfair that requests create reasons, one might worry that on the Imperfect Duty Account, there is a risk that requests will create an unfair division of benefits and burdens among those who are subject to imperfect duties and among those who stand to benefit from compliance with them. After all, as *someone subject* to imperfect duties, you might have more reasons to comply, just because people feel inclined to issue requests from you. And as a *potential beneficiary* of imperfect duties, by requesting excessively from others, you might direct to yourself more than your fair share of compliance with imperfect duties. I'll consider each worry in turn.

It is unfair that people are burdened by the reasons created by excessive requests, but this is a datum for a theory of requests to accommodate, not something to be explained away. When a couple's children almost always request help from their mother rather than their father, or when students more often request emotional support from teachers who are women, these requests create an unfairly gendered division of labor. It seems correct to say that those who are unfairly overburdened in such cases are overburdened not just because they experience social pressure to help others, but also because they are inundated with genuine reasons to help others. The unfairness consists partly in the reasons created by the requests, which lead to an unfair division of labor with respect to the fulfillment of imperfect duties. If we were to deny that requests create reasons in such cases, we would be left unable to fully explain what is unfair about them.

Three devices mitigate unfairness in the distribution of benefits among requesters.[14] First, by unfairly requesting, a requester may give others permission to disregard their requests (Herstein 2017). Suppose a friend repeatedly asks for and receives your help, while passing up several clear opportunities to reciprocate. Or suppose that a student

[14]Gläser (2019, p. 40) observes that two requests made in succession with identical content do not create two reasons. The Imperfect Duty Account nicely explains this: the first request already mitigated the deliberative problem, so there is no deliberative role left for the reason created by the second request.

has a history of requesting additional help, with the result that they have received much more support than other, equally needy students. In such cases, the requester may give their requestee the standing to disregard their requests.

Second, for certain imperfect duties, there may be strong reasons to adopt a standing policy regarding compliance, which will spread benefits fairly and address the relevant deliberative problem. If an individual has adopted such a well-justified policy, a request that calls on the relevant imperfect duty might not further mitigate the associated deliberative problem, and would not in that case create a reason. For example, many adopt a policy of not giving money to those who stand outside of grocery stores to solicit donations for charities, electing instead to donate online after doing their own research. If a person has this policy, and it is justified, then that person's deliberative problem associated with charitable giving has been addressed, and strangers' in-person requests for donations will not create reasons. (If such a policy is not justified, the deliberative problem remains, and these requests do create reasons.)

Third and finally, when the stakes are high enough, the reason created by a request may simply be irrelevant. Suppose you can save Drew or Dorie from drowning but cannot save both of them, and that going into the water is dangerous enough to fall under an imperfect duty; you are not required to save either of them. Even if Drew's request that you save him creates a reason, the reason is plausibly too weak to be relevant to the decision of whom to save.[15] More generally, sufficiently weak reasons are often irrelevant when lives are at stake. If you learned that by saving Drew, you could also obtain ibuprofen that would cure Carl's sore throat, that would give you a further reason to save Drew, but the reason would be irrelevant to the question of what to do, given that there are lives at stake (Kamm 2005). My view does not imply that in high stakes cases, ties can

[15]One might reply that any consideration (e.g. Drew's request) should be able to break a tie (Rüger 2020, p. 464). While it may be permissible in a tie to choose *arbitrarily*, not just any reason is weighty enough to force the case one way or the other. The reason provided by a request may not be enough to disrupt parity between the options (Chang 2017), and acting on it could be unfair to those who have a fair chance to be saved (Bourguignon and Mossé 2025).

be broken by the reasons created by requests.[16]

Let me summarize the conclusions of this section. I have argued that the Imperfect Duty Account does not imply that requests for supererogatory acts create reasons, and that it is able to accommodate the observation that requests for compliance with antecedent imperfect duties (e.g. to respect nature) do not always create reasons. I argued, further, that the practice of requesting is not unfair simply because it is sensitive to quirks of personality. The Imperfect Duty Account correctly predicts an unfair distribution of burdens among requestees. Three devices mitigate an unfair distribution of benefits among requesters, namely the permission to disregard particular requests, justified policies that address deliberative problems, and the fact that a reason created by a request may be irrelevant, given the stakes.

3 Asking Too Little

Even if the Imperfect Duty Account does not license too many requests, it might be thought to license too few of them. Indeed, some requests seem to create reasons without invoking antecedent imperfect duties. Consider a mere acquaintance asking if you could look after their pet for a week, or a romantic partner asking if you would move with them to a new city.[17] These requests create reasons, but the acts requested might not fall under imperfect duties. You have an imperfect duty to *friends* to do things like care for their pets, but perhaps such care falls outside of the scope of your imperfect duties to mere acquaintances. You have an imperfect duty to *long-term romantic partners* to adjust your life plans by doing things like moving with them, but perhaps moving falls outside of the scope of your imperfect duties to a romantic partner you've only been seeing for a month

[16] When the stakes are lower, requests can break the tie. Suppose two students equally deserve study help and only one of them requests it. If the other is not as comfortable making requests and has been systematically disadvantaged as a result, the students are not equally deserving after all. If instead they are equally comfortable making requests, it seems plausible that one ought to help the student who requested.

[17] Thanks to Filippa Ronquist and Sophia Wyatt for pressing this worry.

or two. These cases seem like counterexamples to the Imperfect Duty Account.

In reply, I am tempted to say that if each case is properly spelled out, and the request really does create a reason, we can search about and find an imperfect duty. Perhaps too much weight is being put here on the distinction between acquaintances and friends, or between recent and long-term romantic partners. Or perhaps these distinctions track important distinctions in the relevant imperfect duties, but it only seems plausible that requests create reasons in these cases because we imagine that deeper relationships of friendship or long-term romantic partnership are already present.

But here is a more concessive reply. In both of these cases, a big ask is being made, and I imagine that these requests would be made with some hesitance or nervousness. I think a selling point of my view is that it makes sense of these requests as departures from the default setting, where an imperfect duty is already in place: the requesters are stretching the boundaries of the power to request. They are, in effect, *inviting* the requestee to deepen the relationship—from acquaintances to friends, or from recent to long-term partners—in a way that would *create* the relevant imperfect duties. The requestee has an opportunity to accept this invitation: by doing what is requested, they will not just better comply with an imperfect duty, but create it by developing the relationship. If you look after a mere acquaintance's pet for a week, perhaps you are a step closer to friendship (or at least, a special relationship of reciprocal trust and support). If you move with a recent partner to a new city, perhaps you are deepening the commitment in your relationship. So I want to suggest that the requests in these cases should be thought of proleptically (Callard 2016): they assume imperfect duties are in place as a way of inviting the requestee to take them on.

A maximally concessive reply would be that such cases show the need for *pluralism* about how requests create reasons: requests may create reasons in different ways in different contexts, and no one account may fit all the cases. I will leave open the possibility of pluralism, but I have indicated above some reservations about alternative views, and I

have argued the Imperfect Duty Account has the resources to accommodate these cases.

4 Wishful Thinking and Advice

Having addressed some extensional worries, I will close the paper by addressing an intensional one, which will help me to explain some differences between requests and advice. Normative powers invite a simple pattern of argument: if it would be valuable for us to possess a certain normative power, then we do possess it. But this can seem mysterious, because analogous arguments are clearly fallacious. It does not follow from the fact that it would be valuable for a person to possess the ability to cook a delicious meal, or to cure cancer, that they in fact possess it (Enoch 2009, Bruno 2022, p. 3212).

A full justification of the kind of wishful thinking licensed by normative powers would require another paper, but here are two considerations in its defense. First, the effective exercise of a normative power requires some recognition on the part of those it is meant to affect. As a result, the justification for normative powers rests partly on the existence of actual social conventions: it matters that as a matter of fact, we conventionally treat each other as creating reasons by requesting (Owens 2012, pp. 9, 151). The idea behind normative powers is not that we should follow the rules of a purely imaginary social practice, which would be valuable if, contrary to fact, everyone did the same. Instead, the idea is that our actual social conventions, which treat requesters as wielding a power to create reasons, approximate an ideal social practice by serving certain values, and that this explains why requests in fact create reasons.[18]

[18]One might argue that if requesting is a social practice, then requests create reasons via the principle of fair play (Simmons 1979): (a) if a practice is mutually beneficial and not unjust, (b) the benefits that come from it require that most of us cooperate, (c) cooperation is costly, and (d) one can receive benefits without cooperating, then anyone who accepts benefits of the practice should do their fair share. Perhaps doing our fair share in the practice of requesting involves treating others' requests as providing reasons. However, the principle of fair play struggles to explain the *directedness* of wrongs (Scanlon 1998, p. 316; Kolodny and Wallace 2003, pp. 125-6). In failing to treat another's request as providing you with a reason, you can wrong *them* in particular. But according to the principle of fair play, you take advantage of *everyone who cooperates in the practice of requesting*, which may or may not include the requester.

Second, insofar as normative powers are justified by their value in general, rather than on each occasion of use, the proposed form of explanation parallels some familiar and widely-accepted patterns of justification. We often justify moral principles that assign rights to individuals by reflecting on the valuable status and relations that such rights would enable, were they generally accepted (Kamm 1989; Kamm 1992; Quinn 1998, pp. 309-12; Nagel 1995, p. 92; Kumar 1999, p. 305). In doing so, we are allowing the prospective value of a generally accepted system of rights to justify principles that actually assign us those rights. The justification for normative powers is another case of this familiar pattern of reasoning (Owens 2012, p. 9; Bruno 2022, p. 3225).

These points help me to explain some important differences between requests and advice. At first blush, my appeal to normative powers may seem to leave me unable to properly distinguish these. After all, if you were to treat others' advice as providing new reasons for you to do what they advise (rather than merely summarizing antecedent reasons), you might thereby improve your compliance with imperfect duties. So it seems it would be valuable for us to treat advice as a source of reasons, in just the way that we treat requests as a source of reasons. Thus one might worry that my view implies, implausibly, that requests and advice both create reasons, and in the same way.

Requests differ from advice in two important respects, which correspond to the points above. First, I proposed that requests create reasons in part because we have widely accepted conventions, according to which requests are reason-giving. Indeed, in this paper I am proposing a rationale for these conventions. There are no such conventions in the case of advice: we do not generally treat advice as a source of reasons, in the way that we do for requests. (If, contrary to fact, we did generally treat advice as a source of reasons, I would then say that we were treating advice-giving as a form of requesting.)

Second, I am proposing that the *practice of requesting as a whole* generally serves the value of improved compliance with imperfect duties. By contrast, we give each other valuable advice about all sorts of things which do not fall under imperfect duties—for

example, how to keep a promise to a friend, or how to appreciate a beautiful artwork. Advice does not, in general, serve the value of improved compliance with imperfect duties. It does not follow from my view that *any particular act* creates a reason if treating it as a reason would improve compliance with an imperfect duty. It seems to me important that if a form of second-personal address like requesting or advice-giving is going to create a reason *as such*, the justification for this claim should attach to that form of second-personal address generally, and not merely to particular instances of it.

Conclusion and Outlook

Requests exercise a normative power to create reasons—an ability to create reasons at will. According to the Imperfect Duty Account, requests create reasons because they thereby mitigate deliberative and motivational problems associated with our imperfect duties, while granting requesters control over their dependence on others and associated reasons of reciprocity.

This view explains at once how requests create new reasons, why requesting is valuable, and how the reasons created by requests depend on antecedent considerations. I argued that this view also explains the sense in which the reasons created by requests are discretionary, gives a unified account of how requests create reasons among intimates and strangers, and reveals important forms of unfairness that result from requests. Further, my view leads to an illuminating contrast with Raz's (1988) view of commands: whereas commands create duties by summarizing antecedent reasons, requests create reasons by specifying antecedent duties. I also defended my view from the worries that it licenses too many requests or too few of them, and I briefly addressed a worry that the justification for normative powers involves to a fallacious form of wishful thinking. In developing my view, I pointed out that it explains why self-requests do not create reasons, and in the previous section, I argued that my view has the resources to appropriately distinguish

requests and advice.

This paper discusses what justifies the power to request, but it leaves open a related set of issues in normative metaphysics. On my view, requests create reasons which do not merely make an action "make sense" (Owens 2012, pp. 85-87, 98–100, 117, 228–9), but also weigh in favor of a requirement to do the act in question. Now, strictly speaking, do requests *intensify* existing reasons (see Lewis 2018, p. 12), *trigger* existing conditional reasons (Enoch 2011), or in some "robust" sense create new reasons or indeed *obligations* (Cupit 1994, Gläser 2019, pp. 33-5, Khokhar 2022, pp. 8-10)? Are the reasons created by requests all equal in strength (Schaber 2021, p. 438; but see Weltman 2023, pp. 400-1), or does their strength depend partly on the requester's interests and the relevant imperfect duty? Are these reasons in some deep sense moral or second-personal (Darwall 2006, Ch.1), or are they simply practical reasons, no different in kind from prudential reasons (Lewis 2024)? This paper has largely bracketed these questions, focusing less on the nature of the normative considerations created by requests and more on how requests create them.

In this paper, I restricted attention to requests on one's own behalf, but we can ask about the standing to request for others. Standing can be undercut by *hypocrisy*: if I fall short of an imperfect duty to you, I might thereby undermine my standing to request your compliance with the same imperfect duty, when it benefits me or someone I care about. But the standing to request is also unavailable when requesting would be *meddlesome*: imagine a person asking a teacher to decorate their classroom more, when this person is a complete stranger with no relation to the teacher or any of thier students. There is a lively debate regarding hypocritical and meddlesome blame (Tognazzini and Coates 2025), but the analogous issues regarding requests are comparatively under-explored.

There is, finally, the question of what we owe to those of whom we request. We may owe it to others not to issue a request, as when doing so would contribute to an unfair distribution of responsibility for fulfilling imperfect duties, or would convey a lack of

trust that another will reciprocate (Laskowski and Silver 2021). Further, after a request has been accepted, we may owe it to others not to release them from the resulting duty, if they have already invested significant effort into doing what we asked (Passi 2025).

I have tried to indicate briefly how the account developed here might touch on these further issues, but my aim here has been to address a more basic set of questions, regarding how requests create reasons, why requesting is valuable, and how the reasons created by requests depend on antecedent considerations.

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