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Why Not Ask?

I approach this question by way of a pervasive asymmetry between requests and offers. It is often not okay to request an act, but perfectly fine to accept an offer for it. This asymmetry is puzzling: if the same obligation results from acceptance of a request or offer to do an act, and the request and offer concern the very same act, why should it matter whether the act is introduced by a request or by an offer? I propose that the requests featuring in the asymmetry are wrongful because they create reasons to perform the act requested. This creates a double-bind: if the requestee acts as requested, they pay the *practical* cost of doing so, and if they do not, they pay a *moral* cost, in the form of a reason for regret. This double-bind does not always make requests wrongful, but I illustrate how, in more serious cases, it can be intrusive, manipulative, and coercive. Offers do not create the same double-bind, I argue, because offers do not as such create reasons.

Keywords: requests, offers, normative powers, reasons, wronging

Introduction

Suppose we are mere workplace acquaintances. I have a flight coming up and know you have no plans to be near the airport, which is a 30-minute drive for you. I am also an investment banker with plenty of disposable income, and the metro takes 35 minutes and costs $5. In this context, you would likely be put off by my request for a ride to the airport, but not by my acceptance of your offer to give me one. I will call this the *Requesting-Offering Asymmetry.*

The asymmetry is common. It is typically not okay to request a bite of an acquaintance's dessert, or their jacket to keep you warm. But it is perfectly fine to accept these if offered. The asymmetry arises in particular with respect to expressive acts: even if someone owes you an apology for accidentally blocking your view of a concert, it is wrong (not to mention self-defeating) to request their apology, but fine to accept it if offered. The asymmetry can arise among intimates, and when the act in question is required. There is nothing wrong with accepting a friend's offer to return the five dollars they borrowed three weeks ago. But if it is a trivial amount of money to all parties involved, most would be put off by a request for the cash—it would be petty to keep tabs on such small debts in the context of a friendship. The

asymmetry even arises when the stakes are high. I should not ask my sister for her kidney, but it is fine to accept it if offered—assuming, of course, that she is a healthy match and well-informed about the risks of donation.

The asymmetry is pervasive, but puzzling. The request and offer concern the same act, so the reasons bearing on the act should be the same, either way. But if the act and the reasons bearing on it are the same, why should it matter whether the act is introduced as a possibility by a request or by an offer? Further, the obligations created by acceptance of the Airport Request or the Airport Offer are identical: in either case, you incur an obligation to drive me to the airport by willingly agreeing to do so. But how can my request and your offer result in the same obligation upon their acceptance, when my request wrongs you, and my acceptance of your offer does not? To sum up the puzzle: If the agreements formed by way of request and offer are symmetrical in their *inputs*—that is, the act they concern—and in their *outputs*—that is, the obligations they create—then how can they be asymmetrical in the permissibility of a party entering into them, by making a request or accepting a corresponding offer?

Past work on offers primarily concerns offers to exchange goods for mutual benefit, rather than offers to do favors (Zwolinski, Ferguson, & Wertheimer 2022), with a few exceptions (de Kenessey 2023). Past work on requests has primarily concerned the nature of the obligations or reasons created by requests, rather than the permissibility of making requests (e.g., Cupit 1994, Enoch 2011, Raz 2009, Lewis 2018, Gläser 2019, Schaber 2021, Khokhar 2022a, Weltman 2023), again with a few exceptions (Laskowski & Silver 2021; Pohlhaus 2021; Khokhar 2022b, Lewis 2024). The Requesting-Offering Asymmetry lies at the intersection of these two topics which have received less attention: it primarily concerns the permissibility of making requests for favors and of accepting offers to do favors.

Here is the plan. Section 1 argues that the Requesting-Offering Asymmetry is an asymmetry in permissibility, not merely an asymmetry in politeness. Section 2 explains the asymmetry: the requests featuring in the asymmetry are wrongful because they create reasons to perform the act requested, whereas offers do not as such create reasons. Section 3 assesses alternative explanations of the asymmetry which appeal to intrusiveness, manipulation, and coercion. Section 4 concludes.

1 An Asymmetry in Permissibility

It may seem that the Airport Request is rude but not wrong. To be sure, many acts are lacking in social grace but perfectly permissible—consider an off-topic remark in a conversation. But it does not follow from the fact that an act is rude that it is not wrong. Acts can be wrong *because* they are rude: the standards of politeness, civility, and etiquette serve a number of important functions.

Indeed, learning to adhere to these standards makes us more agreeable, placing reasonable limits on anger and associated harms to others (Buss 1999). Standards of politeness or civility are also often expressive (Calhoun 2000, p. 260): they give us ways of expressing to others that we are good-willed and respect their personhood and agency (Buss 1999, Valentini 2021), even when adhering to the relevant standards requires little conscious thought (Olberding 2016, pp. 439-442). Standards of politeness also serve people's interests in controlling self-presentation (Nagel 1998), by encouraging us to defer choices to others, thereby creating opportunities for them to reveal their preferences and values, while simultaneously protecting others from the pressure to reveal them if they wish not to. Further, like many conventions, standards of politeness can fix the reasonable expectations (Breakey 2022). For example, etiquette permits a minute of tardiness to a meeting over coffee, but not twenty, and for this

reason, one ought to wait at least a minute (but need not wait twenty) for another person to arrive at the coffee shop.

If a norm is a social convention, it may be reproduced over time partly due to the weight of precedent (Millikan 1998, p. 162), and thus may be binding in part because it is recognized as binding (Owens 2022, p. 1), but it is no less authoritative for that reason. Since the norms of politeness are multiply morally laden, there is a false contrast in the suggestion that when the asymmetry arises, the request is impolite but not wrong.

Even so, it is important that we recognize the role that cultural norms play in creating the asymmetry. The next section will argue that the Requesting-Offering Asymmetry is an asymmetry in permissibility, and this explanation will appeal to the claim that unlike offers, requests create reasons. But whether a particular request creates a reason, and indeed whether a particular communicative act counts as a request or offer—as opposed to, say, a command, invitation, or mere expression of a desire—is highly culturally dependent. As a result, whether the asymmetry arises, and the degree to which the request in question is objectionable, will strongly depend on cultural norms.

2 The Normative Power Account

I propose the following explanation of the asymmetry. My request provides a reason for you to do the requested act, which sets back your interests. Standardly, this is because my request puts you in a *double-bind.* If you grant my request, I impose a *practical* burden on you: you perform a costly act which you did not have to perform previously. If you do not grant my request, I impose a *moral* burden on you: you now have a reason to regret that you did not grant it. Either way, by requesting, I exercise a normative power to provide you with a reason that

unilaterally sets back your interests. When these interests are weighty enough, my request wrongs you.

Offers, by contrast, do not as such exercise normative powers to create reasons, though they characteristically express consent to the costs associated with their acceptance. When requesting is wrongful and accepting an offer is not, this is because the former, but not the latter, unilaterally exercises a normative power to provide a reason, which sets back the interests of the addressee; this is the *Normative Power Account* of the asymmetry. I'll first explain the sense in which requests but not offers create reasons. Then I'll show how the Normative Power Account explains the asymmetry.

2.1 Offers and Reasons

A *normative power* is an ability to control a normative condition at will (Raz 2022). Requests, promises, commands, and acts of consent are commonly viewed as normative powers. I will not propose a full account of offers here. As I'll now explain, even if offers exercise normative powers, my view implies that offers do not *as such* exercise normative powers *to create reasons*.

This is independently plausible, because acceptance of an offer is not as such rationally motivating. Unlike a motive to do what was requested "simply because they asked," a motive to accept an offer "simply because they offered" is not intelligible. Indeed, if I tell you that I accepted an offer, you will naturally infer that I had independent reasons, besides the sheer fact of offering, to do so. For example, you may infer that I independently wanted what was offered, that I thought accepting the offer would make the offeror happy, or that I felt social pressure to accept it. By contrast, if it is clear that the requester had the standing to issue the request, their

standing may admit further explanation, but it makes perfect sense for me to be motivated to do what was requested, simply because it was requested.

While offers do not *as such* exercise normative powers to create reasons, an offer can exercise a power to create reasons when it is also a request, a promise, or some other act which exercises that power. For example:

> *Invitation.* Jack and Miles are best friends, and Miles is getting married. Without excuse, Jack refuses Miles's offer that Jack serve as the best man at his wedding.

Miles's offer gives Jack a reason to be the best man at his wedding. But his offer does not *as such* exercise this normative power. Miles's offer, like many invitations, is also a *request*, which explains why it provides a reason for Jack to accept it.

Offers may also create reasons indirectly, given the reasons already applying to the addressee. For example, the awkwardness of refusing an offer may give you a reason to accept it. Or you may have a reason to use my trampoline because you want to, conditional on my consent to your use of it, and my offer may trigger this condition by expressing my consent. Still, these cases do not involve exercises of a normative power to create reasons. Requests, by contrast, exercise a normative power to create reasons.[1]

[1] One might say that an offer provides a *conditional reason* for the addressee to accept *if they want to*. But it is unclear what the postulation of such a reason would explain, which cannot be explained by the observations made already, namely (i) that an utterance can mix offering with other forms of second-personal address, such as requesting, and (ii) that sometimes we have independent reasons (e.g. arising from desires or social pressure) for which offers are mere conduits. One might suggest that an offer provides a *justifying*, rather than *requiring* reason for acceptance (Gert 2003). But this would make it puzzling that acceptance of an offer is not as such rationally motivating.

2.2 Requests and Reasons

The claim that requests exercise a normative power to create reasons is typically supported by two observations. First, as mentioned above, it makes sense to do an act for someone simply "because they requested" (Owens 2012, p. 86; McMyler 2017, p. 79; Gläser 2019, p. 29). Plausibly, this is an intelligible motivating reason because requests provide normative reasons, which can then motivate us. Second, the idea that requests create reasons helps to distinguish requests from commands. Requests create *pro tanto* reasons, which are generally more easily outweighed or undercut than the obligations created by commands (Raz 2009, pp. 14-15; Lance & Kukla 2013, p. 460; Lewis 2018, p. 11). In turn, the idea that requests and commands create new reasons (or obligations) helps to distinguish requests and commands from advice, which seeks to inform the addressee of the considerations that are already in play, without introducing new ones.

The claim that requests exercise a power to create reasons is widely held (Raz 2009, pp. 14-15; Owens 2012, pp. 86-7, 98-100, 228-9; Lance & Kukla 2013, pp. 460-3; Little 2013, pp. 131-5; Lewis 2018; Schaber 2021). There are many different accounts of how requests create reasons, and this paper will not attempt to adjudicate between them. Nor will it argue against *epistemicism,* the view that requests do not create new reasons in any systematic way, but instead merely call attention to reasons that exist already (Weltman 2022a, 2022b, 2023); the debate over epistemicism lies beyond the scope of this paper.

To explain the asymmetry, I appeal to the idea that a wrongful request can sometimes provide a reason. More generally, we often wrongfully exercise normative powers to create reasons. For example, the ability of a person to issue a binding *command* does not evaporate upon conflict with their duties. Imagine a father telling his teenage daughter to take on additional

chores at home, even though she is already struggling to manage school and a part-time job. Plausibly, the father creates a reason for his daughter to spend a few more hours on chores each week, by telling her to do so. But I think we can coherently imagine a version of the case where the father thereby wrongs his daughter. Some theorists go further, arguing that an authority can sometimes permissibly *coercively enforce* unjust commands, such that its subjects are *not entitled to compensation* (Viehoff 2019). But here I am making a more basic point: normative powers like commanding or requesting tolerate occasional and limited misuse.[2]

Importantly, this does not imply (for example) that a request that another commit murder provides them with a reason to do so. For I am not making the stronger assumption that a request can create a reason when the act requested is *independently wrong*.[3] I do not use this stronger assumption, because whenever the asymmetry arises, the requested act is not independently wrong.[4] Consider the cases mentioned earlier: it is permissible to help a colleague get to the airport, to give another person permission to use your jacket, to return borrowed money to a friend, or to donate an organ to a loved one. In each case, it is possible, permissible, and rational for the requestee to do the act in question—that is part of the puzzle.

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[2] Where to draw the line? That is, what distinguishes wrongful requests that create reasons from those that do not? After all, some requests for permissible acts fail to create reasons. If a bigoted person tells Fatima, a Muslim woman, that he is uncomfortable with her hijab and asks her to remove it (Khokhar 2022b, p. 16), this wrongful request does not create a reason, even though the act requested (removing the hijab) is permissible. My view is that requests create reasons when (and because) the act requested falls under an imperfect duty applying to the requestee. Requests for murder do not create reasons, because we lack imperfect duties to murder. Similarly, the request to remove the hijab does not create a reason, because removing it does not fall under an imperfect duty—we may have an imperfect duty to assist others in dealing with legitimate forms of discomfort, but the bigot's discomfort is not legitimate, as it is based on prejudice. Still, we can wrong others by asking them for acts that fall under their imperfect duties (e.g. a ride to the airport), which is why wrongful requests create reasons. I lack the space to fully develop and defend the appeal to imperfect duties in this paper, but I do so in [redacted for anonymous review].

[3] For discussion of the analogous view of promising, see Shiffrin (2011) and Owens (2016).

[4] To elaborate briefly: When the asymmetry arises, it is permissible for you to offer to do the act, and it is permissible for me to accept it. As a result, (a) it is permissible for both of us to assent to the act and (b) given our assent, the act is permissible. When I ask you for an act, I also thereby ask for your assent. So I am asking (a) that you assent to the act, and (b) given our assent, that the act be performed. But we just saw that when the asymmetry arises, both (a) and (b) are permissible. So when the asymmetry arises, the act requested is permissible. It can sometimes seem that the act requested is not independently permissible (e.g. taking a stranger's jacket), but this appearance is illusory, because a request for an act is also a request for assent to it.

2.3 The Double-Bind

The Normative Power Account says that when the asymmetry arises, the wrongfulness of requesting is explained by the fact that it provides a reason, which sets back the interests of the addressee. The account thus applies only when these interests are sufficiently weighty, in absolute terms and relative to the other interests at play, to make the request count as wrongful.[5] When you comply with my request that you pass the salt, or that you save me from drowning by throwing me a life jacket, you pay some cost, but my request does not wrong you, because your interests are not weighty enough, either in absolute terms or relative to the other interests at play.

Most commonly, the requestee's interests are set back because the request puts them in a double-bind, by imposing a *practical burden* if the request is granted, and a *moral burden* if it is not. This wrongs the requestee by attaching costs to the options available to them, thereby giving them a worse choice situation than the one they are entitled to have.[6] The practical burden is simply whatever costs are associated with deliberating about and performing the act in question.[7] As I'll now explain, the moral burden is a reason to regret not granting the request.

To *regret* an event, in the relevant sense, is just to prefer in part that it had been otherwise in some respect (Wallace 2013, pp. 5-6). Regret need not be *all-in*, in the sense of involving (i) "a stable reaction of sorrow or pain about a past action or circumstance" and (ii) "an on-balance preference that things should have been otherwise" (Wallace 2013, pp. 51-2).

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[5] Here I am appealing to the idea that other things equal, my act wrongs you if (i) it sets back your interests by some sufficient amount, and (ii) an alternative act available to me would not have set back anyone's interests nearly as much. For one way of spelling out this idea, see Wallace (2019, Ch. 5).

[6] See Kolodny (2017, pp. 94-95) for the view that threats can similarly wrong addressees.

[7] The relevant costs might wrong the addressee without harming them. In Ripstein's (2006) famous example, "I let myself into your home, using burglary tools that do no damage to your locks, and take a nap in your bed. I make sure everything is clean. I bring hypoallergenic and lint-free pajamas and a hairnet. I put my own sheets and pillowcase down over yours. I do not weigh very much, so the wear and tear on your mattress is nonexistent. By any ordinary understanding of harm, I do you no harm." I am using the notions of burdens, costs, and interests in a wide sense, so that such violations of privacy would count as burdens or costs, which set back the victim's interests (e.g., in control), even if they do not strictly speaking harm them. I impose a burden or cost on you, which sets back your interests, when you have a reason on your own behalf for objecting to my action.

When we choose not to do an act, the reasons that favored it might not become reasons for regret. For example, if you are offered a million dollars or one dollar, the reason to take a dollar is easily outweighed or defeated, and when you choose to instead take a million, you have no reason for regret. But when we pass up an alternative which would have helped another person, and we thereby fail to affirm an important value, we are aptly prone to feel regret. In the case of passing up a request, we do not always feel regret because we take a special interest in *making the requester happy*. Instead, we may aptly regret failing to affirm the *value* that gave the requester the power to create a reason by requesting.

To illustrate, suppose that the power to create reasons by requesting is justified by the fact that requesting is a valuable social practice, which helps us to better comply with our independent reasons to express good will to others.[8] In that case, I claim that in granting the request, a morally motivated requestee affirms the value of expressing good will to one another. In not granting the request, the requestee would have a reason to regret that they did not express good will, regardless of whether they are especially concerned with the interests of the requester in particular.

Even if the strength of your reason for regret and the corresponding reason created by my request are weak—after all, they may be outweighed by your desire not to grant my request—the strength of your interest in not being made to feel regret can be strong. Regret can be intrusive and frustrating and can cast a shadow over what would have been a friendly and pleasant interaction. Further, repeated regrettable failures to respond to value will erode your conception

[8] Thus we might imagine that it is *built into the concept of a request* that a request aims to improve compliance with our independent reasons to express good will to others. Alternatively, we might imagine that the practice of requesting is *intelligible independently of this aim*, but that our tendency to treat requests as providing reasons is justified by the fact we further this aim in doing so. I have the latter in mind, but the point in the main text makes sense on either assumption.

of yourself as fittingly responsive to it. These interests in not feeling regret are intensified when the requester has failed to properly take them into account.

Our interests in not feeling regret do not generally give us complaints against others. For example, suppose I decide to sell my painting, and you decide not to buy it. You may regret your decision, but that does not give you a complaint against me.[9] The case of requesting is importantly different from this one. (i) The requester singles out the requestee, by creating a reason for them *in particular*, and (ii) in requesting, a requester wields a power to *create* a reason for action *at-will*. (iii) Further, when you turn down a request, your regret is not felt *prudentially, for your own sake,* because you missed out on a good, but *morally, for another's sake.* (iv) Finally, it is not the reason for regret *per se* that is objectionable, but the fact that the alternative to regret is an act which comes with a practical cost. So I agree that we cannot always object to being made to feel regret. But we can raise this objection when another has (i) singled us out and (ii) created a reason at will for us (iii) to regret not helping them, and (iv) the alternative is costly.

The idea that requests exercise a normative power is essential to my account of the reason for regret: this reason is explained by the *value* that justifies the power to request, and this reason licenses a complaint only because normative powers grant us *at-will control* over others. In a way, it should be unsurprising that those who wield a normative power carry some responsibility for the ways their addressees will be affected by a failure to comply. Requesters wield power over others, and the values served by this power constrain its permissible use. The same is true of commands, for example. Parents should not issue overly demanding commands to their children, in part because their children will be made to feel guilty for falling short of them. One might hold that failure to comply with a request does not generally lead to *guilt*, because requests tend to create reasons rather than obligations, and guilt is standardly felt upon falling short of an

[9] Thanks to [redacted].

obligation. But requests do create reasons for regret upon non-compliance, which can set back the addressee's interests in many of the same ways that guilt does.

2.4 Pluralism

The Normative Power Account identifies a unifying feature of the requests that feature in the asymmetry: unlike offers, they unilaterally exercise a normative power to provide a reason, thereby setting back the interests of the addressee. A request standardly sets back the requestee's interests by creating a double-bind. However, this double-bind does not always arise—there may be no cost to performing the act requested—and a variety of interests may be set back when a request creates a reason. Here are three examples to illustrate.

First, the wrongfulness of requesting is sometimes owed to the *expressive significance* of creating a reason. For example, if I request that you thank me for the dinner I just made you, the reason created by my request can send the insulting message that you would not have been sufficiently motivated to convey gratitude without the reason I provided.[10] What is wrongful in this case is the *message sent* by the reason.[11]

In another kind of case, creating a reason can be wrongful because it *detracts from the value of a relationship* between requester and requestee. Indeed, many friendships are partly made valuable by a reciprocal pattern of spontaneous favors. To upset this pattern by providing reasons for another to do what they might have done spontaneously can detract from the value of the relationship, and thereby set back an interest of the requestee in its value. In such a case, the

[10] This expressive wrong can occur, even if the request does not deprive the requestee of the opportunity to act for independent reasons, or to express care and thoughtfulness. Lewis (2024) argues that a request to an intimate can be wrongful because it conveys a lack of trust that another will be "sufficiently motivated to protect or promote one's needs, desires, interests, projects, and well-being for one's own sake."

[11] In another kind of expressive case, requesting is wrongful because it fails to treat another's interests as having the same importance as one's own; this is a *failure of equal regard*. Consider a request for a stranger's aisle seat in a plane in exchange for one's middle seat. Requesting is wrongful because in providing the stranger with a reason to give one the seat, one is pushing, without justification, for the satisfaction of one's own interest in the aisle seat over the stranger's identical interest. This fails to treat identical interests as possessing the same weight. See Khokhar (2022b) on requests which fail to express equal regard for others.

wrongfulness of the request is explained by the way that the reason provided by the request detracts from the value of the relationship.

In a third kind of case, the reason created by a request sets back the interests of the requestee by *contributing to a pattern* of similar setbacks over time. For example, suppose that Natalya's coworker Emory requests emotional support, and that others in the office regularly make such requests of Natalya. If Emory is not asking for a therapy session, but for a brief opportunity to unpack a frustrating work-related experience, his request arguably exercises a normative power to provide Natalya with a reason to help him. Even so, Emory's request may be wrongful, because it belongs to a *pattern* of such requests from others in the office, which cumulatively leads Natalya to take on uncompensated emotional labor, while impeding her ability to do other (compensated) work.[12]

In summary, the Normative Power Account is pluralist. It allows that the reason provided by a request can set back a *variety* of the requestee's interests, for example by creating a double-bind, or by detracting from the value of a relationship. As the next section explains, the Normative Power Account is pluralist in a further sense: it is compatible with the observation that particular requests featuring in the asymmetry may be wrongful for a variety of reasons.

3 Alternative Explanations of the Requesting-Offering Asymmetry

This section assesses alternative explanations of the asymmetry, which appeal to intrusion, manipulation, and coercion. In each case, I argue that the proposed explanation is incomplete and that it can be improved by the Normative Power Account.

[12] In such a case, the standing to request can become an instrument of oppressive power. This is the flipside of Young's (2004) observation that oppressive powerlessness consists partly in a loss of respect, where treating another with respect requires that one "do what they request because they have some authority, expertise, or influence."

3.1 Rights against Intrusion

One possible explanation appeals to intrusion. We generally have a right not to be intruded on by relative strangers' personal concerns. For example, I should not rope an unsuspecting stranger into helping me with a book project. Perhaps your right against intrusion is violated by my Airport Request but waived by your Airport Offer.

The wrong of intrusion could be traced to the deliberative costs on strangers of thinking about our problems; to the fact that the meaningfulness or importance to my identity of a project does not in itself generate a strong demand on others for active assistance (Scanlon 1975, White 2017a); or to the importance of autonomously handling the minor inconveniences in one's life.

However, these considerations do not suffice to explain the asymmetry. First, in the case of the Airport Request, we can suppose it is commonly known among us that the deliberative cost of changing up your plans is insignificant: you were planning on going grocery shopping that evening, but there is another grocery store near the airport, and the date and time are determined by my flight. Requesting still seems out of place. Second, getting a ride to the airport is not especially meaningful or important to my identity. Finally, we often want others to autonomously handle their own minor inconveniences—you might feel put off if a stranger asked you to take a seat on the ground and tie their shoes. But you would also likely be insulted if a stranger saw you struggling with your laces and offered to tie them for you. In this way, appeals to the importance of autonomously resolving an inconvenience are often symmetrical, ruling out demeaning requests and condescending offers alike.

There is a more general problem with the appeal to intrusion: it is not clear that there is a single moral objection to intrusiveness as such. Instead, we have a cluster of loosely related objections, relating to deliberative costs, meaningfulness, and autonomy, for example (cf.

Thomson 1975, pp. 312-313). For that reason, it can seem explanatorily idle to postulate a right against intrusion, which is waived by the request and violated by the offer. The Normative Power Account explains the intrusiveness of the relevant requests in a different way. These requests create reasons which intrude on the normative circumstances of the requestee. They standardly do so by putting the requestee in a double-bind, which makes them either pay a practical cost by accepting the request or else pay a moral cost by declining it.

3.2 Manipulating the Good-Willed

One might argue that the relevant requests are wrongful because they *manipulate* the good-willed requestee. There are three importantly different ways of characterizing manipulation. One might say that to manipulate a person is (i) to bypass their deliberation, (ii) to deceive them about their reasons, or (iii) to pressure them into doing an action (Noggle 2022, §2). I consider pressure in the next section. In this section, I will first explain how the relevant requests might (i) bypass the requestee's deliberation or (ii) deceive them about their reasons. I will then argue that neither of these kinds of manipulation provides a full account of the asymmetry.

The first option is to imagine that the good-willed requestee acts from a virtuous *habit* of granting others' requests, which involves not deliberating carefully on a given occasion about the merits of doing the act requested (Owens 2012, pp. 79-82). It is not in general wrong to trigger this habit by making a request, even though doing so bypasses the requestee's deliberation. But perhaps it is wrongful to trigger this habit when one's request does not in fact create a reason. The point of a virtuous habit of granting requests, after all, is plausibly to respond appropriately to requests that create reasons, so a requester abuses the requestee's good will by triggering this habit without creating a reason. On this way of spelling out the appeal to manipulation, the

relevant requests do not create reasons and thereby exploit the requestee's tendency to simply do what was asked.[13]

The second option is to imagine that the good-willed requestee acts from an assessment of their reasons, but that the relevant requests wrongfully *deceive* the requestee about their reasons. Suppose that the relevant requests do not create reasons. Even so, a requester *presupposes entitlement* to request, taking it for granted in the conversation. Just as an assertion that I need to pick up my son from school will lead a conversationally cooperative hearer to accommodate the presupposition that I have a son (Stalnaker 2002), a request will lead a cooperative requestee to accommodate the presupposition that the speaker was entitled to request, and thus created a reason by asking for help. Further, a minimally conscientious requestee who believes it possible that a request provided a reason would want to err on the side of helping, to avoid risking a selfish failure to respond appropriately. This suggests an explanation of the asymmetry: unlike the Airport Offer, the Airport Request may manipulate a conscientious and cooperative requestee, by misrepresenting their normative situation and taking advantage of their tendency to accommodate this misrepresentation.

I am open to the possibility that we can wrong others by misrepresenting their normative situation: if the requestee acts as requested, they perform a costly act, and if they do not, they might feel regret. However, there is no need to assume, as the appeal to manipulation does, that the asymmetry can arise only when the relevant request does not provide a reason, or when the requester is not sure whether it provided them with a reason. Requests can be wrongful simply

[13] An alternative view is that the relevant requests are wrongful because the requestee also pays the costs of doing the act requested, and the requestee has sufficiently strong interests in being given the opportunity to deliberate about whether to pay these costs. However, the request seems objectionable *regardless of whether it is accepted*. Explanations that hinge on the practical cost of doing the act requested cannot explain this, since this cost is only realized if the request is accepted. By contrast, on the view I favor, the relevant change in the requestee's circumstances occurs not when they accept the request, but when the request is made, because they then have a reason to perform the act in question.

because they create reasons, which set back the addressee's interests. Indeed, the requestee may be frustrated precisely because they *know* that they now have a cumbersome reason for action, which puts them in a double-bind: if they act on this reason, they perform a costly act, and if they do not, they will be left with a reason for regret.

3.3 Coercive Social Pressure

One might say that the requests that feature in the asymmetry are wrongful because they create coercive social pressure. Social pressure, in the relevant sense, is the prospect of a socially unpleasant (e.g. embarrassing or otherwise awkward) experience. We can distinguish a few kinds of social pressure associated with the Airport Request. First, if you do not accept my request, you may appear ungenerous to observers; this is the pressure *to appear virtuous* (Benziman 2023, p. 301). Second, if you do not accept my request, perhaps you suggest that I did not have good reasons for requesting (de Kenessey 2017, p. 115); this is the pressure *to avoid insulting the requester*. Third, if you do not accept my request, you will disappoint me, and it is unpleasant to disappoint others; this is the pressure *to avoid disappointing the requester*. In all these ways, a request can create the coercive prospect of a socially unpleasant experience, which forces the requestee to accept the request or to justify their choice to decline it. An offer, by contrast, reveals that the act in question would not be an inconvenient favor performed out of social pressure, but something which the offerror would genuinely like to do.

Coercive social pressure seems explanatory in many cases, but it cannot fully explain the Requesting-Offering Asymmetry, for three reasons. First, we can remove the social pressure by assuming that the requestee is socially graceful. Suppose the requestee can quickly and effortlessly whip up a plausible, sincere excuse: "Sorry, but I think I won't have the time to give you a ride to the airport." With this excuse in hand, the requestee can avoid appearing vicious or

insulting the requester. Suppose, further, that the requester shows no signs of disappointment, and expresses that they have no expectation that the favor will be performed. The social pressure is greatly reduced, but the asymmetry persists: requesting apology, or that a friend repay a $5 loan, still seems wrong, even if the requestee is socially graceful and the requester is careful not to convey disappointment.

Second, part of the puzzle was that the request and offer are symmetrical in the obligations created by their acceptance, but asymmetrical in their permissibility. However, if the request is simply a coercive form of social pressure, it is unclear why giving in to such pressure amounts to incurring an obligation. If a bully coercively gets you to agree to give them your lunch later today, you may have reasons of self-interest to follow through, but your commitment to giving them your lunch is not a valid, independently binding agreement. More generally, agreements reached through wrongful coercion are often thought not to be binding. It remains puzzling, then, that if you accept the Airport Request, you thereby incur an obligation.

In reply, one might stipulate that there is a "sweet spot" of agreements which are coercive enough to be wrongful, but not coercive enough to lose their bindingness. This stipulation is forced on us if we appeal to coercive social pressure, understood as the prospect of a socially awkward experience. But the Normative Power Account has no need for this stipulation, because it appeals to a different kind of pressure: in issuing a request, we can pressure others by creating reasons for them to do what we ask. This pressure is standardly created via a double-bind, i.e. a practical burden if the request is accepted and a moral burden if it is not.

The Normative Power Account fares better with respect to both of the above worries. First, it applies even when the requestee is socially graceful, and the requester expresses no disappointment—even in such cases, requests create reasons. Second, the Normative Power

Account does not make it mysterious why the requests that feature in the asymmetry are binding: the request created a genuine reason, and agreeing to act on that reason constitutes a genuinely binding agreement.

Of course, one might further develop the Normative Power Account by claiming that requests create reasons *by creating the prospect of a socially awkward experience*. Or one might add that social pressure can *exacerbate* the wrongfulness of a request, which already wronged the requestee by creating reasons. But these ways of appealing to social pressure are elaborations of the Normative Power Account, not a substantive alternative to it.

4 Conclusion

This paper proposed the Normative Power Account of the Requesting-Offering Asymmetry. On this account, the asymmetry is explained by the fact that offers do not as such create reasons, whereas requests characteristically exercise a normative power to create reasons, and can wrongfully set back the interests of the addressee by doing so. In using the Requesting-Offering Asymmetry to characterize the normative power wielded by requesters, this paper is proposing that comparing relevantly similar uses of different forms of second-personal address can shed light on how the values they serve constrain their permissible use. This is *the comparative approach* to second-personal address. The Requesting-Offering Asymmetry is just one of a family of similar asymmetries, for example between offering and inviting, and between requesting and commanding (Owens 2012, p. 206). These further asymmetries are a natural next step for the comparative approach.

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