The Paper Chase Case and Epistemic Accounts of Request Normativity

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Abstract: According to the epistemic account of request normativity, a request gives us reasons by revealing normatively relevant information. The information is normative, not the request itself. I raise a new objection to the epistemic account based on situations where we might try to avoid someone requesting something of us. The best explanation of these situations seems to be that we do not want to acquire a new reason to do something. For example, if you know I am going to ask you to read a draft of my paper, you might avoid running into me so as to avoid acquiring a reason to read a draft of my paper. I then argue that the epistemic account can successfully reply to this objection and that in fact the epistemic account does a better job of accounting for cases like this than competing views of the normativity of requests.

Key words: requests, normativity; epistemic account, reasons, normative powers

Requests give reasons to requestees. For example, Val requests that Adrien do the dishes; now Adrien has a reason to do the dishes. Requests therefore have normative force. There are various accounts of this normative force. Most believe that making a request entails exercising a special sort of normative power, like, for instance, what David Enoch describes as "robust reason giving" (Raz 1988, 36; Cupit 1994; Lance and Kukla 2013; Enoch 2011; 2014; Lewis 2018; Schaber 2021; Monti 2021).

Much less popular than normative power views is the view that requests *don't* have any special normative power. The only accounts of the normative force of requests which deny that they have any special normative power are the epistemic account of the normativity of requests, defended by myself and by N. G. Laskowski and Kenneth Silver, and the reasonable harmony account defended by Micha Gläser (Gläser 2019; Laskowski and Silver 2021; Weltman 2023a; Weltman 2023b; Weltman n.d.).[1] According to the epistemic account, a request gives us reasons merely by revealing normatively relevant information. It is the information that is revealed which is normative, not the request itself. Thus when Val requests that Adrien do the dishes, Adrien learns that Val wants Adrien to do the dishes, that there are dishes that need doing, and other relevant information. This information gives Adrien a reason to do the dishes, not the request itself. Had Val revealed this information in some other way, like by saying "there are dishes that need doing and I would like it if someone else did them" to Adrien, Adrien would've had the same sort of reason to do the dishes, despite there being no request.[2]

In this paper I raise a new objection to the epistemic account based on situations where we might try to avoid someone requesting something of us. The best explanation of these situations seems to be that we do not want to acquire a new reason to do something. I then argue that the epistemic account can successfully reply to this objection.[3]

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1. THE PAPER CHASE CASE

The objection can be illustrated by the paper chase case. You have a draft of a paper you would like my comments on. I know this, and I know you're going to ask me to comment on it. I'm selfish and I don't want to have to comment on your paper, at least not in the next few weeks while I'm busy, although my selfishness is not strong enough for me to flatly refuse your request: it would be too rude, or my selfishness would waver in the face of your actually asking me, or whatever. Luckily my office has a window overlooking the front entrance to the building housing the philosophy department, and every time I see you coming, I abscond through a back exit. This allows me to avoid you, preventing you from requesting that I comment on your draft.

This case presents a problem for the epistemic account of the normativity of requests. According to that account, the only thing that your request would do is reveal information that's normatively relevant. But, it seems like I already have the information. I already know you have a draft written. I already know you want me to comment on it. I even already know you're going to act on your desire by requesting that I comment on it. So, surely I already have whatever the normatively relevant information is, and thus it seems the epistemic account ought to say your request would be normatively otiose. If I already have the information, I should already have as much reason to read your draft as I'm going to get.[4]

Even worse for the epistemic account, because I have the relevant information, my evasion is mysterious. Why run if the damage is already done? Since I have the information, I must have the reason. If you were to catch me, nothing would change. And yet my evasion is not mysterious at all. We know why I run from you. I am trying to avoid your request, which, if you manage to make it, will give me a reason to read your paper that I don't already have. So it seems like your request must have some normative power. If you are ever able to make it, then the new reason I acquire must be from the request and not from any information it reveals. This is why I flee from you. You have the power to give me a reason via requesting, and I wish to keep you from exercising this power.

Thus the paper chase case presents an objection to the epistemic account. The objection has two parts. First, the epistemic account seems to predict the request will be normatively inert, because it will reveal no new information. Second, because it makes this prediction, it makes my actions inexplicable, but my behavior is *not* inexplicable. I'm running from you so that you don't request that I read your draft.

2. A PRELIMINARY REPLY

There's one reply the epistemic account can give which has already been elucidated by Laskowski and Silver (2021) and myself (2023b, 1736-9), which is that in cases like this, often the request does in fact provide *some* additional information which is normatively relevant. This reply works better in some cases than others. If for instance I have a sneaking suspicion that you are going to ask me to read your draft, but I'm not sure about this, then the epistemic account can explain my behavior by saying that I am trying to avoid the normatively relevant information that the request would reveal, which is that you *do* in fact want me to read your draft.

This is a good reply for most actual cases, but in the paper chase case it doesn't work, because here we stipulate that I *know* you want me to read your draft, and that you want me to read it badly enough that you're going to issue the request next time you see me. I note this reply not because it helps the epistemic account answer the paper chase case but because this knowledge that we stipulate is rarely available in actual cases. In the real world, we can guess at people's intentions, but until someone requests something, it's always possible that you've misunderstood the situation and that you don't in fact have reason to do what they ask for until they ask, because you're missing relevant information. Because this won't work for the paper chase case, I put this reply aside, but I mention it because this is an important component of the epistemic account when it comes to real world cases similar to the paper chase case.

3. PLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY

One problem for the epistemic account is explaining my evasion. What reason do I have to run if I already have a reason to read your draft? Won't your request be harmless? In fact, however, I have a good reason to run even granting that I already have a reason to read your paper. I run because this provides me plausible deniability. By avoiding your request, I can plausibly act as if I do not know that you want me to read the draft.

If you eventually catch me, I can say "ah, you'd like me to read the draft, would you?" and it won't be polite for you to say "you already know that I want you to read this paper, you jerk, and you've been avoiding me so that I can't ask!" Politeness requires that you play along, and often this isn't just a requirement of politeness but also of epistemic rationality, because if I've been sneaky enough, you won't know (or you won't be sure) that I've been deliberately avoiding you. *I* know that all along I've known you want me to read the draft, but do *you* know this? Typically you won't know this. And even if you do (because perhaps one of our colleagues has informed you of my maneuvers) then it will still be impolite to point this out. Thus I run not so that I can evade the reason for reading your draft, which I have as soon as I know you want me to read it. Instead, I run so I can claim that I had no idea you wanted me to read your draft.

This reply, in addition to saving the epistemic account, is also a *better* description of the situation, such that we can see that the paper chase case is actually an argument *for* the epistemic account. Imagine that plausible deniability is rendered impossible. Our colleague Val is in my office, and we both see you coming. Val says to me "they're coming to ask you to read their draft." Now there is no point in my fleeing. I lack plausible deniability, because if I try to claim I had no idea what was going on, Val can expose my lie. If requests had special normative power, I could still run and be safe, albeit at the cost of being rude. You haven't made your request yet, so fleeing can still save me. If I escape I'll have no reason to read your paper. But the epistemic account correctly predicts that, because the normative game has all along been lost, my only options here are to be rude or polite, and so I might as well be polite and let you catch me. The epistemic account, unlike normative power accounts, correctly claims that we flee in order to acquire plausible deniability rather than to avoid acquiring a reason to read the paper. Thus the epistemic account correctly claims that in cases where deniability cannot be secured, fleeing is no use either. The reason is there despite the request having yet to occur.

One might object that normative power accounts can explain my evasion just as well. One reason to flee that the normative power accounts can compass is that I wish to avoid the consequences that would ensue if you caught me. If we meet, I will have to promise to read the paper, or engage in an awkward conversation where we both know (but do not speak about the fact that) I have been avoiding you, or otherwise do something I'd like to avoid.[5]

I will grant that in real cases this is typically true. However, whatever additional reasons to flee that we can imagine, these can be stipulated away. If I wish to avoid making a promise, we can stipulate that I never make promises: everyone knows I'm reluctant to formally bind myself. If I wish to avoid an awkward conversation, we can stipulate that I actually enjoy awkward situations. And of course if I wish to secure plausible deniability, we have seen how this can be stipulated away. When we are left merely with the bare creation of a reason (according to the normative power view) or (if we stipulate everything away) with nothing (according to the epistemic account), we will reach the correct view that fleeing no longer makes sense for me. But if fleeing no longer makes sense, it cannot be the case that fleeing would help me in one way: by avoiding the creation of a reason. We want to say that if everything is stipulated away, there is no sense in fleeing. But the normative power accounts must say fleeing will pay off by allowing me to avoid the reason.

Moreover, even if we grant that the normative power views can make sense of why I flee without recourse to the claim that by fleeing I avoid the creation of a reason, they face a dilemma.

Either they deny that, when I flee for this other purpose, I avoid the creation of a reason, or they accept this. If they deny this, they give up their thesis, because to deny this is to accept that that the reason exists prior to the request. So they must accept that by fleeing I avoid the creation of a reason. But if they accept this, then they face two objections, which we will now examine.

4. CAN THE NORMATIVITY BE AVOIDED BY AVOIDING THE REQUEST?

If normative power accounts are right, then my evasion pays off, normatively speaking. By avoiding the request I avoid the reason to read your draft.[6] Upon reflection, however, it is not plausible to think that I can avoid my reason like this.[7] We can see this by looking at two cases.

4.1. Cat Care Case

You and I both have cats. You've cared for my cats when I've gone out of town. I've done the same for yours. I learn you've been invited to a conference out of town. I know you're going to ask me to look after your cats while you're gone. This will be effectively effortless for me. You live nearby and your cats are low-maintenance. Our reciprocal relationship is not such that I clearly owe you. We aren't keeping track in a ledger or anything like this. But, things are such that, if I were to turn down your request for cat care, it would not be decent of me. This is doubly the case given how easy it would be for me to take care of your cats.

However, I'm a jerk. So, before you can ask me to look after your cats, I make plans to be gone when you'll need cat care, and I casually inform you of these plans. Thus, you don't ask me to look after your cats, since you know I'll be busy. My plans are trivial: I could schedule my trip any time, but I deliberately choose the time you'll need cat care.

Examine the normative situation. Have I committed the perfect crime by avoiding the acquisition of a reason to care for your cats? I have no perfect duty not to make the plans. After all, I've yet to agree to look after your cats, our relationship is an informal one, and so on. Making the plans probably violates one or more imperfect duties, but the nature of imperfect duties is such that we can't expect me to abide by them in every instance. Whatever we say about duty and bare moral permissibility, however, it is obvious I do something morally objectionable by making these plans. Probably my action is suberogatory: wrong but not forbidden (Driver 1992).[8]

What can explain the fact that my behavior here is objectionable? Surely the fact that I ought not to make plans that make it impossible for me to look after your cats. Why ought I not to make those plans? Answer: the cats need looking after, I owe you, it's no trouble for me, and, crucially, *I know all of this before I make my plans*. I would be blameless if, *before* I knew you need cat care, I coincidentally made plans overlapping your conference. There would be nothing wrong with that. My actions are objectionable because normatively I *already* have everything I need to figure out whether I ought to be looking after your cats. This is what the epistemic account predicts.

Meanwhile, the explanation of this case that normative power accounts must give is less plausible. According to normative power accounts, I'm morally praiseworthy for having made plans. If I hadn't made plans, you would've asked me to look after your cats. This would have created a reason. I then would have refused to look after your cats, thus failing to act on the reason you created. This would be a red mark in my moral ledger. I would be a worse person for refusing to look after your cats. I'm clever, though, and I've preserved my moral character. I made plans, and so now you will never ask me to look after your cats, and I will never get a red mark in my moral ledger for turning you down. I'm a better person than I otherwise would've been because I contrived a way to be busy in order to avoid helping you out. But that description of the situation is implausible. My plan has not preserved my moral character at all.

Normative power theorists might point to other wrongmaking features of my actions.[9] For instance, by making plans I leave you worse off, and it can be wrong to make people worse off. My

claim, though, is that it is implausible to think that I have managed to avoid one kind of wrongdoing by substituting another kind of wrongdoing. What I have done wrong is to avoid taking care of your cats when I know I have good reason to take care of your cats. *That* is the wrong, whether I commit it by making plans or by refusing your request.

We can see it's the same wrong in both cases by considering a case where for some reason it would be perfectly legitimate to turn down your cat care request. In this circumstance it would be acceptable if I made plans, knowing this will prevent me from looking after your cats, just as it would be acceptable to turn down your request. It would be acceptable in each case for the *same* reasons, not for different reasons. The same thing that makes it acceptable for me to turn down your request is what makes it acceptable for me to make plans at the same time you need cat care. Similarly, in the actual case, it is unacceptable for me to make plans for the same reason it is unacceptable for me to turn down your request. The normative situation is determined not by your request or lack thereof, but by other factors.

Think also about the *degree* of wrongness attached to my devious planning in the original case. Is it *more* wrong for me to get out of caring for your cats by making a conflicting plan than it would be for me to just flatly turn down your request for no reason? Is it *less* wrong? Or is it *equally* wrong? It seems to me that my planning is *just as bad* as turning down your request would be. In fact I make the plan precisely *so* I can in effect turn down your request in a socially acceptable way rather than via a rude flat refusal. I give myself plausible deniability by making the plans, but this does not excuse me *at all* normatively speaking. Normatively I have no more reason to make the plans than to bluntly refuse your request. Both are equally bad. (In fact it is probably slightly *worse* to make the plans, because doing so is duplicitous on top of everything else.)

This suggests, then, that there is no interesting normative difference between my avoiding the request and my turning down the request. If there is no interesting normative difference between the two situations, then the best the normative power accounts can say is that the requests created by reasons are normatively uninteresting (in cases like this, at least). It is not incoherent for a normative power theorist to say this. But as noted above in endnote 6, the whole point of a normative power account is to suggest that requests have some sort of special normative power. If this power amounts to practically nothing, normatively speaking, then it is unclear what it means to invest requests with normative power, rather than to rob them of it, as the epistemic account does.

4.2. Paper Caught Case

Say that, while I am avoiding you in the paper chase case, I happen to receive a draft of your paper. Moreover, at some point you will catch me. I can comment on the draft now, when I have some free time. Or I can wait until you catch me, at which point commenting on it will be more work for me, and you will receive the comments later. Should I sit around waiting until you ask me to read it?

Surely not. I have *more* reason to read it now than I will once you manage to catch me. Any reason I would have once you catch me is one I already have right now, except for the reason that it would be rude not to read it once the request has been issued, but after all, I know you're going to catch me eventually, so already I have a reason to comment on the paper so as to avoid potential future rudeness. And I have two additional reasons to read your paper now: I'm not busy, and you'll get the comments sooner.

Defenders of normative power accounts will say that my reasons to read your paper before you request are separate from an additional reason I'd acquire once you issue the request. (This additional reason would be over and above the rudeness reason, which according to normative power accounts would either be parasitic on the deeper fact that there's some special reason created by the request, or incidental compared to the more consequential reason created by the request.)

Granting that the request creates a new reason, this alone does not spell trouble for the epistemic account. What would spell trouble is the claim that this new reason is not created merely

by the information revealed by your request. The epistemic account can accept that your request creates *a* new reason, because (for instance) I have a reason not to be rude, and it would be rude to fail to follow through by doing what I've agreed to do, and so now I have another reason to read your paper. But this reason is created by your request only incidentally: anything else that would've made it rude for me not to read your paper would've created exactly the same reason.

The epistemic account is in trouble only if the request creates a new kind of reason in virtue of your having made a *request*. But it is hard to see how my normative situation will change once you issue your request. Right now, I ought to read your paper. Once you issue your request, it will still be the case that I ought to read your paper. What is the difference? Unless we are *already* committed to a view that is in competition with the epistemic account, it is not clear why we should be tempted to say there is any substantive normative difference that is generated by your request.

5. CONCLUSION

Cases like the paper chase case aren't the only ones that present an objection to the epistemic account of the normativity of requests. Thus there is still much to be said about the debate between the epistemic account and competing accounts. However, because the paper chase case and similar sorts of cases present a powerful objection to the epistemic account, the replies given above (to the extent they succeed) ought to greatly bolster the account's standing.

NOTES

The paper chase case has been suggested to me as an objection to epistemic accounts of request normativity by Tatyana Kostochka and by someone at the 2019 Southampton-Humboldt Normativity Workshop: I believe it was Brian McElwee or Alex Greenberg, but it was relatively late in the day in a dark pub and I had just met many new people, so I cannot quite recall who it was.

1. Laskowski and Silver call the epistemic account the Epistemic-Evidential account.

2. In actuality, Adrien likely wouldn't have *exactly* the same sort of reason, because typically the information revealed in these two scenarios differs in subtle ways. For discussion, see Weltman 2023b: 1736–1739.

3. This objection also works against Gläser's account, and some of my arguments below can be adopted by Gläser.

4. In this way the paper chase case instantiates many features of the cases Weltman (2023b: 1736–1739) and Silver and Laskowski (2021) describe and of epistemically transparent cases as discussed by Enoch (2011) and Weltman (n.d.). It also matches Lewis's example of Sioned and Ffion (Lewis 2018: 5).

5. I thank a reviewer for this journal for raising this objection.

6. It's more complicated than this, because everyone agrees that the epistemic account is partially correct, and thus everyone agrees that once I know you want me to read the draft, I have *some* reason to read the draft (see, e.g., Enoch 2011: 4). Normative power accounts differ from the epistemic account by claiming that a new, additional reason to read the paper is created by the request, whereas the epistemic account denies that any new reason is created. (Actually it's more complicated even than *that*, as noted below in the discussion about rudeness in §4.2, but we will ignore this for now.) If normative power accounts want to be anything other than a normatively uninteresting third wheel, they will have to say the new, request-created reason is normatively typically much more important than the reason I already have in virtue of knowing what you want despite not having been asked.

7. For a similar objection see Monti 2021: 3738.

8. If one wishes to go further and say that my actions are impermissible, that they violate a perfect duty, and so on, that's fine. The worse my actions are, the better it is for the epistemic account.

9. I thank a reviewer for this journal for raising this possibility.

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