
REQUESTING BELIEF

BY

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Abstract: Requests belong to a family of forms of social influence on action that appear problematic when employed in the attempt to directly influence belief. Explaining why this is so is more difficult than it might at first appear. The fact that belief is not directly subject to the will can only be part of the explanation. It must also be the case that requests are incapable of providing epistemic reasons in a way that parallels that in which they provide practical reasons. I propose an account of the nature of requests that is in a position to explain why requests are incapable of doing this.

1. Introduction

Imagine that a student needs a particular grade in a course in order to gain admission to graduate school. Recognizing that her work in the course has not merited the grade, the student asks her professor to give her the grade. Though such a request is clearly inappropriate, it is perfectly coherent. The student ought not to make such a request, but we can easily understand what she is doing in making it. She is performing a speech act that provides her professor with a reason for giving her the grade, with a consideration that genuinely bears on the question whether to give the student the grade. In this case, the reason is not a good or sufficient one. The student's request is not a consideration on the basis of which the professor ought to decide to give the student the grade, but it is a reason for giving the student the grade nonetheless. We can thus easily imagine the professor (inappropriately) acting for this reason.

Now imagine that the student thinks that her professor's believing that her work in the course merits the required grade would give her additional confidence that would increase her chances of gaining admission to graduate school. As a result, the student asks the professor not only to give her the grade but also to believe that her work in the course merits the grade. This request is not only inappropriate. It is bizarre. The request would make sense

if the student were somehow asking her professor to review her work and reconsider her grade, but if this were the case, it would be extremely odd to frame this as a request that the professor believe something. Reviewing her work and reconsidering her grade are actions, and though they may result in the professor's believing that her work in the course merits the grade, they are not themselves this belief. While the student's asking the professor to give her the required grade is a genuine reason, though an inappropriate one, for giving the student the grade, the student's asking the professor to believe that her work merits the grade does not appear to be a genuine reason for believing that her work merits the grade. Or if it is a genuine reason, it is 'a reason of the wrong kind,' a pragmatic reason that bears on the question whether believing that her work merits the grade is desirable or to be brought about rather than an epistemic reason that bears on the question whether her work actually merits the grade.¹ As a result, while we can easily imagine the professor deciding to give the student the grade for the reason that the student asked the professor to do so, we cannot easily imagine the professor believing that the student's work in the course merits the grade for the reason that the student asked the professor to believe so.

The intuitive incoherence involved in such cases of requesting belief has led David Enoch to claim that belief cannot be coherently requested, that belief cannot be requested in a way that is directly analogous to that in which action can be requested.

Suppose that my request is not that you read my paper, but that you believe that it's a good paper. There seems to be something deeply wrong with this request. It doesn't seem like the kind of thing that could be the subject of a bona-fide request. So much so, that there is significant pressure to interpret my request (or my 'request') in some non-standard way: perhaps I am confused about the nature of requests, or perhaps I am really asking that you *say* that it is good, or in other ways act *as if* you believe that it is good, or perhaps I am asking that you somehow *get yourself* to have that belief (2011, p. 8).

I think Enoch is correct that belief cannot be requested in a way that is directly analogous to that in which action can be requested. Interestingly, however, it is not easy to explain why this is so. One might think that belief cannot be coherently requested for the simple reason that belief cannot be directly willed, but the fact that belief cannot be directly willed, assuming that this is a fact, can only be part of the explanation. It must also be the case that requests are incapable of providing epistemic reasons in a way that is directly analogous to that in which they typically provide practical reasons, and it is not easy to explain why requests are incapable of doing this.

Moreover, despite the intuitive incoherence involved in cases like that of the student requesting belief, there are contexts in which the notion of asking or requesting an audience to believe something does not seem out of place. There is a range of cases in which a speaker appears to request that an

audience believe something that are not as intuitively incoherent as the above case of the student. Here are two:

Falsely Accused: I have been accused of a crime that I did not commit. Recognizing that much of the available evidence seems to point to my guilt, I plead with my friends and family, 'Please, I beg you, you have to believe me. I'm innocent.'

Garage Door: My spouse asks me whether I closed the garage door when I left for work this morning. I tell her that I did, but she is hesitant to believe me, noting that I am quite absent-minded and often forget such things. Frustrated, I say, 'Would you please just believe me?'

It might very well be the case that what the speaker says in these cases does not provide the audience with a good or sufficient reason for believing what she says. In this respect, these cases might be similar to the initial case of the student asking her professor to give her the grade. Nevertheless, these cases feel very different from the case of the student asking her professor to believe that her work merits the grade. What the speaker is doing in these cases is not bizarre. Not only are these cases quite intelligible, they seem to involve a kind of interpersonal interaction that has a genuine human significance. So what is going on in such cases? What is the difference between these cases and the case of the student requesting belief, and how are these cases consistent with the thesis that belief cannot be coherently requested?

In Sections 2 through 4, I examine why it is that belief cannot be coherently requested. I argue that requests belong to a family of forms of social influence on action that are problematic when employed in the attempt to directly influence belief. I propose that practical requests, like practical threats and offers, provide reasons for action that stem from the consequences of the action. Insofar as the consequences of a belief cannot amount to epistemic reasons for the belief, requests cannot provide epistemic reasons in a way that parallels that in which they provide practical reasons. Sections 5 and 6 then argue that seemingly unproblematic cases of doxastic requests like *Falsely Accused* and *Garage Door* are an interesting species of indirect doxastic request. Seemingly unproblematic doxastic requests all involve requesting that an audience *believe a speaker that p*. Believing a speaker that p requires believing that p for the reason of a speaker's telling one that p. Seemingly unproblematic cases of doxastic requests can thus be construed as cases in which a speaker requests that an audience perform the mental action of attending to and considering a genuinely epistemic reason for believing that p presented prior to or simultaneous with the request, the epistemic reason provided by the speaker's telling the audience that p. In this respect, such cases are not theoretical analogues of direct practical requests, and they pose no threat to the thesis that belief cannot be coherently requested.

2. *Varieties of social influence*

Requests belong to a family of forms of social influence that, while perfectly coherent when employed in the attempt to influence the actions of others, appear problematic when employed in the attempt to directly influence their beliefs. In addition to requests, this family includes orders and commands, coercive threats, and non-coercive offers.² Asking someone 'Please believe that p,' commanding someone 'Believe that p,' threatening someone 'If you don't believe that p, I will harm you,' and making someone the offer 'If you believe that p, I will benefit you,' all appear problematic. This is not to deny that some sense can be made of such speech acts. In particular, we can interpret the speakers in such cases as attempting to get their audience to do whatever it takes to bring about the relevant belief. If the relevant belief is the belief that God exists, by asking 'Please believe that God exists,' commanding 'Believe that God exists,' threatening 'If you don't believe that God exists, I will harm you,' or offering 'If you believe that God exists, I will benefit you,' I might be attempting to get you to perform actions such as attending a religious service or reading a religious text that I hope will serve to bring about the belief that God exists. But this is already to admit that such speech acts do not aim to influence belief in a way that directly parallels that in which they typically aim to influence action. When a speaker attempts to influence an audience to act in some way by issuing a request, command, threat, or offer, the speaker is not typically trying to get her audience to act on herself in such a way as to bring it about that she acts as directed. If a speaker asks an audience to attend a religious service, for example, she is not attempting to get her audience to perform some actions that may serve to bring it about that the audience will attend the service. The speaker is instead trying to get the speaker to act directly for the reason of her request. If belief could be influenced by requests, commands, threats, or offers in a way that directly parallels that in which action is typically influenced by such speech acts, then it would have to be the case that an audience could believe directly for the reason of a speaker's request, command, threat, or offer. This doesn't seem possible, and this is why straightforward doxastic requests, commands, threats, and offers appear problematic.

But why isn't it possible for a speaker to believe something directly for the reason of a speaker's request, command, threat, or offer? If we could believe at will, in the way that we act, directly for practical reasons, then it should be possible to believe directly for the reason of a speaker's request, command, threat, or offer. Requests, commands, threats, and offers are clearly capable of providing practical reasons, considerations that an audience takes to bear on the question whether to Φ . If we could believe directly for practical reasons, then we should be able to believe directly for the practical reasons provided by these speech acts. The fact that it doesn't seem that we can believe directly for the reason of a speaker's request, command, threat, or offer

suggests that we cannot believe directly for practical reasons, that we cannot believe at will.³ Even if this is true, however, this does not yet explain why it is that we cannot believe something directly for the reason of a speaker's request, command, threat, or offer. If the non-voluntariness of belief is to figure in an explanation of the seeming incoherence of direct doxastic requests, commands, threats, or offers, then it must be the case that these speech acts are only capable of providing practical reasons. If these speech acts are capable of providing epistemic reasons, if they are capable of providing considerations that bear on the question whether *p*, then despite the non-voluntariness of belief, they should be capable of influencing belief in a way that directly parallels that in which they are capable of influencing action. If these speech acts can provide epistemic reasons, then it should be possible for an audience to believe directly for such reasons just as it is possible for an audience to act directly for the reason of a speaker's practical request, command, threat or offer.

Here is one very general argument for the conclusion that requests, commands, threats, and offers are incapable of directly influencing belief by providing epistemic reasons. Doxastic requests, commands, threats, and offers are not the only intuitively problematic instances of these speech acts. Requesting that someone grow two inches, ordering someone to feel fear, threatening someone with harm if she doesn't blush, and offering someone a benefit if she feels angry are all equally problematic. What all of these cases have in common is that they involve a speaker attempting to directly influence something that is not an action, something that one cannot do intentionally. This suggests that it is simply the nature of the speech acts of requesting, commanding, threatening, and offering that they aim to direct the will of an audience by providing the audience with a practical reason, with a consideration that bears on the question whether to Φ . Things that are not intentional actions – things that cannot be done directly for practical reasons – are thus not fit objects of these speech acts. Beliefs are not intentional actions. One cannot believe directly for practical reasons. Beliefs are thus not fit objects of requests, commands, threats, or offers.

There are two problems with this argument. First, there are some respects in which requests, commands, threats, and offers *can* provide epistemic reasons for believing that at which they aim.⁴ The request 'Please believe that I am requesting something of you' does appear to be capable of providing you with an epistemic reason for believing that I am requesting something of you. Moreover, there are contexts in which even seemingly incoherent doxastic requests like the case of the student might be capable of providing epistemic reasons for believing what is requested. If the professor judges that, in the circumstances, the student wouldn't likely issue such an audacious request unless her work in the course actually merited the grade, then the professor is in a position to take the student's request to be an epistemic reason for believing that her work in the course merits the grade. Second,

even if we can rule out such cases, we still face the question of *why it is* that the speech acts of requesting, commanding, threatening, and offering only provide practical reasons. In virtue of what is it the case that these speech acts are only capable of directing the will?

3. *Doxastic threats and offers*

I think that these two challenges can be fairly easily met with respect to the speech acts of threatening and offering. Things are more difficult when it comes to the speech acts of requesting and commanding, but the way in which these challenges can be met for threats and offers provides a template for what should be said about the case of requests.

Start with the first challenge. There do seem to be respects in which doxastic threats and offers are capable of providing epistemic reasons for believing that at which they aim. The threat 'Believe that I am threatening you, or I will harm you' does seem to provide you with an epistemic reason for believing that I am threatening you, and the offer 'Believe that I am offering you something, and I will benefit you' does seem to provide you with an epistemic reason for believing that I am offering you something. Moreover, it is not only such self-referential threats and offers that are capable of providing epistemic reasons for believing that at which they aim. Given the right circumstances, an audience might take a speaker's threat 'Believe that I am the King of England, or else,' to amount to an epistemic reason for believing that the speaker is the King of England. Perhaps the audience judges that the speaker wouldn't have the audacity to issue such a threat in such circumstances unless he was actually the King of England. The speaker's threat thus amounts to an epistemic reason for believing that the speaker is the King of England. The threat is a consideration that the audience takes to bear positively on the question whether the speaker is the King of England.

Nevertheless, there is good reason to think that, when a speaker's threat or offer does amount to such an epistemic reason, the speaker is not influencing her audience in a way that directly parallels that in which threats and offers are capable of directly influencing action. Practical threats and offers standardly involve the issuing of conditional statements of the form 'If you Φ (or do not Φ), I will Ψ .' The antecedent of the conditional states an action that the speaker is attempting to influence the speaker to perform (or refrain from performing), and the consequent states a consequence that the speaker purports to intend to bring about that will either make the audience relevantly worse off, in the case of threats, or relevantly better off, in the case of offers. This consequence is intended to function for the audience as a reason for performing (or refraining from performing) the action indicated in the antecedent. On a greatly simplified version of the seminal account of

coercion offered by Robert Nozick (1969), for example, a speaker S coerces an audience A if and only if:

- (1) S aims to cause A to Φ ;
- (2) S communicates a claim to A indicating that if A doesn't Φ , then S will bring about some consequence that would make A's not Φ -ing less desirable to A than A's Φ -ing;
- (3) S's claim is credible to A;
- (4) A Φ s;
- (5) Part of A's reason for Φ -ing is to lessen the likelihood that S will bring about the consequence announced in (2).

This particular kind of reason for action, one that stems from consideration of the consequences of the action, cannot have a direct theoretical analogue for the simple reason that, leaving aside self-referential beliefs such as the belief that this belief is good to have, the good or bad consequences of believing that p cannot be epistemic reasons for believing that p. The consequences of believing that p can be pragmatic reasons for acting to bring about (or prevent) the belief, but such reasons are a species of practical reasons – they are considerations that bear on the question whether to act in a particular way. They are not considerations that bear on the question whether p, and thus they are not epistemic reasons.

This means that threats and offers cannot provide epistemic reasons in a way that directly parallels that in which they can provide practical reasons. Though the self-referential threat 'Believe that I am threatening you, or I will harm you' can provide an epistemic reason for believing that I am threatening you, this epistemic reason is provided by your hearing and understanding the force and content of my utterance, not by your desire to avoid the threatened consequence. And though an audience might take a speaker's threat 'Believe that I am the King of England, or else' to be good evidence for believing that the speaker is actually the King of England, this epistemic reason does not stem from the audience's desire to avoid a consequence of not believing. Though the audience of a speaker's doxastic threat or offer can take the speaker's speech act to amount to an epistemic reason, this epistemic reason cannot be one that directly parallels the reason provided by practical threats and offers. It cannot be an epistemic reason that stems from the audience's desire to either avoid or acquire a consequence of believing that p.⁵

4. Practical and doxastic requests

The reason that doxastic threats and offers are incoherent derives from the way in which the speech acts of threatening and offering aim to provide an

audience with reasons. If we had a detailed account of the way in which the speech act of requesting aims to provide an audience with reasons, then this too might explain why they seem incapable of providing epistemic reasons.

Enoch attempts to provide such an account. He argues that both requests and commands are forms of what he calls 'robust reason-giving.' According to Enoch, a speaker *S* robustly gives an audience *A* a reason to Φ just in case (and because), (i) *S* intends to give *A* a reason to Φ and communicates this intention to *A*, (ii) *S* intends *A* to recognize this intention, and (iii) *S* intends *A*'s given reason to Φ to depend in an appropriate way on *A*'s recognition of *S*'s communicated intention to give *A* a reason to Φ (2011, p. 15). In order for a speaker to genuinely request or command an audience to believe that *p*, it would thus have to be the case that (i*) *S* intends to give *A* a reason to believe that *p* and communicates this intention to *A*, (ii*) *S* intends *A* to recognize this intention, and (iii*) *S* intends *A*'s given reason to believe that *p* to depend in an appropriate way on *A*'s recognition of *S*'s communicated intention to give *A* a reason to believe that *p*. Enoch claims that (iii*) is highly problematic. A speaker's reason-giving intentions and an audience's recognition of these intentions are 'of the wrong type' to create genuinely epistemic reasons, and they are thus incapable of triggering an epistemic reason to believe that *p* if the speaker requests or commands one to believe that *p* (2011, p. 19). What Enoch calls 'the normative success condition' on robust reason-giving therefore cannot be met, and a speaker's intention (iii*) in attempting to robustly give an epistemic reason by requesting or commanding belief cannot possibly be fulfilled.

Recall that, as in the case of doxastic threats and offers, there are respects in which doxastic requests and commands are capable of providing epistemic reasons for believing that at which they aim. The request 'Please believe that I am requesting something of you' and the command 'Believe that I am commanding you to believe something' both provide epistemic reasons for believing that at which they aim. Moreover, seemingly incoherent doxastic requests like the case of the student might be capable of providing epistemic reasons. If the professor judges that, in the circumstances, the student wouldn't likely issue such an audacious request unless her work in the course actually merits the grade, then the professor is in a position to take the student's request to be an epistemic reason for believing that her work in the course merits the grade. This can be construed in terms of speaker intentions as well. If the professor judges that, in the circumstances, the student wouldn't likely intend to give the professor a reason for belief by issuing such a request unless her work in the course actually merits the grade, then the professor is in a position to take the speaker's reason-giving intentions to be an epistemic reason to believe that the student's work merits the grade. A speaker's reason-giving intentions and an audience's recognition of these intentions are thus not necessarily of the wrong type to generate genuinely epistemic reasons.

Enoch attempts to block this kind of response by claiming that, if belief is capable of being requested or commanded in a way that directly parallels that in which action is capable of being requested or commanded, then it must be the case not only that a speaker's reason-giving intentions are capable of providing epistemic reasons but that they are capable of doing so 'in the appropriate way,' in a way that directly parallels that in which they do so in the practical case. When an audience chooses to fulfill a speaker's request, it is not typically the case that the speaker's request and the reason-giving intentions involved therein function for the audience as mere indicators of what is likely the thing to do in the situation. Fulfilling a speaker's request and obeying a speaker's command are not like following the directions of a GPS device. To treat the requests or commands of others (and the reason-giving intentions expressed therein) as merely reliable indicators of what to do in the situation is not to treat these speech acts in the appropriate way for them to provide reasons for action of a kind acting on which amounts to genuinely fulfilling a request or genuinely obeying a command. So even if doxastic requests and commands are capable of providing epistemic reasons, the way in which they are capable of doing so does not seem to parallel what is involved in genuinely fulfilling a request or genuinely obeying a command.

I think that Enoch's point here is broadly correct, and it parallels something we have seen with respect to doxastic threats and offers. Doxastic threats and offers may be capable of providing epistemic reasons for believing that at which they aim, but the way in which they are capable of doing so does not parallel that in which practical threats and offers standardly provide reasons for action. Similarly, doxastic requests and commands may be capable of providing epistemic reasons for believing that at which they aim, but the way in which they are capable of doing so does not parallel that in which practical requests and commands standardly provide reasons for action. What we have in the case of threats and offers that we do not yet have in the case of requests and commands, however, is an explanation of why this is the case. In the case of threats and offers, this has to do with the fact that the consequences of action can amount to practical reasons in a way that the consequences of belief cannot amount to epistemic reasons. In the case of requests and commands, to say that speaker-intentions cannot generate epistemic reasons in the appropriate way necessary to directly parallel the way in which speaker-intentions are capable of generating reasons for action is to point to the relevant disanalogy, but it is not yet to explain it. Why is it that doxastic requests and commands (and the reason-giving intentions involved therein) are incapable of providing epistemic reasons in a way that directly parallels that in which practical requests and commands standardly provide reasons for action?

I would like to propose an account of the nature of requests that, like the above account of threats and offers, construes the kind of reason that the speech act of requesting aims to provide as one that stems from the

consequences of the object of the request. If this is right, then parallel to the case of threats and offers, this will provide a clear explanation of why it is that that belief cannot be coherently requested.⁶

It might seem *prima facie* implausible to construe requests as aiming to provide an audience with reasons that stem from the consequences of the object of the request. When I ask you to pass the salt, for example, I am not acting in such a way as to construe your passing the salt as an action that will either harm or benefit you. Fulfilling or denying such a request might very well have consequences. Depending on the circumstances, denying my request might strain the relationship between us or make you look petty or vindictive in front of others, and the desire to avoid such consequences might figure into your deliberations concerning whether to fulfill my request. Nevertheless, in asking you to pass the salt, the speech act that I am performing is not one that aims to provide you with a reason for action that derives from such consequences. If you were to pass the salt solely in order to avoid such consequences, then while you would have acted as I requested, there is nevertheless a sense in which you would not have genuinely acquiesced to my request. You would not have acted *because I asked you to*, that is, for the particular kind of reason that my request purports to provide.

While practical requests do not provide reasons for action that stem from the consequences of the action *for the audience*, I think that requests can be construed as providing reasons for action that stem at least in part from the consequences of the action *for the speaker*, in particular, from the consequence of satisfying the speaker's desire that the action be performed. I thus propose that an audience A genuinely acquiesces to a speaker S's request only if:

- (1) S aims to cause A to Φ .
- (2) S communicates to A the desire that A Φ in order to secure the consequence that S's desire that A Φ is satisfied.
- (3) A Φ s.
- (4) Part of A's reason for Φ -ing is to secure the consequence indicated in (2).⁷

In order to facilitate comparison, I have modeled this account of practical requests on the Nozick-inspired account of practical coercion discussed in Section 3. The first two clauses state, roughly, what is involved in a speaker's requesting an audience to Φ , and the second two clauses state what is involved in the audience's acting for the reason that the request purports to provide. Requesting that a speaker Φ here involves communicating a desire that the audience act for a particular reason, namely, the reason that so doing will have the effect of satisfying the speaker's desire that the audience so act.⁸ Genuinely acquiescing to the speaker's request then requires acting for this particular reason, for the reason that so doing will satisfy the speaker's desire.

Importantly, this account holds that A's genuinely acquiescing to S's request requires that A Φ in order to secure the consequence of satisfying S's desire that A Φ , not merely that A Φ for the reason that S wants A to Φ . A might Φ for the reason that S wants A to Φ without doing so in order to secure the consequence of satisfying S's desire. A might not care about satisfying S's desire – she might not care whether what she does has this particular effect – and so she might not take this consequence of Φ -ing to be a reason for Φ -ing. Nevertheless, if A judges that S wouldn't likely want A to Φ unless Φ -ing was actually the thing for A to do in the situation, then S might take this to be good reason to Φ . Here A is taking the fact of S's desire to be a reliable indicator of what to do, but she is not acting in order to satisfy S's desire. She is not acting for the reason that so doing will bring about this particular effect. Insofar as this is the case, she does not appear to be genuinely acquiescing to the speaker's request. Genuinely acquiescing to a speaker's request is not merely a matter of acting for the reason that the speaker wants one to act. It is a matter of acting *for the speaker*, for the reason that so doing will have the effect of satisfying the speaker's desires.

With this in view, we are now in a position to see why direct doxastic requests are incoherent. In order for an audience to believe for the reason of a speaker's request in a way that parallels what is involved in genuinely acquiescing to a speaker's practical request, it would have to be the case that:

- (1) S aims to cause A to believe that p.
- (2) S communicates to A the desire that A believe that p in order to secure the consequence that S's desire that A believe that p is satisfied.
- (3) A believes that p.
- (4) Part of A's epistemic reason for believing that p is to secure the consequence indicated in (2).

In requesting that A believe that p, S communicates to A the desire that A believe that p for a particular reason, namely, the reason that so believing will satisfy S's desire that A believe that p. Genuinely acquiescing to S's request then requires that A believe that p for this reason. However, the fact that believing that p will have the consequence of satisfying S's desire that A believe that p is not an epistemic reason for believing that p. It is not a consideration that bears on the question whether p. It may be a pragmatic reason for acting in ways designed to bring about the belief that p, just as a speaker's threat or offer may be such a pragmatic reason, but it is not a genuinely epistemic reason for belief.

Consider now the respects in which doxastic requests are capable of providing epistemic reasons. The request 'Please believe that I am requesting something of you' can provide you with an epistemic reason for believing that I am requesting something of you, and even the

student's seemingly incoherent doxastic request might amount to an epistemic reason for the professor to believe that the student's work merits the grade if, for example, the professor judges that the student wouldn't issue such a request unless her work actually merits the grade. However, the way in which such requests are capable of providing epistemic reasons does not parallel that in which practical requests, on the account I have proposed, provide reasons for action. Practical requests provide reasons for action that stem from the consequences of the action for the speaker, in particular, from the consequence that so acting will satisfy the speaker's desire. The epistemic reasons that doxastic requests are capable of providing do not stem from the consequences of the belief for the speaker. In the case of the self-referential request, 'Please believe that I am requesting something of you,' the epistemic reason is provided by the audience's hearing and understanding the force and content of the utterance. And in the case of the professor's taking the student's seemingly incoherent request to be a genuinely epistemic reason, the professor is taking the student's request to be a reliable indicator of the fact that her work merits the grade. This is akin to taking a speaker's practical request to be a reliable indicator of what to do in the situation, but as we have seen, even taking a speaker's desire that one act to be a reliable indicator of what to do is insufficient for genuinely acquiescing to the request. In order to believe in a way that parallels genuinely acquiescing to a speaker's request, the professor would have to believe that the student's work merits the grade for the reason that so believing will have the consequence of satisfying the student's desire, but insofar as the consequences of believing are not epistemic reasons, the professor cannot believe directly for this reason.

In sum, the student asking her professor to believe that her work in the course merits the grade seems bizarre because the student appears to be trying to rationally influence her audience to believe something by performing a speech act that is incapable of doing so in the way in which she intends. Since we cannot believe directly for practical reasons, in order to rationally influence the professor to believe that her work in the course merits the grade the student must provide the professor with an epistemic reason, with a consideration that bears on the question whether her work in the course merits the grade. Though her request can provide an epistemic reason for believing that her work in the course merits the grade if, for example, the professor judges that she likely would not issue such a bizarre request unless her work in the course actually merits the grade, it cannot provide an epistemic reason in the way in which the student appears to intend, in a way that directly parallels that in which practical requests are capable of providing reasons for action. It cannot provide an epistemic reason that stems from the consequences of the action for the speaker. The student's request is therefore incoherent.

5. *Indirect doxastic requests*

It remains to consider seemingly intelligible doxastic requests like those in *Falsely Accused* and *Garage Door*. How do such cases differ from the case of the student requesting belief?

I have claimed that we cannot believe 'directly' for practical reasons. The modifier is necessary in order to leave room for cases in which one comes to believe something as a result of finding certain reasons sufficient for acting to bring about the attitude of believing that *p* by, for example, collecting evidence. Such reasons might be called 'reasons for belief,' but they are not epistemic reasons. They are not considerations that bear on the question whether *p*. Instead, they are considerations that bear on the question whether to act so as to bring about the belief that *p*. Such reasons are thus a species of practical reasons. When one acts on the basis of such reasons to bring about a belief, one might be said to believe 'indirectly' for practical reasons.

Insofar as one can believe indirectly for practical reasons, there is a sense in which belief can be indirectly requested (as well as indirectly ordered or commanded and indirectly coerced). A speaker can coherently request that an audience perform actions aimed at rationally or non-rationally bringing about a particular belief. If a speaker wants her audience to believe that global warming is occurring and is largely the result of human activity, for example, she might request that her audience read the relevant scientific literature. Alternatively, if there were a pill available that was capable of inducing this belief, the speaker might request that her audience take the pill. Such requests are perfectly coherent. However, they are ultimately a species of practical request. They are cases in which a speaker requests that an audience perform an action (reading or taking a pill) that the speaker hopes will be sufficient to bring about the desired belief.

Since it is perfectly coherent to request that an audience perform actions aimed at bringing about a belief, one might attempt to construe cases in which a speaker appears to directly request belief as cases of disguised indirect doxastic requests. Part of what makes the case of the student so bizarre is that it is extremely difficult to interpret what the student says as such a disguised indirect request. If the student is really requesting that the professor review her work, for example, then why doesn't she just say this? Still, it might be the case that the two seemingly intelligible cases of doxastic requests that I have presented, *Falsely Accused* and *Garage Door*, seem less bizarre precisely because they are easier to interpret as cases of disguised indirect doxastic requests. When I ask my friends and family to believe me that I am innocent, perhaps I am really asking that they somehow act so as to bring themselves to believe that I am innocent, and when I ask my spouse to believe me that I shut the garage door, perhaps I am really asking that she somehow act to bring herself to believe this. If cases of seemingly intelligible doxastic requests are really cases of disguised indirect doxastic

requests, then they pose no threat to the thesis that belief cannot be coherently requested.

I think that there is something right about this way of handling cases of seemingly intelligible doxastic requests, but the issue needs to be treated with care. It is not obvious what actions the speakers in *Falsely Accused* and *Garage Door* might be requesting their audience to perform. Unlike other cases of indirect doxastic requests, it doesn't seem that the speakers in such cases are attempting to get their audience to non-rationally manipulate their beliefs or to rationally manage their beliefs by seeking out further evidence. The speakers appear to intend to rationally influence their audience to believe that *p* by means of what it is that they are doing in requesting the belief. The next section proposes an account of these seemingly intelligible doxastic requests on which they amount to a very particular species of indirect doxastic request, one in which a speaker requests that an audience attend to and consider a very particular kind of epistemic reason that is provided (or reiterated) simultaneous with the request.

6. *Asking another to believe one that p*

The first thing to note about *Falsely Accused* and *Garage Door* is that they both involve a speaker requesting that an audience *believe her that p*. The belief that they request is not merely believing that *p* but believing a speaker that *p*. In fact, I find it difficult to imagine cases in which a speaker appears to unproblematically request that an audience believe that *p* where this doesn't involve believing a speaker that *p*. A speaker might beg an audience to believe that she is innocent, but in imagining such a scenario we naturally imagine a case in which the speaker has told or is in the process of telling the speaker that she is innocent and is thereby asking the audience to believe her. These possible counter-examples to the thesis that belief cannot be coherently requested thus all have their home in the context of believing a person.

To believe a person that *p* is to believe that *p* for a particular reason, for the particular reason provided by a speaker's telling one that *p*.⁹ Insofar as seemingly unproblematic doxastic requests all appear to aim at an audience's believing a speaker that *p*, there is good reason to believe that there is a genuinely epistemic reason available in such cases that is not available in cases like that of the student. This epistemic reason is provided by the speaker's telling the audience that *p*, by a speech act that has already occurred or is occurring simultaneous to the speaker's request. In *Falsely Accused* the speaker is not only making a request but also telling the audience that she is innocent, and in *Garage Door* the speaker is not only making a request but also reiterating the fact that she has already told the audience that she shut the door.

Recognizing that cases of unproblematic doxastic requests involve requesting that an audience believe a speaker that *p*, one might wonder whether such cases are really just emphatic or stylized cases of telling an audience that *p*. Perhaps all that the speaker is doing in *Falsely Accused* and *Garage Door*, ceremony aside, is telling the audience that she is innocent or that she shut the garage door. I think that something like this is probably true of many cases of what appear to be non-problematic doxastic commands. As in the case of requests, there are some cases in which a speaker appears to command belief that do not seem intuitively incoherent, for example, 'Such and such is the case; believe it' or 'They will tell you that such and such is the case, but don't believe it.'¹⁰ I suspect that Anscombe has cases like these in mind when she says at one point, without elaboration, that 'there are plenty of situations in which one may intelligibly order someone to believe or not to believe something' (1981, p. 44). Nevertheless, I don't think that these cases involve commanding belief in a way that directly parallels that in which action is typically commanded. Instead, they seem to be cases of emphatically telling someone that *p*.

In contrast, I think that cases like *Falsely Accused* and *Garage Door* cannot be adequately construed as cases of stylized or emphatic tellings. It is crucial that such cases do involve telling or re-telling an audience that *p* and thereby attempting to provide the audience with a genuinely epistemic reason for believing that *p*. However, this doesn't exhaust the extent of the speaker's attempted influence on the audience. The speaker is also genuinely requesting something of the audience. So what is the aim of the request?

One possibility is that seemingly unproblematic doxastic requests aim at something less than outright belief on the part of the audience, something like what Cohen (1992) and Bratman (1999) call 'acceptance.' Both Cohen and Bratman construe acceptance as an attitude that is directly subject to the will, and as such, it should be a fit object of request. I think it is implausible, however, that what the speaker is doing in *Falsely Accused* and *Garage Door* aims at anything less than outright belief.

Another possibility is that the object of the request in such cases is believing for a reason, for the particular reason provided by the speaker's telling. In begging you to believe me that I am innocent, I would thus be both telling you that I am innocent and requesting that you believe that I am innocent for the reason of my telling. Believing for an epistemic reason, however, is no more directly subject to the will than believing itself. One cannot believe that *p* for an epistemic reason directly for practical reasons any more than one can believe that *p* directly for practical reasons.¹¹ Believing that *p* for an epistemic reason thus isn't a fit object of request.

I propose that the direct object of request in seemingly unproblematic cases of doxastic requests is in fact a kind of action, not belief, acceptance, or belief for a reason. In begging you to believe me that I am innocent, I am both telling you that I am innocent and requesting that you attend to

and consider this reason. Attending to and considering reasons are mental actions – they are things that can be done directly for practical reasons – and they are therefore fit objects of request. Seemingly unproblematic doxastic requests are thus an interesting species of indirect doxastic request.

This is similar to Enoch's proposal that in seeming to request belief one might really be requesting that an audience somehow *get herself* to believe (2011, p. 8). On the account I am proposing, however, when a speaker requests that an audience believe her that *p*, the way in which the speaker is seeking to get the audience to believe is by attending to and considering a particular epistemic reason, the reason provided by the speaker's telling her that *p*. This makes cases like *Falsely Accused* and *Garage Door* very different from others cases of indirect doxastic requests. *Falsely Accused* and *Garage Door* do not involve a speaker requesting that an audience perform actions intended to non-rationally manipulate her beliefs by, for example, taking a pill, nor do they involve requesting that an audience perform an investigation or put herself in a position to acquire new evidence. The epistemic reason on the basis of which the speaker intends the audience to believe is either already available in the situation or is being provided by the speaker then and there, simultaneous with her request that the audience attend to this reason. The speaker's request in these cases thus appears to have a much more direct bearing on the audience's belief than in other cases of indirect doxastic requests, but this is not because the speaker has succeeded in coherently directly requesting belief. Rather, it is because in making the request the speaker is simultaneously telling (or re-telling) the audience that *p*.

It makes sense that a speaker would ask an audience to attend to the fact that she is telling her audience that *p* in situations like *Falsely Accused* and *Garage Door*. In imagining cases of unproblematic doxastic requests we tend to imagine cases in which a speaker issues the request because she recognizes that much of the available evidence seems to count against what she is telling the audience. In *Falsely Accused*, I recognize that much of the available evidence points to my guilt. Nevertheless, I tell my friends and family that I am innocent in the hope that they will take the particular reason for belief provided by my telling to outweigh the evidence pointing to my guilt. By simultaneously requesting that they attend to and consider the reason for belief provided by my telling, I give them a reason to attend to my telling in a way that might increase the likelihood that they take it seriously. Similarly in *Garage Door*, I recognize that my past track record gives my spouse reason to be suspicious of my trustworthiness in this particular case, but I want to focus her attention on the fact that, despite all of this, I am telling her that I shut the door. I do this by giving her a reason to attend, or re-attend, to the reason for belief that I have provided her. In both of these cases it may very well turn out that my audience does not take my telling to amount to a sufficient reason for believing what I say, but it makes sense that, in the circumstances, I would request that my audience attend to my telling.¹²

I thus propose that cases of seemingly unproblematic doxastic requests are cases in which a speaker both tells an audience that *p* and requests that the audience attend to and consider this reason. The telling provides the audience with an epistemic reason to believe that *p*, and the request provides the audience with a practical reason, stemming from the consequences of the action for the speaker, to perform the mental action of attending to and considering this reason. These cases are not cases in which a speaker requests belief in a way that is directly analogous to that in which action can be requested, and thus they are not counter-examples to the thesis that belief cannot be coherently requested.¹³

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NOTES

¹ Following Hieronymi (2005), I take reasons to be considerations that bear (or are taken by an agent to bear) on questions. Practical reasons are considerations that bear on the question whether to Φ , and epistemic reasons are considerations that bear on the question whether *p*. Considerations can be genuine practical or epistemic reasons without being good or sufficient reasons, but reasons that are not good or sufficient differ from 'reasons of the wrong kind.' Reasons of the wrong kind for an attitude are reasons that do not bear on the question the settling of which is required for the attitude. The question the settling of which is required for the attitude of belief is the question whether *p*. Pragmatic reasons for belief bear on the question whether to act so as to bring about the belief that *p*. Pragmatic reasons for belief are thus practical reasons and reasons of the wrong kind for believing that *p*.

² Arguably, this class also includes advice and non-threatening warnings.

³ Bennett (1990) claims that we cannot get others immediately to believe things by the offering of inducements such as threats or bribes, suggesting that we cannot believe at will. For the purposes of this article, I will simply assume that we cannot believe directly at will. The classic argument for this position is Williams (1973). Bennett objects to Williams' argument. For an alternative argument designed to meet Bennett's objections, see Hieronymi, 2006 and 2009.

⁴ This is noted by Bennett (1990, p. 88). Such speech acts are obviously capable of providing epistemic reasons for believing things other than that at which they aim. The threat 'Your money or your life,' might very well give me epistemic reason to believe all sorts of things about the speaker, including that the speaker is threatening me, but these beliefs are not the primary aim of the threat.

⁵ For a more detailed account of various respects in which belief can and cannot be coerced, see McMyler (2011b).

⁶ Unlike Enoch's account, this account is specific to requests and will not apply to the case of commands. This means that the fact that belief cannot be coherently commanded, if this is a fact, requires a different explanation. I will not attempt to provide such an explanation here.

⁷ These are necessary conditions for acquiescing to a request, not sufficient conditions. My claim will be that doxastic requests cannot meet these necessary conditions.

⁸ Note that the action needn't have the effect of benefiting the speaker, unless we construe the satisfaction of desire as itself a benefit. One might acquiesce to an alcoholic's request for a

drink without the act benefiting or being viewed by anyone, including the speaker herself, as benefiting the speaker.

⁹ It is uncontroversial that a speaker's telling an audience that *p* can provide an audience with an epistemic reason for believing that *p*. For a seminal discussion of what exactly is involved in believing a person, see Anscombe (1979). Anscombe argues that both believing what a person says and believing what a person says for the reason of her saying it are insufficient for believing the person. Believing a person that *p* requires believing that *p* for a reason believing on the basis of which amounts to 'trusting the speaker for the truth.' To simplify matters, I here simply claim that believing a speaker that *p* requires believing that *p* for the reason of a speaker's telling one that *p*, leaving to one side the question of whether believing that *p* for the reason of a speaker's telling one that *p* is sufficient for 'trusting a speaker for the truth.' Note that if one thinks, controversially, that believing a person is a matter of trusting the person for the truth, and if one thinks that we can trust a person for the truth directly at will, then this would mean that believing a person should be a fit object of request. While I have myself argued for the controversial view that believing a person is a matter of trusting the person for the truth (McMyler, 2011a), I do not think that one can trust a person for the truth directly at will.

¹⁰ Zagzebski (2012, p. 5) appeals to such cases in questioning the idea that belief cannot be coherently commanded.

¹¹ This marks a significant difference between theoretical and practical rationality. While one cannot get a belief formed for a reason directly for practical reasons, one can get a decision made for a reason directly for practical reasons, as in Buridan's ass situations. Thanks to Pamela Hieronymi for helpful correspondence on this issue.

¹² There is a further feature of these cases that merits mention. Both *Falsely Accused* and *Garage Door* are cases that involve a close personal relationship between the speaker and the audience, and as a result, there might be non-epistemic interpersonal norms at work in these cases. In *Falsely Accused* the norms of friendship might dictate that a good friend should believe that I am innocent, and in *Garage Door* similar interpersonal norms may dictate that my spouse should believe what I tell her. These interpersonal norms might conflict with epistemic norms. Both Stroud (2006) and Keller (2007) have argued that the norms of friendship can dictate that I should believe what a friend tells me even in cases in which epistemic norms dictate that I should not. The speaker in cases like *Falsely Accused* and *Garage Door* might be attempting to exploit such interpersonal norms in an attempt to get the audience to believe her in a way that conflicts with what the audience ought to believe epistemically. Still, I think it is implausible that this is all that is going on in these cases. First, the speaker in such cases is performing a speech act that purports to provide the audience with an epistemic reason. Why would the speaker do this unless she was intending to give the audience good epistemic reason to believe what she says? Second, I think that belief can be intelligibly requested in cases in which there is no close personal relationship between speaker and audience and in which there are no clear non-epistemic interpersonal norms at play. A speaker might beg a jury to believe that she is innocent, for example, and though such a request may be less likely to result in the audience's believing in the speaker's innocence than in *Falsely Accused*, this doesn't render the request less coherent.

¹³ Many thanks to David Enoch and Will Small for helping me to clarify my initially very muddy thinking about this issue. Thanks also to Simon Keller, Linda Radzik, Linda Zagzebski, and an anonymous referee for providing helpful comments on earlier drafts.

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