

UNITED WISDOM

How to Say No and Stay in the Conversation

Relationships and Shared Life

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

R12 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Epigraph

> *“The superior man is affable, but not adulatory; the mean man is adulatory, but not affable.”*

Confucius, Analects XIII.23, translated by James Legge. Affability is distinguished here from adulation, without a promise to be liked by everyone.

What this article is about

Thursday evening. For the third time this month a colleague writes: “Listen, could you help me out and take my Saturday shift?” The person looking at the screen already knows the answer: they have their own plans for Saturday, and they are tired of the extra shifts always landing on them. Yet instead of a short reply they start typing a long message. They apologise, list family commitments, explain how worn out they are after the week, promise “next time for sure.” They delete it and start again. Twenty minutes later they send “fine, OK” and spend the whole evening angry, at the colleague and at themselves. This is an invented example, but a lot of people will recognise themselves in it.

The question of this article is how to refuse so that the refusal is understood without cutting off the conversation. People usually see only two ways out: give in so as not to offend, or answer harshly to stand their ground. We will try to find a third. To do so we will distinguish several things: a decision and a verdict, an explanation and a justification, what depends on me and what does not. We will also look at why refusing is hard, what helps people say “no,” and where a refusal stops being a matter of finding the right words.

We draw on two psychological studies; on Aristotle, Mill and Confucius; and on Gospel, Taoist, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist texts, each in its own context. The everyday scenes are the authors' inventions and are marked as examples. The article offers no technique for managing other people's reactions and does not promise that a relationship will survive every refusal. Where a “no” is followed by threats or pursuit, the issue is safety, not wording.

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

I. Why refusing is hard even when the answer is clear

Let us begin with the fact that finding it hard to refuse is not a rare personal defect. Rachel Schlund, Roseanna Sommers and Vanessa Bohns (Scientific Reports, 2024) write that people often agree even to requests they would rather turn down, because it is so hard to say no. In their account, a refusal threatens “face,” which in research on politeness means a person's public self-image; it is awkward and socially risky, and a declined request seems to hint at something negative about the person asking or about the request itself. Schlund, Sommers, Bohns, 2024.

The authors speak of implicit scripts of politeness: in ordinary conversation the person being asked is expected by default to comply, and feels obliged to follow that expectation. There is also a simpler side to the matter: “Part of the difficulty of saying no is finding the words to do so when put on the spot.” The person in our example does not lack resolve: they lack ready words that would feel both clear and polite to them.

A detail from earlier studies cited by the authors is telling. Almost all participants in a laboratory experiment went along with an intrusive request while saying that they would rather not. And an explicit assurance that refusing carried no penalty did not make them feel any freer. Knowing that you have the right to refuse and feeling that you really can are two different things.

This gives us a first conclusion for our topic. The reluctant “fine, OK” in the example proves neither weakness of character nor genuine agreement. It is the usual outcome when one's own decision collides with a script of politeness. The researchers distinguish genuine consent from mere compliance: outwardly the behaviour is the same, but in one case the person chose, and in the other they gave way to the pressure of the situation.

These findings have limits. They come from laboratory experiments with students at American universities and a single unusual request; carrying them over to friendship, family or work calls for caution. But the general conclusion is robust enough: part of the difficulty of refusing lies in words and scripts, not only in character. That means it can be worked on.

II. Ready words: what the phone experiment showed

In two pre-registered experiments, Schlund and colleagues tested a simple intervention. An experimenter asked participants to unlock their phone and hand it over so that it could be taken out of the room and checked, a request most people would prefer to decline. In the control version, the experimenter added that participants had the right to refuse and that refusing would not affect their payment. In the main version, the experimenter also suggested words they could use to refuse: “I'd rather not” or “No, thank you.” Schlund, Sommers, Bohns, 2024.

The results were modest but consistent. In the first study (174 participants after exclusions), those who had been given the words felt freer to refuse, with an effect size of d = 0.33. Seventy per cent of them handed over their phone, against 80% in the control group, but the difference was not statistically significant. In the second, larger study (323 participants) the effect on feeling free was repeated (d = 0.24), while the proportions who complied were 78% and 83%, again without a significant difference. An internal meta-analysis of both studies gave d = 0.27 for feeling free; an effect on compliance itself could not be shown.

The authors stress that the same behaviour, agreeing to a request, can be experienced as more or less voluntary. The suggested words changed less what people did than how free they felt while doing it. For telling genuine consent apart from giving in under pressure this matters: someone who knows how to refuse and still agrees is agreeing in a different way.

Two conclusions for everyday life can be drawn from this experiment; this is our own application. First, a refusal phrase prepared in advance, short, polite and without any judgement of the other person, removes part of the difficulty of being put on the spot. Second, the person asking can also make refusal easier. The colleague in our example could have written: “If it doesn't work for you, just say 'can't', I'll understand.” Then the burden of finding the words no longer rests entirely on the one who finds it awkward to refuse.

The limits matter here. The effect is small; the words were supplied by the person asking, not by the one refusing; the experiment took place in a laboratory with a single request. The study did not establish which words work best in real life, and it did not test whether explaining one's reasons helps. So we do not promise a magic phrase. We take from the experiment only what it actually showed: ready words make refusal noticeably more available.

III. A refusal is a decision, not a verdict

A clear refusal names a decision about the request: “This Saturday I won't take your shift.” A verdict speaks about the person: “You're always dumping things on other people.” The verdict may or may not be fair, but it changes the subject of the conversation. The shift was being discussed; now it is the colleague's character. And the colleague starts defending themselves instead of thinking about whom else to ask.

In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle describes two extremes in social life. Some people are over-complaisant: in order to give pleasure they “agree to everything and never oppose,” thinking that their task is to cause no one any pain. Others are cross and contentious: they oppose everything and do not care at all whether they cause pain. Aristotle considers both extremes blameworthy. He is quoted here in the English translation by D. P. Chase. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics.

The mean between them, Aristotle says, has no special name and is most like friendliness. A person of this character “will let pass what he ought as he ought, and also will object in like manner.” He prefers to give pleasure and avoids giving pain, but if agreeing would be unseemly or harmful, while his opposition would cause only slight pain, “here he will not agree but will run counter.” He behaves differently with intimates and strangers, with great men and ordinary people, as befits each case.

This yields a distinction that matters for our topic. A refusal is not a failure of friendliness but part of it: Aristotle's friendly person knows how to object. And a refusal does not require hostility: the contentious person opposes everything, while the person of the mean objects when and as it is needed. In our example, the decision about Saturday is not an assessment of the colleague. If there is a real problem behind the request, for instance that awkward shifts systematically fall to one person, that is a separate conversation, possibly with a manager. It does not need to be packed into every refusal.

The limits of this support are clear. Aristotle describes a virtue of social intercourse in the ancient polis, not the psychology of assertive behaviour. We take a single distinction from him: agreeing and objecting according to circumstances, rather than always agreeing or always objecting.

IV. To explain or to justify oneself

Must a refusal come with an explanation? Here it helps to distinguish two acts. An explanation tells the other person what is useful for them to know: when I will be free, what I can offer, that it is not about them. A justification seeks approval: the refusal seems to become valid only if the other person accepts my reasons. Then every reason becomes a target. “I'm tired.” “You can catch up on sleep on Sunday.” “I have plans.” “Move them.” The refusal quietly turns into bargaining the person never agreed to. This is our own argument, not a finding of any study.

John Stuart Mill provides a philosophical footing for this distinction. In On Liberty he writes that a person answers to society only for the part of their conduct that concerns others, and that in what concerns only themselves their independence is absolute: “Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.” In the last chapter Mill adds that the individual is not accountable to society for such actions, and that others may express their disapproval only by means such as “Advice, instruction, persuasion, and avoidance by other people”. Mill, On Liberty.

This idea has to be carried over with care. Mill writes about the individual's relations with society and the state, not about requests between colleagues or friends. Yet the distinction works here too: my Saturday is largely my own affair, so explaining my reasons is a courtesy, not a duty to report. Things are different when a decision affects other people's legitimate interests: I made a promise, it is part of my duties, the team is counting on me. Then explanation is part of responsibility, not a courtesy.

Mill's list also includes avoidance. The other person is free too: to be upset, to try to change my mind, to keep their distance. That is why the right not to justify oneself does not guarantee that a relationship will survive. My freedom not to account for myself and the other person's freedom to react in their own way exist side by side.

A reason can also work differently, as an accepted sign of politeness. A study by Min Wang and colleagues (Frontiers in Psychology, 2022) notes that “it is quite common in many languages to convey an FTA of refusal indirectly by only stating the reason”; FTA stands for a face-threatening act. “I'm busy on Saturday” is often understood as a refusal in itself. In that case the reason is a signal, not a request for permission. Wang et al., 2022.

Hence the authors' criterion. It is worth explaining whatever helps the other person understand the situation and plan what to do. There is no need to explain what serves only to win their approval. A short reason stated as a fact rather than as a plea usually does not invite argument. If the other person still starts disputing the reasons, one can return to the decision: “I understand, but the answer is the same.”

V. A plain word without oaths or ornament

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus forbids swearing by heaven, by the earth, by Jerusalem or by one's own head, and concludes this teaching with the words: “But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.” (King James Version). Matthew 5:37.

The context of these words is truthfulness of speech and oaths, not polite refusal. Applying them to our topic is our own step: a word that needs oaths and a pile of arguments to carry weight loses its own force. A plain “no” that means no is a form of honesty. This is not a call to rudeness: the point is that a word should mean what it says.

A similar thought, on quite different grounds, appears in the last chapter of the Tao Te Ching in James Legge's translation: “Sincere words are not fine; fine words are not sincere.” It continues: “Those who are skilled (in the Tao) do not dispute (about it); the disputatious are not skilled in it”; the words in brackets are the translator's explanations. Tao Te Ching, 81.

Our application is this. A refusal decorated with excessive pleasantries and apologies often becomes less clear: the other person hears “maybe” in it. And readiness to argue with every objection is exactly the kind of dispute that turns a refusal into a debate. Short, sincere words need not be cold: “No, this Saturday won't work, sorry” can sound warm.

The limits of the comparison: these two traditions rest on different grounds. The Gospel speaks of truth before God and of the prohibition of oaths; the Taoist text speaks of the Tao and of the sage's simplicity. We do not claim that they teach the same thing. We note only that both value a plain word above an ornamented and reinforced one.

VI. What it means to “stay in the conversation”

Staying in the conversation does not mean preserving the relationship at any cost. It means doing what depends on me. Acknowledging the request and the other person's need: “I understand you need someone to cover.” Naming the decision clearly. Offering what I can do instead, but only if I really can and want to: “I could come in for two hours on Sunday morning.” Remaining available for the conversation that follows. And bearing the other person's displeasure without turning it into a reason to give in.

The Confucian Analects offer a precise distinction. In Legge's translation: “The superior man is affable, but not adulatory; the mean man is adulatory, but not affable.” Affability is directed at the person, adulation at their approval. One can be friendly and still disagree. Analects, XIII.23–24.

In the next saying the disciple Tsze-kung asks what should be said of a man who is loved by everyone in his neighbourhood. The Master replies that this is not yet enough to approve of him, just as being hated by everyone is not enough to condemn him. And he adds: “It is better than either of these cases that the good in the neighborhood love him, and the bad hate him.” Our application: the wish to be liked by everyone is not a measure of right conduct. A refusal that someone dislikes is not wrong for that reason alone.

Recall, too, the freedom Mill wrote about: if I am entitled not to account for my decision, the other person is entitled to be upset, to try to persuade me or to keep their distance. To stay in the conversation is to acknowledge this freedom of theirs as well, without demanding that they approve of my refusal. Mill, On Liberty.

I cannot fully control the other person's feelings, conclusions or future behaviour, although my words can influence them. The relationship may change. The article does not promise to preserve it; it suggests not destroying it by my own means, through a verdict, contempt or an ultimatum, and leaving the door open where I want it to stay open. Sometimes a person does not want that, and that too is a decision; boundaries and ultimatums call for a separate discussion.

VII. One's own and another's: traditions on personal choice

Pirke Avot, a tractate of the Mishnah gathering the sayings of the sages, records the words of Hillel: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I care for myself only, what am I?” A third question follows: and if not now, when? The translator Joseph Gorfinkle explains the saying in a note as follows: “Be self-reliant, but not selfish”; this is his interpretation, not the text of the Mishnah. Pirke Avot 1:14.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna instructs Arjuna; at the end of the third chapter, in the passage corresponding to verse 3.35, Edwin Arnold's verse translation says that it is better that one do his “own task as he may, even though he fail,” than “take tasks not his own, though they seem good.” The context is svadharma, duty by birth and station, and a warrior's decision on the eve of battle; it is not advice to do only what one likes. Bhagavad Gita, III.

In the Dhammapada, a collection of sayings from the Pali canon, verse 166 in Max Müller's translation reads: “Let no one forget his own duty for the sake of another's, however great”. The word “duty” is the choice of a nineteenth-century translator; in the monastic context the verse concerns one's own path to liberation. Dhammapada, 166.

These texts rest on different grounds. Hillel holds both poles, oneself and others; the Gita speaks of a religious and social duty; the Dhammapada of one's own path. There is no common doctrine of “personal boundaries” here. But in each text one's own task is not

automatically subordinate to someone else's request, and for Hillel the answer “only for myself” will not do either.

For refusal this means the following. Another person's request, even a serious one, does not cancel my own task by default. But “my own task” is not a synonym for my convenience: in Hillel's question, care for others is part of who I am. A refusal is therefore a decision about balance, not self-assertion for its own sake.

VIII. An objection: a direct refusal can be rude

A strong objection to all of the above: in many cultures and relationships a direct “no” sounds rude. Here it is important not to confuse clarity with directness. The same study by Min Wang and colleagues examines a Japanese convention of refusal. Refusing an invitation threatens the inviter's face, and native speakers of Japanese, the authors write, “prefer to leave sentences unfinished”: they say something like “I'm busy that day, since...” and do not finish. Wang et al., 2022.

For native speakers such an unfinished sentence is not ambiguous; it is a conventional form. The authors compared 28 native speakers of Japanese with 28 native speakers of Chinese who were fluent in Japanese and had passed the highest-level examination. Their brain responses showed an additional load for the non-native speakers: the unfinished sentence registered as a syntactic oddity, and the indirectness demanded more effort. The authors conclude that people with different cultural conventions have to “rely on explicit verbal cues”.

Our conclusion from this: clarity means being understood within a shared convention, and direct does not always mean clear. An indirect refusal can be perfectly clear to one listener and confusing to another. So it matters to know whom you are talking to. If the convention is not shared, because of a different culture, a new colleague, or someone who takes what is said literally, it is worth adding an explicit decision. If it is shared, a gentler form can be both clear and considerate.

The limits: this is one small laboratory study with one pair of languages; it measures brain responses, not the course of real conversations. We do not derive any “national character” from it, and carrying it over to Russian-speaking or other contexts is our own assumption.

The objection does not cancel the main line of the article. The aim is an understood decision without a verdict, not maximum bluntness. But indirectness that leaves the other person with false hope is not kindness either: if they go on counting on my agreement, it is worth saying it more plainly.

IX. An objection: when refusal is not available without risk

The second objection concerns dependence. Money, work, status, care: refusing a boss, a landlord, the person who looks after you, or a partner you depend on financially can be very costly. Words do not level the balance of power.

The authors of the study on ready words note themselves that their experiments did not vary the power relations between the person asking and the person being asked. Power and status, as other work has shown, increase compliance. So, the authors suggest, when the person being asked holds less power than the one asking, a suggested refusal phrase “may prove inadequate to overcome the pressure lower-power individuals feel to acquiesce.” This is their conjecture, not an experimental result. Schlund, Sommers, Bohns, 2024.

Under dependence, a refusal is a decision about risk. Intermediate steps are possible: a partial refusal (“not this Saturday, but the next one”), choosing the moment, putting it in writing, referring to rules and the schedule, support from colleagues or a manager, keeping notes of what happens if doing so and storing them is safe. Sometimes “yes, for now,” while preparing a way out of the dependence, is a reasonable decision, not cowardice. These are the authors' considerations, not a tested protocol.

Here we only touch on the subject: how money, status and dependence change a conversation deserves an article of its own. But one thing should be said plainly: a person who could not refuse from a position of dependence should not be blamed for weakness.

There is also the other side. If I am the stronger party, a boss, a parent, the one who pays, my request may be hard to refuse even if I do not intend it to be. Then it is in my power to make refusal possible: to say outright that “no” is acceptable and to suggest the words, as in the experiment described above.

X. Repeated requests and pressure: where wording stops being the question

If a request is repeated after a refusal, it is usually enough to repeat the same decision; no new reasons are needed. Each new reason invites a new objection. One can name the repetition itself: “You've asked three times now; my answer hasn't changed.” How to respond to repeated requests in detail is a separate topic.

But at some point the matter stops being a question of words. If a refusal is followed by threats, intimidation, ridicule or interference with work, that is pressure. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) lists threats, intimidation, ridicule, put-downs and interference with work performance among the forms of offensive conduct at work; the harasser may be a supervisor or a co-worker. Under U.S. law such conduct is unlawful when it

is linked to protected characteristics and either enduring it becomes a condition of keeping the job or it is severe or pervasive enough to make the workplace intimidating or hostile; other countries have their own laws. EEOC, Harassment.

In close relationships, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) define psychological aggression as “the use of verbal and non-verbal communication with the intent to harm a partner mentally or emotionally or to exert control over a partner.” The CDC describes stalking as a pattern of repeated, unwanted attention and contact that causes fear or concern for one's own safety or the safety of someone close. CDC, About Intimate Partner Violence.

If a “no” is followed by fear for one's safety, control, threats or persistent pursuit, the question is no longer how to phrase the refusal. It is a question of safety. The following guidance is the authors' suggestion, not a CDC or EEOC protocol: lean on people you trust, keep a record of what happens if it is safe to do so, contact specialised support services or the police, and in immediate danger contact the emergency services in your country.

Guilt after refusing is a separate topic. Here we only name it: guilt by itself does not prove that the refusal was wrong.

The article does not diagnose relationships. The signs listed are not a checklist for labelling the other person. They show where advice about words stops being enough.

What this means in practice

Let us return to the colleague and the Saturday shift. Before answering, it helps to ask oneself: what exactly am I deciding right now? Not what kind of colleague I am, and not whether I am a good person, but one thing only: whether I take this shift.

Then the decision can be stated in a single sentence, without judging the other person: “This Saturday I won't be able to take your shift.” If one wishes, the request can be acknowledged first: “I understand you need someone to cover.”

Next, decide what to explain. Only what is useful to the other person: “I could come in for two hours on Sunday morning,” if I really can and want to. Or: “Just so you know, I'm not taking Saturday shifts for the next month,” which is information for planning. There is no obligation to explain the details of family plans or to prove one's own tiredness.

Then comes the reaction. The colleague may be upset, may insist, may look for someone else. That is their freedom. If they repeat the request, the same words can be repeated. If mockery or threats begin, what was said in section ten applies.

If the problem is systemic, if awkward shifts always fall to the same person, it is worth raising elsewhere: in a conversation with a manager, in the rules for drawing up the schedule. There is no need to solve it inside each individual refusal.

These questions are the authors' suggestion for reflection, not a technique that guarantees a result. Their usefulness is easy to check: is the decision clear, did a verdict slip into it, did I say what I can do and not only what I cannot.

At the beginning, the person spent twenty minutes searching for justifications and in the end wrote “fine, OK.” Now they can write a single sentence and leave the conversation open. Whether the colleague will be pleased does not depend on them alone. But the clarity of their answer does.

Key quotation

> *“His proper object-matter seems to be the pleasures and pains which arise out of social intercourse, but whenever it is not honourable or even hurtful to him to contribute to pleasure, in these instances he will run counter and prefer to give pain.”*

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics IV.6 (Book IV, ch. VIII in Chase's edition), translated by D. P. Chase.

In this argument, social intercourse is guided by what is noble and expedient, rather than by a duty always to give pleasure. We read it as a closing thought on refusal without adulation: causing disappointment through a decision is sometimes permissible. This is not permission to cause harm or a universal technique of refusal.

Connections between traditions

These are comparisons of specific texts, not proof of a shared doctrine of refusal. Applying them to a colleague's request is the article authors' own step.

Texts and traditions	A similarity useful for this topic	Limit of the comparison
Christianity: Matthew 5:33–37, KJV ↔ Taoism: Tao Te Ching, 81, Legge	A plain, truthful word is valued above speech that needs oaths or ornament. In our application, no should mean refusal rather than an indefinite promise	The Gospel forbids oaths in a teaching about truth before God; the Taoist text concerns the Tao and the sage's simplicity. These are different grounds, not shared advice on politeness

Texts and traditions	A similarity useful for this topic	Limit of the comparison
Judaism: Hillel, Pirke Avot 1:14, Gorfinkle ↔ Hinduism: Gita 3.35, Arnold, end of ch. III ↔ Buddhism: Dhammapada 166, Müller	One's own task is not cancelled automatically by another's request; for Hillel, caring only for oneself is insufficient too	Hillel holds together self and others; the Gita concerns a warrior's religious and social duty; the Dhammapada concerns one's own path to liberation in a monastic context. These are not a single theory of personal boundaries or an excuse for indifference
Ancient Greek ethics: Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics IV.6, Chase ↔ Confucianism: Analects XIII.23–24, Legge	Friendly social conduct is compatible with objection; everyone's approval is not the sole measure of right conduct	Aristotle describes the mean in social intercourse; the Analects describe the moral character of the superior man. Neither text supplies an experimental guarantee that the other person will accept a refusal

The empirical studies in this article answer different questions: what happened to feelings of freedom and to speech processing in particular experiments. They do not establish unity between these texts' religious grounds.

Comparisons and limits

Distinction	What it helps to see	What does not follow from it
Decision and verdict	A refusal concerns the request, not the person's worth	That a refusal costs the other person nothing
Explanation and justification	A reason can be information rather than a plea	That explaining is never needed
Clarity and directness	Whether a refusal is understood depends on a shared convention	That an indirect refusal is always unclear
Affability and adulation	One can be friendly and still disagree	That friendliness guarantees the other person's agreement
One's own task and another's request	The traditions do not automatically subordinate one's own task to another's	That other people's needs can be ignored
Ready words and unequal power	A prepared phrase makes refusal easier	That words level power and dependence
Repeated request and pressure	After threats and pursuit, wording is no longer the issue	That the other person's persistence obliges one to give in

This is a map of distinctions within the article. Similarities between traditions and research findings are limited to the passages cited; religious statements are attributed to their own texts, and the everyday scenes are the authors' examples.

Sources and passages used

The editions and translations used are in the public domain, the articles are under Creative Commons Attribution licences, and the U.S. government materials are in the public domain. Quotations are given verbatim from the English translations and articles; the Gospel verse is quoted from the King James Version. The modern scenes and practical questions are the authors' examples.

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Tags

Refusal, how to say no, clear refusal, explanation and justification, request, consent and compliance, politeness, saving face, conversation, workplace relationships, repeated request, pressure, safety, dependence and power, cross-cultural communication, indirect refusal, Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, Confucius, Analects, Tao Te Ching, Sermon on the Mount, Pirke Avot, Hillel, Bhagavad Gita, Dhammapada.

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.