

**Commitment:
What is Self-Binding, and How is it Possible?**

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I will argue that nothing truly binds us in the absence of our ability to bind ourselves to ourselves, an ability which I, following Heidegger, call “commitment” (*Bindung*) or “resoluteness” (*Entschlossenheit*).

There is something paradoxical about commitment, however. For John Haugeland, whose thinking on this topic provides the starting point for my own, “existential commitment” is “no sort of obligation,” not a “communal status,” but a “resilient and resolute first-person *stance*.”¹ In such a stance, I “bind myself” by taking responsibility for a way of life (“disclosedness”) in which I am “beholden” to things in various ways.² However, the “governing or normative ‘authority’ of an existential commitment comes from nowhere other than itself, and it is brought to bear in no way other than by its own exercise.”³ Criticizing this view, Joseph Rouse points to the paradox: A “self-determined commitment could have only the *semblance* of authority,” since, “as Kierkegaard trenchantly noted, the authority that a commitment could secure through self-determination [...] is like the authority of a monarch in a country where revolution is legitimate.”⁴ This paradox has led philosophy to seek the ground of bindingness in some

¹ John Haugeland, “Truth and Rule-Following,” in *Having Thought: Essays in the Metaphysics of Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 341.

² John Haugeland, “Truth and Finitude,” in *Dasein Disclosed*, ed. Joseph Rouse (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 218.

³ Haugeland, “Truth and Rule-Following,” p. 341.

⁴ Joseph Rouse, *How Scientific Practices Matter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) p. 247.

authoritative *entity*: natural law, social convention, human rights, ideal consensus, the moral law, God.⁵ But, as Heidegger notes in what amounts to a motto for my essay: “We orient ourselves toward beings, and yet are never able to say what it is about beings that binds us.”⁶ This does not mean that we cannot say what binds us; rather, it means that what binds us does not belong to the order of beings but to *being* – specifically, what it means to be a self. Being bound by beings presupposes the capacity to bind oneself to oneself. I take this to be what Haugeland was getting at, and it is also central to Heidegger’s rejection of Kant’s definition of freedom as a kind of causality whose law derives from reason. For Heidegger, freedom is the *origin* of reason and so of all legitimation, justification, authority, and (normative) binding.⁷ This sounds very much like a version of Rouse’s paradox, and in order to show why it is not, my argument will be divided into three sections: (1) a review of some ways of being bound, together with some consideration of whether we are really bound in any of these ways; (2) an argument, based on Heidegger’s phenomenology of commitment, that we are indeed bound in these ways, but only if self-binding, is possible; and (3) a concluding sketch of Heidegger’s answer to Rouse’s paradox.

⁵ Rouse’s own view (*How Scientific Practices Matter*, p. 247) is more complicated: “What needs to be understood is not how we can commit ourselves to something [...], but how something already at stake in our situation can have a hold on or over us.” The complication lies in the fact that “what is at stake” belongs to the order of meaning (being), not beings.

⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, tr. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) p. 361.

⁷ I argue in some detail for this claim in Steven Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

§1 *Some ways of being bound*

There are numerous kinds of binding, many ways of being bound, so let's start small. In German, the term for "hyphen" is *Bindestrich*, binding stroke. A hyphen unites two or more words into one, as when Heidegger writes "In-der-Welt-sein" in order to name a "unitary phenomenon."⁸ But it can also be used to separate them, as when Heidegger writes "Dasein" as "Da-sein" in order to emphasize a certain complexity within an orthographically simple term. In both cases, however, the terms bound by the hyphen belong together only because the phenomenon they designate is already a unity. The hyphen can be read as binding or separating only with an eye toward something else. By itself, the stroke does nothing; the question is: what binds the *phenomenon*?⁹

Another way of being bound provides perhaps the root meaning of the term in English: Odysseus is "bound to the mast" by leather straps; in *Brother Where Art Thou?* George Clooney is bound to his fellow prisoners by chains of iron. In such cases, the chains or straps make it difficult for one thing to separate from another, but they do not make a unity of the two things. In

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 78.

⁹ The hyphen's mode of "binding and separating" parallels Heidegger's account of the logical "copula" and informs his ontological grounding of reason in care. Interpreting Aristotle, Heidegger argues that the "is" of an assertion (*logos apophantikos*) binds and separates only because it rests on a more primordial phenomenon of "agreement" which Heidegger calls *nous* and identifies with understanding something *as* something. In Heidegger's own terms – which we shall explore below – this understanding is "comportment," and an essential element of comportment is commitment, or self-binding. Commitment is thus a necessary condition even for logical "binding." See Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, pp. 304-333.

this sense, their binding power is quite limited. Unlike the hyphen, which indicates a real unity in the phenomenon, the binding accomplished by chains is external to what it binds. If I am able to escape my chains, they no longer bind anything.¹⁰ Thus they temporarily restrict my freedom, but do not *touch* it. What sort of binding can touch freedom itself?

One candidate is found in the English phrase, “the ties that bind.” This is often used in connection with family relations and suggests an *affective* union. Let us call this “love.” Love binds the lover to the beloved; the affect touches my freedom in a distinctive, double-sided way. On the one hand, the love I feel for the beloved is not in my power, as discover out if my love is not reciprocated; on the other hand, love invests my freedom, gives it meaning, in the form of devotion to the beloved. I am bound to another as to a “completion” of myself – not another *part* of myself but a fulfillment that I myself cannot provide. However, if affective binding can touch my freedom, it cannot really bind it. If I fall out of love, I am no longer affectively bound. Or if the beloved spurns me in a decisive way, my love will turn into something else – obsession perhaps, which may or may not fade with time. The point here is that “chains of love” are no more binding on my freedom than the chains that bind the chain-gang – though affective binding does, if perhaps only temporarily, constitute a real unity, through freedom, of two beings.

Of course, there is another sense of the phrase, “the ties that bind,” which indicates a different sort of binding, namely, that of a special obligation – for instance, to family members – no matter what my affective state might be. Here we arrive at a form of binding from which escape seems impossible, a *normative* form that continues to bind me, apparently, no matter how

¹⁰ In the film, the prisoners help *one another* to break their chains. This brings certain “second-person” considerations into play, which will be discussed below.

I feel and no matter where my freedom turns. What must freedom be, if it can be bound in this normative way?

Rousseau famously wrote that “man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.”¹¹ One thing he meant to invoke by the “chain” metaphor is the normative force exerted on the individual by “society” – that is, by the customs of the social whole. The customary is normative in the sense that it is what is normally done around here, what is expected by and of everyone. Freedom is bound by custom, by civil society, by *Sittlichkeit*, whose “chain” consists in social sanction against deviant behavior. Custom thus binds freedom into a unity with other freedoms, an “us” whose demand for conformity does not merely touch freedom but shapes it from within. It does not matter that *l’homme* is born free; by the time freedom “recognizes” itself, it is already bound – that is, shaped – by the normalizing forms of custom. As Heidegger put it, we are first of all and most of the time *das Man*, the anonymous “anyone” of custom.¹²

Nevertheless, while such binding does shape freedom, it is not, in fact, inescapable. One can recognize the normative force of the normal and still reject it, act otherwise. Freedom can incorporate social sanction into itself as a chain whose power to bind is in principle temporary. In short, the non-conformist is possible. The non-conformist treats the social norm as though it were a chain from which she was already free, as non-binding in the sense in which the prisoner’s chain is not *normatively* binding. If the non-conformist is indifferent to the frowning stares of others, the normative force of the norm by appeal to which their frowns make sense disappears. She thus denies the *authority* of the social norm. Custom does not constitute the kind

¹¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, in *The Basic Political Writings*, tr. Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 141.

¹² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 164.

of bond from which something like an obligation to conform to it could outlast one's free commitment to it.

The situation does not significantly change if, in order to deal with the authority problem, social sanction is institutionalized in the form of law. Positive law selects those modes of behavior that a society will not only frown upon, but will punish, and because the norm has been established by the lawgiver, the norm of behavior is no longer merely the normal but the legal. Even if the non-conformist, indifferent to social sanction, does not feel the normative force of the norm, that norm, as law, has authority, and so binds the non-conformist come what may. Freedom is obligated to obey the law, even if it does not, because the law is nothing but the *form* of obligation.

What can give a norm this sort of authority is, however, not at all clear. Why can't non-conformist freedom become revolutionary freedom, an indifference to the law based on a conviction that it lacks legitimacy? But isn't "legitimacy" just another word for law? Not quite: it is what Heidegger would call the *being* of the law. This reveals the problem of positive law: a positive law that lacks legitimacy is not a law; it is custom coupled with an institution for sanctioning, namely, punishment. Just as the non-conformist who is indifferent to social sanction is not bound by customary norms, so the revolutionary who is indifferent to punishment is not bound by positive law.

But what if the revolutionary's conviction is wrong? What if the law has legitimate authority? In such a case, it seems, the revolutionary is bound by the law despite her indifference to it. Many questions arise here, of course. Is legitimacy conferred by the authority of the lawgiver to give the law? Or is the lawgiver authoritative because its status as a lawgiver is legitimate? If the former, then the law binds freedom because the lawgiver has the authority to

bind in a way that outlasts whatever freedom does. If the latter, then freedom is bound only if the lawgiver's authority is already bound by something that grants legitimacy, the *being* of the law. The former leads to a theological or quasi-theological natural law doctrine, while the latter anticipates the notion of autonomy, in which the lawgiver's act is already measured by a law that it gives *itself*. Let us examine each in turn.

Laws of nature in the scientific sense bind us in a way that precludes escape; they are chains we cannot break. But this is only because they are not really laws – they are theoretical re-descriptions of what is, of what *happens*. Like the prisoner's chains, they are non-normative; further, unlike those chains, they do not address freedom at all. A doctrine of natural law or natural right, then, must contain a normative moment, an address to freedom. At the same time, it will incorporate the moment of inescapability found in scientific laws of nature. Thus, deviations from natural law are normatively assessable, but the laws themselves just “are,” like positive law. And so, like positive law, they cannot avoid questions regarding their authority and legitimacy. Such questions can seem inappropriate only if one understands natural laws as mere descriptions of what is, and then it is hard to see how supposed deviations from them could be normatively assessable. If natural law is *normative* – if such law is a chain we can break and still be bound by it – then the origin of its binding character, its legitimacy, must be specified. The natural law tradition answers: *deus sive natura*. Nature is *intrinsically* normative, hence an authoritative lawgiver. But if that is so – if nature has the authority not merely to bind freedom conditionally (say, in regard to what conduces to optimal flourishing) but also to produce obligations that *outlast* a commitment to flourishing – the “inescapability” of the law remains to be accounted for. A divine command theory might serve here, but then we again face the question of whether the legitimacy of the law derives from the authority of the commander, or

whether the commander has authority because of the legitimacy of the law commanded.

The approach through autonomy seems to fare better as an account of how the law binds, i.e., creates an obligation that resists my indifference to, or rejection of, its legitimacy. The idea is something like this: If freedom can be bound only by a law that it gives itself – that is, if no law can be a real law (legitimate) unless its authorship (authority) makes reference to my own free choice (autonomy) – then *positive* law is binding on freedom only if it is imposed by a lawgiver whose authority reflects my own. If this is so, then the revolutionary might well be justified in being indifferent to positive law, not bound by it, so long as her freedom is not “reflected” in it – that is, so long as such law does not have the proper origin. But if the revolutionary is wrong – that is, if positive law *does* reflect her “will” and is thus legitimately established – then she is indeed bound by the law and stands under an obligation to obey, no matter what she does.

This obviously raises questions – about democratic politics, about decision procedures, about how to determine when a law reflects the “general will” – but my concern here lies in a different direction: how is autonomy, self-legislation, *possible*? How can a law I give myself be binding at all? To be binding across time, such a law must hold even if I “change my mind.” Otherwise, when I “break” the law, the obligation seems to vanish; the law is no longer normative for me, since I have simply given myself a new law. Thus we confront Rouse’s paradox: my authority to bind takes place in a context where “revolution is legitimate.” What sort of response can the theorist of autonomy offer?

Perhaps the simplest form of autonomy, or self-binding, is the promise. In promising, I obligate myself to do what I promise. If I fail to do it, then I have not given myself a new law; rather, I have broken my own law, which nevertheless continues to bind me. But how is such

self-binding possible?

Here the autonomy theorist must give some account of freedom, that is, of what the self must be if it can be bound by *normative* “chains.” If freedom is conceived as *Willkür*, arbitrary choice, self-legislation will be impossible. So freedom’s choices must themselves be seen as universally bound by a law that *constitutes* freedom as freedom. In Kant, this is the moral law, whose content, the categorical imperative, is given by the form of law itself. Freedom is not freedom unless its “maxim” conforms to the form of law; otherwise, it is unfree action authored by contingent factors such as natural inclination, desire, or self-love.

As Heidegger notes, Kant conceives freedom under the category of causality, where causality is the law that establishes a necessary connection between antecedent and consequent.¹³ If I help a stranger because I am moved by sympathy, then the act does not issue from freedom, so defined, since helping a stranger is only contingently connected to a sympathetic disposition. This is part of what is meant in saying that love and other affects “touch” freedom but do not bind it. On the other hand, if I help a stranger because I *ought* to – that is, because it is my obligation – then the act is free; its antecedent (respect for the law) is necessarily connected to its consequent since, in being done for the sake of the law, it conforms to the *form* of law. Freedom is thereby severed from *Willkür*: if I make a promise and do not keep it, I have not made a new law but have broken my own law, which *is* a law only because the antecedent is necessarily connected to its consequent and so is indifferent to time and contingency.

The Kantian conception of autonomy has been accused of emptiness: either no actual

¹³ Martin Heidegger, *Vom Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*, Gesamtausgabe Bd 31 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1982), pp. 256-59, 299-303.

obligations – or else too many – can be derived from the categorical imperative itself, since it provides only the *form* of obligation, an old bottle into which any sort of new wine may be poured.¹⁴ But our interest here lies in another direction, namely, in the binding character that is supposed to lie in the very definition of freedom. In what sense is the moral law a form of *self-binding* or autonomy?

Kant's answer is an ontological one: the self is an additive creature composed of rationality and animality. As an animal, it is subject to various inclinations; as rational it can assess these inclinations in terms of reason, the form of law. If reason is “practical” – if it contains conduct-binding laws – then it provides me with a measure of what I ought to do. And if freedom is a kind of causality, then my *Wille* is nothing but conformity to this measure. If I act in accord with the measure of my animal nature, I am in conflict with *myself*, my own autonomous will. When I act for the sake of duty, in contrast, I bind myself to the moral law and so bind myself to myself. Autonomy is a form of self-binding because it is a way of bringing unity to the duality in my nature. The moral law binds freedom come what may because freedom belongs to a creature who, to be a self at all, be “one thing,” must assess the deliverances of its animality by a law that co-constitutes selfhood. Such binding not only shapes freedom but *obligates* it.

Acting for the sake of duty is thus a form of self-binding, but am I obligated to care about bringing unity to myself? Though the Kantian tradition has no direct answer to this question, it has confronted it in various ways. In examining two of them we are led to Heidegger's alternative conception of self-binding, where the question cannot arise since Heidegger's

¹⁴ This objection, central to Hegel's criticism of Kant, is extensively explored in Jesse Slavens, *Tracking Kant's Bête Noire: The Significance of Hegel's Emptiness Critique for Contemporary Kantian Ethics* (PhD dissertation, Rice University 2017).

ontology of the self begins with care (*Sorge*) as such, rather than with an equation between freedom and reason.

Christine Korsgaard provides an argument for the necessity of caring about self-unity, based on her notion of practical identities. A practical identity is “a description under which you value yourself” – that is, one “under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking.”¹⁵ Thus, if my practical identity is being a father – if “fatherhood” is a description under which I *value* myself – then I *care* about living up to the norms of fatherhood, and I find the actions that are governed by those norms worth doing. Absent such care, I might well know what is normally expected of fathers around here, but it would not motivate me to act in accord with such expectations. Thus it is because fatherhood is not merely my nominal identity (a social normative status), but my *practical* identity, that I am self-bound to what is entailed by the norms of fatherhood. They give me practical reasons for what I do. But this sort of self-binding is not unconditional. Not only do I have many, and possibly conflicting, practical identities; I can also “stop caring whether [I] live up to the demands of a particular role,” lose my commitment to it.¹⁶ Thus, because the model of practical identity does not explain how the moral law binds freedom unconditionally, it cannot explain an obligation to care about bringing unity to my self.

Here Korsgaard introduces an argument whose “transcendental” character is signalled in its movement from the ontological to the practical register. Korsgaard begins with an ontological premise: prior to any practical identities, you are “a human being,” a rational animal, a

¹⁵ Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 101.

¹⁶ Korsgaard, *Sources*, p. 120.

“reflective animal who needs reasons to act and live.”¹⁷ From this ontological premise, she derives a practical conclusion: In order to have any practical reasons at all, “you *must take* this more fundamental identity, being such an animal, to be normative as well” – that is, “you *must treat* your humanity as a practical, normative form of identity.”¹⁸ And to treat humanity as a practical identity is just to be bound by the moral law.

It would seem, then, that self-binding is both necessary (since without it I cannot *be* any self, have any practical identity) and possible: though “voluntarism is true” because I am the authoritative legislator of the law,¹⁹ the law does not derive from my *Willkür* and so it genuinely binds me. In this case, *no* revolution is legitimate.

However, while Korsgaard’s picture contains elements that we also find in Heidegger’s, it remains an example of what Heidegger calls “being bound by beings.” For it depends on a prior ontology that initially makes no reference to the normative. According to Korsgaard, it is “simply the truth” that you are an animal who needs reasons in order to survive.²⁰ But from this nothing normatively binding follows, and so the “must” in Korsgaard’s transcendental argument – to care about anything, you must care about *this* – has only factive, and not practical normative, force. Without such an argument, however, which moves from being to beings, we simply cannot say what it is about beings that binds us.

Stephen Darwall offers a different approach to autonomy, one that abandons the search for the possibility of self-binding in the self’s first-person perspective in favor of what he calls

¹⁷ Korsgaard, *Sources*, p. 121.

¹⁸ Korsgaard, *Sources*, pp. 123, 121. My emphasis.

¹⁹ Korsgaard, *Sources*, p. 104.

²⁰ Korsgaard, *Sources*, p. 32.

the “second-person standpoint,” a phenomenologically more concrete conception of what one’s *practical* “humanity” means. To begin from the second-person standpoint is to focus on the self “in the accusative,” a “you” who is the addressee of claims addressed by others. The challenge is to show that claims addressed to me by others contain no authority that could not derive equally from myself. Otherwise, I will no more be bound by such claims than I am by the claims of custom. Darwall’s response to the challenge proceeds from the idea that “it is only deliberation from the second-person standpoint that requires us to assume autonomy of the will.”²¹ From the phenomenological point of view, this is to substitute for an ontology of the rational animal an ontology of the *person*, highlighting the normative commitments of what Husserl called “the personalistic attitude.”²²

Darwall’s essential claim is that the phenomenon of being normatively bound is intelligible only if we “assume” – in the sense of “occupy” – “a second-person standpoint.”²³ Such a standpoint “presupposes” (in phenomenological terms: is constituted by) an “interdefinable circle” of concepts (phenomenologically: intentional implications) which include “second-person authority, valid claim or demand, second-personal reason, and responsibility to,” as well as several others such as second-person standing and second-person competence.²⁴ Further, the second-person standpoint is ontologically basic: “there is no way to break into this

²¹ Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006) p. 32.

²² Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Toward a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy, Book II*, tr. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989) pp. 181-84, 223-293.

²³ Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, p. 23.

²⁴ Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, p. 12.

circle from outside it.”²⁵ To be a practical self (a person), then, is to possess second-person competence and so be bound already by its entailments. As animals, we are socialized into such competence, but we are persons only within it. Were we to abstract from this interdefinable circle, we would not find a “free” self but an entity on whom the relevant normative concepts can get no grip at all.

Beginning with the phenomenon of the second-person standpoint seems to eliminate the problem of self-binding, since once second-person competence is achieved, all the normative bonds are inter-agential, based on our mutual recognition as “free and rational agents.”²⁶ But, as Darwall acknowledges, this does not do away with autonomy altogether. The second-person standpoint is not an alien force imposed on us as an external authority; nor is it a kind of natural law. Rather, deliberation *within* the second-person standpoint shows that autonomy belongs among its cluster of conceptual presuppositions: “There can be second-personal authority only if there is second-person competence. And persons can be assumed to have second-person competence only if we can assume autonomy and some form of moral reasoning like the [categorical imperative].”²⁷ Persons can “sensibly be held accountable for complying with norms only if they can themselves accept and determine themselves by them,” which is possible only if “what makes the demand-warranting norms valid is their issuing from a process that people can, at least in principle, go through in their own reasoning and thereby make the relevant demands of themselves.”²⁸ So, “in principle,” the authority of such norms depends on treating oneself as both

²⁵ Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, p. 12.

²⁶ Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, p. 22.

²⁷ Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, p. 242.

²⁸ Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, p. 242.

addressor and addressee.

Darwall's position, too, has many affinities with Heidegger's phenomenology of obligation. However, he avoids the paradox of self-binding only by reducing the first-person singular to a pre-social stage in development. Heidegger, in contrast, argues that *within* the social whole there is still the ontological question of how, in the first-person singular, I constitute myself *as* a self, become *responsible* for being a self. Without this sort of responsibility, the forms of second-person address amount to no more than the claims of custom, a "form of life" that is not obligatory. In Heideggerian terms, the rational entailments of the second-person standpoint bind a self who has not yet "understood" itself. Such a self has understood what Darwall calls its "responsibility *to*" – its answerability to others – but has not yet understood its responsibility *for* being a self. Within the second-person standpoint there is no need for self-binding; I am bound to others through a web of commitments – the web of practical reason – which cannot be further grounded. But if responsiveness to reasons requires not just answerability to others but also responsibility *for* what one takes *to be* a reason, then the commitment to oneself that grounds such responsibility, though invisible from the second-person standpoint, will be a necessary condition for second-person binding. Thus we are brought back to square one: what is self-binding, and how is it possible?

§2 Ontological commitment prior to persons and rational animals

Our examination of autonomy has shown that reason can bind freedom only if freedom is nothing but reason. Once freedom is combined with an "animal nature," we cannot say what it is about reason that binds us, since it does not bind the animal in us. Freedom thereby becomes noumenal. To avoid this problem, freedom must not be conceived as a causality exercised

contingently by an entity who is otherwise constituted; it must be the essence or being of that entity, must belong to every dimension of its behavior. For such an entity, self-binding will not be a matter of law, authority, or legitimacy, but of *meaning*. From the phenomenological point of view, commitment concerns what it means to be.

Heidegger is Kantian enough to recognize that “only where there is freedom do we find the *possibility* of something having a binding character.”²⁹ For Kant, such possibility is opened up by reason: inclination guides the animal in various directions, but the animal does not encounter the world as affording a normative distinction between what it is inclined to do and what it ought to do. As rational, the animal possesses such a distinction, measured by the moral law, but it remains obscure why the animal should be bound by the moral law. In Heidegger’s ontology this problem cannot arise, because an opening to possibility defines the *kind* of entity we are. Possibility is inseparable from our being in a way that the moral law is *not* inseparable from the animal’s. We are beings “in [whose] being that being is an issue.”³⁰ To say that my “being” is an issue is not to say that I am an animal who struggles for survival, but rather that what it *means* for me to be is normatively *at stake* in everything I do and say. Before any form of law, the “possibility of something having a binding character” already belongs to the phenomenon of meaning – the meaning of being which is at stake in existing. Existing – which Heidegger calls “transcendence” – demands a “deeper binding character than the observance of rules.”³¹ Transcendence is *freedom*: “letting oneself be bound” or “holding oneself toward

²⁹ Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, p. 339.

³⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 32.

³¹ Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, p. 286.

something binding.”³² What, then, is the connection between freedom and the possibility of self-binding?

In *Being and Time*, the argument begins with a phenomenological description of how, in everyday life, things are not merely present to us but show up as meaningful in some way. Though Heidegger does not explicitly discuss it, such meaning entails reference to a norm. Whether I am absorbed in the task of making a birdhouse, preparing an art installation, or conducting an experiment in the laboratory, things are there for me as suitable or unsuitable, appropriate or inappropriate. That is, they show up in light of what they are *supposed* to be. The possibility of succeeding or failing at what it is supposed to be is constitutive of our meaningful encounter with any thing. Somehow, then, a binding measure is already at work in what we do. But this sort of binding is fungible; it binds me to things, and things to themselves, only so long as I am engaged with the task. When I am installing an exhibit of paintings, a thin latex glove is what is called for, whereas when I am jack-hammering my sidewalk, it fails miserably. Here, the glove has not changed its properties; rather, those properties are encountered in light of a measure, or meaning, that belongs to them thanks to what I am doing *with* the glove. The reason that we are never able to say what it is about beings that binds us, then, is that beings are not, in themselves, *binding*.³³ To be encountered *as* determinate things – as suitable or unsuitable for the

³² Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, p. 342.

³³ This is the crux of the disagreement between Rouse and Haugeland. The latter’s “mistake” is to conceive “practical and discursive normativity in terms of commitments undertaken by subjects that would confer normative authority upon otherwise anormative objects.” For Rouse, this leads Haugeland’s philosophy of science into a “problematic voluntarism,” together with a “problematic scientism.” Rouse, *How Scientific Practices Matter*, pp. 235, 257. A partial response to Rouse can be found in Steven Crowell, “Competence Over Being as Existing: The

job, as confirming or disconfirming an hypothesis, etc. – something must make them binding.

Before going on to say more about what that might be, we should acknowledge that the meaning of things has always already been standardized. The social whole – which Heidegger calls *das Man* – is constituted by what is normally done, and so both the tasks we engage in, and the things that ordinarily belong to them, present themselves as already binding in the way that custom is binding. But while this social normative status is there before anything I do, it is not *originary*, it does not necessarily bind in the particular case, as we discover whenever a tool is put to a new and successful use, or when the non-conforming scientist productively disrupts the whole experimental context. For Heidegger, the normativity of the typical is not ontologically basic; it rests on a “deeper binding character than the observance of rules,”³⁴ even rules of thumb.

Returning to the argument: What makes it possible for things to have a binding character? Here Heidegger’s ontology recalls Korsgaard’s notion of practical identity. The meaning (suitability) of something derives from the work being done with it, but the measure of that work – of what I am trying to *do* – in turn depends on what I am trying to *be*. It is because I am acting “for the sake of” a practical identity – being a teacher – that what I am trying to do with this chalk, this blackboard, these assignments, and those classroom protocols reveals them as appropriate or inappropriate. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger calls acting for the sake of some practical identity “comportment” (*Verhalten*), and he identifies comportment with transcendence as freedom. So it is in comportment that we must seek the nature and possibility of self-binding.

Indispensability of Haugeland’s Heidegger,” in *Giving a Damn: Essays in Dialogue with John Haugeland*, ed. Zed Adams and Jacob Browning (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017), pp. 73-102.

³⁴ Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, p. 286.

Acting for the sake of being something – a teacher, father, carpenter, citizen, husband, scientist – means trying to live up to the measure of what it means to be that thing. Thus it is a kind of self-relation: Dasein comports itself toward its own being, i.e., toward a *possibility* for being.³⁵ But this kind of possibility is not merely logical. For instance, it is logically possible that I could be a big-league baseball player, brain surgeon, or teacher, but as comporting myself toward a “possibility for being,” I am *able* to be only a teacher.³⁶ The others cannot be practical identities because I cannot exercise any of the relevant skills; I can only think about them. With teaching, in contrast, I can engage with things for the sake of being a teacher because, in so acting, the norms of teaching get a grip on what I actually do. But how? They do so because I am invested in – *care* about – whether I succeed or fail. *Ontological* possibility is opened up only where my own being is in play or at risk – that is, only in commitment, in which I bind myself to the measure of what it is that I am trying to be. Freedom is thus norm-oriented from the outset, which is not to say that it is oriented toward reason.

Trying to be something (for instance, a teacher), differs from trying to do something (for

³⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 116.

³⁶ Heidegger’s term for this sort of possibility is *Seinkönnen*, translated by Macquarrie and Robinson as “potentiality-for-being” (*Being and Time*, p. 119). We might also translate it as “ability to be.” Heidegger’s technical term for it is “understanding” (*Verstehen*), and he explains it as follows: We “sometimes use the expression ‘understanding something,’ ‘being a match for it,’ ‘being competent to do something.’ In understanding, as an *existentiale* [i.e., a category of Dasein’s being], that which we have such competence over is not a ‘what,’ but being as existing.” This is what a *practical* identity is: “Dasein is not something present-at-hand which possesses its competence for something by way of an extra; it is primarily being-possible. Dasein is in every case what it can be, and in the way in which it is its possibility” (*Being and Time*, p. 183). The point is that acting for the sake of some “possibility for being” is a *skill*, and as such, norm-sensitive.

instance, making a lesson plan) because being something is not measured by an end that is separable from the trying. In Aristotelean terms, it is *ateles*: its success or failure is *continually* at issue in it. And since comportment is not measured by outcomes, its measure lies beyond beings. Heidegger makes this connection with Plato explicit: “Transcendence is specifically expressed in Plato’s *epekeina tes ousias*.” Transcendence, “understanding,” is “the primal activity of human existence,” and “the essence of the *agathon* lies in its sovereignty over itself as *hou heneka* – as the ‘for the sake of ...’, it is the source of possibility as such.”³⁷ To commit to teaching as one’s practical identity, then, is just to act in light of what is good in the matter of teaching, what a teacher should be. As “beyond beings,” however, the meaning of teaching is settled neither by what I actually do nor by the norms of teaching current in my social milieu. Instead, freedom understands itself in terms of an “exemplar” (*Vor-bild*) and becomes itself exemplary in a performative *avowal* of what it understands the good in the matter of teaching to be.³⁸ “Freedom provides itself with intrinsic possibility” by binding *itself* (its current behavior) *to itself* (what it means to be what it is trying to be).³⁹ That there are customs and rules for teaching is undeniable, but what teaching means is available to me only if it is at issue in my comportment, only if it binds me to myself. If I don’t care about being a teacher, then the measure of teaching

³⁷ Martin Heidegger, “On the Essence of Ground,” in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 124.

³⁸ On “avowal” in this sense, see Richard Moran, *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), and the discussion in Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology*, ch. 4.

³⁹ Martin Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, tr. Michael Heim (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) p. 185.

does not bind me.

As Heidegger puts it, “freedom makes Dasein in the ground of its essence responsible [*verbindlich*] to itself or, more exactly, gives itself the possibility of commitment,” and the “totality of the commitment residing in the for-the-sake-of is the world.”⁴⁰ For instance, freedom’s commitment to the *Vor-bild* of teaching opens up the world of teaching, a normatively ordered “relational totality of [...] signifying” wherein things can show up according to a measure, and so as what they in truth are.⁴¹ By giving freedom this “form of wholeness,” commitment allows things to bind me in various ways.⁴² They become “more in being” – i.e., *normatively* salient, meaningful – the “free counter-hold” to what I am trying to be.⁴³

When I act for the sake of being a teacher, I am beholden to the way things actually *are* because the *Vor-bild* of teaching makes freedom sensitive to the way things *should* be. In one of Heidegger’s examples, a lecturer experiences the blackboard as “badly positioned.” That it is *badly* positioned means that “in relation to the lecture theatre *as a whole*”⁴⁴ – that is, to the whole context, the world of teaching – it is not where it should be. Its position binds the lecturer because of her commitment to teaching. If she is indifferent to its position, she is not performatively avowing the *Vor-bild* of teaching; she is failing as a teacher. Of course, within the lecturer’s commitment to teaching, the board’s “bad” position can be turned to “good” use, but this just means that it binds her in a different way, to which she must be sensitive as implied by

⁴⁰ Martin Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, p. 192.

⁴¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 120.

⁴² Heidegger, *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, p. 185.

⁴³ Heidegger, *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, pp. 192-93.

⁴⁴ Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, pp. 334-35.

her commitment. Commitment to teaching thus yields the “counter-hold” of things upon me; being bound by them means acknowledging my “powerlessness over their resistance.”⁴⁵ Such resistance is not brute stubbornness, however; it is the “discovery of what is resistant to one’s endeavors,” i.e., to what “one’s drive and one’s will are *out for*” as “modifications of care.”⁴⁶

The freedom that belongs to commitment is not spontaneity; it cannot be “localized in a particular activity.”⁴⁷ There is, then, no “maxim” that constitutes my trying to be a teacher, and commitment, unlike autonomy, cannot be measured by a law of reason that binds an antecedent necessarily to its consequent. Any *thing* – even the moral law – can bind me only if I can bind myself to myself through the commitment that belongs to a practical identity. Freedom does not supply me with a rational law of my being but with “the *possibility* of commitment,” and it is through commitment, self-binding, that freedom becomes responsible: In trying to be a teacher, I am responsible *for* what it means to be a teacher, and responsible *to* the others with whom I am – ultimately, to all others. It follows that the ontology of comportment also underlies the “world” of the *person*, the rational entailments that constitute the second-person standpoint.

The world of teaching includes both the normative constraints that bind me to things, and the obligations I have toward others such as students, parents, and colleagues. Being committed to teaching involves addressing claims to these others and being responsive to the claims others address to me. To say that we cannot understand the interdefinable circle of concepts that makes up this second-person standpoint “from the outside” means that its normative order is opaque in the absence of my commitment to acting for the sake of being a teacher. For Heidegger,

⁴⁵ Heidegger, *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, p. 215.

⁴⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 253-54.

⁴⁷ Heidegger, *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, p. 184.

however, in contrast to Darwall's analysis of the second-person standpoint, the world of teaching is not a fact, governed by rational entailments, but *at issue*, grounded in a *Vor-bild* of meaning which, as beyond beings, is never fixed. Like any other comportment, then, second-person competence cannot be understood in terms of an antecedent capacity for moral reasoning.

Perhaps we now understand why Heidegger says that no thing can bind freedom in the absence of a commitment to some practical identity. But if self-binding is the way freedom makes itself responsible, we might still wonder how such normative self-responsibility is *possible*. Aren't we simply returned to a version of Rouse's paradox? On the one hand, I am not obligated to be a teacher – nor anything else, for that matter – and so what binds me about things in teaching, and my obligations to others in that regard, are not unconditionally binding. I can cease caring about being a teacher – cease trying to act in light of the meaning at issue in teaching – and then the world of teaching becomes simply another social role that “someone” might occupy. Furthermore, it seems that my performative avowal of what teaching means is, if not precisely arbitrary, then at least non-binding. To bind myself to *one* way of going on, one meaning of teaching, does not exclude changing my mind about it, in which case the putative obligations of the original commitment are no longer binding. But if they do not outlast my commitment, were they ever binding in the first place? There seems to be nothing in Heidegger's account of self-binding that would correspond to the law of “humanity” (Korsgaard) or “personhood” (Darwall) to explain the possibility of self-binding. Does Heidegger's picture provide us with any *other* resources for addressing Rouse's paradox?

§3 Heidegger's answer to Rouse's paradox

Commitment to a practical identity admits one to a world in which one is bound to things, and to

others, by ties of affection, custom, positive law, special obligations, and second-person reasons arising from the good at stake in that identity. But since the binding power of none of these outlasts my commitment, we must look beyond comportment – acting for the sake of practical identities – to find something that binds freedom no matter what it says or does. To address this problem Korsgaard, as we saw, has recourse to a transcendental argument. Heidegger makes a similar move, but he does not begin with a metaphysical definition of our being – rational animality as “simply the truth” – that we must then *treat* as a practical identity. Instead, he starts with a phenomenological description of our ontological *self-relation*: freedom belongs to an entity for whom what it is to be is always at issue.⁴⁸ Heidegger’s transcendental move thus targets a kind of self-binding that is already constitutive of the self’s being at issue, a kind of responsibility that is not limited to comportment understood as responsibility for some particular way of being. Such self-binding does not yield legislation but a non-contingent, transcendental obligation to account for myself in the space of reasons.

Heidegger begins with a phenomenological description of that condition in which I lack commitment to *any* practical identity. In *Angst*, my affective ties to the world no longer claim

⁴⁸ Why isn’t this simply another “metaphysical” definition, “simply the truth”? This is a complicated question, and it turns on Heidegger’s understanding of philosophy as itself a kind of practical identity whose meaning is at issue. This means that all philosophical assertions must be understood as “formal indications” (not simply “truths”) that serve to put those who consider them in a position to assess the phenomenological evidence for themselves. On formal indication, see Steven Crowell, *Husserl, Heidegger, and the Space of Meaning: Paths Toward Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), ch. 7. We cannot develop this issue in detail, but the point is that Heidegger is offering a better *description* of our selfhood than the one attained through the description, “rational animal,” and his description does not entail valuing one’s rational animality as a practical identity, though it does not rule it out either.

me: “the ‘world’ can offer nothing more, and neither can the Dasein-with of others.”⁴⁹ I am no longer drawn by the good of any practical identity. This is a kind of existential “death” – the possibility of being unable to be anything.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, such a condition does not render me a substantial atom in the void; as care, my being remains at issue. This radically “first-personal” self-understanding is “articulated” in what Heidegger terms the “call of conscience.”⁵¹

Conscience, as a “giving-to-understand,” articulates my “guilt” (*Schuld*), where guilt is not tied to some specific misdeed (since such things have become irrelevant, tied as they are to the norms of the practical identities that have ceased to matter), but rather identifies a fundamental characteristic of my being: being *responsible* for a “nullity” (*Nichtigkeit*).⁵² What is this nullity? Precisely my *not* being autonomous: “*never* to have power over [my] own being from the ground up.” I am “thrown” into a situation which “grounds” me – my facticity, which includes all that *is*, including the natural, social, and historical – but because my being is also characterized by possibility (*seinkönnen*), such “givens” do not take the form of implacable necessities. Rather, they are “never anything but the ground for an entity whose being has to *take over* being a ground.” As existing, I “must take over being-a-ground”⁵³ and have always already done so in

⁴⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 232.

⁵⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 294. Heidegger’s notion of death as a “possibility” (“nicht-mehr-dasein-könnens”) includes the sense of an “ability-to-be” we introduced earlier. Death is not something that “happens” to Dasein; it is a way to be. See William Blattner, “The Concept of Death in *Being and Time*,” *Man and World* 27/1 (1994), pp. 49-70.

⁵¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 316-19. For a fuller treatment of the themes introduced in the present discussion, see Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology*, chs. 8-9.

⁵² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 329.

⁵³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 330-331. In these passages, Maquarrie and Robinson translate *Grund*

one way or another (either authentically or inauthentically). What does the “must” here mean? What is the ontological significance of Heidegger’s phenomenology of the breakdown of practical identities?

The key point lies in the ambiguity of the term “ground.” Grounds in the sense of that which I can “never have power over” are beings as such – causes, social norms, the ties that bind, laws – all of which, as we have seen, lack *intrinsic* binding power, normative *force*, meaning. On the other hand, “ground” also means *reason*. The “must” in Heidegger’s description of what the call of conscience gives us to understand, then, means that I *cannot not* “take over” *being* a ground – that is, treat my factic grounds in light of “possibility,” in light of my ability-to-be. Recalling our earlier discussion, we can say that, for Heidegger, to take over my factic grounds in light of my ability to be is to take them up in light of the *idea tou agathou*, that is, in light of what is *best*. But this is just to stand toward such grounds as toward potentially normative *reasons*. Freedom’s ontological responsibility is not to this or that possibility, but to the “possibility of commitment,” to resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit*) as responsibility for (what I take to be) justifying reasons for what I do and say.

Thus if comportment, practical identity, binds freedom to an exemplar, or *Vor-bild*, of the good at stake in what it is trying to be, the breakdown of all practical identities discloses something like a transcendental condition of such self-binding. Insight into such a condition does not stem from an argument that in order to have any practical identity you must value your rational animality; rather, a phenomenological description discloses something *unconditional* in our being. We are not animals who need reasons in order to live; we are beings for whom what it

and its variations with “basis.” I have altered this to “ground.”

means to be is always at issue. This being-at-issue is what “taking over being a ground” means.

Heidegger’s version of the transcendental “argument” has consequences for how we think about various ways of being bound. If I “must” treat my factic grounds as potentially normative reasons, and if to be a self at all is to be “with others” (*Mit-sein*), then my responsibility for reasons is also my *answerability* to others for those reasons. Factic grounds include normative claims that others make on me. This does not mean that such claims *eo ipso* have normative authority, but it does mean that in taking a stand on whether they provide *me* with reasons to act on them, I am obligated to give an account of myself to others, whether I am called upon to do so or not. Sociality is not definitive of myself in the way that the second-person standpoint is definitive of the “person,” but neither is it optional. The world I inhabit with others is a world of what Rouse calls “intra-active phenomena,” whose meanings are constituted not by me alone but by an interlocking set of commitments and entitlements that make the phenomena at issue in them binding on me.⁵⁴ While the (transcendental) possibility of self-binding grounds the possibility of this system of intra-active phenomena, it does not constitute the shape it takes, and once I have committed myself to a way of going on in a practical identity, the various claims on freedom – affective, familial, socio-practical, custom, law – bind me in the way peculiar to them, with obligations that outlast my momentary whims. I am answerable to others for the choices I make in the face of what claims me, and the normative pull of such claims on freedom is the starting point for *any* way of going on. Without the ability to self-bind in the sense we have

⁵⁴ Rouse, *How Scientific Practices Matter*, pp. 273. As I mentioned earlier, Rouse ultimately grounds this normativity in what is at stake in the practice in which we are engaged together, and not in the commitment of the participants. Apart from disagreeing with his criticisms of existential commitment, I find Rouse’s general account (and within it, his account of the “normativity of nature”) quite compelling.

been tracking, the animal could not so much as *recognize* such things as having normative force; but because self-binding is necessary, they *do* have such force.

We can now understand Heidegger's answer to Rouse's paradox. Since binding oneself to the normative is ontologically necessary, it is neither escapable nor a matter of self-legislation. And only if self-binding is a matter of self-legislation can questions of authority and legitimacy – which seem to render self-binding paradoxical – arise. The obligation to enter into the space of reasons neither pre-exists my being (as though it were derived from a law of reason contingently connected to my animal nature) nor arises from the edict of a lawgiver (*myself*) whose authority can be overthrown at any time. Rather, freedom just *is* this kind of responsibility: the reasons that I and others give may all be revisable; responsibility for relating to my facticity in normative terms, in light of what is best, is not. The *possibility* of (capacity for) commitment, or resoluteness, is a necessary and sufficient condition for being a self. A self-binding that can outlast any particular commitment – namely, our obligation to account for ourselves in the game of giving and asking for reasons – is thus possible because it is *constitutive* of my being; freedom's only options here are between authentic and inauthentic self-binding.

This also explains how we can enter into the moral universe of the second-person standpoint from a certain “outside.” Though we are socialized into personhood, the person must, within the domain of second-person reasons, be able to take responsibility for the normative claims that constitute it. My authentic relation to second-personal claims is one of “transparency” in regard to my responsibility for their normative character.⁵⁵ Such responsibility cannot be

⁵⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 346. Authenticity differs from autonomy in the way that “transparency” with regard to my responsibility for normative *force* differs from “respect” for my power to bring my behavior under the form of *law*.

captured by the idea that we must “assume” autonomy as a “presupposition” of the second-person standpoint. In conscience, I *am* both addressor and addressee of a claim, but the claim itself, the call, is not the voice of an autonomous faculty of reason. Instead, it directs me toward real dialogue with the real others among whom I am, and by way of such a call do I become responsive *to* the actual reasons of others.⁵⁶ Thus I am responsible for giving an account of myself, even when I change my mind about, for instance, what it means to be a family member or a citizen.

To sum up: while I am free to abandon my commitment to any practical identity, the ontological possibility of such commitment, freedom, is already bound by a normative claim that outlasts whatever I do or say – namely, its responsibility for the normative (*ta agathon*), and so for reasons and reason-giving. I am bound to myself not by beings – things, customs, laws – but by *being*. The meaning of things is never determinate, and so we are never able to say what it is about beings that binds us. But, to borrow Merleau-Ponty’s apt phrase,⁵⁷ “we are condemned to meaning [*sens*]” by virtue of factic freedom, which affords the possibility of commitment or self-binding. This possibility sustains the binding character of anything else that can make a normative claim on us.

⁵⁶ This brings Heidegger into unexpected proximity to Habermas’s notion of “discourse ethics.” For some discussion see Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology*, ch. 10.

⁵⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. lxxxiv.