

8-2018

## Abandoning the Dream of Omnipotence: On Autonomy and Self-Binding

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Abandoning the Dream of Omnipotence: On Autonomy and Self-Binding

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy

by

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University of Arkansas  
Master of Arts in Philosophy, 2009

August 2018  
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This dissertation is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## **Abstract**

I offer a prolegomenon to the philosophical study of a uniquely human activity—the self-binding act. This philosophical interest directly connects with the Enlightenment project of centralizing personal autonomy and individual freedom as primary values of personhood. Self-binding represents an easily referenced action that introduces a possible clash between autonomy and freedom on the one hand seen as in conflict with other ancient basic human values like self-control and avoiding akrasia. This dissertation investigates the inverted manner whereby an act of self-binding, which voluntarily and effectively limits a person's options, can end up augmenting rather than interfering with personal autonomy. I claim that, properly understood, self-binding, rather than a threat to personal autonomy, turns out to be a paradigmatic act of autonomous agency and a tool for overcoming akrasia. I show how the self-binding act assists and even expands Harry Frankfurt's concept of volitional necessity which overestimates the potential stability of the human will and underestimates the impact of three considerations related to the instability of the will: (1) the ontological reality of time; (2) the psychological reality of a tendency to assent to or rebel against authority and (3) a discounted reality wherein future negative consequences are minimized or dismissed. Accounting for these three realities in the act of self-binding fortifies volitional necessity into a tighter, more integrated concept. There are obvious traversals with the concepts of agency, autonomy, rationality and the inevitable reductionist claims to consider along with worries about coercion and paternalism. Antecedent authority-sourcing is a central issue for autonomy and self-binding. Surprisingly, the Self as the sole, ultimate source for self-binding turns out to be more complicated than at first glance. Finally, I have made an attempt to elucidate why and how the self-binding act might work by proposing several analogues, particularly a striking correspondence with the functions a fence.

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## Preface.

“O beloved Pan and all you other gods of this place,  
grant that I may become beautiful in my soul within, and that  
all my external possessions may be in harmony with my inner self.  
May I consider the wise to be rich. And may I have such riches  
as only *a person of self-restraint* can bear or endure.”

—Socrates, *Phaedrus* 279c

Everyone knows what a patient is, and we know that people voluntarily check themselves into hospitals to be treated as patients. Philosophers also know of Aristotle’s theory of change involving the changer and the changed and his conjecture that an agent of change could also be a patient in the process.<sup>1</sup> But a more involved, contemporary notion of “patency” was new to me until a few years ago when I ran across an expanded, more inclusive or holistic take on the meaning of human agency as a corollary of personhood or selfhood. A feminist philosopher named Soran Reader at Durham University in Great Britain, who tragically died of cancer in 2012 at a relatively young age, was inspired by a concept from David Wiggins which he described as a philosophy of need.<sup>2</sup> concept of “patency” which she described as “the other side of agency.”<sup>3</sup> Reader asserts that there is a pervasive and longstanding bias in favor of agents or perpetrators or actors which has led philosophers to neglect or misunderstand the role of patients and patency, those in need or those who are characterized as victims. Her view of patency includes certain aspects of personhood that involve dependency, subjectedness, suffering, passivity, victimhood and harm. These, she claimed, are just as constitutive of selfhood as the

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *On Generation and Corruption*, Greek: Περὶ γενέσεως καὶ φθορᾶς [Latin: *De Generatione et Philosophical Study* (New York: Oxford University Press 1982).

<sup>2</sup> David Wiggins, “An Idea We Cannot do Without: What difference will it make (eg. to moral, political and environmental philosophy) to recognize and put to use a substantial conception of need?” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 57 (December 2005): 25-50.

<sup>3</sup> Soran Reader (1963-2012) was a philosophy professor at Durham University. Cf. <https://www.dur.ac.uk/philosophy/soran-reader/>

traditional Enlightenment view of human agency.<sup>4</sup> This made intuitive sense if for no other reason than the traditional differentiation made in philosophy between acting and being acted upon, or between our own actions and those things that simply happen to us.

I had written some on this topic for other graduate classes before taking a seminar at the University of Arkansas on Identification with Dr. Eric Funkhouser. We looked particularly at Harry Frankfurt and several other philosophers, mostly in response to Frankfurt's ideas. That is, the moment when the happy coincidence occurred was upon reading Frankfurt and then talking with Eric about some kind of thesis involving this fascinating conundrum of the expansion of selfhood by means of a kind of denial of self. Dr. Funkhouser then introduced me to the sociologist Jon Elster and his notions of self-binding or precommitment. I was hooked immediately, and the ideas for a dissertation topic began forming. What if this patency idea could be totally intentional and purposeful? That is, what if I can voluntarily make myself or acquiesce to becoming a patient in order to achieve some objective that I intend? Stoicism places us all in this patient role and then asserts that our agency emerges in how we respond to everything that happens to us. But I want to ask a different question. Instead of a tight-lipped Stoic extinguishing of desire altogether, might the control of the self be augmented and temptation be preempted by a binding or limiting *action in advance*, so that despite my 'heat of the moment' desire, I have already cut off the option to fulfill that desire? But therein lies a problem. Engaging in such an act of voluntary patency appears to threaten some important aspects of personal autonomy. If I intentionally limit certain personal options for action, it

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<sup>4</sup> David E. Cooper, "Reason and Agency: Enlightenment, Kant, and Romanticism," ch. 3, in *The Measure of Things: Humanism, Humility and Mystery* 58-63 (New York: Oxford University Press 2007).

appears that I am intentionally limiting my freedom to act in certain ways. It is this special kind of action that begs to be further clarified and described philosophically.

Accordingly, a topic for philosophical consideration was born. So, the question that this dissertation addresses is fairly straightforward: how is it that a person's action which effectively limits her options to act, can turn out to enhance her self-governance or autonomy? In my opening quote for this paper I reference a line from Harry Frankfurt who adds the term "liberated" to describe the resulting sense of autonomy that is achieved in this intentional option-limiting action often described as self-binding.<sup>5</sup> The notion of liberation or freedom however, potentially opens a door related to the free will-determinism debate which I will not enter. What's more, I do not present self-binding as some deep dark puzzle or unresolvable paradox. By my own experience, it is clear to me that I discover a greater self-governance or autonomy through temporarily limiting certain options, which might also appear to limit my personal autonomy. Self-restraint is considered a characteristic feature of becoming a responsible adult. This is what Frankfurt means by "abandoning the dream of omnipotence" and goes to the heart of what it means to identify ourselves as autonomous persons.<sup>6</sup> We want to be free to choose, yet we also recognize the wisdom of intentionally limiting our choices from time to time. But what kind of wisdom is this that finds liberation in subjection? Looking further into the topic, I have

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<sup>5</sup> Harry Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1988): 266.

<sup>6</sup> Harry Frankfurt, "Comments on MacIntyre", *Synthese* 53, No. 2, November 1982: 319-321. One discerning note. The "omnipotence" that Frankfurt is pointing out which is beyond the limits of human capability is not the topic of his little essay "The Logic of Omnipotence" in his *Necessity, Volition and Love* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1999): 1-2. That brief entry is Frankfurt's response to the ancient "Omnipotence Paradox" or the "Paradox of the Stone" concerning divine omnipotence. One of the first requirements of mature personhood, says Frankfurt, is the recognition that we are not omnipotent.

discovered that this question has not been thoroughly examined from an analytic philosophy perspective. So, this has made the subject all the more intriguing to me. Of course, in addition to ancient religious perspectives, the idea of freedom through self-denial is not new and is much older than Christianity.<sup>7</sup> As for the ancient Greeks and Romans, philosophers were laying the groundwork for this paradoxical concept by simply noting the human conditions of necessity and mortality distinct from the gods of their mythology.

[F]reedom in this philosophical sense consists of adjusting expectations to the realities of one's situation: freedom requires acquiescing to necessity. This viewpoint is expounded by later Stoic sages in Greek by both slave (Epictetus) and emperor (Marcus Aurelius) with enduring influence on Western thought.<sup>8</sup>

Tracing their roots to at least 2,500 years ago, the great eastern religions of Buddhism and Hinduism are now well-known in the West for this cabalistic notion of freedom through surrender.<sup>9</sup> This esoteric aspect of the topic has also held some appeal. University of Arkansas philosophy professor, Dr. Lynne Spellman, an Aristotle and ancient Greek philosophy scholar and an expert on mysticism in philosophy, helped turn my mind in this direction. The ancient Greeks explored the topic of self-governance, typically translated ἐγράτεια (egratayuh) or σωφροσύνη (sophrosoonay) and its lack thereof, ἀκρασία (akrasia) which is typically translated

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<sup>7</sup> Kurt A. Raaflaub, "Freedom in the Ancient World," in Simon Hornblower, Antony Spawforth, and Esther Eidinow eds., *Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 315-316 (New York: Oxford University Press 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Edward Johnson, "Freedom" in Nigel G. Wilson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece* 305, (New York: Routledge 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Dale S. Wright, "Freedom: the practice of constraint" ch. 7 in *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2000): 119-138; Stephen Knapp, *The Heart of Hinduism: The Eastern Path to Freedom, Empowerment and Illumination* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse Publishing 2005). "By surrendering ... to Lord Hari [of the Vedic scriptures] who is always the platform of perfection, ... one can escape from fear to liberation," p. 164; Matthew D. Mackenzie, "The Five Factors of Action and the DeCentring of Agency in the Bhagavad Gita," *Asian Philosophy*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2001: 141; Kurunēgoḍa Nāhimi Piyatissa, "Giving Up Power," ch. 3 in *Buddhist Tales for Young and Old*, paraphrase English translation by Todd Anderson (Taipei: Buddhist Educational Foundation 1996). URL = [http://www.buddhanet.net/bt\\_2c3.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/bt_2c3.htm)



as weak will. “To give in to oneself is nothing other than ignorance, and to control oneself is nothing other than wisdom,” was Socrates’s claim against the great Sophist Protagoras, suggesting that *akrasia* does not exist.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Aristotle takes a more empirical approach claiming that there are actually two kinds of *akrasia*: προπέτεια (*propeteia*) translated impetuosity and ἀσθένεια (*astheneia*) translated weakness.

The person who is weak [deliberates] and makes a choice; but rather than act [according to] reasoned choice, he acts [according to his] passion... [T]he impetuous person does not go through a process of deliberation and does not make a reasoned choice; he simply acts under the influence of a passion. *At the time of action*, the impetuous person experiences no internal conflict. But *once his act has been completed*, he regrets what he has done. One could say that he deliberates, if deliberation were something that *post-dated* rather than preceded action *comes too late* to save him from error.<sup>11</sup> [Italics mine]

Then, there is the resulting notion that there exists an inner governor ἡγεμόνος (*ehgeymonos*) translated as an inner law-giver inside every person.<sup>12</sup> What if this inner governor freely selects certain self-binding acts to assist this inner governance?

Of course, the practical, lived-life aspects have deep appeal. In another life, as they say, originally as a Business major, I was always drawn toward titles like this recent one from *Fast Company*, “Why Customers Will Pay You To Restrain Them,” [by Dan and Chip Heath, April 2009]. A former senior-level computer scientist and gaming theorist at Yahoo is working on this same issue (strategic behavior in one-person games and how to solve the problem of *akrasia*) and introduced a new word into my vocabulary: to preproperate.

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<sup>10</sup> Plato, *Protagoras* 358c, trans. Stanley Lombardo and Karen Bell in John M. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co. 1997), 787.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Kraut, “Aristotle's Ethics: *Akrasia*.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edward Zalta, ed. (Summer 2018). URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/aristotle-ethics/> and <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/aristotle-ethics/#Akr>

<sup>12</sup> See for example: Plato, *Republic* 3.389c, 4.430d-e, 6.488, trans. George M.A. Grube, in John M. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co. 1997).

Procrastination is the irrational delay of tasks with immediate cost and delayed benefit. Preproperation is the irrational not delaying of (overindulgence in) activities with immediate benefit and delayed cost. Our preferences are inconsistent — in fact, logically contradictory — over time. Why do we have this problem? The technical answer is time inconsistency... How do we solve this problem? The answer is self-binding, that is, the use of commitment devices.<sup>13</sup>

So, it energizes me that the questions taken up in this philosophical writing very much track with real-world kinds of issues and problems. I offer this background simply to say that certain aspects of this topic have been percolating for a long time from a number of angles.

As far as the claims I defend, they can be summarized as follows:

1. The self-binding act (the intentional limiting of options as a rational decision) poses a serious, but answerable question for what we really mean by the notion of personal autonomy. I claim that, rightly understood, the self-binding act expands and augments our picture of the autonomous agent. In fact, it could perhaps be seen as the basis for curing certain disorders of agency, by means of a voluntary, self-enforced “patency”.

2. How this commonly accessible action delivers such uncommon results—that is, a greater, more integrated sense of self as an autonomous individual leads to exploring *why* self-binding works as a kind of “self-altruistic” action. If altruism is a selfless subservience to the well-being of another, then self-altruism involves a subservience to the self *as though seen as* or through the eyes of an empathetic other. Self-binding can be characterized as a subserviently altruistic act toward oneself which ends up incongruously “unbinding” or freeing the self in some way. It may involve limiting a certain set of options in order to free up another set of even more personally beneficial options. Certain analogous functions of a fence (and the human propensity to resist fences) go to the heart of this point.

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<sup>13</sup> Daniel Reeves, “How to Do What You Want: Akrasia and Self-Binding,” *Beeminder Blog*, January 24, 2011. URL <https://blog.beeminder.com/akrasia/>

3. There is a human tendency to unwittingly enslave ourselves or to pathologically justify our enslaved condition, perhaps in the name of security (the ancient Hebrew experience of being enslaved to the Egyptians as the archetype), there is a need to continually clarify the appropriate authority, even as we praise the helpful act of self-binding. Am I really the “I” who authorizes the action that limits my options? Given these human tendencies, coercive paternalism always looms. Self-binding autonomy morphs into hegemony. Self-binding actions ‘for *my own* good’ are urged upon the populace as public policy requirements to make rational choices ‘for *our* own good’ or ‘for the greater good of society’. Autonomous self-binding then gets a utilitarian makeover, thus the constant need to differentiate the Self in self-binding.

4. Applicable philosophy of action issues are addressed including autonomy, agency (especially non-unified agency), rationality, (instrumental, practical and functional along with the problem of irrationality), volitional necessity and coercion. Reductionist views are considered along with behavioral economic analyses particularly causal decision and rational choice theories. Practical applications in medicine and law involve end-of-life decision-making. In psychology there are addiction studies to consider. In political philosophy it is the issue of paternalism and public policy. I offer no motivational self-help manual here nor any quasi-religious mystical answer as to how a person can “feel in some sense liberated by acceding to power.”<sup>14</sup> Philosophy of action does not really deal directly in such queries. However, I do hope that the thoughts within these philosophical parameters might trigger further philosophical work on the fascinating topic of self-binding and autonomy.

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<sup>14</sup> Harry Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1988), 266.

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## Introduction

### Abandoning the Dream of Omnipotence: On Autonomy and Self-Binding

“The suggestion that a person may be in some sense liberated through acceding to a power which is not subject to his immediate voluntary control is among the most ancient and persistent themes of the moral and religious tradition. It must surely reflect some quite fundamental structural feature of our lives. *This feature remains, however, relatively unexplored.*”<sup>15</sup> --Harry Frankfurt

“The yearning for utter freedom - or, what comes to the same thing, for omnipotence - is a recurrent theme in human thought and endeavor. Children generally begin life unable to tolerate any discrepancy between their own wills and reality. If they are not soon enough taught to understand and to accept their finitude, they become spoiled. Then they are tormented throughout their lives by an inability to be satisfied by anything. They cannot permit themselves to be satisfied, because to do so would be to concede a limit to their demands. It would mean abandoning the dream of omnipotence. The spoiled child is cruelly trapped by this dream: he wants everything, but just on account of that there is nothing which he really wants - that is, nothing with which he will be content. As a further consequence of this, he will feel chronically uncertain of his own identity.”<sup>16</sup> --Harry Frankfurt

These opening quotations from Harry Frankfurt about a person being “in some sense liberated through acceding to a power...not subject to his immediate voluntary control” piqued my interest from the moment I read them. It is precisely this “unexplored... [yet] fundamental structural feature of our lives” that I intend to investigate in this dissertation. A person can so arrange her affairs so that the power potentate, to which Frankfurt alludes, will turn out to reside in the selfsame person who is “acceding to a power.” That is, I can aim to wield power over myself by intentionally limiting certain options that might have been otherwise possible for me to choose. I precommit or in some sense, bind myself at time T1 to accede power over myself at time T2. This prearranged limitation of options or precommitment can take any number of forms, but all of these actions have at least one thing in common: a conscious prior consent to set a compulsory limit on one’s own options. For a working definition of precommitment a good place

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<sup>15</sup> Harry Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, p. 266.

<sup>16</sup> Harry Frankfurt, “Comments on MacIntyre”, *Synthese* 53, no. 2 (November 1982): 319-321.

to start is with Jon Elster. “Precommitment, or self-binding, is a self-limiting act carried out by an agent for the purpose of achieving a better outcome, as assessed by his preferences at the time of action, than what would occur had he retained his full freedom of action.”<sup>17</sup> This first-person power to bind the self is an intriguing and “fundamental structural feature of life”, as Frankfurt notes, yet has received scant philosophical attention. That is, the enigmatic, intentional act of self-binding, even though it is widely-employed in numerous ways in everyday life, has received insufficient direct attention in philosophical circles.<sup>18</sup> Economists especially, as well as self-help gurus and end-of-life counselors, have noted and worked with this characteristically human proclivity and tried to discern the reasons why some have never mastered it. What should be intriguing for philosophy of action, agency and autonomy is that this self-binding action offers a

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<sup>17</sup>Jon Elster, “Don’t Burn Your Bridge Before You Come to It: Some Ambiguities and Complexities of Precommitment,” *Texas Law Review* 81, no. 7 (June 2003): 1775. Sociologist Elster appears to have re-purposed this word for use in a narrowed sense as he began offering his contributions to rational choice theory and formulating his own “constraint theory”. Elster’s earliest definition says that precommitment is a form of binding oneself in order “to carry out a certain decision at time t1 in order to increase the probability of another decision at time t2.” Cf. “Ulysses and the Sirens: A Theory of Imperfect Rationality.” *Information sur les Sciences Sociales* 16, no. 5 (1977): 469-470. Later he would call it “a generic technique lending credibility to threats and promises.” Cf. *The Cement of Society: A Study of Social Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1989), 278.

<sup>18</sup> While contemporary philosophical attention has been scarce there have been more narrowly-focused analyses of the autonomy of persons as medical patients. Some other exceptions would include Gerald Dworkin, “Is More Choice Better Than Less?” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (September 1982): 47-61. Nobel Prize-winning economist, Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1960 & 1980 re-issue; any number of articles and books by psychologist and behavioral economist, George Ainslie starting with his seminal paper, “Specious Reward: A Behavioral Theory of Impulsiveness and Impulse Control,” *Psychological Bulletin* 82, no. 4 (July 1975): 463-496. These scholars have offered many helpful insights that have in turn heavily contributed to Norwegian sociologist, Jon Elster’s idiosyncratic exploration of the topic in a number of articles and books starting with his early paper mentioned above and his Cambridge University Press 1979 book *Ulysses and the Sirens*; then a deeper and more refined look at the concept of “precommitment” *Ulysses Unbound*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2000; and further refined in his more recent work, *Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences* (New York: Cambridge 2007).

provocative, inverted (yet quite effective) tactical component for all conceptual models of personal autonomy and human agency.<sup>19</sup> So, this action that we consider treads on the edge of conundrum. What really is this act that we humans undertake and even recommend as a virtue of itself? In my earlier graduate work, I have noted that while there is no general consensus among philosophers on the meaning of human dignity, yet anybody who's felt humiliated in public by some low-level bureaucrat or young store clerk can insist that they know very well the meaning of *indignity*. It seems that in the business of human elevation there is no clear conception of an up-elevator, but everybody can tell you when their elevator is going down. My thought in the present writing is to see if I can get anywhere by voluntarily taking the metaphorical down escalator. I look into this more mysterious human capacity whereby we can intentionally push the Down button and end up arriving at a better place. We lower ourselves, enthrall ourselves, forbid ourselves of certain options in order to empower, disenthral other compulsions and facilitate other options. There is no denying that this angle of looking at such an enigmatic act feels for some, uncomfortably upside down.

This dissertation investigates the upturned manner whereby a voluntary act of self-binding (sometimes called precommitment), effectively limits my options while also augmenting my self-governance, or that is, my personal autonomy. This odd inversion is part of what makes this study so philosophically interesting. While it appears that a self-binding or precommitting

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<sup>19</sup> If self-binding is used *as rationally intended* by contingent creatures like us, then the act itself may only constitute a useful tool to achieve *optimal* instead of *maximal* personal autonomy. I am indebted to Bernard Berofsky for this useful distinction. Cf. Bernard Berofsky, *Liberation from Self: A Theory of Personal Autonomy* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1995), 117-121. I use the adjective “invertible” in the standard sense of, “that which tends to invert the usual order. “There is a sort of invertible quality in the Japanese...which makes them train their horses to gallop uphill.” <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/>



act is not a *necessary* condition for personal autonomy, the capacity to self-bind can be potentially correlated to one's personal autonomy and could turn out to be a *sufficient* condition. I will claim, therefore, that the act of self-binding is a paradigmatic, differentiating strategy for exhibiting what it means to be an autonomous person, a self-governing human agent. How this can turn out to be the case is an intriguing and important philosophical consideration worth pursuing further. There are numerous philosophical accounts of personal autonomy that provide adequate theoretical latitude for comparing and contrasting with the notion of precommitment or self-binding. More importantly, it is this rather unique approach to goal-directed behavior, temporarily and intentionally placing limits on one's options, which has raised certain personal autonomy questions that some have noted but not thoroughly developed.<sup>20</sup> The implications for personhood attending the action of freely opting for the role of patient over agent albeit temporarily, have been tentatively explored by Soran Reader.<sup>21</sup> For a phenomenological approach to the topic, John Davenport offers an existentialist model of autonomy, which includes what he calls "the striving will" or a kind of innate volitional resolve which entails an alterity of value. This sets up a motivational framework for why individuals can acquire what Davenport sees as a 'higher order of willing' whereby they limit their options or control their impulsiveness

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Fred I. Dretske, *Explaining Behavior: Reasons in a World of Causes*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1988; Soran Reader, "Agency, Patency and Personhood," ch. 26 in Timothy O'Connor and Constantine Sandis, eds., *Companion to the Philosophy of Action* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell 2010), 200-208.

<sup>21</sup> Soran Reader, "Aristotle on Necessities and Needs," p. 113-136 in *The Philosophy of Need*, ed. Soran Reader (Cambridge University Press 2005). Reader has drawn in part on the earlier work of Fred I. Dretske and Mikael M. Karlsson, "Agency and Patency: Back to Nature?" *Philosophical Explorations: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Mind and Action* 5, no 1 (September 2002): 59-81.

through precommitments.<sup>22</sup> If it turns out that this matter of self-binding is a naturally-developed, human skill set which enhances personal autonomy, then there is a formidable incentive or impetus to not only thoroughly explore it philosophically but to call attention to its continuing power as a weapon against the scourge of human akrasia<sup>23</sup> or weak will or acting against one's better judgment or without control over oneself. With no pretense to thoroughness, this proposed dissertation can serve in some measure as a prolegomena to the understanding of self-binding as an important category in the ever-growing field of philosophy of action and human agency.

There is much to be done in setting the table for this topic since the initial consideration is how this seemingly incongruous, inverted nature of an act of precommitment or 'self-binding' could actually be integral to personal autonomy. I claim that a person can be characterized as autonomous while also clearly and intentionally giving up her autonomy in a predetermined measure, *or that is, surrendering a measure of autonomy at least temporarily*, by limiting the options for action available to her at a given time. Starting with definitions for the terms 'autonomy' and 'self-binding' or 'precommitment',<sup>24</sup> in which I do not intend to put forward any novel claims, I will concentrate on what this inversion looks like and what effect it might have on personal autonomy. Self-binding, I will claim, might be considered a paradigmatic act of

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<sup>22</sup> John J. Davenport, *Will as Commitment and Resolve: An Existential Account of Creativity, Love, Virtue, and Happiness* (New York: Fordham University Press 2007), 20ff.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Bobonich and Pierre Destrée, eds., *Akrasia in Greek Philosophy From Socrates to Plotinus* (Boston: Brill Publishers 2007); Alfred Mele makes a distinction between akrasia and weak will beyond the standard translated definition while also acknowledging the more widely accepted meaning. "Autonomy and Akrasia." *Philosophical Explorations* 5, no. 3 (October 2002): 207-216; "Weakness of will and akrasia." *Philosophical Studies* 150, no. 3 (September 2010): 391-404.

<sup>24</sup> For the sake of brevity and convenience I will most often use the term 'self-binding'.

personal autonomy. That is, self-binding properly defined, can serve as a paradigm instance for what is meant by autonomy. If this is true, then the natural question to explore is *how* this might be the case. Accordingly then, I will explore how the act of self-binding can conceivably function in an autonomy-augmenting, reinforcing or enhancing role.

The popular intuition is simple: in resisting a weak will or regulating some impulsive tendency, people have found themselves capable of so prearranging their affairs so that either a desired outcome is produced or an undesired outcome is prevented.<sup>25</sup> Self-binding or precommitment or “Ulysses contracts”<sup>26</sup> are perhaps the most prevalent terms used to describe this particular technique of self-regulation in the literature of philosophy, psychology, sociology and behavioral economics. Persons prearrange their affairs or precommit themselves to an intentional action, which effectively and preemptively limits certain options for themselves and binds them so that either they cannot escape from performing an action or they are effectively

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<sup>25</sup> In fact, this self-regulating exercise is so easily discerned and widely practiced, it is now being studied empirically in neuroscience, yielding a number of helpful empirical discoveries that I reference later. Molly J. Crockett; Barbara R. Braams; Luke Clark; Philippe N. Tobler; Trevor W. Robbins, and Tobias Kalenscher, “Restricting Temptations: Neural Mechanisms of Precommitment,” *Neuron* 79, no. 2 (July 2013): 391–401.

URL=[http://www.cell.com/neuron/pdf/S0896-6273\(13\)00448-0.pdf](http://www.cell.com/neuron/pdf/S0896-6273(13)00448-0.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> The obvious reference is to the tale from Homer, “Ulysses and the Sirens,” *The Odyssey*, Bk XII.37-192. Upon advice from the nymph goddess, Circe, Ulysses commands his men to stuff their ears with wax, tie him securely to the mast of their ship, and then row without stopping near the island where the notoriously seductive, female creatures called Sirens sang songs that hypnotically lured sailors to their deaths on the rocky shores. Here is the first example in recorded history of the use of a “precommitment device”. The mythic hero Ulysses hears the Sirens’ song and lives to tell the tale. The most accessible, popular-level definition and description of a Ulysses contract that I have ever read comes from a neuroscientist working at Baylor College of Medicine. Cf. David M. Eagleman, *Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain*, (New York: Pantheon/Random House 2011), 258-260. Some philosophers working with Decision Theory call it a “well-known sequential decision problem.” Cf. Katie Steele and Orri H. Stefánsson, “Decision Theory.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edward N. Zalta, ed. (Winter 2015). <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/decision-theory/>.

prevented from engaging in an action. It is this ancient human discovery, that a person can prevent an otherwise unintended action (prompted by impulsiveness and weak will) or insure that an intended action occurs, which has intrigued disparate thinkers from religious mystics to military generals.<sup>27</sup>

Now, the interesting philosophical challenge is to understand why and how these binding commitment devices work and how all this relates to personal autonomy, human responsibility and similar notions. It appears that persons must agree to accede to be acted upon and cede control over some of their options thereby behaving more passively as patients instead of more actively as agents.<sup>28</sup> Such a philosophical consideration of self-binding reinforces Soran Reader's claim that philosophers should expand the very definition of a person to include the notion of patiency as well as agency.<sup>29</sup> As to the question of why self-binding works, I will propose the simple analogy of a fence with its various functions as well as a few other tentative comparisons along similar lines. The last sections of this work will explore the importance of discerning the relevant authorities, legitimate and illegitimate, in a self-binding act. I will call this issue the

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<sup>27</sup> Ancient Hebrew theology presents the Jewish god YHWH as the supreme example of a self-binding covenant maker. Cf. John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology, Volume One: Israel's Gospel*, Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press 2003: 197. Lloyd Gerson ed., *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2010 is replete with references to ascetic life behind the locked gates of monasteries where philosophical writing flourished. Han Xin is perhaps the earliest example of a famous military general using a "commitment device" as a tactic with his soldiers forcing them to either drown in a river or fight an enemy army. Cf. Paul K. Davis, *Masters of the Battlefield: Great Commanders* (New York: Oxford University Press 2013) 43-61.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Taylor, "Agent & Patient: Is There a Distinction?" *Erkenntnis* 18, no. 2 (September 1982): 223-232.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. "The Other Side of Agency," *Philosophy* 82, no. 4 (October 2007): 579-604. See also Buss, Sarah. "Autonomous Action: Self-Determination in Passive Mode." *Ethics* 122, no. 4 (July 2012): 647-691.

problem of authority-sourcing.<sup>30</sup> If I am truly autonomous, I am my own authority. But in a case of self-binding, we tend to infer at least some form or other of homuncular (*homunculus* is Latin for “little man”) hegemon function perhaps. But which is ‘the real me’ inside of me that serves as the controlling hegemon for my actions? This notion then opens up an infinite regress of homunculi which is one big critique leveled against Frankfurt’s now well-known hierarchy from simple order desires to higher, 2<sup>nd</sup> order volitions. Am I to see myself as a matryoshka doll full of embedded “Mini-Me’s”? If not, then how do I go about proving that this is not the case whenever I experience conflicting desires or even just those ordinary moments of indecisiveness. Harry Frankfurt says that I can sort all of this out by a kind of rational internal discourse where I first see that I have a desire of the first order as he describes it. And then I observe that I have a 2nd order desire to hold this 1st order desire. But I do not resolve this matter and finally discover what my will actually is *until* I see that I further have a desire to see my 1st order desire be fulfilled in reality which Frankfurt labels a 2nd order volition. This is what personal identification amounts to, Frankfurt claims, and is the foundation of personhood itself.<sup>31</sup> Michael Bratman prefers to talk about self-governance in terms of planning, policy-making and first-order motivating attitudes in what he calls a “conative hierarchy”; all of which are engaged by practical pressures which ultimately deliver “agential authority”.<sup>32</sup> He has summarized the homunculus objection to Frankfurt (an objection first asserted by Gary Watson).<sup>33</sup> “The

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<sup>30</sup> Bramhall’s early responses to Hobbes go to the heart of this issue for personal autonomy. Cf. Vere Chappell, ed. *Hobbes & Bramhall on Liberty and Necessity* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1999).

<sup>31</sup> Harry Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 1 (January 14, 1971): 5-20.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Bratman, *Structures of Agency* (New York: Oxford University Press 2007), 6-7.

<sup>33</sup> Gary Watson, “Free Agency,” *Journal of Philosophy* 72 (April 1975): 205-220.

hierarchical model does not yet have [a causal] account of the agential authority of certain higher-order attitudes. But it needs such an account in order to provide a nonhomuncular model of agential governance.”<sup>34</sup>

Which self is the one that ultimately controls my actions? While I may be unable to resolve this infinite regress problem, the introduction of an act of self-binding suggests that a halt to the regress has been emphatically injected by the agent herself. After all, maybe the biggest reason for a self-binding act is driven by this internal conflict inside or the worry that the agent appears to herself internally as two agents (or more, in the case of Plato’s ship-owner metaphor<sup>35</sup>) in conflict. Others more hesitant about the notion of non-unified agency prefer to use terms like ‘present self’ and ‘future self’ or ‘day self’ and ‘night self.’<sup>36</sup> Here is popular motivational meme on the internet: “Do something today that your future self will thank you for.” As with Plato or even let’s say Cartesian dualism, there is always a way out of the homunculus fallacy. The ship-owner (the innermost self) or the person as represented by her immaterial soul, ultimately decides upon or chooses which action to take. Another way of putting it, ‘I’ become my own hegemon over the other ‘I’ that is pushing the conflicting desire. An act of self-binding puts this problem front and center and clearly owns it as a very tangible, human difficulty or challenge to face and overcome.

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<sup>34</sup> Bratman, *Structures of Agency*, p. 209.

<sup>35</sup> Plato, *Republic* 6.887d-888, trans. George M.A. Grube, in John M. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co. 1997).

<sup>36</sup> Jeff Sebo, “Agent Individuation and the Morality of Self-Binding,” unpublished paper also submitted under two different titles “Is Self-Binding Morally Wrong” and “The Just Soul” at the *American Philosophical Association Pacific Division* under Pacific Division Abstracts 2012. URL: [https://www.apaonline.org/members/group\\_content\\_view.asp?group=110424&id=212372](https://www.apaonline.org/members/group_content_view.asp?group=110424&id=212372) Complete pdf available online [http://www.environment.as.nyu.edu/docs/IO/19230/Sebo\\_AgentIndividuation.pdf](http://www.environment.as.nyu.edu/docs/IO/19230/Sebo_AgentIndividuation.pdf)

All of this appears, at first glance, to raise a question for Harry Frankfurt's hierarchical model of reflective endorsement (or higher order volitions) of first-order desires. Again, Michael Bratman has noted that Frankfurt has no "non-homuncular model" or account of the agential authority in his proposed higher-order attitudes. Bratman offers his own alternative to the hierarchal account.<sup>37</sup> I can see an act of self-binding providing an example to consider for this critical analysis. When an agent has conflicting desires and then, by means of a self-binding act, clearly identifies with one of those desires, a Frankfurtian second-order volition is supposedly born. I will return to this claim of Frankfurt a little later on. But who authorizes my actions? Self-binding sets apart this question in stark relief since the endorser of my actions is the same person as the endorsee. In cases of internal conflict, if I temporarily interrupt this reflective endorsement exercise so as to coerce a predetermined outcome, the players in this conflict drama appear to involve *both* the cast and the "front of house", both actor and audience, to use the terminology of stagecraft. Think of a marionette puppet and the one manipulating the strings. If the one who authorizes the action on the stage as a marionettist is identical to the marionette itself (Pinocchio come to life<sup>38</sup>; or the one performing the action), then the stage act may go according to plan. Some psychiatrists have oddly called this "self-paternalism."<sup>39</sup> But if the puppeteer or

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<sup>37</sup> Michael Bratman, "Planning, Agency, Autonomous Agency," in John Martin Fischer, ed., *Free Will: Critical Concepts in Philosophy, Vol. IV Free Agency, Moral Responsibility, and Skepticism* 72 (New York: Routledge 2005).

<sup>38</sup> "I've got no strings to hold me down/To make me fret, or make me frown./I had strings, but now I'm free!/There are no strings on me./Hi ho, the merrio! That's the only way to go!" by Dickie Jones from *Pinocchio*, the movie. Cf. the fascinating background on the original story. Clancy Martin, "What the Original 'Pinocchio' Really Says About Lying," *The New Yorker*, February 6, 2015. URL= <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/original-pinocchio-really-says-lying>

<sup>39</sup> Marilyn K. Rosenson and Agnes M. Kasten, "Another view of autonomy: Arranging for Consent in Advance," *Schizophrenia Bulletin* 17, no. 1, 1991: 1-7; Joseph A. Rogers and J. Benedict Centifanti, "Beyond 'self-paternalism': Response to Rosenson and Kasten," *Schizophrenia Bulletin* 17, no 1, 1991: 9-14. See also Michael Quante, "Precedent Autonomy

marionettist cedes control to another, then the marionette/marionettist no longer appears to be acting autonomously. Someone *other* is being allowed to pull the strings. I will use this image later on in order to depict and consider certain notions of liberal paternalism in public policy contexts and the informed consent of a polis with the desire to be governed by a social contract.<sup>40</sup> It also happens to be just here, in ancient Greek thought concerning the polis and social contract, where we first encounter the *αὐτονομία* (*autonomía*) of a city-state and the earliest etymology of the word autonomy.<sup>41</sup> Likening the State to the individual in contract with herself could have conceptual fruit to bear. One philosopher chose this very comparison for the opening lines of an essay on autonomous agency.

Autonomous agents, like autonomous nations, are able to govern themselves. They are not controlled by external forces or manipulated by outside agents. They set goals for themselves, establishing principles for their choices and actions, and they are able to act in accord with those principles. Just as deliberative democracies legislate so as to balance competing interests, autonomous agents deliberate to reach some consistency among their competing desires and values. And just as good governments create their laws in the open without undue influence by covert factions, autonomous agents form their principles for action through conscious deliberation without undue influence by unconscious forces.<sup>42</sup>

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and Personal Identity,” *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 9, no. 4 (December 1999): 364-380. “‘Self-paternalism’ means that the former self is paternalistic, not that one is acting paternalistically on oneself. If one rejects the metaphysics of the complex view of personal identity and takes the human being as the entity that is identical in the metaphysical sense of persistence, ‘Ulysses contracts’ should not count as paternalistic at all.” p. 376.

<sup>40</sup> Willard Gaylin and Bruce Jennings, *The Perversion of Autonomy: The Proper Uses of Coercion and Constraints in a Liberal Society* (New York: Simon & Schuster 1996); Jennifer S. Blumenthal-Barb, “Choice Architecture: A Mechanism for Improving Decisions While Preserving Liberty?” in Christian Coons and Michael Weber, eds., *Paternalism: Theory and Practice* 178-196 (New York: Cambridge University Press 2013); Mark D. White, *The Manipulation of Choice: Ethics and Libertarian Paternalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2013).

<sup>41</sup> Martin Ostwald, *Autonomia: Genesis and Early History* (New York: Oxford University Press 1982).

<sup>42</sup> Eddy Nahmias, “Autonomous Agency and Social Psychology,” in Massimo Marraffa, Mario De Caro, Francesco Ferretti, eds., *Cartographies of the Mind: Philosophy and Psychology in Intersection* 169 (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer 2007).



I will make some further requisite distinctions in order to set aside possible reductionist accounts of self-binding. Along the way, I address personal and practical interfaces of self-binding action with ascetic practice,<sup>43</sup> self-help strategies,<sup>44</sup> addiction recovery strategies,<sup>45</sup> medical ethics of advance directives<sup>46</sup>, and simple human flourishing outcomes<sup>47</sup> related to acts of self-binding.

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<sup>43</sup> Edith Wyschogrod, “The Howl of Oedipus, the Cry of Heloise: From Asceticism to Postmodern Ethics,” in Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis eds. *Asceticism* 16-32 (New York: Oxford University Press 1998); James A. Francis, *Subversive Virtue: Asceticism and Authority in the Second Century Pagan World* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press 2008); Richard Finn, *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman World* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2009).

<sup>44</sup> Roy F. Baumeister and Steven Berglas, *Your Own Worst Enemy: Understanding the Paradox of Self-Defeating Behavior* (New York: Basic Books 1993); Elizabeth Harman, “‘I’ll Be Glad I Did It’: Reasoning and the Significance of Future Desires.” *Philosophical Perspectives*, 23, no. 1 (December 2009): 177-199; Paul Katsafanas, “Autonomy, Character and Self-Understanding,” in Iskra Fileva, ed., *Questions of Character* (New York: Oxford University Press 2016); Daniel Akst, *We Have Met the Enemy: Self-Control in an Age of Excess* (New York: Penguin Press 2011).

<sup>45</sup> Rober Ladouceur; Alex Blaszczynski and Daniel R. Lalande, “Pre-commitment in Gambling: A Review of the Empirical Evidence.” *International Gambling Studies* 12, no. 2 (February 2012): 215-230. URL=<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14459795.2012.658078>; Chandra Sripada, “The Second Hit in Addiction.” In Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter, ed. *Moral Psychology*, Vol. 4: *Free Will and Moral Responsibility* 295-304 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2014). Limiting one’s options equals giving up autonomy, seen as a burden, thus psychic costs to maintaining sobriety.

<sup>46</sup> Rebecca A. Dresser, “Ulysses and the Psychiatrists: A Legal and Policy Analysis of the Voluntary Commitment Contract.” *Harvard Civil Rights Civil Liberties Law Review* 16 (1982): 777-854; Allen E. Buchanan and Dan W. Brock, *Deciding for Others: The Ethics of Surrogate Decision Making* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1989); Dresser, “Autonomy Revisited: The Limits of Anticipatory Choices,” in *Dementia and Aging: Ethics, Values, and Policy Choices* 71-85, Robert H. Binstock, Stephen G. Post and Peter J. Whitehouse, eds. (Boston: Johns Hopkins University Press 1992); John K. Davis, “How to Justify Enforcing a Ulysses Contract When Ulysses is Competent to Refuse,” *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 18, no. 1 (March 2008): 87-106; Robert M. Veatch, *Patient Heal Thyself: How the “New Medicine” Puts the Patient In Charge* (New York: Oxford University Press 2009); Lubomira Radoilska, “Autonomy and Ulysses Arrangements,” in L. Radoilska, ed., *Autonomy and Mental Disorder* 252-280 (New York: Oxford University Press 2012).

<sup>47</sup> Gail Corrington, “Anorexia, Asceticism, and Autonomy: Self-Control as Liberation and Transcendence.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 51-61; Alfred R. Mele, *Effective Intentions: The Power of Conscious Will* (New York: Oxford University Press 2009); Roy F. Baumeister and John Tierney, *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength* (New York: Penguin Press 2011); Leslie D. Frazier and Michelle L. Barreto, “Self-Regulation and Eudaimonic Well-Being Across Adulthood.” *Experimental Aging Research* 38, no. 4 (July 2012): 394-410.

## Chapter 1. Autonomy and Self-Binding: Definitions and Applications.

### 1.1 AUTONOMY DEFINED

Though we have already taken a step or two toward definitions it is important to begin by observing that a big reason that self-binding is philosophically interesting is because the option-limiting strategies it requires, appear *prima facie* to restrict personal autonomy. Whether such restrictions are by definition irrational is the debated point given certain characterizations of human autonomy. Merely defining and describing the concept of personal autonomy is itself a formidable task. The debate among philosophers is broad and contentious, leading Gerald Dworkin to shrewdly refer to the concept as “a term of art.”<sup>48</sup> Joel Fineberg has been most adept in categorizing the widely-varied distinctions that philosophers defend concerning autonomy. Using his inclusive approach, I will take the notion of personal autonomy as simply a representation of human agency in the “actual condition of self-governance with its associated virtues.”<sup>49</sup> Such an expansive definition is meant to avoid a more exacting position in ongoing debates over personal autonomy.

The dictionary itself is an illustration of the difficulty in fine-grained definitions of autonomy. *Oxford English Dictionary*’s very first definition refers to *political* autonomy, and the second is *moral* autonomy, specifically as it is used in Kantian philosophy. The third definition of the word considers what is often referred to as *personal* autonomy: “c. More generally: liberty to follow one’s will; control over one’s own affairs; freedom from external influence, personal independence.” The 4<sup>th</sup> definition is “d. [w]ith reference to a thing: the fact or quality of being

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<sup>48</sup> Gerald Dworkin, “The Concept of Autonomy.” *Grazer Philosophische Studien: International Journal for Analytic Philosophy* 12/13. (April 1981): 202-213.

<sup>49</sup> Joel Fineberg, “Autonomy,” in John Christman, ed., *The Inner Citadel: Essays on Individual Autonomy* 27-53 (New York: Oxford 1989), 28.

unrelated to anything else, self-containedness; independence from external influence or control, self-sufficiency.”<sup>50</sup> Under this last definition an engineer might refer to the function of a machine as autonomous, for example. In reference to personal autonomy then, it is the third definition that seems to be the most relevant for the philosophy of action. Yet, even here, the definition has the least consensus of meaning except in general terms with a kind of portmanteau set of meanings. Gerald Dworkin puts his finger on these concerns in defining autonomy:

It is apparent that ... ‘autonomy’ is used in an exceedingly broad fashion. It is used sometimes as an equivalent of liberty (positive or negative in Isaiah Berlin's terminology), sometimes as equivalent to self-rule or sovereignty, sometimes as identical with freedom of the will. It is equated with dignity, integrity, individuality, independence, responsibility, and self-knowledge. It is identified with qualities of self-assertion, with critical reflection, with freedom from obligation, with absence of external causation, with knowledge of one's own interests. It is even equated by some economists with the impossibility of interpersonal comparisons. It is related to actions, to beliefs, to reasons for acting, to rules, to the will of other persons, to thoughts, and to principles. About the only features held constant from one author to another are that autonomy is a feature of persons and that it is a desirable quality to have. It is very unlikely that there is a core meaning which underlies all these various uses of the term. Autonomy is a term of art and will not repay an Austinian investigation of its ordinary uses. ... I use the vague term [personal autonomy] to “characterize” rather than “define” or “analyze” because I do not think it possible with any moderately complex philosophical concept to specify necessary and sufficient conditions without draining the concept of the very complexity that enables it to perform its theoretical role. Autonomy is a *term of art* introduced by a theorist in an attempt to make sense of a tangled net of intuitions, conceptual and empirical issues, and normative claims.<sup>51</sup>

In light of the above, I will guardedly venture agreement with Feinberg that generally an autonomous individual is to be considered “a person possessing 1. a capacity; 2. an actual

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<sup>50</sup> “autonomy”, *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. Also available at <http://www.oed.com/>

<sup>51</sup> Gerald Dworkin, “The Concept of Autonomy,” *Grazer Philosophische Studien: International Journal for Analytic Philosophy* 12/13 (April 1981): 202-213.

condition; 3. an ideal of character or 4. a sovereign right or authority.”<sup>52</sup> John Christman chooses to restrict his definition to “the *capacity* to be one’s own person, to live one’s life according to reasons and motives that are taken as one’s own and not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces.”<sup>53</sup> Sarah Buss sees personal autonomy as a kind of self-relation aiming toward self-authorization, where the person denies “that anyone else has the authority to control her activity within this [self-relational] sphere; she is saying that any exercise of power over this activity is illegitimate unless she authorizes it herself.”<sup>54</sup> I am interested, of course, in the seemingly incongruous nature of this self-authorization as it pertains to self-binding. And as it turns out, this particular type of action challenges one of Buss’s assumptions in defining personal autonomy as lacking a correlate with political autonomy. In defining personal autonomy, Buss, alludes to self-binding without recognizing that she has just offered the very correlate she denies [*italics mine*]:

In order to form an intention to do one thing rather than another, an agent must regard her own judgment about how to act as authoritative — *even if it is only the judgment that she should follow the command or advice of someone else*. This tight connection between being an agent and having authority has no correlate in cases where the authority at issue is political.<sup>55</sup>

“The judgment to follow the command ... of someone else” is the first step in self-binding, even if that someone else happens to be a wiser, calmer, less impulsive version of oneself. Whenever I, as my own agent, authorize my action but the action binds me in a way that restricts certain

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<sup>52</sup> Feinberg, “Autonomy” in *The Inner Citadel*, p. 27-53.

<sup>53</sup> John Christman, “Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed. (Spring 2011). URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/autonomy-moral/>.

<sup>54</sup> Sarah Buss, “Personal Autonomy”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed. (Winter 2014). URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/personal-autonomy/>

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

options that might otherwise be open to me, I have done something extraordinary. I assent to a power, which is, in a significant way, external to my typical self-relational, authority-granting agency. The correlate in the political sphere is the necessary core of the social contract—the granting or acceding of one’s authority as an agent to another. Agents comprising the polis are the ‘authority at issue’ in a social contract. These agents agree to accede a measure of power to a political authority. One constant concern for both personal and political autonomy is authority sourcing. Self-binding, then amounts to an out-sourcing of authority in a particular way. The self-binding act puts this question front and center: is it autonomy-threatening or heteronomy-embracing. I will claim that properly understood self-binding is neither.

I should make clear that I will use the word ‘autonomy’ to refer expressly to *personal* autonomy. Despite Dworkin’s depiction of autonomy as “a tangled net of intuitions, conceptual and empirical issues, and normative claims”<sup>56</sup> we still need a somewhat narrowed definition to work with. I will therefore take personal autonomy to mean a manifest condition of human beings related to the intuition that they can control if, how and when they will act within normal limits, given typical constraints of possibility. I take this to be basic with no need to further qualify the definition with contributory concerns, though these play a role in areas of applied ethics. The compatibilist worry, whether persons are actually free or only apparently free to act is also not a concern that I intend to address since it will not affect the claims that I put forward about autonomy and self-binding. Additionally, my definitional framework for personal autonomy allows a certain flexibility using Feinberg’s four-fold characterization: capacity, condition, character ideal and sovereign right.

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<sup>56</sup> Dworkin, “The Concept of Autonomy” p. 203.

## 1.2 SELF-BINDING DEFINED

“Most philosophers and political scientists have become so entranced by autonomy that they find it hard even to consider, let alone to accept, an argument showing that complete autonomy is a bad thing.”<sup>57</sup> Self-binding is better understood as a direct complement or logical extension of personal autonomy and has been proposed and assumed in bioethics contexts for years without being subjected to very much philosophical scrutiny especially in the philosophy of action, agency and autonomy. Bioethicist Stephen G. Post is a representative example. “[I]t is now a common bioethical assumption that the *extension of patient autonomy through advance directives* is in principle correct, even if its implementation may be complex.”<sup>58</sup> [Italics mine.] But how we arrive at this connection has been far from clear. Soran Reader and others have certainly paved the way for a deeper consideration of the profound connection between autonomy and self-binding or what she has described as the connection between agency and patiency. She claims convincingly that her notion of patiency yields a wider, more robust theory of personhood which in turn offers some principled ground for examining this fascinating act called self-binding. This specific kind of action illustrates Reader’s reconceived picture of the agent voluntarily making herself a patient and by means of this act not only retains her personhood but can even extend her personal autonomy by means of her condition of patiency.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Bernard Gert, “Hobbes” in John Skorupski, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Ethics* 96 (New York: Routledge—Taylor & Francis, 2010).

<sup>58</sup> Stephen Post, “Alzheimer’s and the ‘Then’ Self,” *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 5 (1995): 307–321.

<sup>59</sup> Soran Reader, “The Other Side of Agency” *Philosophy* 82, no. 4 (October 2007): 579-604; “Agency, Patiency, and Personhood,” in Timothy O’Connor and Constantine Sandis, eds. *A Companion to the Philosophy of Action* 200-208 (New York: Blackwell Publishing 2010); Dretske and Karlsson, “Agency and Patiency: Back to Nature?” 2002.

What I mean to take from Reader is this: The consent to be acted upon as a kind of patient, or that is, the act of consenting to a self-imposed constraint or intentional option-limited state is what is meant by terms like precommitment or Ulysses contracts or self-binding. Of course, the medical jargon for Ulysses contracts today is usually termed “advance directives.” The connection of this self-binding act with patient autonomy is a big concern in biomedical ethics. In 1999 Münster University philosopher Michael Quante noted the following four different terms in the bioethics literature for “advance directives” all using the word autonomy: prospective autonomy (Cantor); future-oriented autonomy (Dresser); precedent autonomy (Dworkin); and extended autonomy (Post).<sup>60</sup> Due to the nature of the act itself, intentionally surrendering some measure or range of options, it is natural to assume a connection with autonomy, agency and personhood. I will look at this relationship in the next section. For brevity’s sake, I will typically use the term “self-binding” rather than any number of other alternate terms and phrases. I will focus on any purposeful act that serves to either limit one’s options or penalize acting on certain options or simply committing oneself in advance to a plan of action in order to achieve some other desired, perceived good. Here is Jon Elster’s definition.

When precommitting [self binding] himself, a person acts at one point in time in order to ensure that at some later time he will perform an act that he could but would not have performed without the prior act. As I define it, precommitment [self-binding] *requires an observable action*, not merely a mental resolution.<sup>61</sup> [Brackets mine.]

For alliteration’s sake we could say that self-binding can be 1) a *preventive* act (a palisade against an undesired behavior). Ulysses tied the mast is the standard example. Or 2) a *penalizing* act (a penalty or cost imposed if I give into temptation). The severing of a close

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<sup>60</sup> Michael Quante, “Precedent Autonomy and Personal Identity,” *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 9, no. 4 (December 1999): 366.

<sup>61</sup> Jon Elster, “Don’t Burn Your Bridge Before You Come to It: Some Ambiguities and Complexities of Precommitment,” *Texas Law Review* 81, no. 7 (June 2003): 1754.

relationship or the penalizing loss of employment or even just some public embarrassment can of itself constitute a penalty which in turn motivates a person to behave in a way they have claimed that they want to behave. Here is an actual instance.

In a cocaine addiction center...[patients] may write a self-incriminating letter, preferably a letter confessing their drug addiction, deposit the letter with the clinic and submit to a randomized schedule of laboratory tests. If the laboratory finds evidence of cocaine use, the clinic sends the letter to the addressee.<sup>62</sup>

Jon Elster puts it this way: “Precommitment may occur either by deleting elements in the set of feasible actions or by affecting the consequences of choosing them.”<sup>63</sup> 3) But I would provisionally add a third; call it a *publicizing* act (I make known a plan to do X). More than merely imposing a consequence, the speech act in itself can be the act that binds the binder depending, for example, upon the psychological and emotional hold of cultural rituals related to personal honor and integrity. Culturally-sanctioned ritual suicide (seppuku, literally in Japanese, “cutting the belly”) was well-known in Japan from the 700’s CE to 1873 when it was formally outlawed.<sup>64</sup> In its earlier forms samurai warriors would publicly swear allegiance to a master and vow to perform the seppuku ritual if they dishonored the warrior’s code or their master.<sup>65</sup> In the action of their vow it was as though the act of suicide itself had already been performed. Perhaps this third distinction I am trying to discern should be considered provisional since it depends upon the psychology of the self-binder. A mental resolution which you announce (even if mostly to yourself) but observable by others, carries its own precommitting quality. Here is an example

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<sup>62</sup> Thomas Schelling, “Self-Control,” in George Loewenstein and Jon Elster, eds., *Choice over Time* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation 1992), 167.

<sup>63</sup> Elster, “Don’t Burn Your Bridge,” p. 1754.

<sup>64</sup> Joseph M. Pierre, “Culturally Sanctioned Suicide: Euthanasia, Seppuku, and Terrorist Martyrdom,” *World Journal of Psychiatry* 5, no. 1 (March 2015): 4-14.

<sup>65</sup> Andrew Rankin, *Seppuku: A History of Samurai Suicide* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Publishing 2011).



of what I mean. Meb Keflezighi, winner of the 2014 Boston Marathon and 2009 New York City Marathon was asked about how he trained. He said, “It’s important to have a routine. I usually run in the morning, when my body is fresh and unaffected by meals. *Designate a time and it will hold you accountable.*”<sup>66</sup> This elite runner, simply by having a plan, felt bound or precommitted to his plan.

Under these descriptions, I specify an agent voluntarily limiting her own future options or penalizing the exercise of those options by means of a commitment device, imposing at T1, certain binding consequences on the agent’s future self at T2. While I have chosen to stick with the single term, self-binding, other synonyms in addition to the ones above include: precommitment devices, commitment devices or self-control technology (as used in psychology, economics, game theory)<sup>67</sup>; Ulysses arrangements or Ulysses contracts (from Homeric myth, used almost exclusively in addiction recovery and medical contexts); self-directives or advance directives (mostly found in the medical field of palliative care and taken up in medical ethics).

The commitment devices employed for self-binding are merely the various means by which I limit my future options by voluntarily imposing consequences or by precluding

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<sup>66</sup> Meaghen Brown, “8 Training Secrets from Meb Keflezighi,” *Outside* (October 2014) 52. URL: <http://www.outsideonline.com/fitness/running/road-running/Meb-Keflezighi-Is-Still-Leaving-Everyone-in-His-Dust.html>

<sup>67</sup> Here are a few examples. Considered a modern pioneer in behavioral economics and game theory (cf. Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1960). Schelling was one of the first to go into some detail (see chapters 2 and 3) on commitment devices which he preferred to call “strategic moves.” See also, Gharad Bryan, Karlan Dean, and Scott Nelson, “Commitment Devices,” *Annual Review of Economics* 2, no. 1 (2010): 671-98; Isabelle Brocas, Juan D. Carrillo, and Mathias Dewatripont, “Commitment Devices under Self-Control Problems: An Overview,” in I. Brocas and J. Carrillo, eds., *The Psychology of Economic Decisions, Vol. II: Reasons and Choices* 49-66 (New York: Oxford University Press 2004); Janet Schwartz, Daniel Mochon, Lauren Wyper, Josiase Maroba, Deepak Patel, Dan Ariely, “Healthier by Precommitment” *Psychological Science* 25, no. 2, (February 2014): 538-546.

outcomes on my future options. This simple, preemptive act only seems counterintuitive, which I believe is due to its inverted character. That my intentionally imposing limits on my future personal options can actually strengthen personal autonomy amounts to a natural inverting of the traditional association of maximum freedom with personal autonomy. For one thing, the desire matrix itself needs examining. The desires and actions involved in self-binding might turn out to be a special kind of exercise of autonomy.

Think of this simple 1st order desire: Ulysses desires to hear the Sirens sing while also desiring not to die. But neither this nor its attending 2nd order desire (to want to have, or to be moved by, the 1st order desire) entails any willingness to self-bind so that the desire is effective. Even Frankfurt's 2nd order volition (to desire that the 1st order desire be his will), is also not the essential focus of self-binding. But as it must be a part of the analysis, let us call the foregoing Ulysses example a primary 1st order desire along with its necessary 2nd order volition. Even though the limiting of future options seems to be a kind of limiting of freedom, the self-binding case is not quite so simple. The same person both limits and is the entity being limited. I have called this an inversion case because of how this act functions in relation to freedom. I limit my options at T1 in order to free up more options for later—subjugate at T1 in order to liberate at T2. This experiential human discovery is intriguing and offers a strong psychic grip on so many who have employed its strategies to great personal advantage. With all of the above we have allowed ourselves at least enough definitional room to proceed to possible areas of application and further analysis.

### 1.3. AUTONOMY AND SELF-BINDING: FOUR REALMS OF PRACTICAL INTERFACE

1.3.1 Medical ethics concerns: Advanced medical directives are found in living wills and healthcare power of attorney legal documents.<sup>68</sup> They are essentially self-binding strategies in which a person accedes power or authority over oneself to another person or persons in the event of some form of incapacitation of the “Principal”, or that is the person initiating the self-binding strategy or commitment device. The concern in such cases involves the thorny issue of so-called medical paternalism or “substitute decision-making”<sup>69</sup> and what constitutes the “informed consent” of a patient.<sup>70</sup> Discerning the relevant authority is easily the most contentious issue here, though it can be spelled out in very precise legal language. Unfortunately, in more difficult end-of-life cases, no written or otherwise recorded medical directive exists. There is no formal, legal consent to ‘pull the plug’. There is no DNR (do not resuscitate) order whenever breathing has ceased or the heart has stopped beating. One remedy for this adverse circumstance is an advance directive or living will. This is simply commitment device which is meant to formalize a self-binding action as legally binding. In the legal realm of the medical industry, it has evolved as a helpful instrument for reducing conflict when medical decisions must be made in

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<sup>68</sup> AmericanBar.org, AllLaw.com and LegalZoom.com use “living will” and “advance directive” interchangeably. Another commonly used term is “health care proxy.” From a philosophical perspective see Agnieszka Jaworska, “Advance Directives and Substitute Decision-Making,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed. (Summer 2009). URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/advance-directives/>.

<sup>69</sup> Christian Coons and Michael Weber, Michael, eds., *Paternalism: Theory and Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2012).

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Ruth R. Faden and Tom L. Beauchamp, *A History and Theory of Informed Consent* (New York: Oxford University Press 1986); John K. Davis, “Precedent Autonomy, Advance Directives, And End-Of-Life Care,” in Bonnie Steinbeck, ed. *Oxford Handbook of Bioethics* 349-374 (New York: Oxford University Press 2007). See also I. Gremmen; G. Widdershoven; A. Beekman; R. Zuijderhoudt and S. Sevenhuijsen, “Ulysses Arrangements in Psychiatry: A Matter of Good Care?” *Journal of Medical Ethics* 34, no. 2 (February 2008): 77-80; Tom Walker, “Ulysses Contracts in Medicine,” *Law and Philosophy* 31, no. 1 (January 2012): 77-98.

circumstances where the Principal or the patient is incapacitated (due to advanced dementia<sup>71</sup>, coma or stroke, as examples) to such an extent that the person is unable to give informed consent. This particular medical directive can be seen as a way to retain autonomous self-reliance instead of having to resort to the uncertainties and unnecessary complications of some form of social reliance. This is a clear, paradigmatic example of how a self-binding action is expressly intended to strengthen rather than weaken personal autonomy. Of course, as one might imagine, the legal and ethical considerations are a massive area of concern, which I am unable to address in this writing.

1.3.2 Psychological issues: Voluntary option-limiting or action-penalizing strategies which I may impose upon myself can be used as a mental health strategy. In certain cases of chronic mental illness (for example bipolar disorder) a self-binding directive or Ulysses contract may be a helpful intervention to prevent harm to the person and/or others.<sup>72</sup> Self-binding requires a patient to intentionally differentiate what authority will be allowed to dictate the course of the patient's behavior with agreed upon limits.

a. Addiction recovery strategies. Recovery involving self-binding can occur in isolation or in community. The more successful strategies seem to occur in a social context, specifically a

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<sup>71</sup> Rebecca A. Dresser, "Ulysses and the Psychiatrists: A Legal and Policy Analysis of the Voluntary Commitment Contract," *Harvard Civil Rights Civil Liberties Law Review* 16 (1982): 777-854; also Dresser, "Autonomy Revisited: The Limits of Anticipatory Choices," in *Dementia and Aging: Ethics, Values, and Policy Choices* 71-85, Robert H. Binstock Stephen G. Post and Peter J. Whitehouse, eds. (Boston: Johns Hopkins University Press 1992); Ronald Dworkin, "Autonomy and the Demented Self," *The Milbank Quarterly* 64, Supplement 2: Medical Decision Making for the Demented and Dying (1986): 4-16.

<sup>72</sup> Ron Berghmans, Marja van der Zanden, "Choosing to Limit Choice: Self-Binding Directives in Dutch Mental Health Care," *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 35, no. 1 (Jan-Feb 2012): 11-18.

community of recovering addicts. The well-known 12-step recovery program dating from the 1930's has always incorporated group meetings with so-called sponsors or recovering addicts who are further along in the process who serve as authority figures in addition to the group itself. Then, the very first step is always an admission of powerlessness, which suggests that settling the authority issue (a topic that will come up later) in one's mind is central to the success of the recovery program.<sup>73</sup>

Self-binding even in the form of taking a pill or consenting to some chemical coercion, Antabuse (disulfiram) for alcoholism for example, involves a doctor (dominant authority) and patient (subservient acquiescent) relationship. Or it could involve 'institution as hegemon', maybe as large as the state itself with individual constituents in compliant agreement to mutually self-bind themselves for the greater good of the whole or the many. Individual citizens can allow themselves to be bound by the state in a certain way which would not be applicable to other citizens. Many countries, for example, now have laws to allow gambling addicts to be "voluntarily coerced" not to wager over a certain amount. This contractual self-binding arrangement, between a person and a gambling casino, bans the addict from wagering any more than a total preset amount of money.<sup>74</sup> The happy outcome for both the state and the gambling addict is that the addict herself can be offered at least a starting point for recovering from her

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<sup>73</sup>Craig Hanson, "Philosophical Perspectives on Theories of Addiction," *Thinking about Addiction: Hyperbolic Discounting and Responsible Agency* 1-12 (New York: Rodopi 2009).

<sup>74</sup> Cecil VanDevender, "How Self-Restriction Laws Can Influence Societal Norms and Address Problems of Bounded Rationality: Casino Self-Exclusion Laws," *Georgetown Law Journal* 96, no. 5 (June 2008): 1775-1806. See also Robert Ladouceur, Alex Blaszczynski and Daniel R. Lalande, "Pre-commitment in Gambling: A Review of the Empirical Evidence." *International Gambling Studies* 12, no. 2 (February 2012): 215-230. Available online—<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14459795.2012.658078>

addiction and the state is saved the cost of dealing with some of the many detrimental financial burdens placed upon other citizens on account of the number of gambling addicts in society who are bringing hardships upon their families and friends due to their addiction.

b. Other mental disorders. Beyond the familiar addictions there are a number of other mental disorders where self-binding strategies have been used with varying levels of success: obsessive-compulsive disorders, eating disorders, kleptomania, pyromania, agoraphobia and various other phobias. A friend who had been clinically diagnosed as severely agoraphobic wanted desperately to show me around the campus of the University of Mississippi in Oxford where he literally grew up, as he and his single mother lived in an apartment in a sorority house where she served as manager. But due to a big SEC football game that Friday, there were people everywhere. In an act of self-binding, he declared to me that if he did not go through with giving me a campus tour, he would confess to me a “deep, dark shameful secret” of something he had done back in his college days that no one else knew. The imagined shame of having to share such a story outweighed (at least temporarily) his paralyzing fear of crowds. I only mention this lengthy list of possibilities at this point in order to demonstrate the scope of practical applications for self-binding strategies, particularly in the field of psychological counseling for mental health.

1.3.3 Human flourishing strategies: Self-binding strategies as human flourishing strategies are widely recommended and practiced in both open and closed societies. A well-known tenet of Hindu, Buddhist and Stoic religious tradition, both ancient and modern, is the personal control of one’s desires and letting go of the Western fixation on material consumption. There is also the creative force which can be unleashed by self-binding which I analyze in some detail later on. Or, to use Ross Posnock’s term, renunciation, or the idea of intentionally

abandoning more culturally-approved ways of living in pursuit of something more.<sup>75</sup> But how to encourage without coercing is the public policy question for self-binding. Who or what will have the authority to bind me so that I may achieve some human flourishing end? Say I want to acquire or increase in myself the virtue self-reliance or the virtue of friendliness, in the spirit of the Aristotelian approach to ethics. Any number of self-binding techniques might be at one's disposal to develop the virtue of friendliness while avoiding its excesses or deficiencies. To foster a stronger character trait of friendliness I might join an elite social club with a number of prospective friends I would be interested in getting to know. In addition to the expensive, monthly dues, one of the requirements is to host a social gathering in my home. The costly fees plus the club's other social expectations might be seen as binding strategies that nudge me into the necessary human interactions that are necessary for friendships to blossom.

On a wider scale, a more socially-cohesive culture (as in the so-called Nordic model<sup>76</sup>) can trigger greater human flourishing, only if enough people self-bind in certain ways—honoring civic rules involving community involvement, public service, housing development, mass transit, health care and so on. But how can this happen without a certain amount of outright social coercion? Here is journalist Amy Choi's conclusion in her review of the book and TED Talk, *The Art of Choosing* by Sheena Iyengar, professor at Columbia Business School. "Yet complete radical freedom and individualism creates a life that can't be lived. Tyranny is unacceptable ... But somewhere between tyranny and radical freedom resides a mixture of constraints, social

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<sup>75</sup> Ross Posnock, *Renunciation: Acts of Abandonment by Writers, Philosophers, and Artists* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2016).

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Torben M. Andersen, Bengt Holmström, Seppo Honkapohja, Sixten Korkman, Hans Tson Söderström, and Juhana Vartiainen, *The Nordic Model: Embracing Globalization and Sharing Risks*, Research Institute of the Finnish Economy (Helsinki: Taloustieto Oy Publishing 2011). Available online at <https://economics.mit.edu/files/5726>

norms, legal constraints and individual freedom of choice that enables people to lead satisfying, meaningful and authentic lives.<sup>77</sup> What self-binding amounts to, on an individual level (the primary focus of this writing) is the tandem question that must be explored before it is pushed into the public policy arena. Successfully accomplishing projects, averting failures, avoiding procrastination, achieving success in one's chosen activities in life: these all contribute to human flourishing and are aided by self-binding.<sup>78</sup> But if I propose to be my own autonomous authority over myself, how is it that I am to yield to this other authority? With this question, I am alluding to the content of the chapters ahead. "Which I is I?" as the poet Theodore Roethke has so famously put it.<sup>79</sup> Ultimately, I must say that *both* the 'authority-I' and the 'acquiescing-I' will benefit and flourish whenever "I" intentionally limit some range of options that would otherwise be at my disposal all with the ultimate beneficial purpose of attaining some virtue I have set out to practice, which will lead to my own flourishing.

Perhaps the greatest virtue where self-binding is the central strategy is that of cultivating the capacity itself no matter which flourishing objective might be in view. Merely the awareness of a capacity can be a strength of itself. In today's language, so heavily influenced by pop psychology, a common term for this simple habit of the mind is delayed gratification.

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<sup>77</sup> Amy S. Choi, "How cultures around the world make decisions," review of TED Talk, *The Art of Choosing* by Sheena Iyengar, Oct 21, 2014. Available online: <https://ideas.ted.com/how-cultures-around-the-world-make-decisions/>; Sheena Iyengar, *The Art of Choosing* (New York: Hachette Group Books 2010).

<sup>78</sup> Jennifer Roback Morse, "No Families, No Freedom: Human Flourishing in a Free Society," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16, no. 1 (January 1999): 290-314. Economist Morse makes a compelling case for teaching self-binding strategies in the context of a family. "Without loving families, no society can long govern itself, for the family teaches the skills of individual self-governance" p. 290.

<sup>79</sup> Theodore Roethke, "In a Dark Time" from *Theodore Roethke: Selected Poems* (New York: Library of America 2005), 116.



Habituating this practice is considered a virtue for achieving most any worthwhile objective and an essential part of child development and maturation to adulthood. Put in economic terms, (again alluding to the chapters ahead) a self-binding act avoids the problem of instant gratification bias and has been empirically verified and dubbed “hyperbolic discounting” by behavioral economist, George Ainslie: “It begins with a startling experimental finding: People devalue a given future event at different rates, depending on how far away it is. This phenomenon means that our preferences are inherently unstable and entails our present selves pitted against what we can expect our future selves to want.”<sup>80</sup>

Of course, the concept is very old in philosophy.<sup>81</sup> Put in philosophy of action terms, let’s say I have an acute, possibly irrational desire for X along with a competing and conflicting rational desire for Y. Determining which desire is the one that I actually prefer is a distinction that forces me to have my desires in a face-off with my preferences. This is the issue that Michael Bratman attempts to describe with in his conative hierarchy notion of self-governing policies.<sup>82</sup> A desire is a conative state while a preference involves something cognitively more—a rational comparing and weighing of options. So, I can choose to severely limit my options for satisfying the desire for X if I also rationally recognize that it would be more advantageous for me if my conflicting or competing preference for Y wins out in the long run. A child learns to contract with parents concerning her immediate versus long-term desires—say for desserts or

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<sup>80</sup> George Ainslie, *Break-Down of Will* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2004), i. Hyperbolic discounting was first reported and demonstrated in George Ainslie, “Specious Reward: A Behavioral Theory of Impulsiveness and Impulse Control,” *Psychological Bulletin* 82, no. 4 (July 1975): 463-496.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Ross Harrison, “Discounting the Future,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series* 82, (1981-1982): 45-57

<sup>82</sup> Michael Bratman, “Autonomy and Hierarchy” (ch. 8) in *Structures of Agency* (New York: Oxford University Press 2007), 162-186.

between-meal snacks, or for play time with friends or mommy-daddy time or screen time with some video game, or for the purchase of toys or music recordings and so on. My own 10-year old daughter once deferred several immediate rewards like small amounts of allowance that might have gone to purchase any number of inexpensive toys, choosing instead to save her money for a larger prize, an entire video game system. Some can learn to swim against the human nature current and choose *not* to hyperbolically discount the future. We all know of children who start opting to deny themselves short-term rewards in favor of saving to buy a car or even to contribute to their college tuition fund. Such examples can be seen as self-binding strategies that contribute to human flourishing.

It appears then that one significant motivation to self-bind is whenever there is some recognized *prix ultime* preference in one's life. The famed neurologist, Oliver Sacks, wanted so desperately to complete a book he was working on, he said that he precommitted to himself to commit suicide if he did not finish it on time. And he said that he sincerely believed at the time that he would absolutely carry through with this extraordinary precommitment if he failed to complete the manuscript by the deadline. As it turned out he actually submitted the writing two weeks ahead of schedule.<sup>83</sup> The salient feature in this example, most would agree, is just how unbelievably resolute this man must have been inside his own mind and yet also how dissolute he must also have felt about his own weak will.

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<sup>83</sup> Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich, co-hosts, "Me, Myself and Muse: An Interview with Oliver Sacks" and "Help! What do you do when your own worst enemy is...you?" *RadioLab* Season 9, Episode 3, WNYC radio podcast. URL=  
<https://www.wnyc.org/radio/#/ondemand/117165> OR <http://www.radiolab.org/story/117165-help/> See also iTunes radiolab030811.mp3

To self-bind when faced with competing desires is challenging. However, in many ways the more difficult cases are those involving conflict between irrational and rational desires complicated by emotion or burdened by addiction or hampered by both. A diabetic may have an irrational desire for a sugary dessert along with a rational desire for a healthy, disease-free body. She delays gratifying X until the irrational desire subsides in intensity or she finds a substitute. She can aid her will to delay by means of commitment devices. These help defer the former in order to achieve the latter and involve an ‘acquiescent-self’ acceding to an ‘authority-self’. This sounds simple and easy but as any “sugar addict” can tell you, acceding to your own authority is anything but easy. Discovering the desire and the will to self-bind remains the biggest challenge.

With all of the above, we have come to one of the core considerations in ancient Greek philosophy. The attendant, ancient Greek virtues here are temperance, prudence, soberness, self-control or moderation, (all these words are used to translate the same Greek word σωφροσύνη *sophrosyne*),<sup>84</sup> self-mastery or self-governance (ἐγκράτεια *egkrateia*), self-discipline or self-restraint (αὐτοέλεγχος *autoelenchos*) which are all clearly related to the more modern (Kantian) notion of personal autonomy (αὐτονομία *autonomia*).<sup>85</sup> Something as basic as employing option-limiting strategies in order to bind oneself to a schedule of activity in a project aimed at achieving some worthy end, contributes to human flourishing and the achievement of ends, goals and projects.

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<sup>84</sup> The Greek word *sophrosyne* cannot be translated by any single English word, so says Hamilton and Cairns in their Princeton edition of Plato’s dialogues. As the highest ideal in Greek thought, the word was meant to comprehend two of the greatest sayings of the Delphi oracle, namely, “know thyself” and “nothing in excess.” Cf. Edith Hamilton, Huntington Cairns (eds.) and Lane Cooper (trans.), *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2005), 99.

<sup>85</sup> Ostwald, *Autonomia: Genesis and Early History*; see also Paul Formosa, “Kant’s Conception of Personal Autonomy,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 44, no. 3, (Fall 2013): 193-212.

1.3.4. Public policy and governance. Since the time of the ancient Greek city-states, social contract theory represented by a kind of group self-binding (*autonomía*) State has been the defining expression of *self*-governance. In such cases, the “self” is not the lone individual but instead a group of individuals who have contracted together to be bound by a set of mutually agreed upon laws. When a set of individuals agree to cede authority over certain aspects of their lives thereby limiting certain options they might’ve had otherwise, then these groups were described as *autonomía*—self-governing.<sup>86</sup> The Athenian in Plato’s “Laws” viewed the State and its laws as a kind of self-binding device, or a “training in self-command.”<sup>87</sup> Such a “set of rules” was to be “used to cultivate moderate habits [whether those in military service should be forbidden to drink wine was the specific habit under discussion. The set of rules was seen] ... simply as a device for mastering [such pleasures].”<sup>88</sup>

Of course, the contemporary standard worry is the issue of power or authority. I will take up this problem in the last chapter. When the State, as the duly ceded authority or power, intervenes paternalistically with mandates or laws which coerce or quietly “nudge” the populace to ostensibly self-binding actions then the all-important self (including individual rights, issues of privacy, etc.) in self-binding begins to be eroded by authoritarian or paternalistic public policy actions. Clearly discerning the appropriate authority is the big concern here. The *individual*

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<sup>86</sup> Ostwald, *Autonomia*.

<sup>87</sup> Translated phrase from Hamilton and Cairns, *Dialogues of Plato*, “Laws” 673e, p. 1270.

<sup>88</sup> John M. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works*, “Laws” 673e (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing 1997), 1364. In addition to self-mastery over the pleasures of wine, Plato’s Athenian later references Iccus of Tarentum, a famed athlete of Olympia and his abstaining from sexual pleasures for the sake of apparently his own personally-imposed set of rules for athletic training: “his passion for victory, his pride in his calling, the *combined fortitude self-command of his character* that, as the story goes, he never once came near a woman.” Cf. Hamilton & Cairns (eds.), Cooper (trans.), *Collected Dialogues of Plato*, “Laws” VIII, 840a, p. 1405. [Italics mine.]

rationally limiting her own personal options is quite different from the State doing it for her, “for her own good.”<sup>89</sup>

Here again, the political philosophy aspects of self-binding are mostly beyond the scope of this writing even though there are important commonalities to examine along the way. The sociologist Jon Elster is quite famous for incorporating both individual and socio-political aspects into his analyses of self-binding.<sup>90</sup> There are clear parallels between the original etymology of autonomy from the Greek word, *autonomía*, which related originally to political governance and then the evolving use of the word (mostly via Kant) to refer to moral and personal autonomy. That is to say, the procedure for how autonomy works in an external political sphere is remarkably similar to the internal mechanisms of personal autonomy. Let the autonomous State be the person and the social contract be considered the agreement within the person (authorized by the same person) to self-bind. The challenges and conflicts of self-governance that arise internally within individuals might be profitably examined by comparing them to conflicts involving social contract self-governance within the State.

These four realms of practical interface serve as real-life reminders of the immediacy of the topic and will come up often throughout the remainder of this writing. Now that we have autonomy and self-binding definitions in place and the more salient practical applications noted, it is time to have a look at a few conceptual traversals in the philosophy of action.

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<sup>89</sup>Cf. Mark D. White, *The Manipulation of Choice: Ethics and Libertarian Paternalism* (New York: Macmillan 2013). For an Existentialist or Continental philosophical treatment of this problem see Richard Schmitt, *Beyond Separateness: The Social Nature of Human Beings—Their Autonomy, Knowledge and Power* ch. 8, “Power and Empowerment” 149-176 (San Francisco: Westview Press 1995).

<sup>90</sup> See for example, Elster, “Don't Burn Your Bridge,” *Texas Law Review* 2003.

## Chapter 2. Autonomy and Self-Binding: Traversals with Other Important Concepts

I turn now to a précis of specific traversals so as to allow the topic of self-binding to slowly unfold, from varied strands within the academic tapestry of the philosophy of action and agency. There are admittedly very wide domains of philosophical relevance to consider. It is often taken as obvious that maximizing the number of options for action in turn maximizes a person's experience of freedom, which in turn maximizes one's sense of personal autonomy. On the other hand, there is an age-old, widespread practice that defies the obvious, even suggesting that greater freedom might be found in the limitation of options.<sup>91</sup> I am talking about a truly ancient, human self-restraint tactic that involves intentionally limiting one's present options in order to achieve a future goal. Think of Homer's myth of Ulysses and the Sirens or the Spanish conquistador, Hernán Cortés burning his own ships in order to bind himself and his men to their mission of exploration.<sup>92</sup> In fact, the term "Ulysses contract" is a standard term in academic literature ranging from medical ethics to gambling legislation. Here is an intriguing human practice which can be comprehended conceptually within the philosophy of action. While I will mostly set aside the possible moral psychology implications, I see at least three philosophical

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<sup>91</sup> Tyler Cowen, "Self-Constraint Vs. Self-Liberation," *Ethics* 101, no. 2 (January 1991): 360-373; Jerome B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy* (New York: Oxford University Press 1998). Lubomira Radoilska, "Autonomy and Ulysses Arrangements" in L. Radoilska, ed. *Autonomy and Mental Disorder* 252-280 (New York: Oxford University Press 2012).

<sup>92</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey* Bk XII.153-165, p. 276, Robert Fagles trans. (New York: Penguin Books 1996). Ulysses: "I told my shipmates, ... 'I alone was to hear [the Sirens'] voices, ... / but you must bind me with tight chafing ropes / so I cannot move a muscle, bound to the spot, / erect at the mast-block, lashed by ropes to the mast. / And if I plead, commanding you to set me free, / then lash me faster, rope on pressing rope.'" Because of the fame of this classic example, self-restriction laws are sometimes referred to as Ulysses contracts; for Cortés example, cf. "burn your boats (or bridges)" John Ayto, *Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms* (New York: Oxford University Press 2010), 49.

domains that can be clearly implicated in the act of self-binding—autonomous agency, volitional necessity and instrumental rationality.

## 2.1. AGENCY AND AUTONOMY: Korsgaard and Kant

Any account of agency requires clarifying the distinction between acting (undertaking) and suffering (undergoing). There is obviously a difference between what we do and what befalls us. Soran Reader's point is that there is a built-in bias in tying agency with only one kind of action and thereby unjustifiably degrading persons who find themselves in the role of patients. We need a new word bank to describe the action of reciprocity or patiency as well as the action of agency. That either type of act can be characterized as autonomous, especially the former, is worth contemplating and this is precisely where I want to insert the prototype of self-binding. Think for a moment, of what happens when an agent *voluntarily* puts herself in the place of a patient. The act of self-binding appears to be located directly at the axis of this distinction between doing and 'being done to'. But does this special kind of acting that intentionally gives up an array of options circumscribed both temporally and circumstantially, amount to a kind of restricting of personal autonomy? It seems undeniable that this is the case, despite the added dimension of intentionality.

But restricting is not necessarily threatening even though self-binding might be labeled a threat to autonomy. Personal autonomy implies freedom of choice within a specified set restrained by individual circumstances. If these circumstances are restricted or restrained by any entity other than those entities which are pre-given parameters of the set itself, then there is said to be a loss of autonomy. However, the condition itself, of restrained circumstance within pre-given parameters, is not a necessary and sufficient condition to claim a loss of personal autonomy. This is one simple way to differentiate how self-binding and personal autonomy may

coexist. And not only coexist but even give mutual support for the other's intelligible co-occurrence.

The threat to personal autonomy from self-binding might seem apropos if, an otherwise autonomous, agent self-labels thereby feels diminished in some way despite voluntarily making herself a patient as part of a self-binding commitment. If she experiences this shift in self-image despite knowing that she has purposely imposed these absolute limits upon her options, then the threat to autonomy might be real. Say I decide that in order to lose some weight and get into better physical shape, I will sell my car and either walk or ride a bicycle some distance every day to the college campus where I work. Going without a vehicle severely limits my options for when I can go where I might want to go. If I want to leave campus to go someplace else for an appointment I have to calculate in advance the time it takes to get to a station to catch a bus or a train to my ultimate desired destination. I put myself at the mercy of others' schedules and my own physical stamina on a given day. In ceding over the governance of myself as it relates to my time and energy and flexibility of alternative action, I may experience a certain lack or even a vague threat to my autonomy. Yet, as I explain this chosen course of option-limiting to others a typical response might be to laud my action as taking control of my own health with all this self-coerced walking. Have I changed the definition of agency or autonomy by an act of self-binding? Not at all. But adding this self-binding scenario into the theorizing soup of human agency necessarily affects the flavor of what it means to be an autonomous agent.

For example, in Book IV [430e] of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates, speaking to his familiar interlocutor Glaucon, claims to not know what people mean when they use the term self-control—"Yet isn't the expression 'self-control' ridiculous? The stronger self that does the controlling is the same as the weaker self that gets controlled, so that only one person is referred



to in all such expressions.”<sup>93</sup> While appearing to dismiss a non-unified agency view of personal autonomy and self-control in this case, later on Plato seems to both embrace and imaginatively expand the picture with his now famous chariot and ship owner allegories. Here is the tripartite soul composed of reason as the charioteer, guiding two winged steeds, representing the “spirited” (emotion) and the “appetitive” (desire). Or in the case of the ship allegory, the ship owner, the captain or navigator and the unruly sailors, mostly corresponding to the tripartite soul presented in the chariot allegory.<sup>94</sup>

It is important to observe how agency and autonomy are affected whenever a self-initiated ostensive curtailment of these human features occurs. This is all the more an issue for our own time given that elevating human autonomy has been at the center of the Enlightenment project particularly since Kant.<sup>95</sup> That is to say, intentionally limiting one’s options appears to be an impediment if not an outright contradiction to the traditional Enlightenment view of personal autonomy as giving oneself sovereign, law-making power over the self. Psychologist and social theorist, Barry Schwartz famously summarizes the issue: “In terms of fetishizing the idea of choice, the U.S. is the absolute pinnacle. We want to be able to choose everything that matters, as well as the things that do not.”<sup>96</sup> It might be that self-binding could even undermine the

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<sup>93</sup> Plato, *Republic* IV.430e, trans. G.M.A. Grube in John M. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co. 1997), 1062.

<sup>94</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* 246a–254e, trans. Christopher Rowe, New York: Penguin Classics, 2005; and *Republic* IV.439d–442c; VI.488a–e, Cooper ed., *Plato: Complete Works*, p. 1111.

<sup>95</sup> Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What Is Enlightenment?’” *Berlinische Monatsschrift* (*Berlin Monthly*), Friedrich Gedike and Johann Erich Biester, eds. (December 1784); see also Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: ‘What Is Enlightenment?’* trans. H.B. Nisbet (New York: Penguin Books 1991); Lewis Hinchman, “Autonomy, Individuality and Self-Determination,” in James Schmidt, *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-century Answers and Twentieth-century Questions* 488–516 (Berkeley: University of California Press 1996).

<sup>96</sup> Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*, revised edition. (New York: Ecco Press 2016), 4.

Kantian notion of self-constitution that Christine Korsgaard defends.<sup>97</sup> That is to say, any sovereign-like self-legislation that intentionally limits the range of one's options would not seem to be in keeping with the spirit of a more absolute Kantian notion of autonomous freedom. Kant's own conception of moral autonomy does recognize this apparent contradiction that I am trying to depict. He toys with these very issues which self-binding calls into question.

If the 'I' that imposes obligation [*das Verpflichtende Ich*] is taken in the same sense as the I that is put under obligation [*dem Verpflichteten*], a duty to oneself is a self-contradictory concept. For the concept of duty contains the concept of being passively constrained [*einer passive Nötigung*] (I am bound [*verbunden*]). But if the duty is a duty to myself, I think of myself as binding and so as actively constraining (I, the same subject, am imposing obligation [*Ich bin . . . der Verbindende*]). And the proposition that asserts a duty to myself (I ought to bind myself) would involve being bound to bind myself (a passive obligation that was still, in the same sense of the relation, also an active obligation), and hence a contradiction.<sup>98</sup>

To take the matter even beyond mere Kantian incongruity, at least one contemporary philosopher actually proclaims that self-binding is morally wrong because personal morality should be like political morality, invoking the likes of Plato and John Rawls.<sup>99</sup> Just as we should leave others to be autonomous, that is, not coerce them (other persons, other states) to actions that we deem best for them, Sebo says, so too our "day selves" should not coerce or bind our "night selves" or vice versa. In this rather schizophrenic picture of non-unified agency, each self, residing within the selfsame person is deemed sovereign and so ought *never* to be option-limited, or bound or otherwise coerced by the other self. Of course, the problem with this picture is

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<sup>97</sup> Christine Korsgaard, *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press 2008).

<sup>98</sup> Immanuel Kant, "The Metaphysics of Morals," ch. 6 in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary J. McGregor (New York: Cambridge University Press 1996), 417.

<sup>99</sup> Sebo, "Morality of Self-Binding."

immediately apparent: a recognition of non-unified agency is not an assertion of binary independent entities in opposition to each other—day-self versus night-self.

I respond to these objections, these imagined threats to one's agency, with one of the most ordinary and pragmatic intuitions: if I can do it, then it must not be a real threat to my agency. That is, if I, whoever the "I" might be, can do it (self-bind) intentionally, with an expressed, beneficial to myself, purpose in view and I can succeed in my original intention (the intent of a T1 act/Ulysses contract, i.e. hear the siren's song and live to tell the tale) then this is enough to convince me that I am not diminishing myself as a person when I employ such a tactic as self-binding. The Latin apothegm, *impōnit finem sapiens et rebus honestis* is fitting: "The wise man sets bounds even to his innocent desires."<sup>100</sup> Also, to be clear this is not the age-old notion of voluntary slavery that Rousseau inveighed against in defending his own notion of a social contract<sup>101</sup> or that John Stuart Mill opposed in his critique of paternalism.<sup>102</sup> With self-binding, the authorizing self is both the enslaver and the enslaved. As a result, upon deeper examination, such a self-binding action can actually strengthen one's agency, even though the process appears in a rather inverted fashion. This is what caused Kant and others to raise the aforementioned potential contradiction.

But remarkably self-binding is an ancient, self-imposed convention praised by religious ascetics in joyful appreciation for their own chains. Rather than bemoaning a sense of lost autonomy, the clanging of the monastery gates behind Thomas Merton was a happy sound of

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<sup>100</sup> Juvenal, *Satire 6*, 444, eds. Lindsay Watson and Patricia Watson (New York: Cambridge University Press 2017), 71.

<sup>101</sup> Williamson M. Evers, "Social Contract: A Critique," *Journal of Libertarian Studies* 1, no.3 (Summer 1977): 185-194.

<sup>102</sup> Richard J. Arneson, "Mill versus Paternalism," *Ethics: An International Journal of Social, Political, and Legal Philosophy* 90, no. 4 (July 1980): 470-489.

liberty for him. This is perhaps the mystic's favorite paradox wherein self-binding becomes self-liberating—that enigmatic act of the person as agent discovering a deepened sense of the self by voluntarily choosing to be the person as patient in a place where the self can experience a kind of sublime sense of freedom. In contemporary times, as a Cistercian monk, the late Thomas Merton remains one of the most well-known and widely-studied religious mystics in the world. While the preservation of spirituality, the solitude of privacy, and the beautification of the soul (or one's interior life) are all important motivations for self-binding, the asceticism of the religious hermit also seems to be less about self-reliance and more about transcendent dependence. “So Brother Matthew,” writes Merton, “locked the gate behind me and I was enclosed in the four walls of my new freedom.”<sup>103</sup> It is easy to see Merton's inspiration in the words of the revered Mahatma Gandhi. “[N]othing less than self-surrender [is] the price for the only real freedom that is worth having. When a man thus loses himself, he immediately finds himself in the service of all that lives.”<sup>104</sup>

So, where is this imagined loss or damage to agency to be found in the special case of self-coercion which we call self-binding? I am not seeing any real loss in personal autonomy owing to the self-endorsed realization of a person's own aims as a result of the action. There is nothing demonstrably lost in the structure of one's agency when an agent chooses patiency, that is, deliberately chooses to limit her options for a time for a distinctly and personally beneficial purpose. If the so-called day-self has made a rational decision to do X, knowing full well that the night-self will try to resist, delay or undo such a decision, there appears a powerful strategy at

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<sup>103</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co. 1948), 372. The chapter where this quotation is found is entitled, “The Sweet Savor of Liberty.”

<sup>104</sup> Mohandas K Gandhi, “The Eternal Duel,” *Young India* 10 (December 20, 1928):420. See also Thomas Merton, ed. *Gandhi On Non-Violence*, (New York: New Directions Publishing 1965).

“day-self’s” disposal—the power to anticipate and so preempt this weak-willed behavior in a deliberate option-limiting act of self-binding. The imagined ethical wrongs to the self can be self-adjudicated the next morning by the day-self with its cool reason in plenty of time for the night-self to have slept off the previous night’s hot passion.<sup>105</sup>

Take the matter of threats to autonomous agency a step further. The subject of addictions and irresistible compulsions gets discussed under the heading, “disorders of agency.”<sup>106</sup> Therapists applaud and even attempt to train their client addicts to practice some form or other of self-binding. A counselor might say, “When you know that you will be weak-willed and tempted to drink during this social function that you are required by your work to attend, why not make an informal contract with a trusted friend to go with you to the event and prevent you from drinking by coercion if necessary.” After several practice runs with the trusted friend you find less and less need for this self-binding tactic until a point comes when you feel confident enough to go to an event that includes social-drinking by yourself and not drink. We might even go so far as to propose, at this point, that your agency has been strengthened.

Here is a straightforward, ordinary example of how a form of cure for this particular disorder of agency could be intentionally limiting oneself to the deliberate “orders (or self-

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<sup>105</sup> This is Elster’s picture (drawn from 17<sup>th</sup> cent. French moralist philosopher, Jean de la Bruyère) of the three categories of human motivation: interest, passion and reason that I will mention again. Self-binding decisions motivated by reason typically turn out to be more efficacious and valuable than ones motivated by passion, certainly more so when the choice is between self-binding and refusing to self-bind. Cf. Jon Elster, “Don’t Burn Your Bridge,” *Texas Law Review* 81, no. 7 (June 2003) and Jean de La Bruyère, *Characters* (1688), trans. Edward Fertig (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1992).

<sup>106</sup> Hanna Pickard, “Responsibility without Blame: Philosophical Reflections on Clinical Practice,” in KWM Fulford, Martin Davies, Richard Gipps, George Graham, Tim Thornton and Giovanni Stanghellini, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry* 1134-1154 (New York: Oxford University Press 2013).

orders) of patency.” Self-binding might well be described as an “order of patency” whereby a person discovers a deeper sense of personhood when the capacity to submit oneself in a certain way is part of one’s repertoire of person-building skills. I make myself the patient of the trusted friend until I recover a stronger sense of my own autonomous agency. In other words, in my “do-it-yourself” self-binding act, I mentally check myself in as a patient under orders, so as to cure a disorder of my agency, namely akrasia. Or, if one prefers another term for this lack or deficiency, my perceived inability to control myself except by acquiescing to some exterior device, which I allow to effectively limit the options at my disposal. This is not to say that self-binding ought be viewed as a kind of magical cure for akrasia; only to say that when viewed in a particular way, the agent-turned-patient, in an intentionally self-bound circumstance, presents at least one potent antidote to the all too human scourge of akrasia.

But it appears obvious in the case of Ulysses that the binding we deliberately undertake may not be due to the disorder of a weak will, but instead due to the overwhelming nature of the temptation itself—an inducement with the power to weaken the strongest hearts. Rather than the cliché, “every person has their price”, let this be more along the lines of the fabled Achilles heel or that other cliché, “all of us have at least one chink in our armor.” Which is to say, no matter how strong the will, there will be circumstances beyond our power of control. Circumstance coupled with opportunity bring down the strongest among us. The most powerfully autonomous among us, possessing an incomparable agential strength of will cannot of ourselves prevail over all allurements. In these cases we see very clearly the need to enthrall ourselves with an opposing power, a power that we submit to as ‘patients acted upon’ rather than as ‘agents initiating acts’. Thus, our traversal with autonomous agency appears in the form of a reliable rescue in just such circumstances.

In either case, whenever we try to describe self-binding we are simply pointing to an actual event or process of events in the experience of autonomous agents intentionally yielding control of our choices to some other entity or individual and within a set temporal boundary. The event itself encapsulates a unique aspect of personal autonomy that involves intentionally treating oneself as a patient. We are analyzing a powerful human faculty that I will call “autonomous patency”, not a necessary or sufficient condition of autonomy, but an augmenting competency that can be practiced and used to great effect.

Here then is the internal progression of autonomous patency as I conceive it.

I. Cognizance. Awareness comes first, particularly of three things: that my rational, strong-willed self prefers  $P$  over  $\sim P$ ; that I can have moments of weak will (*akrasia*) and that in those moments, my predictably otiose self ends up desiring  $\sim P$  over  $P$ .

II. Causal activity. The progression of causal activity proceeds as follows: 1) An internal promise, or commitment to one’s self, necessarily combined with 2) actions either done separately or in concert. The action may then involve a simple irreversible action or a triggering action. Examples of the irreversible action would be the addict who flushes the pills or pours out the booze or Hernando Cortez burning his ships at Veracruz. There may also be an *activating* component which sets in motion an irreversible self-binding process. Here, there are intermediaries—the men under Ulysses’ command who tie him to the mast, for example. Or an intermediary could be just an automated, electronic process shutting down a person’s line of credit at a casino if a predetermined debt ceiling is reached. These intermediaries help facilitate the preauthorized self-binding. Still, the ultimate outcome is almost as certain as it would be with the simpler, solitary action. Think of someone with a credit card addiction using the personnel of the U.S. Postal Service to mail a cut-up credit card back to the credit card company with a note

asking them to close the account. There are many examples like this in the world of personal finance consulting. The idea is simple: the best way to resist temptation is to never be tempted!<sup>107</sup> One way to not be tempted is to engage in self-binding.

III. Consequences. We subsequently observe some other action either being avoided or insured, depending upon the autonomous patient's intention and will. The efficacy of autonomous patency depends upon both temporal contingencies and a potentially strengthened will due to the practiced repetition of self-binding actions in the past. Behavioral economists use the term "intertemporal choice" which describes how an individual's current decisions affect what options become available in the future.<sup>108</sup> As self-binding decisions are enacted regularly over time, new options not otherwise available, open up. The physical discipline of athletes would be an example—from strength conditioning routines to complex game strategies that must be practiced over and over. In psychology the relevant term is "automaticity of action".<sup>109</sup> Self-binding lies at the nexus of autonomy and agency by providing us with a concrete illustration of an act which is both an undertaking and an undergoing that delivers positive consequences. While its efficacy is not absolute it does appear to augment the agent/patient in her intentions.

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<sup>107</sup> J.D. Roth, "How to Use Barriers and Pre-Commitment to Automatically Do the Right Thing," *MoneyBoss.com Blog*, December 10, 2015. URL=<http://moneyboss.com/how-to-use-barriers-and-pre-commitment-to-automatically-do-the-right-thing/>

<sup>108</sup> Cf. Christopher F. Chabris, David I. Laibson, and Jonathon P. Schuldt, "Intertemporal Choice" in Steven N. Durlauf and Lawrence E. Blume, *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics* 168-177, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2008; George Loewenstein, Daniel Read, Roy Baumeister, eds. *Time and Decision: Economic and Psychological Perspectives of Intertemporal Choice*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation 2003.

<sup>109</sup> Thalia Wheatley and Daniel M. Wegner, "Automaticity of Action, Psychology of," in Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Bates, eds., *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (New York: Elsevier Science Ltd.), 991-993.



## 2.2. VOLITIONAL NECESSITY AND SCHIZOTYPY: Frankfurt and Luther

In philosophy of action, part of the philosopher's task is to discern whether there are normative reasons for an action such as self-binding. But in the case of self-binding the issue of motivation gets tricky. Say, at time T1 I am highly motivated not to smoke a cigarette. But I also know absolutely that at time T2 I will definitely *not* be so motivated. If, as Davidson and others have noted, a normative reason for action must satisfy a certain motivation requirement,<sup>110</sup> then the following question arises. At which time am I being rational—when I desire at T1 to bind myself, or when I have the opposite desire at T2? Opposing desires are a central concern. The point being that at both T1 and T2, I may very well be highly motivated. Ulysses is highly motivated as he shouts and begs for his men to unbind him from the mast and row his ship even closer to certain disaster. But irrationality may not always be so obvious.

2.2.1 Necessitation and the volition to self-bind. Then, tied in closely with motivation there is the matter of volition, a necessitation of the will, as Frankfurt puts it. This is where we need to look more carefully at what it means to have a motivation and subsequently a volition to self-bind. Self-binding as an action involves more than just having an idea to act in a way that shuts off certain options completely and then following through with this idea. According to Frankfurt, one can have a volitional necessity for or against an action which is inextricably tied to more than just cognition. Something deeper is going on.

It [volitional necessity] is manifestly pertinent as well to our attitudes, to our choices, and to our actions. So far as these are concerned, many people have believed that *constraining the will* of the agent impairs, and at the limit may be altogether incompatible with, his freedom. In my opinion, this is far from being the case. *The grip of volitional necessity may provide, in certain matters, an*

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<sup>110</sup> Cf. Maria Alvarez, "Reasons for Action: Justification, Motivation, Explanation", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed. (Winter 2017). URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/reasons-just-vs-expl/#NormReas>

*essential condition of freedom; indeed, it may actually be in itself liberating. A number of my essays are devoted to exploring ways in which volitional necessities of one sort or another facilitate, or are essential to, an autonomy that they might be thought to diminish or to preclude.*<sup>111</sup> [Italics mine]

Since “constraining the will” is at the heart of the incongruity related to self-binding and autonomous freedom, there is an obvious worry. How can I *will* to constrain my own will? Or is that even possible? Where and how does any volitional necessity secure a berth within the apparatus of the human will? Of course, we must first acknowledge that if someone else constrains me *against my will* then I experience a loss, to some degree or another, of my personal autonomy, or my freedom to do as I please. This much seems uncontroversial. Or so it would seem. But if I am the one who constrains me in a manner that is at some specific point in time a constraining, which is against my will, then there is an oddity in the picture. It is as if I split myself and part of me becomes the “someone else” constrainer and the other part, the constraineed. How can this be? Harry Frankfurt has stepped into this picture with his notion of volitional necessity. He wants to claim that the will constrained in a certain way (a sense of volitional necessity) can actually facilitate and be essential to my autonomy itself.<sup>112</sup> But how is it even possible that I could ever *will* one action and simultaneously constrain my will against that same action? After all, a will constrained by one’s self presumes a sense of need for the constraint. And furthermore, if this scenario is even possible, how could we ever claim that self-constraint does not violate personal autonomy?

In his essay, “Concerning the Freedom and Limits of the Will,” Frankfurt lays the groundwork for the case that rather than impairing the agent’s freedom, self-constraint, [an act of

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<sup>111</sup> Harry Frankfurt, *Necessity, Volition and Love*, p. x.

<sup>112</sup> Harry Frankfurt, “The Importance of What We Care About” *Synthese* 53, no. 2 (November 1982): 264-266.

self-binding would be one type of self-constraint], is actually liberating and facilitating to autonomy.<sup>113</sup> Again, philosophers are still trying to explain how all this willing against our own wills can take place. Or, maybe this is the wrong way to put it. Frankfurt seems to think so. His “volitional necessity” formulation, does not concern itself with the normative. He prefers instead to describe what he believes is going on when we claim to act or refrain from acting for reasons. We are given a theory to explain what it is to be volitionally necessitated (as opposed to logical or causal necessitation) while only speculating as to how or why this human condition of the will comes about.

That is, Frankfurt is more interested in describing what appears to him to be occurring inside the person who is volitionally necessitated rather than delving very far into the normative hows and whys of persons who find themselves in such a state. Recall from the beginning that I have been using the puzzling act of self-binding to extend Frankfurt’s intuitions about a volitional necessity which is self-imposed leading to a personal sense of liberation. At one point in Frankfurt’s early reflections, he comes close to equating volitional necessity with an act of self-binding as though such a voluntarily self-imposed action at T1 can turn into an involuntary condition at T2. I claim that when the temporal aspect (a necessary component of self-binding) is allowed into Frankfurt’s equation, then the autonomously-imposed vs. heteronomously-imposed or the voluntarily-imposed vs. involuntarily-imposed action dilemma becomes comprehensible. Consider what Frankfurt has to say on this odd self-imposed versus *not* self-imposed conundrum of volitional necessity.

To be sure, people do often force themselves to act in certain ways - for instance, when they are strongly tempted to act otherwise. But the strenuous exertion of

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<sup>113</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, “Concerning the Freedom and Limits of the Will,” *Philosophical Topics* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 119-130.

will power in cases of those kinds is fully voluntary. The agent can discontinue it whenever he likes.<sup>114</sup>

2.2.2 Frankfurt's volitional necessity dilemma. The involuntarily-imposed carries the stigma of coercion while the self-imposed is more of an inner, almost mysterious, compulsion since volitional necessity cannot be the result of strenuous exertion of will power. Now consider an act of self-binding wherein the agent gives up voluntary control for the purpose of avoiding giving in to temptations to act otherwise. Whenever Frankfurt describes the self-imposed facet of volitional necessity he is coming very close to T1 in the self-binding scenario. When this self-imposed necessity is maintained involuntarily, he has just described T2 in self-binding, where the agent no longer has an option.

On the other hand, even if volitional necessity is self-imposed there must be some respect in which it is imposed or maintained involuntarily. The condition that it be self-imposed helps to account for the fact that it is liberating rather than coercive - i.e., the fact that it supports the person's autonomy rather than being opposed to or independent of his will. ... *It may seem difficult to understand how volitional necessity can possibly be at the same time both self-imposed and imposed involuntarily*, or how it is possible to avoid the conclusion that an agent who is constrained by volitional necessity must be simultaneously both active and passive with respect to the same force.<sup>115</sup>

Frankfurt then proposes to get around this apparent dilemma by suggesting three lines of analysis: 1) we are still talking about the same agent's will and not someone else's will; 2) the agent's will does not necessarily have to be under his own voluntary control; and 3) in addition, the fact that this agent cares about (the notion of care is a theme in the essay) and is not passive about his necessitation, is a significant fact about that agent's will. So this flanking move by Frankfurt, claiming a non-voluntaristic aspect to his identification theory allows him to "construe care as something that does not fall under the voluntary control of the subject. Cares are non-

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<sup>114</sup> Frankfurt, *Importance of What We Care About*, p. 88.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

voluntarily imposed ... [w]hat we care about is not for us to decide,” says Katrien Schaubroeck in support.<sup>116</sup> Frankfurt goes even so far as to say, “A person’s will is real only if its character is not absolutely up to us.”<sup>117</sup>

But this picture seems incomplete. For one thing, Frankfurt nowhere gives us a complete accounting for what he imagines a mental state of caring really is. How can this mental state of caring be somehow independent of a person’s proprietorship of it? Frankfurt’s first point of explanation for the dilemma is already obvious. The question is not *that* it is the case but *how* it can be the case that we are talking about the same agent’s will. As to the second point, philosophers have largely acknowledged, at least since Hume, that a person’s will, dominated as it is by “passions”, may not be under her voluntary control, yet still be correctly characterized as her will.<sup>118</sup> How this can be the case is still a hotly debated area in philosophy of action and in moral philosophy. The third point suggests that having an endorsing (not passive) and caring attitude outflanks the difficulty of a volition that must be both self-imposed and imposed voluntarily. But an attitude about a difficulty is not a resolution of the difficulty itself.

2.2.3 Possible remedies for Frankfurt’s dilemma. These may be summarized as temporal, obedience, and consequent-sensitive features. This extremely powerful, ‘not up to us’ necessity of the will that Frankfurt wants to assert, ends up with a shaky assumption that such a state of constancy is not uncommon and is accomplished in the manner Frankfurt describes. Yet, here is

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<sup>116</sup> Katrien Schaubroeck, *The Normativity of What We Care About: A Love-Based Theory of Practical Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Leuven University Press 2013), 149.

<sup>117</sup> Frankfurt, *Necessity, Volition and Love*, p. 100.

<sup>118</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, original 3-vol. by Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press 1739-1740 (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications 2003), 295. Cf. the discussion at Rachel Cohon, “Hume’s Moral Philosophy,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed. (Fall 2010). URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=hume-moral>

this puzzling conflict in its appearance within us. Is it self-imposed, other-imposed, or is it both? And if it is the latter how can this possibly be the case? What might have strengthened Frankfurt's attempted resolution of the apparent dilemma is first, a supplemental recognition that we are temporally extended agents and what this entails, second is the powerful human instinct to obey a perceived authority, and third, a recognition of and willingness to focus on the negative consequences of a behavior. As it turns out, all three of these conditions can be empirically designated and described under the heading of normal schizotypal behavior in otherwise non-pathological individuals—an idea I will explain a little later. In short, as temporally extended agents, we are inclined over time to vacillate in both our intentions and our will to follow through with our intentions; we also have proclivities to either submissively obey perceived authorities or defiantly rebel and disobey; and further, we often tend to ignore or defy the negative consequences of our actions.

These common realities of human nature can help account for the self-imposed plus involuntarily-imposed difficulty or dilemma that Frankfurt has introduced. Again, in summary, the recognition of our temporality, obedience issues with authority and our consequence-ignoring tendencies can all be contributing factors to explain how our discovering a sense of volitional necessity can appear as “at the same time both self-imposed and imposed involuntarily.” While this characterization of the case may help explain an enigmatic aspect of volitional necessity, it might also mitigate the exceptionality of the notion of volitional necessity itself. Given these human propensity observations, the line of distinction between volitional necessity and unwilling addiction could turn out to be more blurred than first thought. Before we consider contraindicating examples, let's look at the three features I have proposed (temporality, obedience and consequences) one by one with the temporality issue first.

## Temporality

Temporal extended agency is inescapable. We may reflect upon or, remain unreflective regarding our motivations. We may make plans to carry out some action or maybe we intentionally or unintentionally avoid making plans. In all of these circumstances, we unavoidably perform all our actions and make our choices within a temporal context. Whenever we take this inescapable element into consideration, a unified, yet often divergent will, starts to make more sense. Choices cannot be made in a time vacuum. The caprice of the human will over time is the primary impetus for devising some binding event in advance of a temptation to do X or to do otherwise than X. Since we are clearly temporally extended agents, affected by events over time, this condition of our agency is a truly profound consideration that may not always be weighed in our descriptions of how the human will might function or fail to function, particularly in cases of conflict.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Several have contributed ideas regarding temporality, notably: Michael E. Bratman, "Reflection, Planning and Temporally Extended Agency," *The Philosophical Review* 109, no. 1 (January 2000): 35-61; also found in Bratman's *Structures of Agency* (New York: Oxford University Press 2007), 21-46; Zoltán Wágner, "Caring, Temporality and Agency: An Analytic and a Continental View," *Filozofia* 66, no. 9, (2011): 906; Wagner compares Frankfurt with Heidegger suggesting despite Frankfurt's claim that human caring is tied up with the temporal nature of human existence, Wagner sees Frankfurt's view as too mentalistic and leading to solipsism; Roman Altshuler, "An Unconditioned Will: The Role of Temporality in Freedom and Agency," PhD diss., State University of New York at Stony Brook, May 2010. UMI: 3409136. Althuser takes a non-eliminativist position to argue for something he calls "deep temporality" whereby he notes that when presented with situations of conflict between two opposing attitudes or constituents of his will, these may range across a number of possible choices, not just two or a few. They are not simple events, but cover entire time-spans containing many events. All of these authors are attempting to account more fully for the vagaries of human will within a temporal milieu. This temporal feature is at the core of the self-binding event.

As all of this is applied to Frankfurt's worry of the self-imposed versus the involuntarily imposed, it is this intertemporal choosing which allows us to comprehend the picture as an issue of both/and instead of either/or, since humans tend to waver between weak and strong in their decision-making and follow-through proficiency. When they self-impose a requirement of the will at T1, it may very well be the case at T2 that they actually experience the requirement as something involuntary and imposed from without as a genuine necessity. A moment's reflection along this line tells us that this kind of internal back-and-forth is nothing new as humans can often experience themselves as a bundle of contradictions often characterized with the term cognitive dissonance,<sup>120</sup> even as they aim for a sense of internal unity in the choices they make.<sup>121</sup> The obvious and unavoidable impact of temporality does not require lengthy argumentation. What's more, this temporal condition is hardly the exclusive province of the unwilling addict. Thus, in the case of self-binding, the self-imposed condition at T1 turns into, insofar as the perception inside the agent's mind, an involuntarily imposed, compulsory condition at T2. He may not endorse the imposition at T2, but will very likely wholeheartedly endorse his self-binding at some later time.

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<sup>120</sup> "A deceptively simple cognitive consistency theory, first proposed in 1957 by the US psychologist Leon Festinger (1919–89), concerned with the effects of inconsistent cognitions—interpreted as items of knowledge or belief." Cf. "cognitive dissonance", Andrew M. Colman, *Oxford Dictionary of Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press 2015), 142.

<sup>121</sup> Cf. George Loewenstein and Erik Angner, "Predicting and Indulging Changing Preferences," in George Loewenstein, Daniel Read, and Roy Baumeister, *Time and Decision: Economic and Psychological Perspectives of Intertemporal Choice* 351-391 (New York: Russell Sage Foundation 2003); T.C. Schelling, "Self-Command: A New Discipline," in George Loewenstein and Jon Elster, eds., *Choice Over Time* 167-176 (New York: Russell Sage Foundation 1992).



## Obedience

The second consideration for resolving this apparent conflict with volitional necessity concerns the natural human impulse, not just to rebel, but also to obey.<sup>122</sup> It seems hardly necessary to support this self-evident observation. From a negative angle, we need only point to the sick parade of tyrants and dictators, cult figures and charlatans that have marched through human history promising liberation through obedience. All these require obedient sycophants. Oxford's *Dictionary of Psychology* in the previous reference chose to only highlight this troubling aspect of obedience in connection with the infamous Milgram experiment example.<sup>123</sup> On the darker side, from the infamous Milgram experiment to the latest reality show on Netflix<sup>124</sup>, this seemingly innate *willingness to obey a perceived authority* needs be studied for both its commendable and reprehensible aspects. By this I mean that there is more to be contrasted here than Frankfurt and others have explored.

But on the positive side, it might be said that the political notion of a social contract, even the foundation of law itself, rely upon the human instinct to want to seek out an authority to obey. While humans are unruly, disobedient creatures who, on the whole, do not like to be

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<sup>122</sup> By obedience I mean that “form of social influence in which a person yields to explicit instructions or orders from an authority figure. Experimental research into this phenomenon was pioneered by the U.S. psychologist Stanley Milgram (1933–1984) who conducted a series of experiments, the first of which was published in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* in 1963, in which two-thirds of participants administered what they believed to be extremely painful, possibly lethal electric shocks to innocent victims when instructed to do so by an authoritative experimenter.” Cf. A. Colman, *Oxford Dictionary of Psychology*, p. 518; Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

<sup>123</sup> “A famous experimental procedure introduced in 1963 by Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram (1933–84) to study obedience to authority.” Cf. “Milgram experiment,” Colman, p. 437.

<sup>124</sup> Laura Hudson, “A new Netflix show [Derren Brown: The Push] wants to manipulate people into committing murder,” *The Verge* online magazine, New York: Vox Media, February 20, 2018. URL: <https://www.theverge.com/2018/2/20/17032706/netflix-push-derren-brown-milgram-murder>

coerced or enslaved, still we are also tribal, communal beings. Thought we may not all be docile sheep, yet we do not appear to be born anarchists either. But obedience is more than an emotional contagion or that is, a kind of peer-influenced compliance behavior.<sup>125</sup> Obedience is also clearly not behavior that is meant to accord with whatever we believe is the majority opinion. That is, obedience does not necessarily equate to conformity. Finally, depending upon the observer, obedient behavior can be seen either as moral or immoral or non-moral.

Now the issue gets a bit murky when we step in and propose that the authority to be obeyed can be seen as originating from another interior jurisdiction within the same agent. Kant theorized that such perceived authority was innate and appears to us as a binding law, one that we are morally obligated to obey and emanating from the structure of the mind itself.<sup>126</sup> His view started a whole new chapter in the notion of autonomy (auto=self; nomos=law; literally self-law) whereby a self-imposed “law” can also sound and feel like something other-imposed.<sup>127</sup> And so,

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<sup>125</sup> This is why the massive and now infamous 2014 Facebook “secret mood” experiment, is not applicable. Cf. Adam D. I. Kramer, Jamie E. Guillory and Jeffrey T. Hancock, “Experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no 24, (June 17, 2014): 8788-8790; also Vindu Goel, “Facebook Tinkers with Users’ Emotions in News Feed Experiment, Stirring Outcry,” *New York Times*, June 29, 2014. URL= <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/30/technology/facebook-tinkers-with-users-emotions-in-news-feed-experiment-stirring-outcry.html>

<sup>126</sup> One of the most thorough and recent treatments of Kant and autonomy is Oliver Sensen, ed. *Kant on Moral Autonomy* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2013).

<sup>127</sup> “Autonomy of the will is the characteristic [property] of the will by which it is a law to itself, independent of any characteristic of the objects of willing .... the will of every rational being is necessarily bound to it as a constraint, ... This synthetic proposition commands apodictically.” Jonathan Bennett’s translation offers simpler wording: “This synthetic proposition presents a command [to the self] and presents it as necessary.” Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, A German-English Edition* (1785), trans. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann (New York, Cambridge University Press 2011), 108; also Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals*, Jonathan Bennett trans., September. 2008 p. 36-37. URL= <https://www.stolaf.edu/people/huff/classes/GoodnEvil/Readings/kantgw.pdf>. For more background on the questions and problems of the antecedent ideas and thinkers which Kant was likely working with and responding to, cf. Schneewind, *Invention of Autonomy* 1998.

to modify a quip from G.K. Chesterton, “Kant got over the difficulty of combining furious opposites, by keeping them both, and keeping them both furious.”<sup>128</sup> Kant’s metaphysical claim of the innate “categorical” is still debated. Nonetheless, setting aside autonomy’s precise origins, the widely-held perception of a self-legislating picture of the will, needs some attention. Paul Ricoeur, in his 1986 Gifford Lectures, offers “an agentless semantics of action” in an earlier lecture, then out of his earlier claims finally offers an intriguing comment on the meaning of obedience particularly Kant’s notion of obedience to oneself. Namely, obedience to the self just equals autonomy. All the more reason for the Kantian to cling to the ethical postulate called the Categorical Imperative.

To be sure, we have not left the vocabulary of the [Kantian] imperative, but we have in a sense sublimated it: when autonomy substitutes for obedience to another obedience to oneself, obedience has lost all character of dependence and submission. True obedience, one could say, is autonomy.<sup>129</sup>

Let us consider a normative kind of example of this idea—the religious monastic. According to one of the more famous monks of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Merton, the greatest consecrating vow of Catholic monasticism is obedience. “[T]he monk renounces not his possessions, nor his body, but the inmost sanctuary of his spirit.”<sup>130</sup> However, it is impossible that this inner-most haven can be invaded from the outside, except by one’s own permission. “A person can be forced to do something, but can never be forced to will something. Obedience,

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<sup>128</sup> “Christianity got over the difficulty of combining furious opposites, by keeping them both, and keeping them both furious.” G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, originally published New York: John Lane Company 1908, reprint ed. San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1995: 101.

<sup>129</sup> Paul Ricoeur, in *Oneself As Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1992), 210.

<sup>130</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey* (Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel Publishing 1977), 64, 67.

then, is giving up the right to exercise freedom as one pleases.”<sup>131</sup> Indeed, the famous subject of the original “Damascus Road experience”, a foreign-born, Jewish rabbi named Saul, in describing his conversion to Christianity around 59 C.E., declared to the Jewish King Herod Agrippa, a Roman client monarch, that “he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.” (Acts 26:19 NRSV) Later he would offer a beautiful expression of his conception of freedom and slavery to his Christian neighbors in the adjacent province of Galatia: “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.” (Galatians 5:13 NRSV). Other similar examples might be proposed from many other life perspectives such as military service, voluntarist political theory, and even in the sometimes tyrannous atmosphere of a commercial kitchen inside a five-star restaurant. “Yes chef!” has become a two-word meme on the internet.

Regardless of motive or time duration or legal obligation, the notion of willful obedience to another seems to be a bipartite process which begins internally with a will to obey another authoritative will, then comes the external action of the obedience itself. When a person has the self-awareness to sort out this two-step process, first as something born from within and then describable externally as obedience, the second step is just as readily described as self-constraint which in turn becomes necessitated in the Frankfurt sense.

As I mentioned in the beginning, I have intentionally avoided the compatibilist issue of Frankfurt’s principle of alternate possibilities, or whether this process might depend solely upon an agent’s freedom to act otherwise. It would however appear necessary to my claim about

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<sup>131</sup> Thomas Merton, *Basic Principles of Monastic Spirituality* (Bardstown, KY: Abbey of Gethsemani 1957), 86-87. See also, “Vows, Monastic” in William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2002), 513.

obedience to authority and volitional necessity that there is some sense of freedom to also choose disobedience. But asserting this free capacity to obey is not the same as trying to mount a full-blown case for free will, as such. With this view then, obedience, even to oneself, by definition, is impossible and even incoherent without the possibility of a self, having the ability and opportunity to will to do otherwise. This partly coincides with Frankfurt's volitional necessity as he considers an example originally used by Rogers Albritton of another famous monastic.<sup>132</sup> The father of Christian Protestantism, Martin Luther, made his famous pronouncement of conscience, "Here I stand" before the deliberative Roman Catholic assembly convened by Emperor Charles V which put Luther on trial for a long list of heresy charges issued by Pope Leo X. Traditionally, this declaration of Luther's has been viewed as a case of a certain "necessitation" (rather than reasoning) of the will which made it impossible for Luther to *will* himself to recant. "I can do no other," said Luther. And so, to recant, in Luther's mind, would have been equivalent to willing oneself disobedient to the divine word of God found in the Christian scriptures.

So, when Luther took his priestly vows this was something akin to "crossing the Rubicon" in the famed accounts by Plutarch and Suetonius where they both report Julius Caesar's famous words *iacta alea esto*, Latin for "the die is cast."<sup>133</sup> It must have been akin to Luther's original legendary vow, hastily made when he had been caught out in a thunderstorm near Stotternheim, Germany and a lightning strike threw him to the ground. Thinking he was

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<sup>132</sup> Rogers Albritton, "Freedom of Will and Freedom of Action," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 59, no. 2 (November 1985): 243. Albritton's presidential address to the APA, distinguished freedom of action (the freedom to do what we will) from freedom of the will itself. Both Albritton and Frankfurt are referring to the account of Luther's heresy trial as translated by Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury 1950).

<sup>133</sup> Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. James Rives, chapter 32 (New York: Penguin Classics 2007), 16.

going to die, he cried out to St. Anne (patron saint of miners; copper mining was his father's profession) "Save me, St. Anne. I will become a monk!"<sup>134</sup> One thing is certain and all Luther biographies appear to concur on this point—the great reformer ultimately understood his vow as one of obedience to the authority of *sola scriptura*. Or that is, his vow of allegiance was first and foremost (solely and completely) to the authority of Scripture which was believed by Luther to be divinely inspired and superseded the magisterium of official Church dogma. In Luther's will to obey, the die was cast, the ships burned, Ulysses tied to the mast.

Here then is a normative claim which serves to extend Frankfurt's volitional theory concerning at least one attitude that appears to motivate volitional necessity. Obedience to the authority of some "other" can be seen as an underlying commitment that can potentially generate volitional necessity.<sup>135</sup> Self-binding then, becomes a direct strategy for making this happen inside the will. Even in the case of Ulysses tied to the mast, Homer's conquering hero submits to and obeys the authority of a power which is not subject to his immediate voluntary control—his own intrepid sailors under his command who have been given an order, had their ears filled with wax. Even as he commands himself to be bound, Ulysses is at once also surrendering to the existential fact of his own need, which he cannot fulfill by himself. Thus, the actor willingly becomes the acted upon. And in such a state of self-imposed patency, he can do no other except what he originally willed. He was free to be bound at T1, then bound to be free at T2. In similar fashion,

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<sup>134</sup> This story of the lightning strike was first recorded by Johannes Mathesius, one of Luther's students, in his edited book of conversations and anecdotes, entitled *Luther's Table Talk*. Cf. Hartmut Lehmann, "Legends Regarding Luther," in Mark A. Lamport, ed., *Encyclopedia of Martin Luther and the Reformation* 425 (New York: Rowman and Littlefield 2017).

<sup>135</sup> Rather than merely something dangerous and a potential threat to personal autonomy, Linda Zagzebski has argued that obedience to the authority of one's own beliefs can be justified along the same lines as justifications for political authority in the tradition of political liberalism. Cf. "A Defense of Epistemic Authority," *Res Philosophica* 90, no. 2 (April 2013): 293.

Luther freely submitted to obey the will of the monastery—its rules, its hierarchy of superiors, its abbot. But as it turned out, his deeper, more abiding submission was his obedient surrender to the scriptures upon which all else was to be established. The highest authorities at the imperial Diet of Worms tested his surrendered obedience but by then, Luther was already ‘tied to the mast’ by his writings and public lectures. There was a higher authority than even the magisterium of the Church itself—the Christian Bible. Disobedience to this ultimate authority was unthinkable and became a foundational concept (*sola scriptura*) of the Protestant Reformation. An important point should not be overlooked here. Rather than Frankfurt’s simple picture of an unwillingness to will otherwise, Luther’s original *will to obey*, must be included in the scenario as a motivation that led to a sense of volitional necessity. Obedience accounts for the unwillingness to will otherwise. This overlooked component, the will to obey a perceived authority, is a key to Frankfurt’s naming his volitional necessity as the inability to do the unthinkable. This is a significant distinction. Not enough recognition is given, in “Luther cases”, to a *will to obey* typically bound up with acceding to or obedience to the authority of an “other”. We could just as readily offer cases of military obligation, athletic authorities or even some secret political sect and so on. We want to do more than merely describe volitional necessity as part of a person’s will apparatus. We want to know how a person comes about owning and endorsing this willingness. That she acts according to Frankfurt’s requirements (identifies with this necessity, endorses her incapacity to will otherwise, cares deeply and maintains wholeheartedness about her volitions without ambivalence) is not in question here. That there are volitional disabilities that people have, (anxiety, depression, phobias, etc.) are also not the concern. A broader query is to ask how these willing and unwilling attitudes, these necessities and disabilities come about in the first place.

### Excursus concerning Frankfurt and the Unthinkable

While “volitional necessity” might not have that many parallels with a non-volitional addiction, or perhaps with some kind of cult manipulation, there are other ways of thinking about the topic, namely the human inclination to obey authority which gives us a way to explain this apparent conflict with self-imposed (autonomous) versus involuntarily-imposed (heteronomous) requirement. Frankfurt prefers to describe Luther as finding himself unwilling, and therefore unable, to will otherwise. The act is unthinkable. But for Luther, the unwillingness to will otherwise has a clear provenance. It is a derived instantiation of a prior, original will to obey another authority. And just here is where self-binding offers a helpful test case. There are cases, Frankfurt claims, in which people find it impossible to “bring themselves to perform certain volitional acts which means their wills are limited. They are subject to a kind of volitional necessity, in virtue of which there are conceivable acts of willing that they are unable to perform.”<sup>136</sup> But this inspirational way of framing the case (the father of Protestantism, standing on the great principles of the Reformation Movement) might tip the scale in favor of accepting that not only are such instances of volitional necessity conceivable, they ought weigh against otherwise normative necessities. A volitional necessity makes it impossible to even conceive of another choice. The action becomes, as Frankfurt puts it, unthinkable.

Enter the self-binding (self-imposed) act which effectively and involuntarily binds or imposes itself upon one’s will. While it might be difficult to always discern the authentic desires within a person at a given moment, the successful self-binding act is meant to give the person a kind of reinforcement of this sense of necessity. Here’s what that might look like. Whereas there

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<sup>136</sup> Frankfurt, *Necessity, Volition and Love*, p. 80.



existed at T1 a kind of ambivalent “thinkableness” worry, at T2 the sense of involuntary imposition is quite real. And assuming the precommitment device was effectively put in place, even if there is a tacit admission of divided volition or even, like Ulysses, a loud and angry attempt to reverse his decision to self-bind at T1, both the temporality and obedience features of the case assist the more reassuring sense of volitional necessity. A person might easily reflect on this case as follows: “Even though I don’t feel so good about my decision at the moment (T2), things have already been decided (T1), and what’s more, they’ve been decided by me. And I know that tomorrow (T3) I will feel much better about this necessity and fully expect that I will own it as my own volition.”

But again, exactly how to get to this point, seems to be the illusive question. Frankfurt goes on to suggest that *wholeheartedness* about the things we care about is when volitional necessity appears. That is, the health of the will in overcoming ambivalence is to possess a unified, volitionally robust, wholeheartedness toward one’s higher-order attitudes and inclinations.<sup>137</sup> But as far as I can make out, this only moves the concern down the line so that now we must ask, how does a person come to be wholehearted? Well, says Frankfurt, it just comes down to having “no endogenous desire to be volitionally different than he is.”<sup>138</sup> To be wholehearted then, the person must have a sense of *satisfaction* with the internal harmony of his whole volitional system. Okay, but you can see where this is going. Being satisfied about, being wholehearted toward, having the requisite approving volition to endorse a willingness—all of these may describe but they do not circumscribe the case itself. The human will is always about

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<sup>137</sup> Frankfurt, p. 100

<sup>138</sup> Frankfurt, p. 101

something. And that which activates the will must be a part of the description of the will in action.

I have often wondered how many people can happily affirm a normal life chock full of volitional necessities that guide their actions almost imperceptibly. The ideal here is daunting to say the least and I am still not clear on how Frankfurt thinks it originates. Here is a further example of this internally debatable assertion in Frankfurt's view of the human will. In answering his own question about how one comes to be satisfied with a volition, Frankfurt wants to return to his pattern of suggesting that it is just a matter of "an absence of any tendency or inclination to alter its condition."<sup>139</sup> This, of course, is similar to how he wants to describe a volitional necessity to start with, as an unwillingness to will otherwise, or no desire to be volitionally different. If you sadly find yourself without a sense of volitional necessity, and accordingly without a wholeheartedness in your volitions concerning the things you care about and therefore without a sense of satisfaction, then you are in a state of ambivalence which is a significant disability, says Frankfurt. You might even have "extensive repertoires of worthwhile options" but without wholeheartedness, without volitional unity, you are unable to make coherent use of your freedom to choose an option. But if you do not know how to come be satisfied, by means of figuring out what you care about and being wholehearted in your commitment to those things, all of which leads to this sense of volitional necessity which is the hallmark of volitional unity, then freedom no longer makes any sense.

What strikes me is that this description of a common human instability captures a vast majority of people especially at intermittent stretches of time in their lives. And so, says

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<sup>139</sup> Frankfurt, p. 104

Frankfurt, we must concern ourselves with “whether people can come to know what they want to do with the freedom they enjoy.”<sup>140</sup> But again, the nagging issue that hangs over the entire volitional necessity proposal is not that it might be this way with the inner workings of the human will, but why and how it can be this way. The answer to this question can help us with the daunting mission of coming to acquire some kind of healthy volitional necessity about our most worthwhile life projects.

One might think that some insight could be gained by looking to examples of negative consequences<sup>141</sup>, namely the unwilling addict who does what he does not will. But Frankfurt wants to draw a bright line of distinction here.

The predicament of the unwilling addict is that there is something which he really wants to do, but which he cannot do because of a force other than and superior to that of his own will. In the case of the person constrained by volitional necessity, there is also something which he cannot do but only because he does not really want to do it.<sup>142</sup>

And so, Frankfurt insists, no unwilling addict can ever be volitionally necessitated since the experience of necessity will always be something alien or external and something that the addict does not want to identify himself with. The unwilling addict does not self-impose a requirement not to be guided by any influence except those with which he most deeply identifies. In fact, he will suppress or dissociate himself “from whatever motives or desires he regards as inconsistent with the stability and effectiveness of his commitment.”<sup>143</sup> But the notion of self-imposing a necessity of the will becomes a problem since “[i]t must be an essential feature of volitional

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<sup>140</sup> Frankfurt, p. 102

<sup>141</sup> A clear-eyed recognition of the negative consequences is a way to view one’s necessitated volition as involuntarily-imposed yet self-imposed and is the third overlooked consideration, upcoming, in my analysis of Frankfurt’s volitional necessity claims.

<sup>142</sup> Harry Frankfurt, “The Importance of What We Care About” *Synthese* (November 1982): 265.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

necessity that it is imposed upon a person involuntarily. Otherwise it will be impossible to account for the fact that the person cannot extricate himself from it merely at will - i.e., the fact that it is genuinely a kind of necessity.”<sup>144</sup> Frankfurt goes on to admit that this may seem difficult to understand and one reason is because it appears to blur that line of distinction he was trying to draw between unwillingly addicted and volitionally necessitated individuals. I have already critically reviewed the three ways he wants to resolve this difficulty. I am proposing three additional supplementary ideas that might help clarify and support volitional necessity despite Frankfurt’s contradictory intuitions about it.

The successive layering of conditions—to endorse my unwillingness or my aversion; to identify with; to be wholehearted about; to come to be satisfied with; even to discover a kind of love for—all might be construed as necessary conditions for having a sense of freedom in my decisions regardless of viable alternative possibilities. But they are not sufficient if all of this is just something that sort of happens to you without due recognition of our temporal extended agency and our tendency toward willing obedience to authority. Whence the will to act in this way—to endorse, identify, be wholehearted, be satisfied and come to love? Without some additional insight into the machinations of the human will, we are not making much progress in finding sufficient conditions for avoiding ambivalence and finding this illusive volitional unity.<sup>145</sup> Here is where Frankfurt resorts to comparing this state of affairs to a religious conversion. “It may be as St. Augustine supposed, that a thoroughly unified will comes only as a

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<sup>144</sup> Frankfurt, p. 88.

<sup>145</sup> I am indebted to some lines of analysis proposed by Christian F. Rostbøll, “Freedom as Satisfaction? A Critique of Frankfurt’s Hierarchical Theory of Freedom,” *SATS—Northern European Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (May 2004): 131-146; also to Berofsky’s critique of the Frankfurt hierarchy and his chapter five on values, identification and the self and the “primacy of our first order natures”. Cf. Berofsky, *Liberation from Self*, pp. 77-106.

gift of God.”<sup>146</sup> Then, he goes on to consider the alternate state of volitional indeterminacy as something possibly determined by social, political and cultural conditions of each person’s life. That is about all we get since he prefers to return to a little more in-depth description of wholeheartedness and psychic unity until he appears to feel obligated to return once more to Augustine:

Saint Augustine thought that a transition to psychic unity from a state of volitional division requires a miracle. So, he prayed for conversion. That is not actually such a bad approach to the problem. In any case, it seems to have worked out well for him. I have another suggestion, however, which he appears not to have considered.<sup>147</sup>

But rather than seriously examine the religious conversion claim that he has introduced, Frankfurt cavalierly proclaims that he has another suggestion which he later calls “advice” as though this glaring omission in his case concerning the human will has suddenly turned into a matter of psychological counseling. I make this negative assessment based on the offhand type of dismissive conclusion in his anecdote which tries to correlate the deep, psychic life-change of a religious conversion with just having a good sense of humor. Frankfurt, as though donning the hat of a church father, gives a suggestion that comes out of a story about a woman commenting to him on what she thinks is really necessary in a successful relationship. A sense of humor is more important even than honesty, she claimed. Frankfurt closes the chapter with something like a narrative identity/autonomy claim<sup>148</sup> without seriously considering what motivates a person whose “will is utterly divided” to come to acquire volitional unity in the first place. We are owed a little more profundity as there must be more to the story than this:

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Frankfurt, p. 107

<sup>148</sup> Cf. John J. Davenport, *Narrative Identity, Autonomy, and Mortality: From Frankfurt and MacIntyre to Kierkegaard* (New York: Routledge Publishing 2012).

But suppose you are simply unable to make up your mind. No matter how you twist or turn, you cannot find a way of being satisfied with yourself. My advice is that, if your will is utterly divided, and volitional unity is really out of the question, be sure at least to hang on to your sense of humor.<sup>149</sup>

Better advice might be to look into how temporal circumstances are playing a role and perhaps the question of whether perception of obedient surrender might help to “make up your mind.”

I have proposed so far that the issues of agent temporality and the natural human instinct to obey a perceived authority could be very real factors that can help decipher Frankfurt’s acknowledged incongruity in claiming that volitional necessity entails acts that are both self-imposed and imposed involuntarily.

### Negative Consequences

A third consideration involves something so plain and simple, it is overlooked for that very reason, namely our willingness to examine the negative consequences of a future action. This requires that we revisit Frankfurt’s unwilling addict versus ambivalent actor distinction. To be clear, I am not directly challenging the Frankfurt account of volition and hierarchy of desires at this point. However, it may be that the Frankfurtian account too quickly dismisses addiction cases and their negative consequences, where the unwilling addict is trying valiantly to resist an overwhelming compulsion or inhibition. To me, the unwilling addict appears not that different from the simply ambivalent person. But Frankfurt says that the unwilling addict will tend to experience a constraint as something moving him or obstructing him *against his will*. It is his inability to choose effectively which sets him apart from the volitionally necessitated individual who endorses (without ambivalence) certain aversions and wholeheartedly welcomes certain incapacities of the will as actions which are unthinkable. Here is a description.

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<sup>149</sup> Frankfurt, p. 107

An addict who struggles sincerely against his addiction is contending with a force by which he does not want to be moved and which is therefore alien to him. Since the conflict is not wholly within his will, he is not volitionally divided or ambivalent. The unwilling addict is wholeheartedly on one side of the conflict from which he suffers, and not at all on the other. The addiction may defeat his will, but does not as such disrupt its unity.<sup>150</sup>

The unity of one's will is the thing that is at stake with volitional necessity. But, as a depiction of the human will Frankfurt's picture seems incomplete since not all addicts report the actual experience of their addiction in the manner that Frankfurt describes. There are, in his claimed distinction, two missing pieces. Volitional division may contain a difference-making, temporal component and involve a kind of internal rebellion or the mistaken belief that one's personal autonomy can never contain a sense of patiency and obedience to another will. These missing considerations lead to my claim that Frankfurt's unwilling addict picture is deficient. Another, just as accurate, portrayal of addiction could be described as fully volitional, on Frankfurt's definition, yet divided because of the twin difficulty of time and this internal upheaval that resists obedience to any perceived authority. In fact, for some philosophers and cognitive neuroscientists a divided volitional state is part of a definition of addiction itself.<sup>151</sup>

If we acknowledge how quickly and easily human beings can ignore the consequences of their own actions and change their minds, even their allegiances, and then reverse themselves almost as quickly, then we can imagine a willfully wholehearted hoarder for example, being volitionally necessitated both to hoard and not to hoard, depending on time and circumstance.

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<sup>150</sup> Frankfurt, p. 108.

<sup>151</sup> Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Hanna Pickard, "What is Addiction?" K.W.M. Fulford, Martin Davies, Richard G.T. Gipps, George Graham, John Z. Sadler, Giovanni Stanghellini, and Tim Thornton, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry* 856 (New York: Oxford University Press 2013); see also Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Jesse S. Summers, "Defining Addiction: A Pragmatic Perspective" in Hanna Pickard and Serge Ahmed, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Science of Addiction* 123-131 (New York: Taylor & Francis Group 2018).

Our imagined hoarder appears to have an on-again, off-again addiction to collecting which, if the person is questioned, responds just like a volitionally necessitated individual would respond. At T1 the person loudly declares his abhorrence of hoarding as unthinkable, oblivious to the hoarded chaos surrounding him. The person at that moment, on that day cannot be tempted to hoard anything more, endorses his unwillingness, even his aversion to hoarding, cares about and is wholehearted in his unwillingness to engage in hoarding behavior. Here is one tell-tale sign of addiction, yet the addict presents as an absolutely, volitionally necessitated individual. But then, a little later, when a new temptation presents itself at T2, let us say that we can step in ask him about his hoarding problem. At that point, the person may again loudly proclaim that he has no addiction and appears completely unaware of his previous declarations and the negative consequences of the junk piling up around him in his home. It is as though he is under some kind of amnesia spell. In fact, he may turn and claim that his acquisitiveness at T2 is laudable, economically-shrewd behavior since these items he is acquiring are a bargain and can be sold for a profit later on. At this point in time, if the bargain and profit motive rationale is accepted, one might well describe the person as volitionally necessitated to hoard at that moment while just as volitionally necessitated not to hoard at the earlier time.

We can just as quickly imagine a volitionally necessitated gambler with a serious addiction to gambling, given certain circumstances where the aversion to gambling leads her to see the activity as unthinkable. At other moments, another necessitation leads her to a self-imposed yet involuntarily imposed state of mind where she feels that she absolutely must gamble to try and pay off family debts. She has such a wholehearted, care-filled, love for the gaming tables, it is unthinkable for her *not* to be there for the sake of her family and for the sheer joy and absolute thrill which she autonomously embraces. Her overwhelming aversion is repugnance at



the thought of willing herself to walk away from the casino. Bernard Berofsky proposes just such an example.

Suppose I am addicted to gambling. I find enormous satisfaction in the dangers, the thrill of uncertainty, the prospect of large winnings. To suppose that my motivation is knowledgeable, we shall have to provide me with certain advantages such as wealth (for I would not otherwise knowingly risk the calamity of large losses) and the absence of close personal attachments (only if their condemnation of my pursuit affects me adversely and induces me to abandon this activity). Suppose also that the choices I have made to sustain this venture have been dispassionate in the required sense. Although quite passionate about gambling, I find that my commitment is a stable one: I do not regret these decisions during moments of cooler reflection. I view those who charge me with an incapacity for “sober” reflection as engaged in an effort to subvert my values and arbitrarily impose theirs. I will now argue that the value of gambling to me survives quite serious second-order reservations.<sup>152</sup>

Our gambler might even struggle and scream if anyone tried to prevent her from gambling. Like the ecclesial tribunal judging Martin Luther, we might say that she is misguided and appears to be unmindful of any negative consequences associated with her actions, yet it seems hard to deny that she is also under the compulsion of a volitional necessity which she clearly deems as something unthinkable to choose to act otherwise.<sup>153</sup> But where is any serious consideration given to weighing the negative consequences of these conflicting volitional necessities?

Both the hoarder and the gambler experience delightful and completely welcome compulsions and aversions depending on the time and fluctuating sense of need. At T1 they might indulge their obsession and may report little sense of regret also depending on the immediacy and intensity of their perception of the negative consequences. One might say they are inter-temporally necessitated in their volition. But can they be characterized as *willing*

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<sup>152</sup> Berofsky, p. 94.

<sup>153</sup> These very real examples have led to new proposals to capture the seduction of this addiction. Cf. Igor Kusyszyn, “Existence, Effectance, Esteem: From Gambling to a New Theory of Human Motivation,” *International Journal of the Addictions* 25, no. 2 (July 2009): 159-177.

addicts? Not at all, simply because of this temporal volitional anomaly that I am describing—there exists a classic disunity of the will over time. Both may engage in intact, higher-order volitional decision-making about their addictions. In fact, so complete is their craving at T1, if interviewed, they will affirm that *not* to engage in the hoarding or gambling behavior would be unthinkable. Moreover, they are filled with anxiety when asked if they might imagine themselves having to give up their hoarding or their gambling behavior. But then, at some point later, after the heat of the compulsion has dissipated, they wince and cringe and express deep remorse for their actions. Their volitional state at T2 is completely reversed from T1. It is as though a part of their minds had been completely partitioned off, as one addict described it to me. As a result, they may report that they experience absolutely no aversion to their addictive behavior, no internal conflict, no sense that the behavior is alien to them at T1.

And keep in mind that these are otherwise normal-functioning, highly intelligent adults who can then turn around in a later moment, as though awakening from a dream or a completely unconscious state, and be shocked at their earlier behavior. Again, it is only at this later point in time that they report experiencing regret over their earlier behavior. But tellingly, the memory of the negative consequences of their addictive actions is already quickly fading. When interviewed at T2, again they describe themselves as truly and wholeheartedly desiring to desire not to have the addiction. Yet, these same unwilling addicts will turn around and again clearly endorse their compulsion at T1 and ignore or seem oblivious to any negative consequences. This aspect of focusing on or choosing to ignore negative consequences is where my deviation from Frankfurt turns back toward the issue of self-binding.

So, whenever the person 1) engages in a kind of “hyperbolic discounting”<sup>154</sup> where the temporal concern is miscalculated and mostly disregarded; 2) perhaps out of a childlike view of their autonomy as omnipotence, obstinately scorns any sense of need or disposition to obey anyone or even listen to another will either inside or outside themselves; and 3) minimizes and shrugs off the inevitable negative consequences, that person should consider some form of self-binding action that might awaken him to the disunion of his will. Volitional necessity is not something that just comes over us out of nowhere. There is more to the story than just Frankfurtian descriptions of caring and wholeheartedness and a sense of satisfaction. Hannah Pickard has recently made this negative consequences distinction clear in the matter of addiction.

[The] conception [of addiction] depends on three core ideas: disease, compulsion, and negative consequences. Yet the meaning of the ideas of disease and compulsion, and the significance of negative consequences, is rarely made explicit. *I argue that it is only when the significance of negative consequences is appreciated that the puzzle of addiction comes clearly into view*; and I suggest that there are both conceptual and empirical grounds for scepticism about the orthodox appeal to neurobiological disease and compulsion to explain the puzzle.<sup>155</sup> [Italics mine.]

That is, in Pickard’s view the core concern with Frankfurt’s notion of necessity should revolve in a more straightforward way around a focused recognition of the negative consequences of an action rather than whether or not one endorses one’s own aversion to the action. Leaving aside psychological disease theories or even the notion of an unwilling compulsion (which is just as mysterious as its more commendable opposite, a certain kind of incapacity of the will called a

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<sup>154</sup> An economic concept first introduced by George Ainsley which I will examine more in-depth under the heading of “Instrumental Rationality.” Cf. George Ainslie, “Specious Reward” 1975.

<sup>155</sup> Cf. Hannah Pickard, “The Puzzle of Addiction,” in Hanna Pickard and Serge Ahmed, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Science of Addiction* 9-22 (New York: Taylor & Francis Group 2018). URL: [https://www.hannapickard.com/uploads/3/1/5/5/31550141/fulford\\_-\\_philosophy\\_\\_psychiatry\\_-\\_ch\\_50\\_-\\_sinnott-armstrong\\_pickard.pdf](https://www.hannapickard.com/uploads/3/1/5/5/31550141/fulford_-_philosophy__psychiatry_-_ch_50_-_sinnott-armstrong_pickard.pdf)

volitional necessity), when the focus, as with Pickard, remains simply on the harmful results of an action or lack of action, then we have at least one clue to solving the riddle of a self-imposed as well as an involuntarily imposed necessity of the will. People find themselves divided in their volitions when they ignore the temporal aspects of their agency, cling to a kind of dream of omnipotence that tells them not to worry about any autonomy-threatening notions of obedience, or remain oblivious (intentionally or not) to the negative consequences of their own behavior.

This rather common human condition we might call simply the fluctuation of the human will, inured due to the nature of time, a certain omnipotent-like predisposition toward authority and inattention to consequence supports my descriptions of a volitionally-necessitated yet also apparently unwilling addict though not simultaneously. This is a state of mind that does not neatly fit into the more unwavering Frankfurtian scheme. Like the volitionally necessitated, the individuals in these cases continue to sense the same odd disunion between the self-imposed and the involuntarily imposed which helps in part to resolve a quandary Frankfurt himself has noted. Here then is the importunity of the unwelcome versus the welcome volition.

But the point is that both the unwilling addict and the volitionally necessitated seem to have a *réticence* (in the French nuanced sense of the term as an unreasoned silence), towards their volition. This is where Pickard's insight is again helpful. The unwilling addict may appear to willfully ignore negative consequences by blaming "the heat of the moment" while the volitionally necessitated cannot bear to contemplate the negative consequences and is thereby incapacitated with an unwillingness to suppress the original need to obey. Frankfurt describes it as endorsing the aversion while Pickard offers a better etiology of the aversive condition. Again, as previously described, along with the inattentiveness to consequences problem, my earlier considerations are that of temporality and obedience as inescapable aspects of the human will

apparatus. And as it will turn out, these aspects play a role in better comprehending how self-binding is supposed to work where a proper focus on future negative consequences leads to a happier set of consequences. And this third key aspect offers a clearer understanding of the human will at any given moment by seeing how and why self-binding can help both the unwilling addict and the volitionally necessitated.

Recall that for Frankfurt, having an aversion to some action and then heartily endorsing that aversion in my own mind is a key component of his volitional necessity. Which is to say that I have placed myself under constraint in such a way that I endorse my aversion and I care about continuing that aversion. I am loath to take any action that might hinder this aversion. The action then, is in a way unthinkable. The decision has already been made and I do not have any desire to rethink my decision. Then, Frankfurt is quite intent in distinguishing this state of mind from that of the unwilling addict or someone with an overwhelming compulsion or inhibition who has an incapacity “to choose effectively.” The volitionally necessitated person clearly has an incapacity similar to the unwilling addict but Frankfurt would have us understand that this incapacity is part of the solution or part of the effectiveness of the choosing. It is important to her because it allows her to have effective volitions, while in the unwilling addict the incapacity is the problem and continually defeats her volitional stance.

Both might earnestly prefer the exact same outcome but one person’s willing is effective while the other’s is not. And all of this revolves around a sense of volitional necessity in the one and a lack of this sense in the other. Why and how this is the case, in Frankfurt’s view, is just something “a person discovers” and admits that it is a “rather notable peculiarity.” The notable part which is so peculiar is that the volitionally necessitated person typically does not experience this “constraint” of her will as an obstruction to her will. But now we are back to the same old

puzzle of an action both being self-imposed and involuntarily imposed at the same time. In fact, the constraint is imposed by her own will, yet she may not even know it. No wonder Frankfurt admits this as a peculiarity that he does not seem to know how to explain. And it gets even more peculiar and even Zen-like in his experiential query: “For this reason he experiences his submission to it less as a defeat than as a liberation.”<sup>156</sup> It is not clear whether Frankfurt is proposing what he believes to be a real paradox, or simply offering a question that needs further study. It might be that he would agree with Roy Sorensen that “[t]hose who pose paradoxes are not asserting any of the propositions that comprise the paradox. They merely ask a question. ...[T]his basic maneuver is ... a steady favorite in Eastern philosophy.”<sup>157</sup>

2.2.4 The Self-Binding Addendum. With these three considerations above, I have offered a depiction of volitional necessity that fits more readily with the everyday reality of the ever-vacillating human will. Also, my aim at this juncture is not to imagine the act of self-binding as part of some Zen mystery or paradoxical question. Rather, the idea is to insert an addendum using the act of self-binding as a helpful illustration of what Frankfurt is trying to put his finger on. But I also propose that his unwilling addict distinction need not be so dissimilar since the volitionally necessitated and the unwilling addict can both employ the same self-binding action with the same intended outcome and achieve a similar result—the former reinforces a volition and the latter reinstates a volition. Both may engage in the action out of a recognition of their own need. One might self-bind as a self-reinforcement measure (a way to endorse an incapacity) while the other employs self-binding as self-enforcement (a way to start down the path toward

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<sup>156</sup> Harry Frankfurt, *Necessity, Volition and Love*, 1999, p. 111-112.

<sup>157</sup> Roy Sorensen, *A Brief History of the Paradox: Philosophy and the Labyrinths of the Mind*, (New York: Oxford University Press 2003), 93.

volitional necessity). Either way, the enigmatic sense of liberation by subjugation is vividly experienced in both subjects. And then, as though to further acknowledge the temporal aspect of self-binding, Frankfurt goes on to point out that...

necessities of the will are ... subject to change. What is unthinkable for a person at one time may not be unthinkable for him at another, as a consequence of alterations in the contingent circumstances from which volitional necessities derive.<sup>158</sup>

Trying to grasp these contingent circumstances might look like and how they might come about has been an ongoing theme in this writing. My claim has been that digging deeper into the act of self-binding provides an important clue to this puzzle.

This is why I find it odd that in the very next breath, Frankfurt seems to undercut the validity of self-binding as a valid strategy.

A person may even find it possible deliberately to alter the necessities that bind his will. Needless to say, however, he cannot alter them by a sheer act of will. A person cannot redesign his own volitional nature simply by making up his mind that what has been unthinkable for him is no longer so.<sup>159</sup>

How can this be correct, since self-binding has proven itself to be such an effective tactic for doing this very thing—humbly redesigning one’s own volitional nature. I see an action as “unthinkable” and so I may bind myself in such a way that the action is not only unthinkable but impossible. A repetitive practice of self-binding reinforces the volitional nature itself. Whether or not I find myself tempted becomes irrelevant except in the following sense. Both the volitionally necessitated and the unwilling addict may engage in a self-binding action, the former to reinforce and the latter to in fact redesign his own volitional nature over time. The insertion of a self-binding action makes it possible to conceive of these two volitional states on a dimensional

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<sup>158</sup> Frankfurt, *Necessity, Volition and Love*, 1999, p. 112.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

continuum rather than categorically detached from each other. The key is, of course, in what Frankfurt might mean by “making up his mind” for which I have offered an actionable alternative that essentially reframes the way something is thinkable at one juncture and then becomes unthinkable at another. There are again the issues (from Aristotle by way of Soran Reader<sup>160</sup>) of obediently surrendering to my own need in such a way that my autonomy is not impaired as I self-impose a state of patiency upon myself by means of a self-binding act. The abhorrent yet thinkable begins to become happily and necessarily unthinkable.

So, in all of this I mostly agree with Frankfurt, but not for the reasons that he might expect. I can just as readily see myself experiencing a submission to an incapacity (volitional necessity), an aversion to some unthinkable action, one that I have wholeheartedly endorsed because I care deeply about the incapacity, but also simply because I have chosen to obey and autonomously surrender my own will. Obedience is a chosen incapacity of the will. I willingly choose to incapacitate my own will and subjugate it to another. This is rather different from Frankfurt's imagined structure of the human will. What Frankfurt wants to call a scenario of volitional necessity, (making an action unthinkable due to my endorsing an aversion to it because of another course of action which I also positively endorse simply because I identify with, endorse and wholeheartedly care about those actions), I can instead just as clearly comprehend as a *preemptive* commitment to *obey* another will with negative consequences fully in view. With the submissive concept of obedience, no action can ever be considered unthinkable since an act of obedience must involve the obedient one and the one to be obeyed. Since the obedient one bends to the will of another, the thinkable or unthinkableness of an action is not within her

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<sup>160</sup> Soran Reader, “Aristotle on Necessities and Needs,” in *Philosophy of Need*, 2005, p. 113-136.



purview. So-called Luther Cases then get cast into an entirely different light. When Luther says “I can do no other” it is not because of an incapacity of the will but rather the chosen capacity to obey another will, namely the will of God as he understands it from holy scripture. To put it another way, the incapacity (being enthralled by another will) is chosen for reasons. This view of volitional necessity offers more explanatory power over the more mysterious incongruity that Frankfurt acknowledges. Obedience entails susceptibility to a genuine and ever-present capacity to alter one’s will according to the will of an other. A genuine necessity of the will can be a matter of a willing obedience with this other proposed Frankfurtian psychology as one possibility of the structure of a person’s will at a given point in time.

2.2.5 Normal Schizotypy and a ‘Luther Case’ thought experiment. How can we bring all of these supplementary considerations together into a more true-to-life picture of volition and necessity and the applicability of self-binding? Philosopher Christopher Gill, an expert on Seneca and Stoicism, calls this phenomenon, “psychological self-division.”<sup>161</sup> With that segue, we now arrive at a cross-disciplinary juncture with some interesting, empirical psychology data related to this topic. This kind of fractious vacillating, an all too familiar human behavior that I’ve outlined, can be revealingly described as “normal schizotypy.”<sup>162</sup> Rather than a categorical distinction about volition, which is the way I would characterize Frankfurt’s view, I propose a

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<sup>161</sup> Cf. Christopher Gill, “Seneca and selfhood: integration and disintegration,” in Shadi Bartsch and David Wray, eds., *Seneca and the Self* 65-83 (New York: Cambridge University Press 2009).

<sup>162</sup> “Schizotypy is a personality trait dimension extending into the normal range,... Schizotypy in the normal range is... associated with an increased reliance on the right hemisphere in a variety of tasks.” Cf. Michael P. Kelley, “Schizotypy and Hemisphericity” *Psychological Reports* 109, no. 2, 2011: 533-552. More than merely a description of hypocrisy, this psychological observation is also not new and is obviously related to ancient philosophical, multi-self conceptions of personal identity. See for example, Harry S. Sullivan, *Schizophrenia as a Human Process* (New York: Norton Publishing 1962).

dimensional view (as preferable to the categorical) whereby the volitionally necessitated and the unwilling addict are two sides of the same coin or at least belonging on the same continuum.<sup>163</sup>

The dimension model terminology offers a common sense approach to analyzing this behavior.<sup>164</sup> Which is to say, these can be continuum dimensions (rather than categorical divisions) coinciding within the same individual, given either a certain humble acknowledgement or a stubborn defiance of the facts that we are time-bound, obedience-inclined creatures who have the capacity to recognize negative consequences when they are clearly presented to us. I am certainly not proposing any kind of novel view of human personality in pointing out this aspect of commonly-observed, normal human action and the latest trends in psychological research.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century the study of personality has moved beyond the confines of the DSM (Livesley, 2001a; Widiger & Simonsen, 2005). As noted previously, the DSM model does not offer an empirically based taxonomy, and it has kept its categorical distinction between normality and pathology in the face of scientific evidence that argues against this. ... There is greater tolerance for, and interest in, dimensional conceptualizations of personality and psychopathology that have empirical backing, as well as models that predict and demonstrate discontinuity in some behaviors and disorders (e.g., schizotypy; Lenzenweger & Korfi ne, 1992).<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Adrian Raine, Todd Lencz and Sarnoff A. Mednick, eds. *Schizotypal Personality* (New York: Cambridge 1995). The authors claim that theirs is “the first book devoted to schizotypal personality... [providing] a comprehensive overview of current knowledge from some of the world's leading researchers in the fields ...of genetics, neurodevelopment, assessment, psychophysiology, neuropsychology, and brain imaging. *A central theme is the exploration of categorical and dimensional approaches* to the understanding of schizotypal personality disorder”; Thomas A. Widiger and T.J. Trull, “Plate Tectonics in the Classification of Personality Disorder: Shifting to a Dimensional Trait Model,” in W.J. Livesley, ed. *Handbook of Personality Disorders* 60-83 (New York, Guilford Press 2007) and Andrew E. Skodol, “Dimensional vs Categorical Models,” in Thomas A. Widiger, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Personality Disorders* 35-57 (New York: Oxford University Press 2012).

<sup>164</sup> Schizotypal behavior considered within the normal range of dimensional models includes descriptive terms like “peculiarity, oddity, cognitive-perceptual aberrations, and openness” (with imaginative fantasy and aesthetic interests listed under the latter).

<sup>165</sup> Stephen Strack, ed., *Differentiating Normal and Abnormal Personality* (New York: Springer Publishing 2006) xxi.

Using this dimensional versus categorical approach to the empirical data from psychology and psychiatry, it appears that the categorical distinction between the unwilling, the ambivalent and those who experience volitional necessitation may not be as categorical as one might think.<sup>166</sup> Let us then propose some added dimensions to the Frankfurtian picture of volition: a. There can be the volitionally necessitated but only at times. This dimension would not comprise the ambivalent or unwillingly addicted; b. There can be those who are the volitionally necessitated about certain actions while also unwillingly addicted in other areas; and there are those who can be c. both volitionally necessitated and unwillingly addicted concerning the same behavior depending upon time and circumstance. How these poles of volitional behavior can be found in normal, otherwise high-functioning adults in response to the oddity of an action which is simultaneously self-imposed and imposed involuntarily, can be helpfully characterized with our contemporary psychological description commonly termed normal schizotypy behavior.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> “The alternative view, [to dimensionality analysis] which considers schizotypy to be a discrete *category* discontinuous with normality, encourages a different approach...” Cf. Peter H. Venables, “Schizotypal status as a developmental stage in studies of risk for schizophrenia,” in Raine, Lencz and Mednick, eds. *Schizotypal Personality*, 1995, p. 94.

<sup>167</sup> I distinguish this current understanding from the 1960’s situationist critiques which offered a theoretical framework for explaining unstable behavior in otherwise psychologically normal individuals in terms of situation and not personality traits. “Prominent psychologists at that time suggested that personality traits did not exist, that the apparent behavior patterns were due largely to the situations in which the persons were in rather than the persons themselves.” Columbia psychology professor, Walter Mischel was considered “the patron saint of situationist psychology.” John Doris, Stephen Stich, Jonathan Phillips, and Lachlan Walmsley, “Moral Psychology: Empirical Approaches,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta ed. (Winter 2017). URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/moral-psych-emp/>>. Cf. Widiger, “Historical Developments and Current Issues,” in *Oxford Handbook of Personality Disorders* p. 27.

Put simply, normal people can experience a kind of short in the wiring of their will apparatus. In such a state there is an unpredictable blinking on and off over time of certain capacities or forms of willing. The once tight necessity of volition starts to loosen. Humans tire in their vigilance to beware of negative consequences to action; our enthusiasm for submissive obedience wavers and our acuity for correlating strength and weakness of will according to the passing of time lessens. The will apparatus can become shaky and misaligned. This behavior is well-described in the psychiatric literature as normal schizotypal behavior on a dimensionality scale ranging into more traditionally pathological symptoms. The significance of this point is that my earlier imaginary hoarder and gambler examples cannot be waved off as pathological behavior that is irrelevant to Frankfurt's volitional necessity case. Eccentricity is not necessarily pathological. "There is no great genius without a tincture of madness," said Seneca in an aphorism that he attributed to Aristotle.<sup>168</sup> Quite to the contrary, it seems that all of us can engage in some range of vacillating and unpredictable behavior at different times in our lives while at the same time being seen as otherwise psychologically healthy human beings.<sup>169</sup>

With this empirical background psychology in mind, let me now offer a more extended version of the so-called Luther Case. Using Frankfurt's exemplar case of volitional necessity in Martin Luther's "Here I stand" declaration, we can compare it with an imagined case of normal schizotypal behavior in the same character. Let's imagine two Luthers: one we can call "Devout Luther" of traditional Reformation history and referenced by Frankfurt and others in so-called

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<sup>168</sup> Lucius Annaeus Seneca [4 BCE – 65 CE], "On Tranquility of Mind" in John Davie, trans., *Seneca: Dialogues and Essays* 139 (New York: Oxford University Press 2009).

<sup>169</sup> See also, Nancy C. Andreason and Scott Olsen, "Negative v. Positive Schizophrenia", *American Medical Association's Archives of General Psychiatry* 39, no. 7 (1982): 789-794; B. Nelson and D. Rawlings, "Relating Schizotypy and Personality to the Phenomenology of Creativity," *Schizophrenia Bulletin* 36, no. 2 (2008): 388–399.

“Luther cases”.<sup>170</sup> I have already reprised Frankfurt’s account of how Luther illustrates this volitionally necessitated case. Now, let us consider another easily-imagined Luther that we will label as Drunk Luther.<sup>171</sup> A bit of background is in order. The oldest continuous beer brewing operation in the world (begun 724 CE) was run by Christian monks at Weihestephan Monastery near Munich. Germans loved their beer, still do and Luther was no exception. We know for example, that his favored brew was Conventus, that Luther’s wife, Katharina von Bora was the brewmeister of the household and even sold the libation for extra income. “Monks ales” were called “liquid bread” in Luther’s day and in the brewing monasteries monks were allotted 5 liters (over a gallon) of beer daily. Two sayings were common: “We live by the work of our own hands” and our ale is “made with care and prayer.” Beer connoisseurs worldwide still marvel at the expert knowledge and skill, fastidious attention to detail and outright devotion that the monks bring to the craft of beer brewing.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Bernard Williams analyzes the same phenomena in Luther cases under the heading of “Moral Incapacity”, cf. Bernard Williams, “Moral Incapacity,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, 93 (1993): 59-70. But on Frankfurt’s view, volitional necessity need not involve the ethical. Gary Watson has an extensive discussion comparing several philosophers’ views on Luther cases, including Robert Kane and Daniel Dennett in the chapter, “Volitional Necessities” (ch. 4) in his *Agency and Answerability* (New York: Oxford University Press 2004), 101-113.

<sup>171</sup> The Drunk Luther imaginary sobriquet is not without grounds. It is said that Pope Leo X dismissed Luther’s “Ninety Five Theses” as merely the rantings of another drunk monk. Cf. Donald M. Whitford, “Luther’s Political Encounters”, in Donald K. McKim, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2003), 197; “Luther famously observed of his Reformation that the Word [of God] did everything while he drank beer with his friends.” Cf. Wade Johnston, “Amsdorf, Nicholas von,” in Mark A. Lamport, ed., *Encyclopedia of Martin Luther and the Reformation, Vol I* 14 ( New York: Rowman & Littlefield 2017).

<sup>172</sup> Kenneth J. Woo, “Beer,” in *Encyclopedia of Martin Luther and the Reformation* 63-64, 2017; William M. Johnston, “Brewing, Western Christian,” in *Encyclopedia of Monasticism* 181-183 (New York: Routledge Publishing 2013).

Given the necessarily looser definitions of drunkenness in the Middle Ages, it is not a stretch to imagine, not only that many European monks were addicted to beer, but also that Martin Luther himself would have been in such an inebriated state from time to time. Should Luther's more fervent moral defenders be put off by my thought experiment, I hasten to add the word "imaginary" and only offer the popular material about Luther to help us visualize the example as conceivable. And, though the clinical diagnosis of addiction would have been foreign to Luther, he was certainly familiar with his Bible's condemnation of drunkenness and even wrote a sermon condemning the same.<sup>173</sup> But the evidence that Luther enjoyed his beer is undisputed. To what extent is the disputed part. A recent PBS documentary had a list of "Luther Trivia". Number one on the list: *Alcohol cures all evils*. Luther thoroughly approved even advocated drinking heavily. "When a young man wrote to him complaining of despair at the prospect of going to hell, Luther wrote back advising him to go and get drunk. That, he said, was what he did to defy Satan whenever he felt tempted to despair."<sup>174</sup>

I want to imagine a Drunk Luther who is happily, volitionally necessitated in his absolute devotion to beer. This would like us to imagine Luther with more than a mere "willing

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<sup>173</sup> Martin Luther, "Sermon on Soberness and Moderation against Gluttony and Drunkenness, 1 Peter 4:7-11," (May 18, 1539), John Doberstein, ed., *Luther's Works*, Vol. 51 (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press 1959). URL: <https://standardbearer.rfpa.org/node/47113>

<sup>174</sup> Cf. "Luther Trivia: 10 things you didn't know about Martin Luther" from the recent PBS series by Madathilparampil Mammen Ninan, *Martin Luther: The Reluctant Revolutionary*, Amazon Digital Services 2017. URL: <http://www.pbs.org/empires/martinluther/cheats.html> URL: <http://www.talentshare.org/~mm9n/articles/Luther/index.htm> This bit of trivia is drawn from a book by a student of Luther's. Cf. Johannes Mathesius, *Martin Luther's Table Talk (Tischreden) Abridged from Luther's Works*, Vol. 54, ed. and trans. Henry F. French (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press 2017), 129-130.

addiction” which is still a fluid concept in the psychological and philosophical literature.<sup>175</sup> I am proposing a Luther who not only does not see his beer-drinking as an addiction, he wholeheartedly endorses his aversion to drinking mere water and ‘can do no other’ but consume his own home brew. This is not just a person who is unwilling to pursue an alternate course. He is unwilling to reconsider his unwillingness to change his course of behavior at all. Devout Luther resolutely stands on his obedience to scripture. Drunk Luther happily staggers along the corridors of Wartburg Castle with his empty stein after a night of drinking and solving all the many ills of Catholicism with his comrade-in-arms, Phillip Melanchthon. Beer drinking is as much a part of his daily routine as a monk as celebrating mass. He might even laugh in our faces if we tried to convince him that his will apparatus was damaged somehow. That is, if we pointed to some pragmatic negative consequence of his beer drinking, he might just as easily point to a negative pragmatic consequence of drinking too much contaminated water.

We obviously hesitate to call him an unwilling addict or even a person with an ambivalent attitude about his behavior. It is certainly conceivable that if we were to try and prevent him from partaking of this celebrated libation brewed by monasteries across Europe, he would loudly and heartily object to such a prohibition. Drunk Luther can be said to be volitionally necessitated in his drinking, yet there seems to be something far less noble about this alternate Luther case. Keep in mind that I do not aim to offer a direct objection to the notion of volitional necessity, only to take it from a categorical to a dimensional formulation. That is, not all volitional necessities are created equal. If we can easily imagine the Devout/Drunk Luther as

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<sup>175</sup> Owen Flanagan, “Willing Addicts? Drinkers, dandies, druggies and other Dionysians,” in Nick Heather and Gabriel Segal, eds., *Addiction and Choice: Rethinking the Relationship* 66-81 (New York: Oxford University Press 2017).

normal schizotypal behavior, we can further demarcate the three possible states both for and against his beer drinking—1) a Luther who is intermittently in a state of volitional necessity; 2) a Luther who may be volitionally necessitated in certain doctrinal expressions of his faith (i.e. sola scriptura), but also perhaps unwillingly and even unwittingly addicted in relation to beer; 3) a Luther who, in terms of his bouts of drunkenness, could be so fiercely defiant in his love of beer-drinking as to be volitionally necessitated on the one hand. But then, after reading again the warnings in Proverbs against strong drink he is so convicted in his heart, so prone to reflexive obedience, he is overcome by an entirely different volitional necessity. The very taste of beer is revolting and at this new point in time, he is unwilling to reconsider his aversion. But then, at another happier, less depressed period in his life, his volitional necessitation swings toward defending the Christian's consumption of strong drink as a necessity: "Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses." (1 Timothy 5:23 NIV). At one point Luther even goes so far as to recommend to a young acolyte essentially to go get drunk. "Luther thoroughly approved even advocated drinking heavily. When a young man wrote to him complaining of despair at the prospect of going to hell, Luther wrote back advising him to go and get drunk. That, he said, was what he did when he felt despair."<sup>176</sup> And Luther might offer further necessitation for strong drink over water in the manner of a pious follower of his Master recalling and celebrating the Lord's first miracle of water to wine at a wedding feast (John 2:1-11). No church historian would try to delegitimize the Protestant Reformation on account of a leader who regularly vacillated between these two states of mind, necessitated at one point, not so necessitate at another.

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<sup>176</sup> "Luther Trivia: 10 things", *Martin Luther: The Reluctant Revolutionary*, Amazon Digital Services 2017. URL: <http://www.pbs.org/empires/martinluther/cheats.html>



The point of this thought experiment is not to deny volitional necessity as a concept but to assert that there are issues that can play havoc with Frankfurt's famous declaration concerning the will, considerations which I have outlined above. The tipping point from a necessitated to less than necessitated volition may not be as simple as labeling it ambivalence or addiction or even simple akrasia. There are other considerations which, if thoughtfully attended to, may have the effect of strengthening volitional necessity. Seen in this light, the action of self-binding tightens and reinforces volitional necessity. For the will apparatus to stay tightly held together, there are simple actions that effectively integrate the whole. Self-binding relates to volitional necessity as fastening lug nuts screw on to wheel studs or bolts and tighten a wheel to an axle.

Other well-known examples of this kind of struggle come to mind—Shusaku Endo's 1966 novel *Silence*<sup>177</sup> about Jesuit missionaries known as Kakure Kirishitan (Hidden Christians) who suffered horrendous persecution after the Shimabara Rebellion in 17th century Japan. Martin Scorsese's 2016 film based on the book focused on three different Portuguese missionaries and one indigenous Japanese convert exposing each one's internal struggles as they start with what they imagine to be a volitional necessity, like Luther or even stronger, concerning their faith, only to wither under intense persecution. Time, obedience to authority and negative consequence play clear roles in the story. The four characters, each in his own way, are Frankfortian "cases of volitional struggles" as Gary Watson also analyzes and rightly asks "on what ground can the struggle be mounted" if volitional necessity is at stake?<sup>178</sup> Ultimately, Liam Neeson's character, Father Cristovão Ferreira, the elder mentor for the other two, exhibits this

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<sup>177</sup> Shusaku Endo, *Silence: A Novel*, William Johnston, trans. (New York: Picador Classics-Macmillan Publishers 2016). Film by the same name directed by Martin Scorsese, screenplay by Jay Cocks. Cf. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0490215/>

<sup>178</sup> Watson, "Volitional Necessities", p. 115.

paradoxical complexity we are trying to understand in his experiencing a complete shift in volitional necessity. Recanting one's faith under extreme torture does not mean that the volitional necessity was not there in the first place. I do not imagine Frankfurt would claim that only religious martyrs or those professing a willingness to be martyred can claim volitional necessity. Humans are nothing if not fickle. "We are a puny and fickle folk. Avarice, hesitation, and following are our diseases,"<sup>179</sup> as Emerson famously evaluated. His remark serves to illustrate the three realities that must be taken into account when considering cases of volitional necessity. Obliviousness to the negative consequences of greedy desires, the entailed temporal reality of hesitation, and the dangers of blind following of a perceived authority, all play their role even among the exemplars of volitional necessity.

A popular American example is the laicized Franciscan priest and alcoholic, Brennan Mannan who called himself the "Ragamuffin evangelist."

"Ragamuffins have a singular prayer: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." ... Warning: Mine has been anything but a straight shot, more like a crooked path filled with thorns and crows and vodka. Prone to wander? You bet. I've been a priest, then an ex-priest. Husband, then ex-husband. Amazed crowds one night and lied to friends the next. Drunk for years, sober for "a season", then drunk again. I've been John the beloved, Peter the coward, and Thomas the doubter all before the waitress brought the check. I've shattered every one of the Ten Commandments six times Tuesday. And if you believe that last sentence was for dramatic effect, it wasn't."<sup>180</sup>

Through the ups and downs of his amazing life of profound humility and service to others, and a life of great pendulum swings into dissolution and self-loathing, Mannan serves as another illustration of a volitionally necessitated holy man at time T1 and then an inexplicable about-face

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<sup>179</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: The Library of America/Penguin Putnam Inc. 1983), 115.

<sup>180</sup> Brennan Manning, *All Is Grace: A Ragamuffin Memoir* (David C. Cook Publishing, Colorado Springs, Colorado 2011), 28-29.

into a violently degenerate crazy man at T2. Alcohol may have been his drug of choice but his example is less about a particular addiction and more about the enigma of schizotypal behavior in otherwise intelligent and deeply devout individuals who clearly experience volitional necessity regarding their religious commitment at times in their lives.

And then of course, perhaps the most stunning revelation of a life of inner turmoil in contemporary times is Mother Teresa. It seems there were times in this saint's amazing life when the unthinkable became thinkable, or at least her own "I can do no other" volitional necessity seemed to wilt into "I can no longer do no other" volitional inanition.

"There is so much contradiction in my soul.—Such deep longing for God—so deep that it is painful—a suffering continual—and yet not wanted by God—repulsed—empty—no faith—no love—no zeal.—Souls hold no attraction—Heaven means nothing—to me it looks like an empty place—the thought of it means nothing to me and yet this torturing longing...<sup>181</sup>

To be torn in this way, as Mother Teresa described herself, seems to go far beyond some vague feeling of spiritual ambivalence and more along the lines of the aforementioned dreaded torment of a "double-souled" person! Yet, no one can doubt that this woman can also be held up as an ultimate exemplar for volitional necessity.

How then, should we view these apparent cases of volitional necessity while there also appears to simultaneously exist within the same person an addiction of some kind, or at least a persistent inner turmoil as though the experience of volitional necessity itself (self-imposed + imposition from without as Frankfurt portrays) feels more like torture than tranquility—a placid volitional state of wholeness. Yet, there it is, in the same person. I think Frankfurt's account has overlooked a crucial element of the volitional matrix where both disunity and unity of the

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<sup>181</sup> Mother Teresa and Brian Kolodiejchuk (ed.), *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta* (New York: Image Catholic Books 2009), 169.

volitional state are explicable conditions potentially within the same individual. We might like to turn the other direction and let examples of volitional states be related to cases where the addict might reason to herself that she has a divided volitional state which presents itself as a twin set of necessities. At times, she has a full-scale aversion to stopping her addictive behavior in which case Frankfurt wants to call her a willing addict. We just as easily might say that she has a volitionally necessitated state that vacillates in opposite directions.

Again, this is out-of-bounds for Frankfurt since he doesn't want to call a serious addiction a matter of volitional necessity. Nonetheless, think of the parameters placed on the definition of volitional necessity and then imagine a person addicted to some behavior or substance. The addict might choose to make a sternly-willed choice against addictive behavior, but then finds that despite her willing or her trying to will to do otherwise, she instead engages in the same old addictive actions. She sees herself as too weak to bring herself to will otherwise. Volitional necessity goes a step deeper, says Frankfurt, and proposes that the person who is unwilling to will against her own addiction is not really an addict or is better described as a willing addict. Frankfurt's volitional necessity describes an action that an agent literally cannot do. Gary Watson, in amending Donald Davidson's picture of what an agent can do offers this refinement:

What we can do depends on the exercise of our unimpaired capacity for choice....I want to underscore the centrality of this basic concept to the way we think about human action...a distinction between will and power; it is one thing to be unwilling to do something, quite another to be unable.<sup>182</sup>

Frankfurt claims that an individual can find herself not just unwilling but also unable to do something—a volitional state which is necessitated. Volitional necessity, by my analysis, still

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<sup>182</sup> Gary Watson, "Volitional Necessities," in *Agency and Answerability*, 2004, p. 90.

sounds like a “positive addiction” and a concept that could use a finer edge. Instead of merely labeling this incongruous state as a necessity of the unified will, why not give some attention to other features within our agential domain: temporal agency, obedient patience, and cognizance of negative consequence? Then we can better explain why not everyone, all the time, quite lives up to Frankfurt’s ideal volitional integration especially given our normal tendency to minimally schizotypal behavior.

## 2.3 RATIONALITY AND COERCION: Wallace and wacky writers

2.3.1 Instrumental rationality. Before considering coercion let us first turn to the matter of so-called “instrumental rationality” which appears to require more than mere motivation as is illustrated in the case of self-binding. First a broad definition for clarity.

Someone displays instrumental rationality insofar as she adopts suitable means to her ends. Instrumental rationality, ... is an important, and presumably indispensable, part of practical rationality... [I]t has been suggested that instrumental rationality, is partly constitutive of intention, desire, or action. [And more importantly] it has been argued that instrumental rationality is not only a part, but a special part, or even the whole, of practical rationality.<sup>183</sup>

Our traversal in this case is to consider how a self-binding act can be instrumentally rational or a suitable (practically rational) means to some desired end. I will only consider a few ideas from Jay Wallace that relate to this question. Wallace sees rational agency as an intentional activity that is guided by the agent’s conception of what they have reason to do.<sup>184</sup> He offers and assesses three approaches, which he identifies as internalism, meta-internalism, and

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<sup>183</sup> Niko Kolodny and John Brunero, “Instrumental Rationality,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Edward N. Zalta ed. (Winter 2016). URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/rationality-instrumental/>

<sup>184</sup> Beyond the so-called “motivation requirement,” Wallace is helpful here in specifying a further “guidance condition” or action guided by the agent’s own deliberative reflection. Jay R. Wallace, “Three Conceptions of Rational Agency,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 2, no. 3 (September 1999): 217-242.

volitionalism. Wallace argues for the last one for which he has coined the phrase “volitionalist conception of rational agency.”

With internalism the agent’s substantive desires are simply a given and are supposed to explain rational motivation. But how the agent is actually guided by her conception of reasons is unclear. This lack of a guidance condition is a problem for an internalist account. There is no real role for normative reflection on one’s reasons playing a part in the cause of one’s rational action. Self-binding offers a telling example of this need to clearly differentiate an agent’s motivations as guided by reasons. When an agent binds herself at T1 so that she cannot do otherwise at T2 then there must have been some serious reflection and consequent resolve in the self-binding action which must go beyond a mere internalism account. As it turns out, this claim has empirical support from neurological studies as noted earlier. The aforementioned study, reported in *Neuron*,<sup>185</sup> looked at precommitment (self-binding) which they defined as the voluntary restriction of access to temptations. The study found that precommitment is a more effective self-control strategy than willpower alone. This is because the act of precommitment engages a key area of the brain known as LFPC (lateral frontopolar cortex). Willpower only engages the DLPFC, (dorsolateral prefrontal cortex) and the PPC (posterior parietal cortex). But as neuroscientists know, the LFPC portion of the brain serves to increase connectivity with DLPFC and PPC. The research suggests that “LFPC sits at the top of a cognitive control hierarchy from which it orchestrates different courses of actions.” Self-binding ignites the LFPC. The report concluded that precommitment (self-binding) activity in the brain is adaptive whenever instances of weak will are anticipated. And this would mean that an optimal precommitment strategy needs

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<sup>185</sup> Crockett, et al, “Restricting Temptations: Neural Mechanisms of Precommitment,” *Neuron* 2013.

to acquire information about the likelihood of a person's willpower failures. As it turns out, self-binding provides a kind of guidance condition since it involves considerable reflection and planning and self-knowledge of one's weaknesses. In its summary, the study offered this conclusion: "Our findings support a hierarchical model of self-control in which LFPC orchestrates precommitment by controlling action plans in more caudal prefrontal regions as a function of expected value."<sup>186</sup>

In the case of meta-internalism this is accounted for according to the agent's basal desire to act rationally according to reasons which Wallace just calls a disposition. This is the causal interpretation that stands between normative reflection and motivation. So, our normative beliefs succeed in guiding our behavior to the extent that we have this standing disposition to be rational agents and thus the 'meta' prefix is attached to the internalism view. Meta-internalism interprets this dispositional guidance condition as a constraint on normative reasons.

At this juncture Wallace might well have proposed self-binding as a paradigmatic problem example. Here is an agent trying to do something about this dreadful state where she finds herself intentionally engaging in an activity which she concurrently also believes she does not have reason to do. Wallace does add a helpful footnote concerning the akratic (weak willed) state of affairs which agents find the need to self-bind against.

Some might prefer to characterize akrasia differently, as involving action contrary to one's judgment about what it would be best to do. I shall assume, however, that these formulations are equivalent: [for] practical deliberation, judgments about what it would be good to do are, in effect, judgments about what one has reason to do.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid, p. 400.

<sup>187</sup> Wallace, "Three Conceptions," p. 231.

When it comes to human akrasia, meta-internalism says that an agent lacks a basic capacity to act in accord with reason. But therein lies the vexing problem presented by self-binding. The meta-internalism view assumes that the requirements of practical reason must nevertheless apply even in cases where they are clearly being violated. In human motivational psychology terms, the meta-internalist is committed to the belief that our actions are causal consequences of psychological states. But as in the self-binding paradigm of the akratic agent, the meta-internalist must in turn acknowledge that this is a case where the agent “could not have acted rationally, given the nature and strength of the desires and tendencies to which they were actually subject at the time of action.”<sup>188</sup> If we want to explain how reason functions causally according to our tendencies and desires and claim that an agent could have done otherwise, even while requiring that the substance and force of the agent’s beliefs remain constant, we must abandon a core meta-internalist contention about reasons and causes. Before offering his account of “volitionalism,” Wallace summarizes the problems with these other two views of rational agency, internalist and meta-internalist accounts, which ...

fail to capture our conception of ourselves as potentially rational agents, within the practical point of view. When we deliberate about what to do, we take it that we have it in our power to determine for ourselves how we shall act, by exercising our capacity for self-control. That is, we take it that we are not simply determined to act by the strength of the desires to which we are antecedently subject, but that it is up to us to choose what we shall do. This is the basis for the familiar conceit that the capacity for self-control involves an ability to rise above the desires to which one is subject, and to take the reins in one’s own hands.<sup>189</sup>

Wallace then rightly concedes any conception of rational agency, including his own, must account for the issue of practical irrationality—to which self-binding is a tactical response. Self-

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid, p. 232.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid, p. 233, 234.



binding seems to clearly illustrate a way to “make sense of our subjection to rational requirements even in cases in which we knowingly fail to comply with them.”<sup>190</sup> In self-binding we do not merely take the reins, but instead we intentionally have the reins tied to our hands!

2.3.2 Wallace’s Volitionalist Account and Self-Binding Motivations. Now it is time to consider Wallace’s volitionalist account of rational agency as he marks out a set of motivational states that are under an agent’s direct control, motivations connected with decision and choice, for example. And so, in Wallace’s volitionalist motivational state,

[I]t is most often in our power to determine what we are going to do, by deciding one way or another. Furthermore, when we exercise our power of self-determination by actually making a decision, the result [in the consequent action] is something we have done, not something that merely happens to us.<sup>191</sup>

But how would a volitionalist describe a case where the self-determined decision is one where we, in our autonomous patiency role, allow something to happen to us? Ulysses commands that he be bound and so allows the binding, so that later he will also allow himself to hear the sirens without the deadly consequences. The key with the Wallace volitionalist would be the motivation for self-binding in the first place—a motivation which is under or directly subject to our control. Whenever we recognize this type of motivation we are able to see “reasons for action as norms of reasoning, capable both of guiding our activity through deliberation and of retaining their normative force when such guidance breaks down.”<sup>192</sup>

Self-binding cases recognize those times when our internal, self-determining, self-guiding mechanism is more likely to break down and offers us a vouchsafing assurance that our autonomous agency is not at stake whenever we self-determine to make ourselves temporary

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid, p. 236.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid, p. 237

<sup>192</sup> R. Jay Wallace, “Normativity and the Will,” in John Hyman and Helen Steward, eds, *Agency and Action* 212 (New York: Cambridge University Press 2004).

patients. We can still see ourselves as self-determining agents regardless of the strength of the many competing desires to which we are subject. Rather than a threat to agency, this volition of patiency that leads us to a self-binding act, ends up enriching our own personhood, because we have discovered a new piece of cognitive armament at our disposal. Wallace labels as “hydraulic” and “empiricist” the other contrasting views to his more inclusive conception because they view an agent’s motivations merely in terms of the causal strength of a psychological state (full of competing desires) to which the agent is passively subject. There must be room in our etiology of human action, he believes, to account for this capacity for self-determination beyond mere empirical description. Despite our tendencies to weak-willed behavior, as agents we still have the ...

capacity to comply with reasons [we] knowingly act against.... [T]he volitionalist capacity for choice is, ... precisely a capacity to determine what one shall do in ways independent from one’s merely given psychological states. In this way, the volitionalist conception represents a clear improvement over both internalism and meta-internalism.<sup>193</sup>

Wallace might have offered our facility for self-binding as one of those agential capacities at our disposal in order to rationally counteract our akratic tendencies. When an agent decides to self-bind she has chosen a suitable means-ends strategy which is recognizable as instrumental rationality.

2.3.3 Why Self-Bind: Rationality, Temporality and Practical Necessity. What then are we to make of self-binding in light of Wallace’s picture of volitionalism for explaining instrumental rationality? Three observations need mentioning. One is this odd manner in which self-binding presents itself as an instrumental or practical yet irrationally option-limiting,

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid, p. 238.

means/ends pursuit.<sup>194</sup> Yet, the idea of an unqualified irrationality seems too strong of a description. As noted earlier, sociologist Jon Elster wants to explain self-binding as a demonstration of “imperfect rationality”.<sup>195</sup> Regardless of this distinction, the act is both practical and puzzling. A second observation concerns the widely-perceived need for controlling impulsive behavior and preventing akrasia. Every day humans employ this odd, unexpected inversion of action as a means to effectively resist temptation to act in a way they might regret later. Under the heading of instrumental rationality then, the prompting question is simple: Why? That is, what are the motivations for humans to choose this particular self-coercive way of handling temptation and weak will?

Elster follows the 17<sup>th</sup> century French moralist, Jean la Bruyère from his *Caractères* (a translation of Theophrastus, the successor to Aristotle) in proposing three “motivations for precommitting”. As a starting place for brief reflection, these are as good as any.<sup>196</sup> People are motivated by a. *interest*, which relates to seeking personal or group advantage, including typical interests like money, power, or honor. Then there are the emotional promptings of b. *passion*. In addition to emotions like anger or envy, Elster also includes hunger, thirst, sexual desire, states

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<sup>194</sup> The neurological and behavioral sciences put it this way: “Precommitment is non-normative, in the sense that a rational decision maker with time-consistent preferences should never restrict his choice set.” Cf. Crockett et al, “Neural Mechanisms”, p. 393.

<sup>195</sup> Jon Elster, “Ulysses and the Sirens: A Theory of Imperfect Rationality.” *Information sur les Sciences Sociales* 16, no. 5 (1977): 469-470. Economists have opted for the term “bounded rationality” as distinguished from “omniscient rationality” in trying to account for “less intentional conceptions of the causal determinants of action.” Cf. James G. March, “Bounded Rationality, Ambiguity, and the Engineering of Choice,” *The Bell Journal of Economics* 9, no. 2 (Autumn 1978): 591.

<sup>196</sup> Robert Solomon agrees: “Elster’s “alchemies” ... shares with my view the idea that emotions serve our purposes and our interests.... Serving purposes opens up the ‘why?’ questions.” Cf. Robert Solomon, *Not Passion’s Slave: Emotions and Choice* (New York: Oxford University Press 2003), 224.

of pain, states of chemically-addicted intoxication. And the third motivational state is c. *reason*, which Elster chooses to interpret as a utilitarian motive of concern for the common good and individual rights.<sup>197</sup>

Elster then moves quickly to distinguish “two future-directed intentions” one being a prediction and the other a preference recognition.<sup>198</sup> Given that a person will be in, or conflicted about, one of the above three motivational states at two given times—T1 and T2. At T1 he may predict that at T2 he will be under the influence of a motivational state in which he is more likely do A even though he prefers that he do B. First, comes the T1 prediction of the state he will find himself in at T2 and next comes the recognition of his preference of B over A at T2. Elster frames the problem as a predicted motivational state which is seen as “interfering with rationality” at T2 and the solution described as follows: “If at Time 1 he can perform an action that will ensure that he will do B and if the cost of performing that action is less than the value difference between A and B (as assessed at Time 1), he has an incentive to precommit himself.”<sup>199</sup> The incentive may be considered rational but not perfectly so, according to Elster since specific options have been removed. These lost options may (or may not) represent a lost autonomous liberty. This is the rub of self-binding. The agent chooses at T1 to install irrevocable penalties against choosing A, or to eliminate even the possibility of choosing A at T2 leaving the agent with no real choice but to do B, recalling that B was the agent’s original preference all

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<sup>197</sup> Cf. Jean de La Bruyère, *Characters* (1688), trans. Edward Fertig (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1992); Jon Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1999), 334; and Elster, “Don’t Burn Your Bridge,” p. 1755.

<sup>198</sup> Another economist puts it this way: “Rational choice involves two guesses, a guess about uncertain future consequences and a guess about uncertain future preferences.” Cf. James G. March, “Bounded Rationality, Ambiguity, and the Engineering of Choice,” *The Bell Journal of Economics* 9, no. 2 (Autumn 1978: 587.

<sup>199</sup> Elster, “Don’t Burn Your Bridge,” p. 1755.

along. Here we have practical necessity bumping into rationality in a felicitous way in these purported autonomy-disrupting intertemporal choices along the way.

George Ainslie, in a widely-cited article, offers an economist's perspective on this issue. There are three reasons he proposes for human "maladaptive behavior" or the propensity to act against preference: 1) ignorance of consequences; 2) compulsion born of repetitive conditioning; 3) and distorted valuation of consequences. Each suggests its own remedy though Ainslie favors the third reason and remedy as having the best power to explain behavior. Human tendency is to "sharply discount the future" along with "an inability to clearly imagine distant goals".<sup>200</sup> This appears to imply "an innate property of the way we perceive time." Ainslie suggests, based on early behavioral science research that "impulsiveness arises because of the discounting of delayed events."<sup>201</sup>

All of the above leads to a third observation concerning the practical side of self-binding. Self-binding actions are at the motivational heart of all serious academic specializations. The aim is to ruthlessly narrow down one's field of study expressly in order to actually advance the specific discipline in some way no matter how miniscule the progress might be. Interdisciplinary studies have their place, but the very real danger to be avoided is a shallow dilettantism. This intellectual hazard and its prevention was an ancient worry even dating back to the time of Confucius and recorded in his *Analects*.

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<sup>200</sup> George Ainslie, "Responsibility in a Reductionist Model," in Craig Hanson, *Thinking about Addiction Hyperbolic Discounting and Responsible Agency* 95-114 (New York: Rodopi 2009).

<sup>201</sup> George Ainslie, "Specious Reward" 1975. Ainslie is the first in the behavioral economist academic literature to closely study what he termed, "devices for controlling impulses" while in turn crediting two sociologists (Strotz and Becker) for uncovering and highlighting the significance of using such devices to control impulsive behavior. Jon Elster regularly credits Ainslie as his original source for appropriating and re-purposing the term "precommitment".

Dilettantes often trot out their affected vocabulary and stylized methodology for purely aesthetic reasons or for the mere gratification of sounding like an “educated” person. However, Confucius warns, “If one is outwardly fierce but inwardly feeble, one may be compared to the small man. In fact, isn’t one just like a burglar making a hole through the wall?” (CA, 17.10). These dilettantes adopt dishonestly the countenance of a learned individual, but *try to sidestep the human mandate for internal discipline*.<sup>202</sup>

2.3.4 Rationality, deliberation and choosing to self-bind. A widely-discussed question, in this digital age of information glut, is how knowledge overload can end up debilitating and immobilizing the rational process of deliberation. Indeed, such a caution has been a philosophical worry for a long time. In all our rational decision-making we should be wary of having too many options, Ronald Dworkin claims.<sup>203</sup> As noted earlier, psychologist Barry Schwartz agrees. “If we’re rational, [social scientists] tell us, added options can only make us better off as a society. Those of us who care will benefit, and those of us who do not care can always ignore the added options. This view seems logically compelling; but empirically, it isn’t true.” Schwartz goes on to cite several studies to support his claim, including a series of studies entitled, “When Choice Is Demotivating.”<sup>204</sup> Alvin Toffler, an editor with *Fortune* magazine, in his widely-influential 1970 book, *Future Shock*, presented us with the term “overchoice” and “choice overload.”<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> David Black, “Confucius on Educational Failure: Three Types of Misguided Students,” *Educational Theory* 64, no. 2 (2014): 150.

<sup>203</sup> Ronald Dworkin, “Is More Choice Better Than Less?” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (September 1982): 47-61. Dworkin claimed that philosophers John Rawls and Robert Nozick both accepted the thesis that “more choices are preferable to fewer.”

<sup>204</sup> Schwartz, *Paradox of Choice*, p. 19.

<sup>205</sup> He devotes an entire chapter (12) to the concept: “The Origins of Overchoice”. Cf. Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House 1970), 263-283.

Similarly, we have valid reasons to fear too much freedom as Harry Frankfurt implies: “enlargements of our freedom enrich us...only up to a point.”<sup>206</sup> But Frankfurt takes the point in an unexpected direction by examining the desires and volitions that constitute the deliberative process itself. Depicting his idea in the most emphatic terms Frankfurt claims that volitional necessities of the will have inviolable limits which are comparable to “logical necessities”. These “logical necessities define what it is impossible for us to conceive. The necessities of the will concern what we are unable to bring ourselves to do.”<sup>207</sup> According to Frankfurt, just as there are necessary truths of logic, a necessary truth of human action is that there are certain “unthinkable actions” which we are unable to bring ourselves to do regardless of the surfeit of choices that we have.<sup>208</sup> As David Dick reminds, Frankfurt is proposing that these “unthinkable actions” are meant to limit our will in two ways: “First, they are to stabilize an agent’s deliberative landscape to avoid a condition I call ‘deliberative paralysis.’ Second, they provide an agent’s will an unchangeable essential character and so, an identity.”<sup>209</sup> Frankfurt is not claiming that some irrational act or violation of volitional rationality is itself inconceivable, only that our wills prohibit the act and thus make it unthinkable. That is, the capacity can be there but the will is not. The act is not thinkable in that more restrictive sense. But I am not convinced of such a high view of human nature, for one, because unthinkable actions sadly become thinkable

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<sup>206</sup> Harry Frankfurt, “Rationality and the Unthinkable,” pp. 177-190 in Harry Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1998), 177.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid, p. 190.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> David Dick, “Frankfurt, Unthinkable Actions, and Deliberative Paralysis,” *Proceedings and Addresses of American Philosophical Association*, Eastern Division Program 85, no. 1 (September 2011): 15.

and actionable with repetition over time.<sup>210</sup> This is the fact about human behavior that gives momentum to self-binding. The academic literature in the history of cultures and the sociology of deviant behavior also bears this out.<sup>211</sup> Temporality can either temper or tamper with rationality. The larger the number of choices and the longer the time frame, the greater the unpredictability in rationality. This is the other side of the necessary truths of human action. It seems problematic to imagine volitional necessities being equivalent to logical necessities in the Frankfurt model. If such were the case there would be a class of actions that no human being anywhere could ever bring themselves to choose much less perform, ever.

In contrast, this formidable practice of self-binding can serve as a standard example of why volitional necessity could be a wobblier than Frankfurt wants us to imagine. People are prompted to self-binding action because they have learned that what they wanted to be a volitional necessity at one point in time turns out to be not so necessary and so volitional at a later point. I may want to care about X, and at time T1, I may have the distinct sense that I do truly care about X, all the while knowing that, at a future point in time, I likely will care far less about X or care far more about Y which is directly opposed to X. In such a case, circumscribing

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<sup>210</sup> There are other typical examples that see weaknesses in Frankfurt's unthinkableness claim. Cf. Stefaan E. Cuypers, "Harry Frankfurt on the Will, Autonomy and Necessity", *Ethical Perspectives* 5, no. (1998): 44-52. Cuypers sees a serious problem of equivocality in Frankfurt's concept of the will but then can only conclude with hard determinism: "we are to a very considerable extent not of our own making but only the product of luck and destiny." (p. 52); Jennifer S. Swindell, "Ambivalence," *Philosophical Explorations* 13, no. 1 (March 2010): 23-34. Swindell sees a problem of ambiguity between Frankfurt's notions of identification and willing in his account of ambivalence which allows for an unthinkable action to become less unthinkable between one's identification with and actual willing of the act.

<sup>211</sup> Marshall B. Clinard and Robert F. Meier, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior* 14<sup>th</sup> ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing 2010), 98-100. Philosopher Sissela Bok has devoted a good deal of her career to understanding and responding to the base tendencies of human nature and lack of moral progress. Cf. *Common Values* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press 1995); also Sissela Bok, *Mayhem: Violence as Public Entertainment* (New York: Perseus Books 1998).



the possible options that I will have, effectively limits viable preferences and achieves what volitional necessity could not. Like the case of Luther, Homer's Ulysses, conceivably self-identifies as the volitionally necessitated intrepid explorer and conqueror. He 'can do no other' but try to devise a way to survive and also hear the Sirens sing. He might have instead commanded his crew to give a wide berth to the island of the deadly Sirens. But such a course of action was unthinkable. His adventuring exploits were what he cared most deeply about—exploring new worlds, conquering terrible monsters and defeating evil tyrants.

After Ulysses and his men have safely sailed past the danger, having self-bound themselves (Ulysses to the mast and his men with their wax-plugged ears), this action of sailing within earshot of the Sirens, was obviously preferred and endorsed by Ulysses (having his men rashly sail into a Siren death trap), is now circumscribed, off-limits and impossible to perform. Was it really so unthinkable? At one point it was and at another point it was not. At that point when his ship is out of range of the Sirens, a different volitional necessity takes over. It is unthinkable that Ulysses should risk his life and the lives of his crew in the way that he did. Yet, only moments before, he is willing to risk lives as a means to his end—hearing the Sirens sing. He was not addicted to the music of Siren choirs but he was volitionally resolute in his desire to hear them and not die, so much so that Ulysses would have fit all of Frankfurt's rules for having a volitional necessity. This Homeric myth seems to illustrate that human nature is profoundly more capricious than the Frankfurt picture presents. In other words, with a self-binding act, I intentionally limit my options not in order to discover or determine my identity but to deter that other part of my identity that tends toward irrational or deviant behavior. According to Frankfurt, there is real peril to one's identity commensurate with an expansion of one's freedom. Identity itself is at stake when my viable options are expanded to the point that an agent may suffer from

“deliberative paralysis.”<sup>212</sup> This notion famously leads Frankfurt on an impracticable quest, in my opinion, to find in oneself a kind of hierarchy, not of needs but of desires. And the ones who engage in this inward progression of identification, to discover what they can reflectively and wholeheartedly endorse as their will, are those who Frankfurt holds up as persons in the truest sense.

But this does not seem right. The more straightforward motivation for our choosing to limit our options (self-bind) is because our identity, in terms of tendencies and weaknesses, is already painfully clear to us. Our normal schizotypy is part of our identity while Frankfurt’s notion of identity seems like a utopian quest. We try to be like deeply-rooted trees but sometimes find ourselves more like barely-rooted saplings that will blow over or wash away in a storm. So, our self-limiting occurs not because we are afraid that confidence in our preferences might be undermined if we did not limit our options, as Frankfurt suggests. To the contrary, it appears to me that those who already have a clear sense of their own identity are the ones most likely to engage in such a restrictive measure of option-limiting, self-binding to begin with. They do not self-limit out of some trepidation that their identity might be at stake, but instead they engage in self-binding acts out of a certain cognizance of their own weak-willed propensities. That is, they own that irrational part of themselves along with the rational. They are not at all afraid they might lose themselves in the surfeit of options; rather it is because they already know themselves all too well. Again, neuroscience confirms this assertion. Exerting willpower alone was found to engage the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) and the posterior parietal cortex (PPC), while self-binding or precommitment engages the lateral frontopolar cortex (LFPC). As it turns out, the

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<sup>212</sup> David Dick, “Frankfurt, Unthinkable Actions, and Deliberative Paralysis”.

research shows that during precommitment, LFPC actually increases connectivity with DLPFC and PPC indicating that “LFPC sits at the top of a cognitive control hierarchy from which it orchestrates different courses of actions.”<sup>213</sup>

2.3.5 Coercion and irrationality: How coercion rationally works in self-binding. By definition, binding another person to act in a prescribed manner entails coercing that other person. And coercion seems to involve a violation of the autonomy of another person: “the application of force to control the action of a voluntary agent; a forcible restraint.”<sup>214</sup> So, by extension, a synonym for self-bind might be self-coerce. But how can this be? By whose will is the force applied? In the case of Homer’s Ulysses, another person applies the force: Ulysses’ minions bind him to the mast upon his command. Nonetheless the nature of the coercion is the thing in question. It is coercion of a sort insofar as the person being coerced is essentially in command of the coercer. On the other hand, imagine a solitary Cortes (16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Conquistador) burning his own ship to prevent himself from fleeing the New World in a moment of fear to get away from some homicidal Aztec tribe. The former case requires another entity, another person or persons; the latter does not. But both involve the voluntary will of the actor—one coerced by others but under his own command, the other coerced by the circumstance brought about by his own irreversible action. Without the voluntary accedence by the first person, there is no ‘self’ in self-binding.

Now, the point of the above is to note that the whole picture seems irrational that any person would allow herself to be coerced in either of these ways—aided or unaided. Since a

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<sup>213</sup> Crockett, et al, “Restricting Temptations” 391.

<sup>214</sup> “coercion, n.”, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, December 2016, Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/35725?redirectedFrom=coercion>

prima facie description implies limited description, the issue may be informed by more descriptive content to ameliorate its possible rationality. This then leads us deeper into the case and relates back to intention as discussed above. There is no self-binding without these three aspects in play: the first-person self, an act of coercion (by accedence), and a tandem of intentions. There is the intention to bind the self in the service of an overriding intention to achieve some goal that might not have been attainable short of a self-binding act. Seen in the light of ultimate intent, an irrational-sounding, coercive act like self-binding might be judged not so irrational after all. The means to achieve the intention might be considered a *contingent rational correlate* and not necessarily irrational.

On the other hand, one might view the motivation to self-bind as an outright admission of anticipated irrationality or perhaps even an intentionally self-deceptive act since the self at time T1 rationally binds the self at T2 because of some anticipated irrationality. “Right now, I feel strong (or for whatever reason the temptation feels weak) and so I will resist eating the cake,” I might tell myself as a diabetic. But since I know that I will not be nearly as strong later on, I engage in a self-binding act by feeding the cake to the birds in the backyard. Self-binding becomes an attempt to limit one’s future options in order to prevent some anticipated irrational decision which contradicts an earlier preference. I throw out the cake now while I am rational and strong-willed instead of trying to resist temptation when I am weak and hungry and temporarily prone to act irrationally.

The coercion is there in that I have forcibly restrained myself so that I do not have the option of retrieving the cake. The birds have eaten it! Or, let’s say, as a student, I know that I must sit for a certain exam tomorrow morning in order to pass a class. But I also know of my propensity to tune out my alarm clock and oversleep despite the alarm. So, I decide to put myself

under threat by agreeing to allow a roommate to dump a cup of ice-cold water on my face if I sleep past my alarm more than two minutes. And I am confident that he will most certainly keep his end of the agreement. The coercion occurs (assuming I am not in a comatose state) when I bolt up with the sensory shock of the cold water.

Merely the self-imposed threat of coercion is enough for a self-binding act to be effective. Both these examples seem to describe quite rational intentions. But it is also true that, when I intentionally limit the options available to me in a given circumstance, maybe to the point of putting myself under threat, then I appear to be engaging in a form of self-coercion which might be considered an irrational act.

2.3.6 Extreme examples from the writing profession. Following various citations from Jon Elster, one of the older recorded examples from ancient philosophy, of self-coercive binding, is from Seneca: “People who ... are afraid of being rash and boisterous when drunk, tell their servants to take them away from the party. Those who [experience] lack of self-control in sickness give orders that they are not to be obeyed when their health is bad.”<sup>215</sup> From early modern philosophy, Spinoza recommends that kings ought follow the example of Ulysses and instruct their judges to be egalitarian in administering justice, even in regard to the king himself, especially if what is commanded contravenes established law. “For kings are not gods, but men, who are often captivated by the Sirens’ song.”<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Lucius Annaeus Seneca, “On Anger,” in John M. Cooper (translator) and J.F. Procopé, eds, *Seneca: Moral and Political Essays* Book III.13.5 (New York: Cambridge University Press 1995), 90.

<sup>216</sup> Benedictus de Spinoza, “On Anger” in *Political Treatise: Designs for States* [III/308] from Edwin Curley, trans. and ed., *Collected Works of Spinoza* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2016), 544.

Variations on this recognized Homeric theme give us a starting place for offering a few more rather famous and colorful examples from the writing profession itself. Starting with a contemporary instance, as noted earlier, the famed neurologist and writer, Oliver Sacks, once solemnly vowed to commit suicide if he did not finish the transcript of a book he was under contract to write by a certain date.<sup>217</sup> It is unclear whether he announced this vow to anyone else, thus giving a chance for someone to point out the rashness and irrationality of his vow. But Sacks might have responded that he had perfectly rational reasons for making his irrational vow, which again speaks to Elster's labeling some forms of self-binding as representing an "imperfect rationality." I will return to this example later. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, outed by Thomas De Quincey as an opium (laudanum) addict, supposedly had such strong desires to kick the habit, he was reported to have "hired porters, hackney-coachmen and others to oppose by force his entrance into any druggist shop."<sup>218</sup> The famed French novelist, Victor Hugo, is said to have stripped naked and commanded his valet to remove all of Hugo's clothes out of his writing study and lock the door so that Hugo would be forced to write and finish his novel, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.<sup>219</sup> These particular acts of binding (one involving a life-threatening self-promise, another involving a Ulysses-like command and the other connected with avoiding opprobrium) seem to be irrational actions on their face yet each have rational intent. An even more egregious

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<sup>217</sup> Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich, co-hosts, "Help! What do you do when your own worst enemy is...you?" *RadioLab* Season 9, Episode 3, WNYC radio podcast. Relevant portion, "Me Myself and Muse." URL= <http://www.radiolab.org/story/117294-me-myself-and-muse/>

<sup>218</sup> Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (Knoxville, TN: Wordsworth Classics 1994), 19; see also Robert Morrison, "Opium-Eaters and Magazine Wars: De Quincey and Coleridge in 1821," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 30, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 27-40.

<sup>219</sup> Irving Wallace and J. J. Pear, "Self-Control Techniques of Famous Novelists, *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* 10, no. 3 (Fall 1977): 518; Richard J. McNally, "Reflections on Mentoring," *The Behavior Therapist* 34, no. 6, (September 2011):100-104. URL Digital Access to Scholarship at Harvard: <https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/8886766>

and widely-publicized example (albeit not from the writing profession) is that of the Egyptian man of the Muslim faith who was prone to stealing.<sup>220</sup> One day when he was terribly distraught and remorseful over his latest thieving episode, he decided to kneel beside a railroad track and allow the wheels of a locomotive to completely sever both his hands.<sup>221</sup>

While these examples may have the scent of irrationality, especially the hand-severing Muslim devotee, again, the intention in these extreme (some might say wacky) cases is perfectly rational. From trying to finish manuscripts to trying to stop a kleptomania habit, the aims of these individuals are quite understandable and not without an explainable rationale. The question is whether it is rational, as a supplementary aim, to coerce myself to achieve generally laudable goals. It is clear enough that self-binding does not absolutely entail an irrational, or even inhumane, demeaning action or commitment device. But the problem remains: to put oneself under any kind of threat seems irrational or at best, simply incoherent as even a possibility. No person in their right mind, as the saying goes, would threaten themselves with harm. Yet, the stories are everywhere of otherwise rational individuals doing this very kind of thing. Nonetheless, merely offering examples of extreme life-threatening commitment devices, does not negate the value of the practice in its less extreme and no-less-effective forms.

So, in the act of self-binding, I tell myself that a) I anticipate a lack in my capacity for self-control, or that my will to resist a future temptation is deficient; but on the other hand, b) I do have the power and willingness *in the present moment* to deliberately cut off in advance any

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<sup>220</sup> The legal punishment prescribed by the Sharee'ah (Islamic law) for a thief is to cut off the thief's hand. Cf. Qu'ran 5:38-50, "The ruling of theft in Islam," August 25, 2009. Online: <http://www.islamweb.net/en/article/136791/the-ruling-of-theft-in-islam>

<sup>221</sup> Cf. Staff writer, "Man cuts off hands to stop himself from stealing," *Emirates 24/7* online newspaper, September 23, 2012. URL= <http://www.emirates247.com/offbeat/crazy-world/man-cuts-off-hands-to-stop-himself-from-stealing-2012-09-23-1.476583>

prospect of a temptation getting a grip on me by severely limiting the options available to me. I burn my ships; I have myself literally bound with ropes or I may even cut off my hands. Understood in this way, the self-binding act appears to be a rather extreme form of self-control with an inverted twist. I seem to be “controlling myself” by not trusting that I can control myself in resisting a temptation. As a result, in the act of self-binding, I effectively accede control over myself to a binding proxy. But to whom? Then, the question of self-deception arises in the fact that I might be deceiving myself concerning my own autonomy.<sup>222</sup>

As it happens, neither irrationality nor self-deception get a chance to get in on the action in a typical, self-binding scenario *if* the overriding intention is effectively accomplished. The intriguing invertibility of each self-binding act is the crucial link that allows such option-limiting actions to be both rational and self-disclosing rather than a soon regretted act that negates an earlier rational intention. When I knowingly limit my options expressly in order to accomplish some other desired end, I am disclosing myself simply as a human being with certain needs or weaknesses in certain situations. Like it or not, this is part of my identity. Self-binding starts to feel more like accommodation for human frailty rather than a limitation of personal autonomy. The self-limiting accommodation achieves my ends by inverted means.

A rather notorious or salacious example of this can be found in the life of the well-known diarist writer, Anaïs Nin, the bigamist wife of Rupert Pole of California and Hugh Guiler of New York. Nin “maintained this fiction so successfully that when [she] died in the late 1970s, there were two separate obituaries, in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*, that listed the

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<sup>222</sup> Stephen Darwall, “Self-Deception, Autonomy, and Moral Constitution,” in Brian P. McLaughlin and Amélie O. Rorty, eds. *Perspectives on Self-Deception* 407-430 (Berkeley: University of California Press 1988).



two separate husbands.”<sup>223</sup> But were both husbands self-deceived? Not according to Nin’s biographer, Dierdre Bair in an NPR interview. “Hugh was no dummy. He knew from almost the beginning what she was doing there in California, but *he chose not to know*.”<sup>224</sup> How is it that this state of mind is sometimes called “self-deception” when in fact there is a rational explanation for a person’s willful ignorance? This seems different and less troublesome than in a case of absolute self-deception. It fits with the old expression, “love is blind” or as St. Paul put it, “Loves keeps no record of wrongdoing.”<sup>225</sup> Another biographer, Barbara Kraft, says that Nin wrote Hugh Guiler a letter to ask forgiveness for her professed deceit. Kraft records that Guiler, rather than expressing shock and dismay, replied with a gracious letter expressing how meaningful his life had been because of her.<sup>226</sup> What’s going on here? One way to cut the Gordian Knot that philosophers have with the issue of self-deception and irrationality is to explain these particular kinds of circumstances as simple acts of self-binding. For whatever the rational motivation might be (love, the embarrassment of a cuckold husband, a sense of social propriety) persons can bind themselves from knowing (in the sense of active investigation of, or simple acknowledgement of) certain details of a situation. Though one might call such a circumstance a case of self-deception, I think the notion of self-binding might offer at least another explanatory option. “I do not want to know,” we hear people say all the time. The cognitive cords of the binding might be soft and easy to break in such cases, but rather than

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<sup>223</sup> Scott Simon, “Anaïs Nin Husband, Rupert Pole Dies in L.A.,” *National Public Radio* interview, July 29, 2006 with Dierdre Bair concerning her book *Anaïs Nin: A Biography*, New York: Doubleday 1995. Cf. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5591676>

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:5 (NIV)

<sup>226</sup> Barbara Kraft, *Anaïs Nin: The Last Days*, San Jose, CA: Pegasus Books 2013: 200.

calling it a deceiving of the self, we might prefer a softer euphemism: the self-binding of amity and civility.

Of course, also under this heading we could consider a continuum of option situations in voluntarily putting myself under duress or coercion or perhaps willful ignorance in order to limit the number of available options. We might then consider self-binding examples on this continuum such as life-and-death Ulysses contracts or end-of-life medical directives situated at one end and at the other end the more positive, life-improving or life-enriching actions. Then there are examples like the Nin case or the issues of dieting or addiction recovery somewhere in the middle. In the option-limiting strategies that I employ, I appear to self-legislate that I shall not have the power to self-legislate by moving certain options off the table in a given circumstance at such-and-such given point in time. It could well be that in the case of self-binding, if the act amounts to an *intentional* deception of the self (a controversial claim of itself) we could have an exception case where the superficially, intentionally, and temporarily self-deceived, aka the self-binders, really *do* get what they want.<sup>227</sup> I will address this issue of self-deception more later on.

## 2.4 REDUCTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS: Self-binding and Sagacity.

In the name of perspicacity, I feel obliged to make sure that I am avoiding certain reductionist implications. There are many other possible traversals as I have termed this section, but there are also those which can be set aside as not really in play when it comes to the act of voluntarily binding the self. *Self-binding is not equivalent to...*

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<sup>227</sup> Eric Funkhouser, "Do the Self-Deceived Get What They Want?" *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 86, no. 3 (September 2005): 295-312.

2.4.1 Self-Binding is *not equivalent to merely autonomy in action*. That is, in the ordinary exercise of my personal autonomy, as earlier defined, I do not necessarily and by intention engage in option-limiting or self-binding actions, also as defined earlier. A finer point needs to be made in this area involving Kantian characterizations of autonomy. 1. On the one hand, the Kantian moral notion of “a giving of the law to oneself” might be seen as having a fundamentally binding character. That is, if I freely act out of my own will and I choose out of my own practical reason to self-legislate, then can be construed as a self-binding act. When I give the law to myself, I can be seen as binding myself in a certain sense, particularly in the matter of moral autonomy. In my treatment of Kantian views of autonomy, I have relied on John Rawls’s approach which takes Kantian autonomy in three senses: rational, full political and moral. *Rational autonomy* in the Rawlsian account is simply the abstract capacity for weighing preferences which is typically assumed by economic theory and is closest to the position I have taken in this writing.<sup>228</sup> On the other hand, if the Kantian principle of *moral* autonomy is included, then self-binding appears to be more than a matter of practical reasoning alone and invokes Kant’s notion of obligation. My freedom to choose to self-bind turns into my obligation to self-bind—not that I *may*, but more rigorously that I *must*.

On the other hand, I have obviously not taken this tact in analyzing self-binding and autonomy. My topic has intentionally specified personal autonomy rather than the more prickly issue of moral autonomy. Stanford philosopher, D.C. Phillips has summarized the matter in this way: “If I ponder whether or not I should be an autonomous person, then I have already decided

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<sup>228</sup> Susan M. Shell, *Kant and the Limits of Autonomy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2009), 7.

to be one because pondering is typically the behavior of an autonomous person.”<sup>229</sup> Using this meaning of autonomy, I have classified self-binding as one of many kinds of action that might demonstrate personal autonomy. If self-binding were merely synonymous with acting autonomously, or equivalent to it, then I would not be considered autonomous until I engaged in some self-binding action.

#### 2.4.2 Self-Binding is *not equivalent* to self-promising

Self-promising is generally held to be a commissive speech act<sup>230</sup>. The key issue is how saying something, an act of itself, does something more than mere utterance. Might some speech acts be self-binding actions. The claims of volitionalism belong here. Have I bound myself just by *saying* that I have? This may seem preposterous but, volitionalism proposes that it is possible for volitions to occur even in the absence of bodily movement. But volitions, ‘willings’, ‘tryings’ are not the same as ‘doings’. They might be antecedent to an act of self-binding, but they do not effectively, of themselves, bind anything. The relevant issues are as follows:

a. How to distinguish an act of self-binding from a simple promise (speech act) made to oneself. It does appear that there could be the necessary condition of a speech act in the special case of someone in authority over others who requires (like Ulysses) and indeed commands another to aid him in a self-binding action. But this is not the same as the more private or more internal, self-promise which does not depend upon one’s authority over a third party. Notably there appears to be a difference in the force of a self-promise over simply a self-assertion as Gary

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<sup>229</sup> Denis C. Phillips, “The Anatomy of Autonomy,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 7, no. 2, (January 1975): 1-12.

<sup>230</sup> I will revisit some aspects of speech act theory in more detail in the next chapter.

Watson has cited. “In general, promises generate more or less weighty reasons that constrain the promiser’s intentions.”<sup>231</sup>

b. As it turns out, self-promising may not be a coherent or even a conceptually possible concept and may actually involve self-deception. Connie Rosati has claimed this.

Many philosophers have been skeptical about the existence of promises to self, and in fact, self-promises appear to face a dilemma. Critics have argued that promises to self are conceptually impossible. Since the agent is both promisor and promisee, she can release herself from a self-promise at will, and so she was never really bound.<sup>232</sup>

I have already noted the issue of self-deception which can be clearly seen as a temptation to not follow through with an internal promise to self-bind. Suffice it for the purposes of our inquiry that this makes the equivalence of self-promising to self-binding problematic at best. Gary Watson

c. When directed toward the self, a “commissive speech act” (as originally proposed by J.L. Austin) may only offer the impression of a coercive force when directed toward the self by the self. In some cases, a self-promise might be considered a “constituent action” though neither necessary nor sufficient, but still serving to intensify the intention to self-bind. One philosopher put it this way: “An action has a constituent if at least part of what it is to be the action consists in another action or in an event.”<sup>233</sup> To the extent that a speech act of self-promising was regarded by the actor as an important piece of her volition, or willing herself, to perform a self-binding act, then self-promising may be considered to play a role in self-binding, though self-

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<sup>231</sup> Gary Watson, “Asserting and Promising,” *Philosophical Studies* 117, no. 1/2 (January 2004): 61.

<sup>232</sup> Cf. Connie Rosati, “The Importance of Self-Promises,” in Hanoch Sheinman, ed. *Promises and Agreements: Philosophical Essays* 124 (New York: Oxford University Press 2011); David Owens, “Duress, Deception, and the Validity of a Promise,” *Mind* 116, no. 462 (April 2007): 293–315.

<sup>233</sup> Douglas Odegard, “Volition and Action,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (April 1988): 141.

promising and self-binding should not be counted as equivalent. Cambridge English professor, John Kerrigan has an eloquently-put insight on this point: “In our binding language today and in the histrionic power of oaths ... [w]e are trying to manifest a truth, or lean into the future self that will deliver on the vow.”<sup>234</sup>

Another somewhat broader term for self-promising is described as a future-directed decision. “A distinctive feature of our agency,” begins Luca Ferrero, “is the ability to bind our future conduct by making future-directed decisions....” Additionally, these “[d]ecisions appear to have rational authority over the agent’s future conduct. When the time of action comes, the agent is normally guided by no other rational consideration but her past decision.” At this point, we are entitled to propose that self-binding is a species of such self-promising or future-directed decision-making, with important additions. Ferrero is oddly dismissive, saying, “She is guided, not goaded [by a precommitment] ....” A precommitment, in Ferrero’s view, is nothing more than a “manipulative form of distal self-control.” But if manipulation is the objection, this raises two important issues never addressed. 1. A future-directed decision can easily be perceived as a form of self-manipulation and distal self-control. 2. As long as the self is in control of the manipulation, it is not at all clear how this might violate personal autonomy. But Ferrero prefers to draw a distinction by proposing that unlike self-binding precommitments, future-directed decisions “do not seem to alter the future situation of choice by introducing features extraneous to the original merits of the case.”

The problems with this line of reasoning start with the unsupported claim that a self-binding strategy amounts to something “extraneous” while, as we have already seen in this

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<sup>234</sup> John Kerrigan, *Shakespeare’s Binding Language* (New York: Oxford University Press 2016), 37.

paper, the opposite can easily be the case. Rather than extraneous to an intention, self-binding can be integral to achieving the desired result or the “original merits of the case” related to a previously-made decision. Second, there is this implication that self-binding cannot involve a “rational guidance of decisions” since it is self-manipulative. Ferrero seems to take this as a self-evident problem and a bit distasteful to contemplate, without ever bothering to explain why this might be the case. Instead, he sees self-binding strategies as merely “mechanisms of brute, non-rational causality that bring about the inception of the action at  $t$  by bypassing the agent’s contemporaneous exercise of rational governance.” That is, since self-binding does not “meet the desiderata of non-manipulation” it cannot possibly respect “the agent’s autonomy over time.”<sup>235</sup> Again, there is no support for why self-binding ought to be perfunctorily excluded, as a clearly viable strategy of rational governance. On the other hand, a helpful aspect of Ferrero’s paper is to draw a correct distinction between self-binding and self-promising by means of a future-directed decision. But to assume a non-rational or even irrational basis for self-binding goes too far and serves to illustrate this widespread misunderstanding of self-binding as instrumentally rational and a superb mechanism for reinforcing personal autonomy.

2.4.3. Self-Binding is *not equivalent* to self-control. First, while self-binding may be a species of self-control, self-control does not entail self-binding. An alcoholic may control himself by taking a self-binding pill in advance or by simply willing himself not to drink. Simply willing the self not to drink without any other binding mechanism, is self-control but it is not self-binding in the senses I’ve described. Second, self-binding may be undertaken with other intentions in mind other than the need to control oneself. Most typically the aim in self-control is

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<sup>235</sup> Luca Ferrero, “Decisions, Diachronic Autonomy and the Division of Deliberative Labor,” *Philosophers’ Imprint* 10, no. 2 (February 2010): 1-23.

to avoid or prevent, while other self-binding aims can be to supplement or enhance. Though the distinction may seem slight, it is not insignificant. I may aim to control myself and avoid “binge-viewing” television programs by a self-binding act of unsubscribing to cable TV. But beyond mere self-control, another aim in self-binding as it pertains to time spent in front of a screen, might involve deciding to divert and restrict the monthly amount spent for cable TV toward the purchase of learning and inspirational DVDs. Here the aim is to enhance my own human flourishing or some positive aspect of human development. This would be an example of self-binding that is more than mere self-control.

Of course, there are instances of self-binding that amount to nothing more than straightforward self-control. An example would be any number of dieting methods that involve simple practices like using smaller plates or literally pushing back from the table at some point during mealtime. If self-binding actually helps abrogate *akrasia* and/or weakness of will, then it would seem to be a species of self-control. But there may be cases when voluntary enslavement becomes an excuse not to expend the energy required for self-control. The *self* in self-control in this instance begins a drift toward *akrasia*. I intentionally relinquish control knowing that my weak will is still there though temporarily controlled. From a normative perspective there are also examples of self-binding as a means of self-control that could go too far and result in some actual harm to one’s self. This is where personal neuroses issues like anorexia may present or the intersubjective pathological indoctrination of a cult could be considered as self-binding gone wrong, all in the name of self-control. Take the more common tendency to procrastinate as a self-control problem. There are all manner of books and articles for understanding why we procrastinate and proposals and programs for overcoming it. As a species of self-control, self-binding can be a great tool. But as Dan Ariely has aptly noted, “[T]hose who *recognize* and



*admit* their [procrastination] weakness are in a better position to utilize available tools for precommitment and by doing so, help themselves overcome it.”<sup>236</sup> Ariely correctly points to the inextricably-related issue of motivation to self-bind which I will address.

2.4.4 Self-Binding is *not equivalent to* informed consent. That is, I, in my fully informed ‘right mind’, simply consent to myself to be bound in some way—the self is just consenting to the self. Informed consent is generally considered a legal term most typically used in a medical context. As applied in our abstract self-binding analysis, the self ‘consents to coercion by some other’ even if the ‘other’ might be the self at a different time. If I later end up regretting my self-binding decision it appears that I might not have been as informed about my future self as I expected to be. Self-binding is distinguished from informed consent due to the issue of intent and the possibility of changing intentions. Not all cases of informed consent involve the intention to self-bind. Legally defined, informed consent involves nothing more than “permission granted in the knowledge of the possible consequences.”<sup>237</sup> In terms of intent, granting permission [to a course of action] is different from committing to a course of action in advance. A self-binding act can be undertaken in complete ignorance of the consequences. This is the image of the lone Cortes without his conquistadors, burning his own ship, so resolute he is not to return home before exploring the new world. He has no idea of the consequences of his self-binding decision. Informed consent is irrelevant in this case.

2.4.5. Self-Binding is *not equivalent to* asceticism. Obviously, this is not say that practitioners of asceticism down through the centuries did not engage in all kinds of self-binding

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<sup>236</sup> Dan Ariely, *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers 2008), 116.

<sup>237</sup> “informed, adj.1, Special uses: ‘informed consent’”, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/95580?redirectedFrom=informed+consent>

activities. The rules of the monastery are self-binding in some sense just by definition. In agreeing to abide by these rules you are committing yourself to self-bind. Acceding power to an assigned, appropriate authority to achieve some perceived good end certainly sounds like asceticism. Some scholars appear to define asceticism even more expansively along these lines.

“Asceticism means the liberation of the human person,” states the Russian Orthodox philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev (1873-1948). He defines asceticism as “a concentration of inner forces and command of oneself,” and he insists: “Our human dignity is related to this.” [Donald A. Lowne, *Christian Existentialism: A Berdyaev Anthology*, New York: Harper 1965: 86-87] Asceticism, that is to say, leads us to self-mastery and enables us to fulfill the purpose that we have set for ourselves, whatever that may be. A certain measure of ascetic self-denial is thus a necessary element in all that we undertake, whether in athletics or in politics, in scholarly research or in prayer. Without this ascetic concentration of effort we are at the mercy of exterior forces, or of our own emotions and moods; we are reacting rather than acting. Only the ascetic is inwardly free.<sup>238</sup> [Underlining mine.]

Traditionally however, the term asceticism refers to austere practices that are characterized by the exercise of extremely rigorous self-discipline, particularly abstention for religious purposes from worldly pleasures typically associated with the body.<sup>239</sup> Of course, the more extreme pain-inflicting practices of asceticism like sleeping on a bed of nails or beating one’s back with chains do not appear to fall under a normative definition of self-binding. And it would not be within the purview of this writing to evaluate the claimed, mystically transcendent goods associated with such pain-inflicting extremes.<sup>240</sup> It is noteworthy that the Greek etymology

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<sup>238</sup> Kallistos Ware, “The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?” in Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, eds. *Asceticism 3* (New York: Oxford University Press 1998).

<sup>239</sup> “ascetic, adj. and n.” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/11367?redirectedFrom=ascetic#eid>

<sup>240</sup> In amenable contrast to inordinate religious zealotry, Guatama Buddha is said to have practiced severe asceticism prior to his enlightenment and the ‘inner light’ discovery of a ‘middle way’ between sensual indulgence and harsh austerity. In this way Buddhism retained and ameliorated many self-binding tenets. Cf. Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2000), 204.

for the word ascetic refers originally to athletic training. The Greek *asketikos* meant one who was rigorously self-disciplined, *asketes* referred to a monk or a hermit, and *askein* meant to exercise, especially to train for athletic competition, or to practice gymnastics.<sup>241</sup>

Not all practices deemed ascetic can be classified as also self-binding. Again, intention appears to be an essential distinction. When a religious devotee self-flagellates in order to suppress an unlawful sexual urge, the self-binding function is clear enough. But when that devotee flagellates her body in order to persuade a deity to rescue a loved one, (maybe from purgatory) this practice seems to distort the normal intent of self-binding and reframe the enterprise as a solely religious quest. But self-binding is not equivalent to a practice of religious holiness. Take the common ascetic practice of fasting. It is self-binding only in the sense that the person binds herself from eating for a set period of time. These days some dieting plans include advice about fasting. But if I fast on orders of a religious sect, to receive some promised measure of spiritual enlightenment through abstinence, my self-binding act of fasting gets baptized into the religious jargon of divine determinism. Self-binding has no necessarily religious ascetic component while most definitions of asceticism include a religious connotation.

Still I believe, with Frankfurt, that this is the unexplored territory where the most productive parallels could be located. It does *not* appear to be reductionist to suggest that self-binding is essentially an attempt to discover some sense of liberation “through acceding to a power which is not subject to [one’s] immediate voluntary control” as Frankfurt put it. The problem with equating self-binding with asceticism involves the instances where no other actual binding authority (religious monastery or the imaginary religious community of the reclusive

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<sup>241</sup> Robert S.P. Beekes and Lucien van Beek, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, Vol. 1 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Publishers 2016), 150.

anchorite), appears to be present except the person allowing herself to be bound strictly by herself. I deliberately avoid the more psychological aspects of how the powerful sense of a transcendent being or even merely a distinct sensation or intuition of the sublime might play into the equation of self-binding.

### **Chapter 3. Autonomy and Self-Binding: Responding to Key Questions.**

From the foregoing overview, several questions naturally emerge as our examination of self-binding continues to unfold.

#### **3.1 DOES SELF-BINDING ENTAIL ABSOLUTE AUTONOMY SURRENDERING?**

When one person's options to act have been significantly curtailed by the actions of another person, then it happens that the latter has effectively restricted the autonomy of the former. But as Kant wondered, autonomy, by definition, appears enigmatically to be a species of self-binding. In addition to our earlier definitions of autonomy and self-binding, further distinctions are needed. (1) the nature of the self in self-binding; (2) the exact nature of the act and the method of binding in self-binding; (3) what one intends to occur when causing one's own options to be restricted. If one person enslaves another person against their will, this is a textbook definition of hegemonic dominance pertaining to both persons and nations. We say that there has been a loss of autonomy in such cases. However, when my options are intentionally self-limited, whether initiated by or expressly allowed *by me*, then there appears to be something else at work even though the external circumstances are virtually identical.

I know a 28-year old man named Tony who was ordered by a judge to report to a correctional facility where he was forced to study and prepare for testing in order to receive a high school G.E.D.—general equivalency diploma. His only other option was significant jail time. Here is a case where a man's autonomy was restricted by another authority (the state of

Arkansas) in order to achieve a desired outcome, one that the man himself actually desired very much. Now, imagine that Tony, who desperately desires to have a high school diploma, was *not* ordered by the state to be incarcerated until such time as he prepared for and passed the GED exam. Instead, let's say that Tony has a friend who has agreed to drop off Tony at the friend's isolated cabin with food and supplies to last 6 weeks, and otherwise completely cut off from the outside world except for a computer with a severely-limited internet connection, restricted solely to educational materials pertaining to GED test preparation. Tony tells his friend to check in on him every couple of weeks to see how he is doing but otherwise to leave him to his studies. Keep in mind that Tony is the one who has initiated these arrangements.

Now, can we say that Tony's autonomy has been restricted in this latter case? Before you answer, keep in mind that the two circumstances with identical outcomes (GED diploma) are intended to be virtually equivalent except for the hegemonic dominance of the state in the former setting. When we define autonomy in external, societal terms as many philosophers do (Marina Oshana for example<sup>242</sup>), then we must say that Tony's autonomy has been absolutely curtailed in *both* scenarios. However, in the latter case, where the ultimate source of authority (subjugator) is the same as the subject of authority (subjugated) our instinct is to say that Tony's autonomy remains intact or unaffected. Rather than resort to enigma or mystery, this too restrictive view of agency itself could be a clue to resolving this apparent conflict. It could be that the notion of autonomy rests too heavily on a privileging of the agent qua *person as actor* over the patient qua *person as a receiver of action*. In this regard, philosopher Soran Reader has noted that in ...

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<sup>242</sup> Marina A. L. Oshana, Marina, "Personal Autonomy and Society." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 81-102; and *Personal Autonomy In Society* (New York: Routledge 2006).

“‘tracing ... our modern notion of what it is to be a human agent, a person or a self,’ we are culturally biased towards thinking of persons as agents. We thus presume that people are, people count, only when they are agents, so that if persons are passive, incapable, constrained or dependent, society’s duty is to help them back to agency and personhood.”<sup>243</sup>

It seems to me that Reader’s view of the nature of personhood offers an intriguing enhancement for what it means to be a person both as agent and patient. Of course, all the philosophical resources for Reader’s kind of analysis have been around since Aristotle’s conception of agents as beings who act on other beings and are acted upon by other beings.<sup>244</sup> Reader proposes that we use the word “patency” to denote this latter passive aspect of personhood. She is not referring merely to patients in a modern therapeutic sense, as for example those being treated in hospitals. Instead she calls her broad proposal of the inescapable passive side of personhood, “the other side of agency” or the “silenced and ‘othered’ aspects of personhood.” As it turns out, agency as personhood, in Reader’s view is only half the equation. Giving perspicacity to the notion of patency as the other half of personhood and the antonym of agency is her project.

Here is a gloss of how Reader develops the above idea. First, in action theory, drawing from Richard Taylor and others she notes that the “other side” of action is a kind of passivity which any action presupposes. In this sense, there are “doings” and there are “sufferings”. Reader uses a more rare *Oxford English Dictionary* definition for the word “suffer.” That is, here is a verb whose grammatical quality is always in the passive voice: “to be the object of an action,

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<sup>243</sup> Soran Reader, “Agency, Patency and Personhood,” chapter 26 in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Action*, 2010: 200-208; also Soran Reader, “Aristotle on Necessities and Needs,” pp. 113-136 in *Philosophy of Need*, 2006.

<sup>244</sup> Aristotle, *Topics*, Bk 2, Pt 5, “an animal ... animate and a biped and capable of acquiring reason and knowledge,” trans. W.A. Pickard (London: Aeterna Press 2015). Available online: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/topics.2.ii.html>

be acted upon, be passive; also to be affected by, subjected to, undergo.”<sup>245</sup> But the question is not whether there is always necessarily *another* or an additional agent involved that is brought in to do the acting? The agent can “suffer” even in her agency role. That is, when an action is done both agent and patient “suffer” in a certain way. When I, as an agent, act by hitting you, I suffer your resistance as my hand strikes you. When I, as an agent, lift a cup of coffee, my hand suffers the resistance of the weight of the cup. I do not hit or lift myself in these senses. Similarly, the passive side is also there in the action in that whenever any action is done, necessarily some patient “suffers” it.

There is another distinction to be made here. This view of personhood in action theory could be further differentiated from the *subject-object* distinction. When we receive knowledge (this distinction originally offered by Aristotle<sup>246</sup>) we are acted upon or in some way, passive. Following Reader, to be a patient or to be passive in this way is not to cease from being a human subject—a knower, a thinker, a moral being. Neither is the person reduced to the status of an object. So, persons occupy the roles of both patients and agents all the time and continue to be fully human in both conditions. I would summarize Reader by suggesting that we can say that *patiency*, in this sense that I have been describing, is a kind of subjectedness while the person is neither *merely* a subject or *merely* an object.<sup>247</sup> One can see how the act of self-binding can be easily situated in this context. Willigenburg and Delaere make a similar claim.

After critically analyzing this idea of autonomy in the context of precommitment, we argue that what is at stake in using Ulysses contracts in psychiatry is not autonomy as sovereignty, but autonomy as authenticity. Pre-commitment directives do not function to

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<sup>245</sup> “suffer, v.”. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. URL: <http://0-www.oed.com.library.uark.edu/view/Entry/193523?redirectedFrom=suffer#eid>

<sup>246</sup> Aristotle, “thinker/thought” distinction, *Metaphysics*: Book XII, Pt. 9, (trans. W. D. Ross)—MIT internet classics. URL: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.12.xii.html>

<sup>247</sup> Reader, “Agency, Patiency and Personhood,” p. 202

protect autonomous self-control. They serve in upholding the guidance that is provided by one's deepest identity conferring concerns. We elucidate this concept of autonomy as authenticity, by showing how Ulysses contracts protect the possibility of being "a self."<sup>248</sup>

Reader goes on to offer three other dichotomies of patiency that she considers equally central. The second aspect is one about which she has edited a collection of essays in *The Philosophy of Need*.<sup>249</sup> The idea here is a focus on the nature of capability. Being capable of, possessing the capacity to, having the power to act in a certain manner clearly implies a "silent other side" which is the correlate liability to suffer. That is, being able to do one thing (take the time to write a philosophy paper) implies that I am unable to do another thing (mow my lawn). The "silenced" other side of capability is "need" or that is the liability to suffer, although having needs is not, in itself, a passive state. So, I am not referencing the antonym of capability (incapability) here but instead that which lies within the concept of capability itself—both patiency and agency. An act of self-binding references the capability a person has to make an autonomous decision to put himself in the position of patient.

One of Reader's more interesting aspects of patiency is the nature of freedom and constraint. In an "agent-only" conception of personhood, the person not only *does* and is capable of *doing* but also *chooses* what to do and what capabilities to develop which entails that a person deliberate and act autonomously with reason. Under universal moral law informed by reason the person making such choices is said to be free, according to Kant. And, as he so famously put it, "is subject to no other laws than those which he (either alone or jointly with others) gives to himself."<sup>250</sup> There are a number of conceptions of just exactly how this free, rational choosing

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<sup>248</sup> Theo Van Willigenburg and Patrick J. J. Delaere, "Protecting Autonomy as Authenticity Using Ulysses Contracts," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 30, no. 4 (June 2005): 395.

<sup>249</sup> Soran Reader, *Philosophy of Need* 2006.

<sup>250</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason, and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics* [1788], trans., Thomas Kingsmill Abbott, Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2011: 279.



gets worked out: either according to a “rational plan of life” (John Rawls); “constitutive projects for why we go on” (Bernard Williams) and “whole-life narratives” (Charles Taylor). Margaret Walker carefully examines and challenges each of these in her book, *Moral Contexts*, as necessarily inadequate and mistaken for capturing what constitutes personhood. Reader cites Walker and goes even further in pronouncing these conceptions of personhood as downright pernicious! There is “[f]reedom’s other side”, she says, which “is constraint: freedom to talk is constrained by grammar ....” I think Reader means this in the most straightforward way. That is, we cannot say what we do not have the words for. And we can only use words meaningfully according to some rough, mutually agreed-upon standard of meaning. These are natural constraints but constraints that bind us nonetheless. Even rationality itself is constrained, says Reader, if we accept merely the paradigm of deliberation only since humans can easily leave out things that matter, fail to apprehend completely and be subject to contingencies outside the deliberative scope. So too in our talk of ‘choice’ the ‘other side’ is necessity.

I do not choose to be a woman, or a member of a certain race; I do not even choose to be an agent, to be capable, to be a rational chooser, or to be independent. Nevertheless, what I go through and how I respond to these aspects is no less personal, expressive, or determinative of me, than what I do out of free rational choice.<sup>251</sup>

Now, think of the circumstance in which I make a free, rational choice to make myself a patient in a self-binding act. Such contexts of intentional self-constraint offer the rather obvious paradigm example of what Reader is trying to pinpoint in her enlargement of personhood beyond simple agential action. There is an agential action implicit in the notion of patiency itself which

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<sup>251</sup> Reader, “Agency, Patiency and Personhood”, p. 205.

had not been explicated that well prior to Reader. What this implicates is the imagined danger of a surrendered autonomy whenever a person as agent/patient engages in an act of self-binding.

A fourth component of the modern conception of personhood where patiency is unfortunately neglected is found in the dichotomy of independence and dependency. Self-binding appears very clearly at the juncture of this dichotomy as a kind of independent or volitional act of intentional dependency. Of course, our modern “agential conception” of personhood commits us to the Kantian elevated view of the self as independent. In my action, there is nothing but my own decision which causes my action and my choosing is not constrained by other agents. However, in the self-binding act, I as agent, may nonetheless by my own decision, choose to be constrained by other agents which appears to challenge the Enlightenment view of autonomy. The demands and the power of this limited view of the autonomous agent seems to have so impressed Spinoza that he came to famously conclude that there can be only One independent being.<sup>252</sup> But even the very idea itself of independence, does not work as a whole concept and must be viewed as only a partial understanding full of caveats. These caveats, says Reader, are...

woven from multiple dependencies which are total, or abject, in the sense that the agent is as truly helpless in relation to them, like any newborn baby. We depend in the here and now alone, on health, space, surfaces on which to act, light, air, food and drink. Beyond the here, we depend on the earth turning and on the sun shining, and on an absence of asteroids, violence, eruptions, or tsunamis. ... It is astounding that the idea of the ‘independent agent’ ever got off the ground, let alone came to identify what persons are.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* I.29 Scholium, in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, trans. Samuel Shirley, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing 2002), 234.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

One thing is clear: free agency does not constitute the essence of personhood or selfhood if we allow the definition Reader wants to assign. Charles Taylor, in his *Sources of the Self*, comments that this exclusive view of the self as a free, rational and autonomous agent is a kind of “selective blindness” suggesting that the “developing power of disengaged, self-responsible reason ... the stance of disengagement, whereby we objectify facets of our own being into the ontology of the subject, as though we were by nature an agency separable from everything merely given in us ...” Taylor goes on to cite Descartes, Locke and Kant as examples and then asserts that “the move is erroneous” and that it is “a wrong view of agency” and “invalid anthropology.”<sup>254</sup> This is precisely the “reductive thesis” which Taylor set out to oppose from the beginning of the book—the claim that “living within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency, that stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as ... undamaged human personhood.”<sup>255</sup>

It could be an interesting thesis to see whether the pre-modern understanding of personal identity as more or less *assuming* human patiency as that precedent state of what it meant to be human while human agency took a back seat. In his *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor borrows the Max Weber via Friedrich Schiller) notion of “disenchantment” to try and help us isolate this fundamental shift to our contemporary “naïve understanding” of the self as autonomous agent. The history of how selfhood roles got reversed and gradually the notion of agential conception of selfhood took hold is a history that should not be elided says Taylor. Meanwhile along the way, the idea of patiency got proscribed as human weakness and superstition—a kind of outmoded

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<sup>254</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1989), 514.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid*, p. 27.

way of explaining what we could not understand or control. That is to say, our personal identity narrative as patients got thrown out along with all the other enchantment stories.

Both Taylor and Reader seem to be aiming for a more expanded understanding of full personhood which includes patiency and agency while recognizing this historical ascendancy of human agency at the expense of patiency. Inserting an extended consideration of this mysterious, yet persistent practice of self-binding as a normative and practical capacity of the person as both agent and patient is a kind of “enlightened enchantment” for our secular age. Again and again, Taylor gropes for ways to describe this “new coherent theory of disengaged agency,” as “new sense of human agency”, as a “massive shift,” as “self-authorizing agency.”<sup>256</sup> The age before “a secular age” of the “porous self” or “unbuffered self” might be seen as one where patiency was just there as a facet of one’s everyday self-concept. But concomitant with the loss of “enchantment” came the loss of a sense of patiency. Taylor follows a similar line in noting the loss of “transcendence” where the “immanent frame” has come to dominate. Being acted upon from “without” or “above” was just ruled out of the question. But then, what are we to make of humans retaining this odd practice of seeking a greater sense of self-control through ceding control at least in the circumscribed context of the self-binding act? The startling effects that people report as a result of self-binding could be a secular age [in the Taylor sense of this term] resituating or reorienting back to what I would describe as the whole, untorn fabric of personhood. I am not sure how enchanting it really is to see ourselves as patients, except that there is a layer of the mystic quality of life that gets reintroduced when it occurs to us that we are not always and absolutely in control of our lives. So, in combining these ideas from Taylor and

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid, p. 130, 227, 294, 591, 585, 588.

Reader, here we have the picture of post-1500 CE moderns in effect jettisoning a full half of what it means to be a person within the notion of human agency in the name of intellectual enlightenment.

Did they just throw the baby out with the bathwater in discarding the magical world of enchantment? Well, that reductionist view seems up for debate as a kind of oversimplification. But it is the kind that Taylor is so good at exegeting and Reader has boldly proposed reformulating. My modest proposal is to suggest self-binding as Exhibit A for exploring a more satisfying view of the self. I find that Reader's proposal is a conscious and intrepid challenge to the standard metaphysics of personal identity.

[T]hese twin features of patiency—the fact that we suffer both as agents and as patients—are unalienable, pervasive and important in human social life. ...This suggests that patiency, far from being a privation of personhood, must metaphysically and conceptually define us as much as agency does.<sup>257</sup>

Self-binding not only embraces Reader's notion of patiency but could be seen as recognizing and illustrating a large part of the landscape of the existentialist credo of *Gerworfenheit*. In Heidegger's phenomenology and existentialist thought the idea of "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*) is standard fare or that is, the fact that there are basic conditions of the world which we find ourselves having been thrown into. There are also so-called "existential givens" which are just basic truths about existence such as one's death, sense of isolation, freedom and, of course, always a sense of meaninglessness.<sup>258</sup> While these ideas have some resonance with Reader's claims and Taylor's grand project, they are not presented in a hard metaphysics proposition

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<sup>257</sup> Reader, p. 201

<sup>258</sup> Cf. Craig DeLancey "Action, the Scientific Worldview, and Being-in-the-World" in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall, eds., *Blackwell Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism* 356-376 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing 2006).

concerning agency and action theory. Here is the surprising possibility: that we can cognitively accept certain limitations on our options and so adjust our thinking in such a way that turns these limitations into opportunities. Seen through the lens of phenomenology, there is something inescapably true inside the mind whenever I see the weight gradually drop off from my dieting or the addictive behavior decline or disappear or my projects being completed on time, due to adopting certain self-binding practices.

There is an even more current notion regarding subjectivity from which patiency can be differentiated. Merely being the “subject-of-a-life”, as Tom Regan has proposed it in the context of animal rights, is not to be confused with patiency.<sup>259</sup> Patiency must be placed in the same category of personhood as agency and in the subjective/objective category. In fact, patiency can be viewed from both subjective and objective points of view. In contemporary analytic philosophy, the issue of subject—and more specifically the “point of view” of the subject, or “subjectivity” -- has received attention as one of the major intractable problems in philosophy of mind (a related issue being the mind-body problem). In his essay “What is it like to be a bat?”, Thomas Nagel<sup>260</sup> famously argued that explaining subjective experience—the “what it is like to be something”—is currently beyond the reach of scientific inquiry, because scientific understanding by definition requires an objective perspective, which, according to Nagel, is diametrically opposed to the subjective first-person point of view.

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<sup>259</sup> “subject-of-a-life” in Nicholas Bunnin and Jiyuan Yu, eds., *Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing 2004), 610, 664; a term popularized by Tom Regan, *Defending Animal Rights* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press 2001).

<sup>260</sup> Thomas Nagel, “What is it like to be a bat?” *Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (October 1974): 435-450.

These additional features of subjective experience are sometimes referred to as “qualia” though this whole area of inquiry has been controversial in philosophy. My point is to note that Reader’s patency thesis is of a kind that appears to fit with Taylor’s broader project and can be clearly distinct from other similar-sounding proposals and might have been helpfully exemplified in how humans go about limiting themselves, making themselves patients in order to enigmatically empower themselves beyond the traditional agency categories of our secular age.

There are many places in which it appears that scholars sense something missing in their account of agency but have struggled to identify this missing something. For example, in Simon Blackburn’s *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* under the term “action” there is this definition:

“what an *agent* does as opposed to what happens to an agent ... Understanding this distinction gives rise to major problems concerning the nature of agency; “libertarianism (metaphysical)”: frequently derided as the desire to protect the fantasy of an *agency* situated outside the realm of nature altogether.”<sup>261</sup>

In the spirit of Soran Reader’s “other side of agency” thesis, the definition of agency can be expanded. Patency, understood as a tandem concept in conjunction with agency, is one way to attack this problem of trying to situate agency in a kind of metaphysical libertarian limbo. Agency includes doing and being done to and the clear awareness of both occurring regularly in a human life. But we have not known exactly what to do with the ‘being done to’ part except to assign it a demoted role even though in the philosophy of action, for every action there is an actor and a receptor of the action.<sup>262</sup> It is as though the implicit but unachievable aim in human

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<sup>261</sup> “action” in Simon Blackburn, *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press 1996), 5.

<sup>262</sup> The idea here goes back to Aristotle’s claim that an agent’s action will always be simultaneous with the “passion” or “suffering” of the patient (animate or inanimate) in suffering or receiving the action. Even within the same person, say in the movement of my arm, I am both actor and receiver of the action in my muscles and bones. That which is being affected is simultaneous with that which brings about the effect. Cf. *Physics* II.3 195 b17 ff.

agency is more often to be the one doing rather than the one being done to. Why not “abandon the dream of omnipotence” and own this other part of our humanity, namely our native impotence (those times when we must recognize our patiency) and then examine patiency’s proper role in understanding personal identity. The concept of patiency as the other side of agency is meant to jumpstart this thinking process. My analysis of self-binding could be seen in this same light.

Certainly, those more trained in linguistic idiosyncrasies would have something to offer here. The ‘agent as patient’ concept appears to need its own neologism. Rather than offer a new word, Soran Reader called for a shift in emphasis away from elevating the agential to simply a recognition of the dignity of personhood as *both* agent and patient.

In our philosophical tradition and our wider culture, we tend to think of persons as agents. This agential conception is flattering, but ... it conceals a more complex truth about what persons are. [There are]... four features commonly presented as fundamental to personhood in versions of the agential conception: action, capability, choice and independence. ...[E]ach of these agential features presupposes a non-agential feature: agency presupposes patiency, capability presupposes incapability, choice presupposes necessity and independence presupposes dependency.<sup>263</sup>

Reader concludes that these “non-agential features” are not only implicit in our agential conception, that are also constitutive of personhood as agential features.<sup>264</sup> It does seem inadequate to merely offer definitional subcategories like active and passive agency or centrifugal and centripetal agency. Since we want a word that names this natural possession or tandem capacity of human beings and encompasses both agency and patiency concepts, a neologism might be in order. I leave it there for linguist experts to reject or propose the actual word that solves this signification problem.

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<sup>263</sup> Soran Reader, “The Other Side of Agency,” *Philosophy* 82, no. 4 (October 2007): 579.

<sup>264</sup> See also Reader, “Agency, Patiency and Personhood.”



Another example of this sense of something missing comes from Christine Korsgaard and her widely-read book, *Self-constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*. Korsgaard appears to reject Reader's view almost out of hand. She proposes that when I act, I then insert myself into a kind of causal network which inevitably means that I become "hostage" to this network. That is, I am hostage to forces of nature and to the action of others. So, does this threaten our sense of agency, Koorsgaard asks. In response, she briefly takes up the idea of contingency and meaning with Kant and Aristotle in background but then concludes—

“We cannot regard ourselves as agents, that is, as the causes of certain effects through our wills, if in fact our wills have not power at all to make our effects to be the ones that we will. And yet we must regard ourselves as agents, that being our situation, and not negotiable, for to be human is to have no choice but to choose.”<sup>265</sup>

“That being our situation” again echoes this sound of resignation to which Reader is objecting. It is as if to say, we really were *meant* to be omnipotent as agents, but since we are not, we have no choice but to just make the best of it and soldier on. These words strike me as a plainly mistaken characterization of personhood in light of Reader's compelling argument regarding patiency. Instead this patiency aspect is to be identified and held up just as distinctly in explaining what it is to be human or to be a person. When we finally grasp this aspect of personhood, we quickly discover that in our choosing there are other choosers, other wills not to mention those accidents of contingency over which our wills cannot possibly have any control whatsoever. Why not stop and ponder this valid understanding of the self as *both* patient and agent? And, what better place to validate this view than with an act of self-binding. No other act better illustrates the startling juxtaposition of the person as agent and patient. A human being is

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<sup>265</sup> Christine Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity and Integrity* (New York : Oxford University Press, 2009), 86-87.

not just one who acts but is a being who is also acted upon, which happens to be a condition of all living beings.

Unfortunately, in the limited reading that I've done in this area, Reader's notion of patiency is not so much negated as neglected and understandably so. The idea of the person as patient is mostly dismissed as a weakness to be avoided—certainly not a worthy direction for personal identification. When agency is privileged over patiency as a crowning Enlightenment achievement in the Kantian elevation of autonomous personhood and human dignity then the notion of caring, for example, gets cast as a concern for others as victims (rather than as patients) who require help out of their patiency status by being empowered to attain a greater sense of agency. With this assumption about human personhood, little consideration is then given to the human value of caring regardless of its object. The idea of self-identified patients caring for other patients is almost incomprehensible and certainly less than ideal. On the other hand, when all persons are viewed in Reader's more wholistic way simultaneously as agents *and* patients, while retaining full identification as persons, then the caring and empathy take on a different tint and texture. Then, persons who readily recognize the patiency aspect of their own lives discover a natural *égalité* with humanity without comparative reference to possessions or societal status or even liberty. They instead are able to focus upon the universal equality of human needs.

Of course, the concern with openly espousing the idea of patiency is the admission that we have certain needs and that we are not wholly self-sufficient, not omnipotent. The worry is that any practiced cognition of this idea strikes at the heart of the exalted place that Western philosophy has given to personal autonomy. But if a demonstrable connection can be made between a widely-practiced self-control mechanism like self-binding and the recognition of the importance of patiency as a neglected aspect of a flourishing human being, then a better

understanding of autonomy could be one result. Along these lines, Reader's philosophy of patency as the other side of agency led to her serving as editor of a volume entitled *The Philosophy of Need* derived from a Royal Institute of Philosophy conference in Britain in September 2003. One of the conferees, John O'Neill presented a paper entitled "Need, Humiliation and Independence" in which he dealt with this issue directly.

That there are real dangers in appeals to needs leading to objectionable paternalistic or authoritarian practices is undeniable. However, nothing in the needs principle as such requires a commitment to the forms of authoritarianism that form the proper object of liberal criticisms, nor is the issue of objectivity as such at issue. A needs principle may involve a commitment to some form of objectivism about human flourishing or well-being. However, that commitment is consistent with a commitment to autonomy.<sup>266</sup>

Where then does the self-binding act fit into a philosophy of need? Whenever I take the initiative to recognize this need that I have as a patient in overcoming some temptation, and I take this preemptive or so-called precommitment action that places me in the role of patient, it turns out that I am demonstrating an expanded view of my own personhood. We incorporate this sense of patency into society by means of self-binding actions that recognize human vulnerability to temptations not as some disorder of agency but as a part of the needs matrix that goes along with simply being human. Along the way we discover that liberty itself can be intentionally limited, an overt act of autonomy inversion, and this option-limiting action paradoxically ends up achieving a greater sense of personal sovereignty over some important aspect of our lives.

Another possible implication of the embrace of the temporary patency of self-binding involves the psychology of rehabilitation for prison inmates, recovery therapy for addicts and counseling for those with psychiatric disorders. Inculcating a healthy sense of voluntary patency

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<sup>266</sup> John O'Neill, "Need, Humiliation and Independence" in *The Philosophy of Need* 73-97 (New York: Cambridge University Press 2006), 78.

is a powerful therapeutic tool for counselors regardless of their philosophical orientation toward or away from the ‘addiction as a disease’ model. Then, to be able to use self-binding strategies in a purposeful way, that is, to offer addicts a sense of personal empowerment as intentional patients can lead to amazing results.<sup>267</sup> That is, in order to successfully cope in prison, inmates could be asked to embrace this sense of patency in the concrete practice of self-binding as part of an inmate’s elevated vision of their own personhood. Anything that can be seen as a choice between options would be fair game for self-binding experimentation—from food to exercise to meditation techniques or reading material that they allow for themselves. The honed practice itself, even without some high-minded intention, can be useful in revealing a power of self-control that had been heretofore hidden from recognition. Inmates who learn self-binding practices, especially those whose addictions landed them in prison, can be encouraged along the way, to reconsider those areas of their lives “on the outside” where there can be some sense of responsible agency. In fact, the rebuilding of responsible agency inside a “damaged” person with a “disorder of agency” would seem to be far more difficult in a society that disparages

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<sup>267</sup> Philosophers Foddy and Gray (referenced below) lay the philosophical groundwork for the neuroscience and psychiatry research of Hart, Lewis, Satel and others who challenge the ‘addiction as disease’ model. Self-binding and the concomitant notion of patency support these alternative views of addiction therapy. Cf. Bennett Foddy, “Addiction and its sciences-philosophy,” *Addiction* 106, no. 1. (January 2011): 25-32. Jason D. Gray, “Philosophy, Phenomenology, and Neuroscience: The Groundwork for an Interdisciplinary Approach to a Comprehensive Understanding of Addiction,” PhD diss. (Philosophy), John Martin Fischer chairperson, University of California, Riverside, June 2013, MLA International Bibliography (3589982); Carl Hart, *High Price: A Neuroscientist’s Journey of Self-Discovery That Challenges Everything You Know About Drugs and Society* (New York: HarperCollins 2013); Marc Lewis, *Biology of Desire: Why Addiction Is Not A Disease* (New York: PublicAffairs Press 2015); Sally Satel and Scott O. Lilienfeld, *Brainwashed: The Seductive Appeal of Mindless Neuroscience* (New York: Basic Books 2013); Sally Satel, “The Science of Choice in Addiction,” *The Atlantic* 312, no. 2 (September 2013): <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/09/the-science-of-choice-in-addiction/280080/>

patency as weakness and views addiction as a form of helplessness or powerlessness.<sup>268</sup> So, counselors might begin (or conclude) a round of “self-binding therapy” by asking inmates, addicts or those with psychiatric disorders to consider in what sense they can see themselves as patients. Then, as they run through a standard, defective view of patency, (it is the world’s fault that I am in prison, or it is my genetics, or my upbringing and so on) they might eventually come to see that, while there are certain contingencies which are out of their control, there is this other side of one’s personhood which can be exemplified in self-binding actions. Here is the person who can flourish not ‘in spite of’ but ‘on account of’ her owned needs. She is a free, responsible agent capable of binding herself as a patient, at least temporarily, in order to achieve some constructive goal. As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, these ideas might be viewed as a very preliminary proposal for how to incorporate Soran Reader’s notion of patency into a broader framework of philosophy such as Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* which comes as close as any at providing a natural entry point for considering how patency might have been lost and how it might be profitably reintroduced by means of constructive acts of self-binding.

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<sup>268</sup> Cf. Hanna Pickard, “Psychopathology and the Ability to Do Otherwise,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 90, no. 1 (January 2015): 135–163; also Pickard, “Denial and Addiction.” *Mind & Language* 31, no. 3 (June 2016): 277–299. Pickard uses the term “disorder of agency” to offer a counter to the popular notion that there is ‘no ability to do otherwise’ in the case of addiction. Oxford philosopher Pickard, along with neuroscientist Serge H. Ahmed, have edited *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Science of Addiction*, New York: Routledge 2018 which contains a number of other articles featuring alternatives to the ‘addiction as disease’ model. Pickard, Ahmed and NYU philosopher Bennett Foddy have together published a lengthy piece in *Frontiers in Psychiatry* Special Research Topic (November 2015) entitled “Alternative Models of Addiction” which has been made available as a free e-book: [http://www.hannapickard.com/uploads/3/1/5/5/31550141/alternative\\_models\\_of\\_addiction.pdf](http://www.hannapickard.com/uploads/3/1/5/5/31550141/alternative_models_of_addiction.pdf)

### 3.2 DOES SELF-BINDING DEVALUE AUTONOMY BY REASONING AGAINST REASON?

Here we are taking up one of the primary conditions that bring us to reason in favor of self-binding in the first place. The issue might be put as follows: the faculty of reason runs into conflict with both the implicit irrationality of a weak will and the irrationality of intentionally giving up options that we might have otherwise desired and had the opportunity to choose. While devalue is not as strong as demolish, any chance of a threat to personal autonomy will be controversial. Of course, many papers and books (even grant-funded academic projects and initiatives) continue to produce research offering reasons why the restriction of personal autonomy is not a good thing and why maximizing personal autonomy should be a cornerstone of political and ethical philosophy.<sup>269</sup> And so we might think that rational agents engaging in practical reasoning will always want to maximize their own personal autonomy. Yet, practical irrationality seems to pose a threat to personal autonomy.

There is room for irrationality both in the theoretical and the practical domain, ... in its strongest form involves a failure to form the attitudes that one acknowledges ... by the considerations one has reflected on... [A] person might end up reading a mystery novel for another hour, while at the same time judging that it ... better on the whole to go back to work on a paper for the upcoming conference. Practical irrationality of this latter kind is known as *akrasia*, incontinence, or weakness of will, ... traditional subjects of philosophical speculation in their own right. If we assume that this strong kind of practical irrationality is possible, however, then we must grant that practical reason is not automatically practical in its issue.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Tom O'Shea, "Critics of Autonomy," *Essex Autonomy Project: Green Paper Report* (June 2012): 1-26. URL: <https://autonomy.essex.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/CriticsofAutonomyGPRJune2012.pdf>; Eddy Nahmias, "Autonomous Agency and Social Psychology," *Cartographies of the Mind*: 169-188; Peter Dalton, "Liberty, Autonomy, Toleration," *Philosophical Papers* 15, no 2/3 (November 1986), 193; Michael Garnett, "Taking the Self out of Self-Rule," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 16, no. 1 (November 2011), 21-31; Chrisoula Andreou, "Self-Defeating Self-Governance," *Philosophical Issues*, Supplement to *Nous on Action Theory* 22 (2012): 20-34.

<sup>270</sup> R. Jay Wallace, "Practical Reason", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed. (Summer 2014). URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/practical-reason/>.

The common occurrence of *akrasia* (weakness of will) in the human species discloses an odd juxtaposition. While *akrasia* seems to be an example of irrationality which threatens autonomy, at the same time, self-binding as a practically-reasoned response to *akrasia*, feels like an irrational restriction that threatens one's autonomy. But setting voluntary limitations on one's potential options, which we might view as a restriction of autonomy, is not always a bad thing as Gerald Dworkin noted many years ago.<sup>271</sup> It may be more helpful at this point to propose a value distinction between *optimal* and *maximal* personal autonomy as it applies to self-binding.<sup>272</sup> This would allow us to argue for the option-limiting act of self-binding to remain under the heading of optimal autonomy by noting the accrued values of self-imposed constraints. Marina Oshana prefers a "hybrid account" that emphasizes "our skill as practical reasoners" who "prompt ourselves to meet ...expectations [to act]". So, as long as we are *seeing ourselves* as the author of our own actions, (even if those actions set limits on future options to act) then "it is this skill that expresses our capacity for self-governance or autonomy."<sup>273</sup> Sarah Conly and Martha Fineman have gone further claiming that autonomy itself has been overvalued particularly as it applies to many public policy concerns where a paternalist approach might lead to better outcomes for

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<sup>271</sup> Gerald Dworkin. "Is More Choice Better Than Less?" *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (September 1982): 47-61.

<sup>272</sup> This distinction between optimal and maximal autonomy in the context of self-binding was prompted by an otherwise singularly, unhelpful book from the Habermas-inspired writings of Claus Offe et al. Cf. Claus Offe, "Bindings, Shackles, Brakes: On Self-Limitation Strategies" in Axel Honneth, Thomas McCarthy, Claus Offe, and Albrecht Wellmer, eds., *Cultural-Political Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment* 63, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1992.

<sup>273</sup> Marina A. L. Oshana, *The Importance of How We See Ourselves: Self-Identity and Responsible Agency* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield 2010), 39; see also Oshana, "How Much Should We Value Autonomy?" *Social Philosophy & Policy* 20, no. 2 (July 2003): 70-98.

everyone.<sup>274</sup> Cass Sunstein has written approvingly of Conly's thesis, though he and Richard Thaler favor a less intrusive approach that they have famously dubbed "nudging".<sup>275</sup>

While I will briefly consider this proposed tactic in political philosophy later on, I primarily focus attention on my more central, theoretical concern: namely how an option-limiting, self-constraining act can simultaneously produce an emancipated, unshackled state of mind while yielding surprisingly more, rather than fewer, possibilities prior to the restrictive, option-limiting action. A standard self-binding example is the blaring alarm clock situated out of reach forcing me to get out of bed. Getting out of bed and getting ready for the workday, instead of sleeping in and then being tardy or absent, thereby opens up possibilities: I have time to stop by Starbucks for coffee; I happen to get noticed as a dependable employee which turns into a greater possibility for a raise or a promotion. In this way, prior self-binding, self-constraining actions lead to self-liberating possibilities thus confirming the old adage: the early bird gets the worm. When one acts for such reasons, even an action that limit future options, one is employing a rational, rather than irrational strategy. If self-limiting of options is not necessarily a threat to autonomy then there is no de facto irrationality. Self-binding becomes a valuable weapon to combat the apparent weakness of one's own will (*akrasia*).

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<sup>274</sup> Sarah Conly, *Against Autonomy: Justifying Coercive Paternalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2012); Martha A. Fineman, *The Autonomy Myth: A Theory of Dependency*. (New York: The New Press 2004), "Instead of an excessive emphasis on individual autonomy, all societal constructs should adopt a notion of "collective responsibility for dependency."

<sup>275</sup> Cass R. Sunstein, "'It's For Your Own Good!'" review of *Against Autonomy: Justifying Coercive Paternalism* by Sarah Conly," *New York Review of Books*, March 7, 2013.



Of course, *reasons* to act do not always provide *motivation* to act. Donald Davidson is known for this distinction between normative reasons and motivating reasons.<sup>276</sup> Here then is conceptual space to propose that self-binding affords a kind of temporal bridge whenever these kinds of reasons come apart. Some say that the possibility of being motivated to do A can be explained by the existence of a reason to do A. Others claim that the existence of a reason to do A must be explained by the possibility of being motivated to do A.<sup>277</sup> Regardless of which way the explanation may run, I claim that on a practical level, self-binding is an amazingly reliable path for directing my actions toward desired ends. Self-binding is this incongruous yet useful tactic when the normative reason to act is there but the motivating reason seems to be lacking, or as is so common with human beings, there are conflicting motives.

So, it is helpful to try and understand the reasons for my actions, which are expressly designed to *prevent* my acting (or not acting at all) for other reasons. Two clearly rational or perfectly reasonable desires conflict inside Homer's Ulysses. One desire is to experience the beauty of a siren song; the other is to not put himself in danger of being killed. He puts restrictions upon himself to prevent the latter in order to experience the former. I love to enjoy a good meal, but I also want to prevent the related health problems attendant with too many good meals. Thus, again I engage in actions that allow the former while preventing the latter. What I do to ensure this entirely rational outcome clearly involves what many might consider an

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<sup>276</sup> Donald Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes", *The Journal of Philosophy* 60, no. 23: (November 1963): 685–700; reprinted in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (New York: Oxford University Press 1981), 3–21.

<sup>277</sup> An excellent essay on the recent work in this area is Maria Alvarez, "Reasons for Action: Justification, Motivation, Explanation," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed. (Summer 2016). URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/reasons-just-vs-expl/>.

irrational act of intentionally limiting my options (some might count this as subjugating my own autonomy) along the way. Self-binding appears to involve an application of practical reasoning in order to resolve this internal conflict of competing desires and bring about a beneficial outcome.

### 3.3. WHAT ABOUT IRRATIONALITY AND INNER CONFLICT IN SELF-BINDING?

3.3.1 Self-binding conflicts and the draw of an irrational impulse. A common circumstance of the human condition is to find oneself in the state of having inconsistent thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes, especially related to behavioral decisions and attitudinal changes. We want to say that the desires that I most identify with, the ones that I want to win out, these are the rational desires that are competing with my irrational impulses. Very often it is precisely this difficulty, where the rational desires are *not* winning out, that motivates self-binding. I may not actually believe the rational-sounding things that I say, particularly in public, so I find myself in this rather conflicted state of mind. “I promise you, my fellow addicts, that I will never let alcohol touch my lips ever again.” As previously noted, the standard psychological term here is cognitive dissonance. In a case of self-binding it may be a conflict between the public self and the private self. And one’s interest in reducing such dissonance, as Jon Elster has noted, can end up even changing one’s own preferences.<sup>278</sup> This psychological portent is clearly a contributing factor in the success of the 12-step addiction recovery approach. Over time, in an attempt to close this cognitive gap by means of self-binding actions, I not only resist certain irrational preferences, but I end up removing and replacing those preferences altogether. So, an intriguing

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<sup>278</sup> Jon Elster, “Strategic Uses of Argument”, in Kenneth J. Arrow et al. (eds.) in *Barriers to Conflict Resolution* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), 237-257.

prospect is that the practice of public self-binding can, of itself over time, lead to changed preferences so that the original need for the self-binding practice is deemed no longer necessary.

Again, the self-binding practice is not some recently discovered novelty formula discovered and commercialized in the modern, multi-billion-dollar, self-help industry. Both monks and moguls, to remarkable success, have practiced it to achieve laudable ends. Put another way, humans have long-ago discovered that one practical way to overcome an uncomfortable or dissonant mental state is to put oneself in another uncomfortable and *seemingly irrational* state where the self is bound in some way and possibly even precommitted to be coerced toward a desired end. It may feel uncomfortable, even irrational to do this—to have to coerce myself, at least in the short term, to do things that I do not desire in that given moment. Yet, as I look ahead long-term, I can see that delayed gratification of some immediate desire can lead me to fulfill a competing desire and bring about even more desirable outcomes in the future or prevent harmful ones

To explain how this works, that a seemingly irrational act of self-restriction of a given set of options can aim toward a rational end of self-emancipation, ancient philosophy turned to allegorical description. Plato's chariot allegory and ship owner analogy and a Socratic dialogue with Glaucon likening an ideal new city to a self-controlled person in Book IV of the *Republic* are some of the earliest examples.<sup>279</sup> Plato noted at least two co-existent metaphysical identities in conflict within the selfsame person. The chariot allegory and the ship-owner analogy present an image of the self that can effectively bind another part of the self in order to try and resolve an inner conflict. These are a nice starting point but need to be extended in order to more fully

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<sup>279</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* 246b and *Republic* VI.887d-888; IV.431b-c., trans. Christopher Rowe (New York: Penguin Classics 2005).

understand what goes on when we engage in self-binding. Other ancient theories of the soul are helpful here, both Aristotle and the Stoics in particular.<sup>280</sup> Still the issue of rationality is a nagging problem.

Take the following real-life case.<sup>281</sup> In 2006, Mensa-member and well-known porn actress Jessica Steinhauser (aka, Asia Carrera) was asked for her opinion by the St. George, Utah newspaper, *The Spectrum*, on the local case of Susan Russell, who was charged with fifteen counts of a third-degree felony in the distribution of pornographic material. Russell allegedly sold pornographic materials and sex toys from a back room in her “Earrings and More” store, potentially violating the “community standards” of the Mormon-dominated town per the Supreme Court case “Miller v. California”. Carrera opined: “I deliberately moved to St. George with my husband so we could raise our kids in a conservative atmosphere, in a low-crime, family-friendly state. I do appreciate that the laws are there, and will make it harder for my kids to get into trouble when they get older.” It is unclear what she means by “get into trouble”. In other words, rather than actually live her life in a permissive community which freely allows and accommodates the production, sale and distribution of pornography, unfettered by small-town community standards, this particular porn star deliberately chose to limit her options and her children’s options by moving to a community with such a restrictive mindset. The case is

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<sup>280</sup> Hendrik Lorenz, “Ancient Theories of Soul,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed. (Summer 2009). URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/ancient-soul/>; see also John M. Cooper, “Stoic Autonomy,” *Social Philosophy & Policy* 20, no. 2 (July 2003): 1-29.

<sup>281</sup> Cf. Staff reporter, “Pornography case puts privacy rights at odds with set public standards,” *The Daily Spectrum*, Saint George, Utah (December 21, 2006): 8; Staff writer, “They’re Accomplished, They’re Famous, and They’re Mensans,” American Mensa’s *Mensa Bulletin* 476, (July 2004): 23; <http://www.thespectrum.com/story/news/2016/01/08/colander-wearing-atheist-enters-plea-dui-case/78523754/>

additionally apropos given the fact that the porn “industry” is almost wholly dependent upon a large segment of the male population unable or unwilling to control a sexual impulse driven by provocative images on a screen. Here is a woman who formerly derived a vast income targeting men with just such an impulse-driven willingness to gladly shell out incredible sums of money to satisfy that impulse. This person now wants to both live in a place where her former occupation is forbidden while at the same time making her new location more accommodating for others who want to make money in the porn industry.

The confusion in Steinhauser’s claim seems to center on normative reasons for self-binding. Those exact same normative reasons to have her lifestyle constrained by small-town community standards existed previously while she was active in the porn industry in another city. That is, those community standards she now seeks out for the perceived benefit of her family would have prevented her employment in that selfsame community. On what basis then can she now claim that Ms. Russell’s rights are being violated? On the basis of the values of her former, less restrictive community where she previously lived? Her explanation for her choice of residency appears to reflect a cultural relativist notion of value—that an individual’s enculturation is the only “standard” of value and such standards vary from community to community. When the particular set of standards in a small, morally conservative, Mormon community in Utah seems useful she moves there. But then, in violation of this relativistic norm she turns and defends Ms. Russell, when such a defense would suggest that she herself will move from that community as soon as the city fathers acquiesce to Ms. Russell’s pornography merchandising. Must her appeal then be made to some notion of a bigger issue of utilitarian or libertarian precedence? I do not think so. The more obvious answer is to give protest solely on the basis of some notion of ethical egoism. That is, both Ms. Russell and Ms. Steinhauser must

be allowed the freedom to choose their actions based solely on self-interest. But here Steinhauser appears to embrace a contradiction—the freedom to intentionally move to a small town to take advantage of its conservative values for the benefit of her daughter while also demanding the right of another person to deliberately undermine and flaunt those very same values. She and her family would set themselves on a kind of utopian quest to discover a community where all its citizens, on the one hand, deliberately self-bind, effectively closing their doors to the porn industry, (so the daughter will stay out of trouble perhaps?) while on the other hand, welcoming émigrés who refuse to voluntarily restrict themselves from porn production or tacit support of such activity.

I offer this rather salacious example as a microcosm which is at the motivational heart of so many immigrant-related public policy issues currently being debated in the United States and Europe. People want to embrace the diversity and inclusiveness of multiculturalism while also wanting to live in a society where their own values are not threatened. Without some mutual assent to self-binding action, these competing desires become hopelessly utopian. As it concerns a former porn star with her own addiction issues, the Steinhauser case may be like any other addictive behavior pattern. When she was gainfully employed as a porn actress, perhaps the motivating reasons were missing for Steinhauser to limit her options. Or, it might be said that there were stronger motivating reasons for her to not limit her options. Then, with the prospect of raising a daughter in the porn industry environment, there came new motivating reasons to choose to self-limit her options and her daughter's exposure to certain options as she grows older. I think it is fair to describe such an example as a case of the real incongruity so often related to the challenge of self-binding.

It is one thing for a person in the above example to “give oneself the law” as the Latin etymology of the word (auto - nomos) implies and as Kant so famously propounded. It is quite another to self-enforce this self-given law. Self-binding places this issue front and center. Under the governance of law, when the regulated (a person, a business or a government) entity also happens to be the regulator, there is clearly the appearance of a “conflict of interest” between the governed and the governor. The above example gives us an overlapping case of personal autonomy versus communal autonomy. We may give the law to ourselves in one location and take it away in another. A nation’s legal system is rightly wary of “self-regulating” government or corporate entities. But are not these mere mirrors of individual, internal self-contradiction? In the case of these other entities, we see more clearly the value of asking them to acquiesce to other governing entities with no other interest except some notion of the common good. It is not quite so clear when it comes to personal self-binding—when, where and how to acquiesce to ourselves.

In our overlapping case, I can imagine that there are any number of self-contradictory examples where a community’s option-limiting for the sake of the perceived common good is easily pilfered for personal benefit as a person finds it convenient or in her own self-interest. The means by which we tie each other into our communal bonds is not that different from how we bind ourselves to ourselves. The potential conflicts of interest always abound. Whenever a self-binding act, construed to be irrational, is employed in order to combat another irrationality (weak will and self-deceptive impulsiveness) what is going on in such a case? I think the answer is straightforward. The concept of personal self-binding gets its cognitive grip on us, precisely on account of this enigmatic circumstance and may even be the missing key to understanding

autonomy itself. Self-binding even seems to be morally neutral. It is an effective tool to accomplish a goal whether in the hands of Mother Teresa or a Mafia crime boss.

This inner conflict of reasons, which self-binding is often meant to resolve, naturally invite cross-disciplinary investigation. There are two rationality-related topics also examined in behavioral economics, social psychology and game theory where self-binding comes up.

3.3.2 Self-binding conflicts and instrumental irrationality. Employing effective means-to-ends strategies, can be a part of practical rationality yet these strategies can come into conflict. Succinctly put, “[t]he problem is, given a goal, what is the best way to achieve it?”<sup>282</sup> Self-binding may or may not represent the economist’s “optimizing behavior” that achieves a given goal since the action itself is typically negative so as to avoid another presently undesired action. We might actually discern two separate purposes for a self-binding action. One could be an external goal whereby self-prohibition staves off an impulsive otherwise irrational act. Another purpose would be an internal goal which is more akin to a healthy practice that has nothing to do with irrationality. There is no irrational action at stake in binding oneself to a daily exercise regimen which is instrumental to achieving the goal of a healthy body.

What is it then for an act, which is intended to anticipate and thereby negate another act, to be characterized as optimizing? Which act is the rational one—the one that I very much desire to avoid at T1 but instead engage in at T2 or the one that I employ at T1 in order to bind myself

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<sup>282</sup> Jon Elster, “Rationality,” in Guttorm Fløistad, ed., *Contemporary Philosophy: A New Survey, Vol. 2, Philosophy of Science* 118 (Boston, MA: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers 1982). See also Manuel Vargas, “Practical Reason, Instrumental Irrationality, and Time,” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 126, no. 2 (November 2005): 241-252; Mary Tjiattas, “Functional Irrationality,” in Jaakko Hintikka, Robert Neville, Ernest Sosa, and Alan Olson, eds. *The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy Volume 9* 133-140 (Charlottesville, VA: Philosophy Documentation Center 2000).



so that I cannot do otherwise at T2? As Jay Wallace has remarked, “[i]t seems undeniable that agents can display a kind of instrumental rationality in the pursuit of ends that they do not themselves endorse, when for instance they are in the grip of akrasia.”<sup>283</sup> Hence the need for further analysis. Some see instrumental rationality as simply equivalent to rational choice theory, as Jon Elster does, while others see more refined distinctions.<sup>284</sup> Elster’s landmark work, *Ulysses Unbound* on the topic of self-binding, has the telling subtitle, “*Studies in Rationality, Precommitment and Constraints*” though Elster has a more exhaustive treatment of instrumental rationality in his *Solomonic Judgements*.<sup>285</sup> I should note that Chrisoula Andreou has contributed a number of helpful articles under this heading.<sup>286</sup>

A challenge to rational choice theory in behavioral economics has come from a field known as picoeconomics<sup>287</sup> which gives more weight to the strength or weakness of a desire or preference as determinative for behavior. Tim Schroeder has also noted this in his philosophical summary article on the topic of “desire.”<sup>288</sup> However, one particularly important aspect of desire that Schroeder neglects to address is the issue of temporality and competing desires, that is, the issue of inter-temporal choice. Unfortunately, George Ainslie’s landmark work in this area gets

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<sup>283</sup> R. Jay Wallace, “Normativity, Commitment and Instrumental Reason.” *Philosophers’ Imprint* 1, no. 3 (December 2001): 1-26.

<sup>284</sup> Niko Kolodny and John Brunero, “Instrumental Rationality,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed. (Spring 2016). URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/rationality-instrumental/>.

<sup>285</sup> Cf. Jon Elster, *Ulysses Unbound*, 2000; Elster, *Solomonic Judgements: Studies in the Limitations of Rationality* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1989); also Manuel Vargas, “Practical Reason,” *Philosophical Studies* 2005.

<sup>286</sup> Cf. “Works of Chrisoula Andreou” at URL: <https://philpapers.org/s/Chrisoula%20Andreou>

<sup>287</sup> Sven Ove Hansson and Till Grüne-Yanoff, “Preferences,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed. (Winter 2012). URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/preferences/>

<sup>288</sup> Tim Schroeder, “Desire,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed. (Summer 2015). URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/desire/>

nothing more than a footnote in Schroeder's *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article. The issue, of course, is the human tendency to act on immediately satisfiable desires in the short-term, over desires that require a measure of temporal delay. There is an ongoing debate on this point in behavioral economics since time preferencing can run counter to utility maximizing in rational choice theory. Many economists advocate a kind of temporal neutrality which attempts to retain the rationality of our choices over time. They simply dismiss a preference for a current utility over a future utility as nothing more than preferring an apple over an orange so that there is no disputing the rationality of the preference itself. Shane Frederick clearly lays out the claims in this temporality debate.

Those who advocate temporal neutrality argue that one should want their life as a whole to go as well as possible, and that counting some parts of life more than others interferes with this goal. On this view preferring a smaller immediate pleasure over a greater future pleasure (or a greater future pain over a smaller immediate pain) is irrational, because now and later are equally parts of one life.<sup>289</sup>

As I've previously mentioned, Ainslie is at least recognized for putting a name to this tendency which he labeled hyperbolic discounting.<sup>290</sup> He has used his original empirical research along these lines with both animals and people to undercut some of the traditional assumptions of rational choice theory. People are more susceptible to a desire with a quicker payoff over a long-term inducement, to the point that they will tend to discount the value of any deferred reward.<sup>291</sup> Conclusions drawn from this demonstrable tendency form the basis of so-called piceoeconomics and have been used to challenge rational choice theory in behavioral

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<sup>289</sup> Shane Frederick, "Time Preference and Personal Identity," in George Loewenstein, Daniel Read, and Roy Baumeister, eds. *Time and Decision: Economic and Psychological Perspectives of Intertemporal Choice* 89 (New York: Russell Sage Foundation 2003).

<sup>290</sup> George Ainslie, "Specious Reward" 1975.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

economics.<sup>292</sup> Typically, the response of rational choice theorists is to draw a distinction between desires and preferences with desires being more basic and thereby more accurately predictive of actual choices.<sup>293</sup>

Setting aside the desire versus preference debate, the temporal issue that Ainslie first described, introduces the intriguing human aptitude to intentionally invert this discounting tendency by limiting certain choices in an act of self-binding. If hyperbolic discounting is a documented tendency, then its remedy could be what might be called hyperbolic distinguishing. I do not intend to suggest that this idea has any direct behavioral science research to support it. But the very existence of self-binding as a human capacity and useful practice has a long history. What I mean to contrast here is that successful self-binding can be seen as a kind of response to the human tendency to discount future likelihoods in favor of more immediate rewards. Effective self-binding can end up intentionally overestimating, in an exaggerated, hyperbolic sense, the likelihood of the undesirable outcome in order to compensate for the tendency to discount or underestimate the likelihood of such an outcome. But how? Well, the long-honored tradition of self-binding fits quite well. A person knowing that a time will come when she will hyperbolically discount a future desirable outcome (or a future undesirable outcome), convinces herself that the best action to avoid this unwise discounting tendency is to hyperbolically distinguish the more distant future outcome which she likely will not desire quite so fervently at a later moment in

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<sup>292</sup> George Ainslie, *Picoeconomics: The Strategic Interaction of Successive Motivational States within the Person* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1992, reissue edition 2010).

<sup>293</sup> Schroeder, "Desire". This is a controversial topic among rational choice and decision theorists. By "basic" they mean something like more fundamental. So, in our making choices between options do these choices express our desires or our preferences? "Perhaps it will turn out that a small number of preferences are basic, and that there just are no facts about the degree to which something is desired overall by a person," says Schroder.

time. Her hyperbolic distinguishing of this desired outcome gives her the necessary vitality of mind to impose upon herself some choice limiting action.

Which desire wins out is the one that delivers the motivation to irrevocably bind the self to that particular desire. This is giving teeth to Frankfurt's 2nd order volition that my 1st order desire be my wholehearted will. In a self-binding act, I am putting a bit of my own identity as an autonomous person on the line in order to say that this desire and not that desire is the one that denotes the 'real me'. It might even be the case that an act of self-binding is a reliable indicator of the relative strength of opposing desires—1. On the one hand, I have a desire that is so strong, I am not even sure that I can resist such a desire without self-coercion via an act of self-binding. 2. This leads to the other hand, as I recognize the strength of a 1st order desire that I do not want or do not desire to have, then my 2nd order desire obviously needs to be stronger than my 1st order desire. But if my 1st order desire seems too overwhelming, it may be that a preemptive self-binding action can turn back such a strong competing desire.

But a problem arises, not in the self-binding act itself but in the impetus of conflict in the scenario that gives rise to the need to self-bind. Here I have a 2<sup>nd</sup> order desire which is to not have the 1<sup>st</sup> order desire be effective; yet, there it is. This desire of the 1<sup>st</sup> order refuses to be denied except by coercion. The introspective question is simply this: am I less of a person and more of a wanton (to use Frankfurtian terms) if I must resort to self-binding in order to buttress my 2<sup>nd</sup> order desire? If I cannot seem to muster the strength of will to resist this 1<sup>st</sup> order desire without self-binding help, then am I to view these preferences concerning my will as diminishing to my identity, since I might be more in need of self-binding measures in order to resist these detrimental 1<sup>st</sup> order desires? What does this say about the comparative merit or recommendatory part which self-binding might play in the human autonomy conundrum? Is self-binding a

scourge or a scalpel for the human will? Is it instrumentally rational or irrational to engage in an act of self-binding? I do not know the answer to this question.<sup>294</sup>

It could be that, in at least some cases of self-binding, we have an exception to Funkhouser's claim that all self-deception is a failure of self-knowledge.<sup>295</sup> Take the aforementioned case of the famed neuroscientist Oliver Sacks and his own self-knowledge that he had a terrible propensity to procrastinate and ended up missing important writing deadlines. To counteract this procrastinating tendency, he decides to intentionally engage in a bit of apparent self-deception. That is, he dishonestly convinces himself that if the book manuscript is not finished on time he will kill himself. Sacks himself admits that he did not really know if he was being honest with himself in his rash vow. However, in the radio interview, Sacks never calls his intention to kill himself a kind of self-deception. There seem to be only two alternatives, either Sacks' behavior was pathologically irrational or an intentional self-deception. His self-binding worked like this: Sacks desperately desires that he submit his manuscript on time before a deadline. Let X stand for the fulfilling of this desire. In order to motivate himself to X, he convinces himself that he will follow through with his intention to commit suicide if he misses the deadline. Let Y stand for Sacks kills himself if  $\sim X$ . The entire motivational structure for this scenario appears to be built around a likely self-deception based not upon a failure of self-

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<sup>294</sup> Davidson wrestled with this issue of what might seem irrational but turns out to be a matter of weakness of will, which while they may reinforce each other, are not the same. Cf. Donald Davidson, "Deception and Division" in Ernest LePore and Brian McLaughlin, eds., *Actions and Events: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson* 138-148 (New York: Oxford University Press 1985). Davidson made similar claims in his "Paradoxes of Irrationality" in Richard Wollheim and James Hopkins, eds. *Philosophical Essays on Freud* 289-305 (New York: Cambridge University Press 1982).

<sup>295</sup> Funkhouser, "Do the Self-Deceived Get What They Want?"

knowledge but upon a full awareness of himself and his weaknesses. So, the reasoning is valid and not irrational:

P1: $\sim X > Y$		P1: $X > \sim Y$
P2: $\sim X$	<b>OR</b>	P2: $X$
C: $Y$		C: $\sim Y$

But Y, in both modus ponens arguments, is the problem. We want to know whether Y is false or just irrational. Or is it irrational *because* it is false? Sacks being convinced that he will kill himself (Y) if  $\sim X$  will not turn out to be a false belief if Sacks actually does kill himself. Of course, there is an obvious irony here as weakness of will (procrastination) ends up triggering an extremely strong-willed, self-binding intention to commit suicide. Again, the previous Davidson reference is trying to sort out this aspect which he calls a “weakness of the warrant.”<sup>296</sup> In the Sacks case we might say that he seems to have had a strong warrant to believe in his own self-threat. What we have in self-binding (Sacks’ self-threat) may only seem to be an irrational act (being employed according to the notion that no rational person would ever attempt to curtail one’s own personal autonomy) in order to counter another irrational tendency (procrastination) reinforced by weakness of will.

My background assumptions are a) that Sacks is a rational individual even as he threatens himself with suicide and b) that it would always be considered irrational to actually commit suicide because of a missed manuscript deadline due to procrastination. But just because Y is an irrational act does not make it false that Y. Of course, what Sacks rationally desires is  $X + \sim Y$  and has added the possibility of Y as a supplemental motivation to X which is a telltale feature of a self-binding act.<sup>297</sup> According to Funkhouser, Y would represent Sacks having a false higher

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<sup>296</sup> Davidson: 81.

<sup>297</sup> That Y is supplemental might be logically illustrated with a disjunctive syllogism using the same criteria as represented above:  $X \vee Y$ ,  $X$ ,  $\sim Y$ . The reverse does not hold however. That is,

order belief. That is, instead of just being irrational, Sacks is engaging in self-deception. It is true that Sacks believes he will commit suicide but it is false that Sacks, assuming he is rational, will actually kill himself if he misses the deadline. The problem is that we cannot know whether or not Y is a false higher order belief until the self-binding episode plays out to the end. The possibility that Y (Sacks' suicide) depends on self-deception occurring at both T1 and at T2. In the Sacks case, his self-deception ends up achieving both desires that X and that  $\sim Y$ . As Sacks insisted in the interview, at the time when he senses the need to greatly intensify his motivational state, he brings himself to believe (falsely perhaps) that he will Y even though we cannot see how it is rational for anyone to really desire to kill themselves over a missed contract deadline. That is, he has a contradictory desire to Y if he does not X. So, at time T1, *before* the deadline at T2, Sacks has two correlated desires: 1. a desire that X and 2. a desire that  $\sim Y$  in order that  $X + \sim Y$ . It would seem that we are now presented with a case of what we might call 'instrumental self-deception.' This condition is a direct result of a man's self-knowledge that he both procrastinates and is capable of fully believing his own self-threats. Sacks knows his procrastinating proclivity but he also knows of an ability he has to irrationally self-threaten and convince himself that he will carry out those threats. Sacks uses this self-knowledge to engage in self-deception as a means to actually achieve his ultimate ends, namely  $X + \sim Y$ , completed manuscript plus no suicide. Therefore, due to a keen self-awareness of weakness (tendency to practice an undesirable habit) self-binding may be represented as an instrumental supplemental

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"Either I kill myself (Y) or I meet the deadline (X). I did *not* kill myself ( $\sim Y$ ). Conclude: I met the deadline (X)." Self-binding acts are intentionally supplemental actions taken up in order to ensure that other ultimately desired actions occur.

action (ostensibly irrational) in order to achieve a desired end, even if the self-binding action involves self-deception.

There are holes in this case however. The only way to really know for sure if the act of Sacks convincing himself to believe Y is *really* a case of self-deception would be if Sacks fails to submit the manuscript and then *does not* subsequently commit suicide. It could be the case that  $\sim(\sim X > Y)$  which appears to most people to be the more rational alternative. However, if Sacks misses the deadline and then follows through with his self-threat and actually kills himself then there was no self-deception, no failure of self-knowledge. Sacks had accurate self-knowledge based upon a true belief because he knew that he would kill himself and he did. What is going on here, since none of this seems very plausible to begin with? The self-binding act may feel like a ruse or a pretext—a deceptive use of self-deception in a temporary setting. Sacks claims to sincerely believe at T1 that a post-missed-deadline life is not worth living. Or is he really deceiving himself? Does he really have this false belief and will he still have this belief at T2? Perhaps at T1 Sacks truly does believe he will indeed kill himself if he misses the deadline and he unequivocally retains this motivational state until he finishes his manuscript which was, after all, the point of the life-threatening self-binding. The very conflict itself that gets set up between competing beliefs and desires ends up achieving the desired end for Sacks. The belief that Sacks should kill himself over a missed deadline is irrational, yet it is useful to achieve a goal. Seen in this way, a failure of self-knowledge (if  $\sim X > Y$  turns out to be false) then he fails in his supposed knowledge of himself at t1 that he will commit suicide at t2), is what Funkhouser claims that self-deception amounts to. Yet, the irony is that this particular type of self-deception



ends up getting the self-deceived what they want. It may be that, *except in certain cases of self-binding*, the self-deceived do not otherwise get what *they think* they want.<sup>298</sup>

3.3.3 Self-binding conflicts and causal decision theory: I will offer only a brief comment under this heading. “Causal decision theory adopts principles of rational choice that attend to an act’s consequences. It maintains that an account of rational choice must use causality to identify the considerations that make a choice rational.”<sup>299</sup> Under this description the self-binder might be seen as a causal decision maker who rationally employs self-control strategies as distinguished from the one who has the same self-control challenges yet might irrationally resist all self-binding means to achieve rational self-controlling ends. Here is where we seem to have flipped the script so to speak. Rather than having to defend self-binding as an irrational act because of its claimed autonomy-threatening properties, we can alternatively propose that it is a perfectly rational choice to self-bind due to the positive consequences of the act. In cases of self-binding which serve to help an agent successfully achieve a desired goal, causal decision theory could be a helpful predictive tool. That is, whenever any type of action (even if it is essentially choice-limiting) achieves an agent’s goal, there tends to be positive feedback which leads to a strengthened tendency to repeat the action. This is a noted characteristic in game theory

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<sup>298</sup> One resolution might be to appeal to another Funkhouser claim that not all self-deception necessarily involves beliefs. Perhaps the Sacks case does not involve self-deception concerning beliefs but related instead to Sacks’ own practical identity, e.g., his desires, emotions, values, and lifestyle. Cf. Eric Funkhouser, “Practical Self-Deception” in Petrizia Pedrini, ed. *Humana Mente Journal of Philosophical Studies 20: Philosophy of Self-Deception* (February 2012): 85-98.

<sup>299</sup> Paul Weirich, “Causal Decision Theory,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Edward N. Zalta ed. (Spring 2016). <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/decision-causal/> Cf. Jon Elster’s most exhaustive treatment of instrumental rationality is found in his volume, *Solomonic Judgements: Studies in the Limitations of Rationality*, 1989. See also Vargas, “Practical Reason, Instrumental Irrationality, *Philosophical Studies*, 2005.

dynamics which is typically studied in conjunction with decision theory.<sup>300</sup> “Over repeated problem-solving runs [in the game], ... there is a repeated feedback cycle between strength as a measure of past successes and strength as the main determinant of future successes.”<sup>301</sup>

Under this same decision theory heading, self-binding can further be seen as a behavioral economist illustration of a kind of balancing strategy against the human tendency to discount the future. Particularly, the human tendency of hyperbolic discounting of more distant future rewards might be successfully foiled by a deliberate act of self-binding. George Ainslie has done the academic legwork showing that this discounting behavior was observed and academically reported on as far back as 1871.<sup>302</sup> But as is so often the case with human behavior, the alternative can also be true. Humans can learn practices that resist hyperbolic discounting, a practice we might call “hyperopic valuing” which can be a powerful motivation to follow through with a self-restraining commitment device. Ideally a self-binding act is meant to avoid foolishly discounting the future, by wisely observing and valuing future desirable outcomes. If the desired outcome is achieved the constraining action will be seen as a rational, means-ends choosing strategy. Then, I will naturally want to employ the same strategy again. Success breeds more future success. If I am Ulysses and I find that my men and I have survived, then a rational feedback loop has been reinforced in my mind so that I might even propose to self-bind again

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<sup>300</sup> Paul K. Moser, ed., *Rationality in Action: Contemporary Approaches* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1990). This volume, containing several widely-cited essays, treats both causal decision theory and game theory under the general heading of rationality.

<sup>301</sup> Arthur W. Burks, “The Logic of Evolution, and the Reduction of Holistic-Coherent Systems to Hierarchical-Feedback Systems,” in William L. Harper and Brian Skyrms, eds. *Causation in Decision, Belief Change, and Statistics: Proceedings of the Irvine Conference on Probability and Causation* 157 (Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers 1988).

<sup>302</sup> Cf. Ainslie, “Specious Reward,” p. 472. See his reference to W.S. Jevons, *The Theory of Political Economy* (London: Macmillan, 1911, originally published 1871).

and have another go past the Sirens for an encore performance! In other words, the triumph of the self-binding act against the natural tendency to discount the future can end up strengthening the desire and the capacity to self-bind.

3.3.4 Self-binding conflicts and Frankfurt's hierarchy. It is time to return to Frankfurt's hierarchy of desires to try and make sense of this battle of internal wills which is central to understanding the motivation for many cases of self-binding. The applicable objection for our study is that his hierarchy might be better pictured as a Russian nesting doll with smaller and smaller but otherwise identical dolls (think desires) inside with no necessary condition for that final entity to finally appear who really controls everything, like the little man behind the curtain in the Wizard of Oz. This sets up the infinite regress and homunculus problem pertaining to Frankfurt's view. Or as Michael Bratman puts it,

An uncontested highest-order desire is, after all, itself another desire, another wiggle in the psychic stew. We have as yet no explanation of why that desire—in contrast with other desires in the stew—has authority to speak for the agent, to constitute, in the metaphysics of agency, where the agent stands.<sup>303</sup>

Now, even though my internal conflicts concerning what my will really is may be frustrating and exhausting there is this unswerving belief that at some point I can discern my own will. I do not want to believe that my will is nothing more than a matryoshka doll full of embedded “Mini-Me’s”! But how do I go about proving that this is not the case whenever I experience a real sense of inner conflict or even just those ordinary moments of indecisiveness. Frankfurt insists that I can sort all of this out by a kind of rational internal discourse where I first see that I have a desire of the first order, as he describes it. And then I observe that I have a 2<sup>nd</sup>-order desire to hold this 1<sup>st</sup>-order desire. But I do not resolve the matter and finally discover what my will

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<sup>303</sup> Michael Bratman, “Three Theories of Self-Governance,” in *Structures of Agency* 2007: 225.

actually is until I see that I further have a desire to see my 1<sup>st</sup>-order desire be fulfilled in reality which Frankfurt labels a 2<sup>nd</sup>-order volition. At that point, you have all you need, says Frankfurt. No more imbedded dolls to discover since you have come to a resolution in identifying your will. You are a solid person and the idea is that your 2<sup>nd</sup>-order volition is the super glue that holds the matryoshka at this level of self-analysis with no need to go deeper—no further regression required. That is, whenever you engage in Frankfurt’s vision of internal discourse, you can at least know for certain what your real will actually is so that this epistemological part of the conflict is resolved. Furthermore, Frankfurt claims, this is what personal identification amounts to and is the foundation of personhood itself.<sup>304</sup>

Now that we have Frankfurt’s account in view, let’s ask if this is all that is needed to situate the act of self-binding into his scheme. It seems to me that there is too little consideration given to the same agent with the opposite desire at a different time, which is the point of a self-binding act in the first place. What if the agent avows a single, outright and fully cognized 2<sup>nd</sup>-order volition at T1 and then turns around at T2 and claims to have an opposite yet similarly avowed volition? Which one is the true 2<sup>nd</sup>-order volition? We might quickly respond that it is obvious that the true and real 2<sup>nd</sup>-order volition is the one intended in the outcome of a self-binding act. But why is the self-binding act sought out and found to be effective in the first place? It is precisely due to this internal perception of two distinct wills in direct opposition inside a person and the felt need to see that the more virtuous preferences actually get put into practice. But without some conception of an internal duel between two fully discernible yet

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<sup>304</sup> Frankfurt’s volitional hierarchy claims can be found in collections of his essays over the years in *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* 1988; *Necessity, Volition and Love* 1999; and *Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting It Right* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press 2006).

opposing wills where one is supposed to win out over the other, it is hard for the self-binding act to get a grip on us as a possible solution. For ancient Greek philosophy, as previously referenced,<sup>305</sup> this comes down to the internal battle between *enkrateia* (ἐγκράτεια literally power over the self) and its antonym *akrasia* (ἀκρασία literally without power over the self). As in English, the ‘a’ prefix negates. With Xenophon *enkrateia* was the foundation for all the virtues and the chief countering virtue against *akrasia* or weak will.<sup>306</sup>

Yet, we still have not responded to the original problem. How, in Frankfurt’s system, can these diametrically opposing, let’s call them desires, both constitute my will if I am taking action to block one of those desires from being realized? In response to this question I propose to turn the picture in reverse. Say that an attempt at self-binding breaks down. Imagine an alcoholic who, in an act of self-binding, has not only emptied the liquor cabinet, but has also taken Antabuse (disulfiram) to make herself deathly ill if she consumes alcohol. Despite these self-binding measures, in a moment of weakness or irrational impulse we might say, she turns around and intentionally purges to get rid of the self-binding drug in her system and then runs to the closest liquor store to indulge her addiction. We can easily conceive of this act as though another full-fledged will is fighting back in a kind of war of two wills within the self. In her self-binding actions this person has clearly identified with one particular version of herself, or in Frankfurtian terms, has shown what her higher order will is. However, in her equally willful and intentional undoing of those self-binding actions, it is difficult to claim that she is not in fact identifying

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<sup>305</sup> Chris Bobonich, “Plato on Akrasia and Knowing Your Own Mind,” in Christopher Bobonich, and Pierre Destree, eds. *Akrasia in Greek Philosophy From Socrates to Plotinus* 41-60 (Boston: Brill Publishers 2007).

<sup>306</sup> Louis-Andre Dorion, “Akrasia and Enkrateia in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*,” *Dialogue* 42, no. 4 (September 2003): 645-672 .

with another will within herself. The rather extreme measures she undertakes to separate herself seem to testify to something more than mere unwillingness to not drink or some ambivalence about her drinking. The willful, deliberate action to unravel and negate a self-binding act rises to a level that allows us to infer a reversal of identification over time. The question we must pose is which is the higher order or second order volition in this case? We want to assume that the higher order volition is opposed to the latter's addictive behavior.

Even if the self-binding act is supposed to merely reveal the true, self-identified higher order desire, the desire that a particular desire become one's will, a couple of relevant issues present themselves. Given the time sequence in my example, one might think that the 2<sup>nd</sup> higher order volition must surely win out especially since there has been a self-binding action to support its being realized. Frankfurt apparently wants to claim as much by offering his well-known example of the physician engaged in psychotherapy with a narcotics addict who decides that it would help him in his therapy work to understand what it feels like to have such an overwhelming desire for a drug. In this sense, the doctor has a 2<sup>nd</sup> order desire for an addictive drug, yet he may not want this desire to be effective or move him all the way to action. That is, he does not desire that his desire effectively become his will, which is what Frankfurt's 2<sup>nd</sup> order volition amounts to.<sup>307</sup>

Curiously though at this point, Frankfurt inserts a self-binding element into his example by suggesting that the doctor may even "prudently arrange to make it impossible for him to satisfy the desire he would have if his desire to want the drug should in time be satisfied."<sup>308</sup> Yet, Frankfurt concludes that we cannot infer that the doctor merely having a 2<sup>nd</sup> order desire of this

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<sup>307</sup> Harry Frankfurt, *Importance of What We Care About*, p. 15.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

kind entails that he actually has a first order desire to take the drug. He calls this “a truncated” [case] ... at the margin of preciousity, and the fact that he wants to want to X is not pertinent to the identification of his will.”<sup>309</sup> This allows Frankfurt to make clear that a 2<sup>nd</sup>-order volition is of the sort that finally moves a person to act in such a way that her desire is effective. That is, the person wants her desire to provide the motive in what she actually does.

But here is where Frankfurt sees a problem with his entailment relation and admits as much in a footnote.<sup>310</sup> That is, given Frankfurt’s case where a person not only desires not to be addicted, but also desires to desire not to be addicted and furthermore desires that her 1<sup>st</sup> order desire turn into a 2<sup>nd</sup>-order volition so that it is effectively her will to be moved by this desire to not be addicted, then it *cannot be the case* “both that A wants the desire to X to move him into action and that he does not want to X.” In making this claim Frankfurt apparently realizes that he opens himself up to counterexamples where his declaration does not necessarily hold, according to his footnote, in certain non-standard cases under a certain kind of description of a 1<sup>st</sup>-order desire.

However, is this not the problem which is implicit in my above proposed case of an attempted self-binding that breaks down? Frankfurt, maybe without realizing it, has already opened the door for a standard case when he imagines his psychotherapist “prudently arranging” for an instance of self-binding. It is just as easy to imagine the psychotherapist undoing his prudent arrangement in which case “A wants the desire to X to move him to action” evidenced by his act of self-binding, and yet “does not want to X” or that is, does not want to avoid taking the addictive drug, evidenced by my postscript to Frankfurt’s story. A drug counselor fitting

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

<sup>310</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, footnote #4, p. 15.

Frankfurt's exact description, who self-binds and then reverses course is hardly a non-standard case.

Of course, this opens the door once again to the homuncular objection. The illusory homunculus inside seems to have a 2<sup>nd</sup>-order volition in direct contradiction to another imaginary homunculus. But how can this be? The stock intuition here is simple. Who says that this desire that another desire be my ultimate will is the real, sincere, authentic, final one that somehow validates the 1<sup>st</sup>-order desire? It may have been a reflective endorsement but it certainly appears reflectively arbitrary. By whose authority can I say that this is so, other than my own authority? This is the problem we started with. The notion that a 2<sup>nd</sup>-order volition will settle things attempts to waive aside the homuncular problem since there are two opposing 2<sup>nd</sup>-order volitions inside the same person calling for an exponentiation of Frankfurt's 2<sup>nd</sup>-order. In our counterexample, we are confronted with a kind of self-referencing infinity mirror<sup>311</sup> of endlessly repeating images—the infinite regress of homunculi or H<sup>n</sup>. Even if we concede that these are simply higher-order conflicting desires, this only pushes our problem to the next mirror in our infinite regress.

One objection to the above might be along the lines of discerning the genuine from the counterfeit or the internal from the external. That is, the issue might not be about identification with one, true internal will but instead there may be multiple identifications possible. Does this amount to a vulnerability to self-deception? Perhaps. Or is there somehow an identifying with a will that is not one's own. "There is in fact a legitimate and interesting sense in which a person may experience a passion that is external to him and that is strictly attributable neither to him nor

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<sup>311</sup> Thomas Bolander, "Self-Reference", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta ed. (Spring 2015). URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/self-reference/>



to anyone else.”<sup>312</sup> So, if I could only discern this externality (or perhaps stop deceiving myself? about what I want my true, authentic will to be), then this regress problem might fade away. Returning to my example, at the very least we can still affirm some sense of intentional self-governing agency in both the will to self-bind and in the subsequent will to undo a self-binding act. Both were willful; though one might have been a willful alienation, an externality as Frankfurt puts it. This is where J.J. Davenport’s phenomenological exegesis of Frankfurt is helpful. [Italics mine]

The range of a person’s volitionally *possible identifications* thus constitutes something like an inward horizon, or an authoritative personal world of the self. This (strongly) higher-order ‘personal world’ is narrower in scope than the personal world of *minimal identification*, and it refers essentially not only to the person as owner of her conscious or unconscious mental life, but also to the person as volitional self, as a source of identifications. Since a person’s ‘inward character’ reflects not only her actual identifications, but *also the range and relative availability of alternate identifications that are volitionally possible for her*, the ‘shape’ of this inner personal world is an index of this inner character. If she is more inwardly disposed to certain types of cares than others, the *contrary identifications may remain volitionally possible* for her, but they will be less willable than the identifications that best fit the cares to which she is disposed.<sup>313</sup>

Let us grant for a moment that this externality phenomenon of possible identifications is a way to help explain the problem multiple homunculi. Even if we can see that this weird external thing belongs to no one, and then after some reflection we come to realize what our true inmost will has to be, we still cannot get around the phenomenon itself—what Davenport calls minimal identification, whether it turns out to be inward or outward. That is, our being able to finally discern and pick out the stronger agential authority at any moment does not solve the problem. It *is* the problem. At T1 there is strong agential authority, a minimal identifying with the will to

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<sup>312</sup> Frankfurt, “Identification and Externality,” in *The Importance of What We Care About*, p. 61.

<sup>313</sup> John Joseph Davenport, “Self Will: An Existential Theory of Motivation and Frankfurt’s Theme of Identification,” (dissertation University of Notre Dame 1998): 372-373.

self-bind. At T2 there is just as strong an agential authority or a sense of identification with the will to undo the self-binding.

One thing is obvious in this case of “self-unbinding” that I have proposed. There is no *single* clear and continuous agential preference or policy at work over time, and that turns out to be a definition for akrasia or so-called weakness of will. And this is the most gripping impetus for the felt need to limit oneself or bind the self in the first place. People have discovered that there is an effective device in their autonomy tool belt that, while it may temporarily limit some of their options, is useful in their self-governance wrestling match in order to force this other will to “break stance” and ultimately “submit”, to use Greco-Roman wrestling terminology. In practical, everyday reality they are not as concerned with reflecting on precisely what their will is, but rather demonstrating with their self-binding behavior what might have been going on inside their heads. As neuroscientist, David Eagleman, puts it: “There’s someone inside my head, but it’s not me.”<sup>314</sup> So, continuing with the wrestling language, in the self-binding act I am using the loud speaker inside my mental arena to announce to myself, as it were: “Let’s get ready to rumble!”

3.3.5 Self-binding conflicts and hacking the hierarchy. To be clear, my primary aim in the example of a botched, conflicted case of self-binding is simply to offer a counterexample to Frankfurt’s attempt to get around the homuncular problem. Could it be that the Frankfurt picture has sent us on a sophisticated, philosophical tail-chasing caper? I think there might be an easy way out (a ‘hack’ to use the pop culture vernacular) if we can stop long enough to look outward for a moment instead of inward. That is, the focus of our attention might be better placed if we

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<sup>314</sup> Eagleman, p. 9ff.

looked not at the attracted person first but at the attraction itself. What is it exactly in the external world that we claim to be aiming for and then what is it that pulls us away from what we are aiming for? Next, we can ask in the same vein, what is it that has such a pull upon the human psyche, to trigger such strong, opposing passions, to tug at opposite emotions at the same time? When we first ask ourselves what exactly our target is and what is the optimum behavior that brings us closest to the bull's-eye mark, then we are better able to align our wills accordingly. Start with the object and work back to the subject instead of the other way around. Ironically, when we look at the problem in this way, we can also see how easy it is to get distracted by any number of other factors that pull us off the mark.<sup>315</sup> If the object of our behavior is to either avoid conduct X or deliberately engage in conduct Y then focusing on Frankfurt's hierarchy of desires and volitions is of little practical use. The point is not introspection about the origin and nature of desire but circumspection in the direction of desire itself. Regardless of where I might be on Frankfurt's desire-volition continuum, there is a better question, namely, is there a mark to aim for or a realm that is clearly wide of the mark that I aim to avoid?

Since I have just made some metaphorical allusions to target games,<sup>316</sup> I offer the following example from archery. Think of a person as an archer aiming her bow at a target. Let the act of aiming and shooting an arrow at a target stand for the entire theatre of action. Let the target be anything a person cares about enough to desire expending energy to achieve or enjoy.

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<sup>315</sup> Cf. "Temperance" by Alfred Mele in *Encyclopedia of Ethics* 1692-1696, Lawrence C. Becker and Charlotte B. Becker, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2013). Mele speaks of a temperate person having "desires that do not hit the mark."

<sup>316</sup> Jeff Fry, "Sport," in Cesar R. Torres, ed., *The Bloomsbury Companion to the Philosophy of Sport*, 371-373 (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing 2016). Fry references "target games" as part of a recognized taxonomy that includes invasion games (basketball), net games (badminton), wall games (racquetball), fielding/run-scoring games (baseball) and target games (golf).

Let the archery equipment be whatever we might want to describe as a person's 'will apparatus'—motivations, desires, intentions, attitudes etc. Using this picture, it seems to me that there has been an inordinate amount of attention directed at this latter set of dexterities and too little contemporary consideration given to the former—that is the teleological aspect of agency and action—the target of our action. I do not mean to propose an Aristotelian capital T, kind of ultimate purpose for human beings but instead I am referencing that practical, everyday purposing which humans must engage in to get things done. Whenever we turn the picture around in this way, the issue of the human will and our competing desires gets framed in a way that trains our minds upon the direction of the aim instead of a description of the aimer. An archer obsessed with technique, fixated on her bow, her hands, her stance and so on, with little attention given to the objective of her sport, will obviously not be as successful in achieving her goal of hitting a target consistently and accurately.

Describing the nature of the human will has been an arduous philosophical undertaking. Despite centuries upon centuries of sage wisdom focused on the topic it turns out that what goes on inside my head as I decide to take up an action or refrain from it remains somewhat mysterious. Why else the widespread practice of self-binding, for example? If humans had learned to control themselves by other, less freedom-impinging, option-limiting ways, I imagine the act of self-binding would be nothing more than a footnote in the history books pertaining mostly to ancient monastic practice. As it stands today, I may not be able to sort out this dueling set of desires inside of me, but it continues to be the case that I can so arrange my future so that one set of desires wins out or does not win out over another. That is, I do not have to be an expert in philosophy of mind or action in order to undertake an action that allows me to be 'voluntarily coerced' to do one thing and not another.

It could be that the more productive line of thinking would be to simply acknowledge that inner conflict is part of the human condition and instead turn our attention toward what actions might be better than some other actions in achieving our goals. Then, the philosophical discussion could be renewed along the lines of what kinds of personal characteristics might be better suited to achieve some particular action regardless of how internally conflicted I may feel for whatever reason. I am not talking about an unmitigated ethically-tinged approach to the philosophy of action. Rather this is a caution about the other end of the spectrum that I should try to avoid the self-referential paradox,<sup>317</sup> which is always a good idea in any study of human nature. Aristotle's philosophy of action or the Stoic philosophy of Epictetus come to mind in offering this shifted emphasis.

Returning to my original counterexample of an undoing of self-binding, the person who reverses course and ends up appearing to have equally competing 2<sup>nd</sup>-order volitions might be said to be "of two minds" according to the ancients. Of course, those ancient thinkers did not have neuroscience to analyze the possible existence of such a "double-souled" (δίψυχος dipsuchos) picture of the mind.<sup>318</sup> This ancient definition of instability related to outward behavior has been helpful in denoting possible evidence of some internal conflict. In modern psychological terms, specialists observe an extreme version of this malady and call it bipolar

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<sup>317</sup> Bolander, "Self reference," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

<sup>318</sup> Stanley E. Porter, "Is 'dipsuchos' (James 1,8; 4,8) a 'Christian Word?'," *Biblica* 71, no. 4 (1990), pp. 469-498. From this one reference, lexical semanticists of *Koine* Greek note the derived etymology of the hyphenated English words 'double-minded' and 'single-minded'. There is some suggestion that the ancient Hebrew word *saiâphim* סַיֵּאִפִּים in Psalm 119:113, "I hate doubleminded people!" (NIV), could have been understood as 'divided thinker' or even 'half-hearted', though the Greek Septuagint (the translation that the author of the book of James would have read) uses the word *παρανομους* which is typically translated 'transgressor'. Later English translations chose the word 'double-minded' which more accurately translates the most ancient biblical manuscripts in existence.

mental disorder in their diagnostic manuals.<sup>319</sup> Much of the life's work of philosophers like Bernard Williams and Charles Taylor (and a major theme in the claims of Existentialist philosophy) center around this theme of single-minded authenticity as an exceptional human value to pursue. When hierarchical mechanisms of ascertaining higher-order volitions go haywire then, there are always phenomenological (Jean-Paul Sartre) and even economic (Adam Smith) proposals on offer. There are even updated versions<sup>320</sup> of the ancient multiple selves accounts in Socrates, beginning with Plato's account of Socrates's famous chariot visualization given to Phaedrus of rival multiple selves competing for supremacy where the controlling true self ends up being the intellect or reason.<sup>321</sup> The issue remains of how to make sense of our supposed volitional hierarchy when the volitions seem to continue in conflict.

Sartre's picture of one's acting in "bad faith" captures this self-induced tension triggered by societal perceptions, where one feels pressure to embrace false values and repudiate one's own inherent freedom, thereby behaving inauthentically. Since we cannot escape this brute fact of our existential freedom, the existentialist exhorts us to resist this enslaving behavior of bad faith with a kind of moralizing fervor. "It is clear that Sartre regards this [bad faith behavior in

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<sup>319</sup> "Bipolar and Related Disorders", *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: American Psychiatric Association Publishing 2013).

<sup>320</sup> Jon Elster, ed., *The Multiple Self* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1985); Geoffroy de Clippel and Kfir Eliaz, "Reason-Based Choice: A Bargaining Rationale for the Attraction and Compromise Effects," a Symposium presentation to the *Faculty of Law, Economics and Finance*, University of Luxembourg, April 1, 2009. URL: [https://www.en.uni.lu/fdef/actualites/reason\\_based\\_choice\\_a\\_bargaining\\_rationale\\_for\\_the\\_attraction\\_and\\_compromise\\_effects](https://www.en.uni.lu/fdef/actualites/reason_based_choice_a_bargaining_rationale_for_the_attraction_and_compromise_effects) The authors try to position this ancient enigma as simply "an intra-personal bargaining problem *among different selves of an individual*, where each self represents a different criterion for choosing."

<sup>321</sup> Plato, *Phaedo* 63b–c; 115c; *1st Alcibiades* 133c4–6; *Republic* IX, 589a6–b6; a helpful summary can be found in Richard Sorabji, "Graeco-Roman Varieties of Self" in Pauliina Remes and Juha Sihvola, eds., *Ancient Philosophy of the Self* 13–34 (New York: Springer 2008).

avoiding responsibilities] as immoral.”<sup>322</sup> It may appear that the existentialist’s way of facing ourselves in our duplicities by determining to bear down harder and act authentically, is just another anxiety-laden project of manufacturing a level of self-control. On the other hand, it might be that the crisis-aimed, caustic existentialist route to “taking ourselves seriously and getting it right”<sup>323</sup> might be quicker. Whether we take an analytical or a phenomenological approach, ascertaining true “wholeheartedness” (Frankfurt’s term<sup>324</sup>) or the always winding path to “authenticity” (Kierkegaard’s term), or an “integrated and unalienated consciousness” (Hegel’s term) or “inwardness” (Charles Taylor’s term for our awareness of the inward self or the private self in contrast to the public self) it is quite the mental and emotional task!<sup>325</sup> Perhaps Sartre’s way has advantages over Frankfurt’s longer and more drawn-out identification method of trying to get to the real you by means of a persistent internal exam to discover levels of one’s desires and volitions. The pertinent observation in either case is that the act of self-binding cuts through (or maybe speeds up) both projects—Frankfurt’s mature intellectual proposal or Sartre’s notoriously equivocal program for self-identification and ultimately self-governance. The self-binder simply chooses a goal, then a self-binding plan for achieving that goal, then, over a prescribed time-frame, observes a successful outcome. It is the action itself that provides the

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<sup>322</sup> David Detmer, *Sartre Explained: From Bad Faith to Authenticity* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing 2008), 87.

<sup>323</sup> The obvious allusion is to Harry Frankfurt’s well-known 2004 Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Stanford, entitled “Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting It Right.”

<sup>324</sup> Here the reference is to chapter 12 “Identification and Wholeheartedness” in Harry Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* 1998 pp. 159-176. Frankfurt’s essay originally appeared in John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, eds. *Perspectives on Moral Responsibility* 170-187 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1993).

<sup>325</sup> Cf. Somogy Varga and Charles Guignon, “Authenticity,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed. (Fall 2017). URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/authenticity/>.

most congruent metric for dissecting our slippery internality. If I am more pleased or more satisfied than I was before the action, then here is at least one revelatory clue to uncovering my true self and overcoming this unstable condition of doublemindedness.

Economic philosophy long ago weighed in on this matter of discovering the true self by means of “self-distancing” which, it is claimed, actually leads to more altruistic behavior.

In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith famously claimed that one develops a self by examining one’s feelings and behavior from an external point of view: by thinking of oneself not as oneself, but as an “other”—a process we refer to as “self-distancing”. He believes that this way of thinking has powerful effects: it allows people to control their emotions and makes them more altruistic.”<sup>326</sup>

When described in this way, self-distancing, rather than offering an alternative is actually a species of self-binding. The key distinction here, especially for economic philosophy, involves the assumed capacity for examining the self “from an external point of view”. Smith’s original and intriguing idea is that people are mentally capable of stepping outside of themselves as though they have the ability to look at themselves through another person’s eyes. The concept is not that far from the “Original Position” in John Rawls, *Theory of Justice*.<sup>327</sup> Self-distancing then, has a self-binding quality in that I may intentionally limit my option of seeing myself from the inward or ‘inside-out’ point of view and instead occasionally confine my thinking to strictly the ‘outside-in’ point of view. The effect is to provide a re-framed vision of my own reality—one

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<sup>326</sup> Warren Herold, Ethan Kross, Walter Sowden, “The Virtue of Self-Distancing” *The Self, Motivation and Virtue (SMV) Project* 2015-2018. URL=  
<http://smvproject.com/initiatives/grants/herold/> This 3-year, grant-funded, interdisciplinary research initiative based at the University of Oklahoma aims to “rigorously [test] Smith’s claim that adopting a self-distanced perspective causes individuals to be more altruistic – i.e., to place more weight on the rights and interests of others, relative to their own.”

<sup>327</sup> Cf. Samuel Freeman, “Original Position,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed. (Winter 2016). URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/original-position/>



that aids in moral development and frees up the altruistic nature within an individual. When viewed in this light the religious ascetics come to mind as a class of humanity that we often consider to be the greatest altruists. And they may very well be the ones who know the most about self-binding having practiced it daily.

### 3.4 IS SELF-BINDING A LINGUISTIC PUZZLE?

3.4.1 Self-binding as a language game. Perhaps the puzzle of self-binding has a linguistic component: talking to myself and making it so. The Wittgenstein-inspired “language game” concept is an intriguing possibility as a way to explain what is going on when a person effectively self-binds in order to achieve some intention. “Giving orders, and obeying them ...” is the first in a long list of what Wittgenstein called “the multiplicity of language games.”<sup>328</sup> Perhaps this is all that self-binding entails: an order given to oneself and the obeying of that order. For Wittgenstein, language encompasses all reality—both words and actions. And so, “the term ‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.”<sup>329</sup> In this ‘form of life’ called self-binding, giving oneself an order does seem to be a necessary component. But this understanding by itself fails to capture that inverted aspect of the activity we are trying to grasp. How is it that I can be in a position to *both* authoritatively give an order *and* then submissively obey the same order? There appears to be a game going on alright but the game appears to be more internally perspectival than externally linguistic. And even here, we have to assert that self-binding entails more than even an internal language-game activity since a self-binding order, by definition,

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<sup>328</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* I, par. 23, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1953).

<sup>329</sup> Ibid.

entails some level of coercion so that, due to an order given at T1, I cannot do otherwise at T2. That is to say, obeying an order is not exactly what is denoted in a self-binding act since obedience would imply a submissive decision at both T1 and T2. When I cannot do otherwise at T2, something beyond merely giving and obeying an order is taking place. Wittgenstein might therefore propose that self-binding still bears a ‘family resemblance’ to some similar activity. But I am at a loss to identify what that might be.

This Wittgenstein-inspired question, moves us to ask which “rule-following” language game is taking place whenever a person self-binds? What rule is being followed? Whatever the rule might be, the action or intended action is intentionally counteracted. If we force ourselves to choose according to some linguistic framework, we end up meeting ourselves coming in the door. This is the paradox Wittgenstein has famously offered which appears to me to be starkly illustrated with examples of self-constraining actions. Here is an action which I desire at T1 either to perform or not to perform in the future at T2. But I am self-aware enough to know that such a desire will fade away by T2. And so, I take a course of counter-action at T1 that absolutely insures that my original T1 desire will be fulfilled at T2. Whatever language game rule I might be following will stand in conflict or will be violated in this countermanded circumstance of self-binding. I follow a rule by not following a rule, as it were.

“This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.”<sup>330</sup>

It is as though I am both Captain Jean Luc Picard AND 1<sup>st</sup> Officer Will Riker (characters in the TV sci-fi drama, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*) inside the same body. An oft-repeated

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<sup>330</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* p. 102.

line from the Captain to his 1<sup>st</sup> Officer is, “Make it so, Number One.” When the captain commands it, there is something going on there, a kind of rule-following action that takes place prior to the action intended in the command. Self-binding can be examined as a mental activity from this kind of linguistic angle with even more incisive analysis because the two selves are set in a delimited temporal context—a present self and a future self. What happens when you have mental activity conditioned by language that seems to mute this temporal context? With no expertise in Wittgenstein studies, I am not in a position at all to pose a scholarly Wittgensteinian response. I do know that the scope of his language-game, rule-following behavior is supposed to cover all human language. Wittgenstein apparently struggled over what to do with the temporality issue in his system, so it is not surprising to discover that he mostly ignored the topic of history (the temporal nature of reality) even in metaphorical references, opting instead for engineering or topographical metaphors.

Wittgenstein’s own attitude to history is not a topic which is either obvious or popular. To the best of my knowledge, fortified by an examination of existing bibliographies, there is no explicit discussion of it. This is no coincidence. Obviously, unlike the nature of logic, language and the human mind, history is not a topic that looms large in Wittgenstein’s writings, whether it be the *Tractatus*, the *Philosophical Investigations* or the posthumous publications from the *Nachlass*. Unlike ethics, religion and aesthetics, moreover, it is not even a topic that he broached explicitly in lectures and conversations.<sup>331</sup>

As James Luchte has pointed out in an existentialist comparison, “The question is whether Wittgenstein is aware of such an original temporality (and of its existential spatiality), or indeed, of its relevance.”<sup>332</sup> Wittgenstein’s *Blue Book* and *Brown Book* disclose this reticence in

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<sup>331</sup> Hans-Johann Glock, “Wittgenstein and History,” in Alois Pichler and Simo Säätelä, eds., *Wittgenstein: The Philosopher and his Works: Publications of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society* 227-303 (New Brunswick, NJ: Ontos Verlag 2007).

<sup>332</sup> James Luchte, “Under the Aspect of Time ‘Sub Specie Temporis’: Heidegger, Wittgenstein and the Place of the Nothing,” *Philosophy Today* 53, no. 1, (Spring 2009): 78.

referencing our natural puzzlement about the very nature of time “when time seems to us a queer thing. ...All the facts that concern us lie open before us. But it is the use of the substantive ‘time’ which mystifies us.”<sup>333</sup> Again from Luchte:

Wittgenstein states that ‘time’ has been a problem for us, symptomatized by our asking the question, ‘What is time?’ Yet, he suggests that there is a flaw with the form of the question: ‘What is...?’ as it forces us to seek a substance for the substantive. Time is yet another example of the mystery of this paradox, as with ‘mental processes’, ‘thought’, or any other name, for that matter. We become puzzled about time when we begin to look more closely at its grammar, which seems to abide contradictions and paradox.<sup>334</sup>

Wittgenstein went on to offer Augustine, in a paraphrase, as his illustration of the time paradox.

It is such a contradiction which puzzled Saint Augustine when he argued, “How is it possible that one should measure time? For the past cannot be measured, as it is gone by; and the future can’t be measured because it has not yet come. And the present can’t be measured for it has no extension.”<sup>335</sup>

With not much help then from Wittgenstein on the broad question of language, mental activity and temporality, I turn to the more concrete and particular. Behavioral economist Keith Chen has compared languages for these distinguishing aspects of temporality.<sup>336</sup> Take those who speak a language (Mandarin, for example) which he describes as non-futured or “futureless” or that is, a language in which the present and future are conceived of as seamlessly fused together. Chen’s research shows that representative members of a Mandarin-speaking culture have a much easier time resisting present temptations in order to enjoy future pleasures. Chen and his colleagues have empirically demonstrated that having this linguistic feature correlates with and

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<sup>333</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, Blackwell 1958), 6.

<sup>334</sup> Luchte, “Under the Aspect,” p. 79.

<sup>335</sup> Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book*, p. 26.

<sup>336</sup> Keith Chen, “Could your language affect your ability to save money?” *TED Talk* filmed in New York (June 2012). Video and transcript available at URL: [https://www.ted.com/talks/keith\\_chen\\_could\\_your\\_language\\_affect\\_your\\_ability\\_to\\_save\\_money](https://www.ted.com/talks/keith_chen_could_your_language_affect_your_ability_to_save_money)

perhaps encourages a cognitive propensity to more naturally engage in self-binding behaviors. Applied economically, the person who is better able to separate her present-self from a future-self may be better equipped to both save money and to take the necessary risks required to secure her economic future. This applies, Chen claims, to entire countries and cultures. People in cultures speaking languages that have the clearest and most distinct words for distinguishing the future from the present, for instance, are more prone to have less money saved for retirement, smoke cigarettes more often, be more obese, and even be less likely to use a condom. Chen poses his hypothesis this intriguing way:

Could how you speak about time, could how your language forces you to think about time, affect your propensity to behave across time? You speak English, a futured language. What that means is that every time you discuss the future, or any kind of future event, grammatically you're forced to cleave that from the present and treat it as if it's something viscerally different. Now suppose that that visceral difference makes you subtly dissociate the future from the present every time you speak. If that's true and it makes the future feel like something more distant and more different from the present, [then ...]<sup>337</sup>

3.4.2 Self-binding as a type of speech act. Setting aside Wittgenstein and time-conditioned language, I want to return to this related field of speech act theory that I have already introduced under the heading of self-promising. First off, let's be clear that it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition that self-binding involve social discourse of any kind. I can, in a moment of resolve, go through my house and throw out all sweets in the pantry and the refrigerator or hidden in my desk. This self-binding action need not involve any sort of speech act even though there might be an internal conversation along the lines of, "I am determined that this time I am really going to stick to my weight-loss plan," one might say. "Therefore, in this moment of strong will, I will remove all temptation found in my house so that in future weak-

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<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

willed moments I cannot give in to temptation quite so easily.” However, a self-binding act may often involve a so-called *illocutionary* speech act.<sup>338</sup> As J.L. Austin first described it, locution is what is said, illocution is what is intended by the speaker in what is said, and perlocution is what subsequently happens after the utterance. Some speech acts then are said to have illocutionary force. Building on the original work of Austin and the illocutionary force of utterances, John Searle proposed five categories of illocutionary speech acts—assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations.

It appears that self-binding may involve at least two of these illocutionary speech act tools. First, a *directive* speech act is when a speaker is trying to get his hearers to do something. Ulysses *ordering* his men to bind him to the ship’s mast is a good example of a directive speech act related to self-binding though the intention of the speech act has an obviously self-referencing quality. The order is as much to himself as to his own men, who merely serve as accomplices in a composite of acts to accommodate Ulysses’ self-binding directive—first, to bind Ulysses to their ship’s mast, fill their ears with wax, follow their commander’s original instruction to row near enough to the islands of Sirenum Scopuli for Ulysses to hear the sirens dangerously irresistible singing, ignore their commander’s screams and desperate attempts to free himself, finally to continue to row the ship out of harm’s way. Even if Ulysses’ directive to his men is disobeyed, there is clearly the intent to self-bind in the directive speech act itself.

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<sup>338</sup>I am not intending to make any innovative claims about speech act theory with this analysis. The standard beginning references are John L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words: The William James Lectures, Harvard University 1955* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1962) and John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1969).

Another speech act labeled *commissive*, commits the speaker to some future action. So, Ulysses commits to be bound to the ship's mast which is only instrumental to another future intention--hearing the sirens' song without his men rowing their ship on to the treacherous rocks. Medical ethics, for example, may examine how to decide which 'commissive speech acts' made by a patient ought be considered binding.<sup>339</sup> Or take the addict who publically commits or *promises* fellow addicts in a recovery group to allow them to hold him accountable for attending meetings, this is known as a commissive speech act. Anscombe's "direction of fit" distinction could be helpful here.<sup>340</sup> Based on her famous example of the husband with the grocery list trailed by a detective tracking his every move, both men may end up with identical lists but the direction of fit is different in each case. Likewise, directive speech acts (commands or orders, for example) have a *world-to-word direction of fit*, while commissive speech acts (commitments) have *word-to-world direction of fit*.

Again, it appears that a speech act, while helpful for differentiating self-binding actions, is neither necessary nor sufficient for a person to engage in self-binding. Nonetheless, a speech act carries its own "illocutionary force"<sup>341</sup> which can be invaluable for overcoming an internal conflict depending on what one is actually doing when she self-binds. These speech act ideas also highlight certain sociological aspects of self-binding and "discursive commitment" or what Brandom and Stalnaker have called, "intentional states and linguistic practice" or the "linguistic

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<sup>339</sup> Cf. Joanne Gordon, "Significance of Past Statements: Speech Act Theory," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 39, no. 9 (September 2013): 570–572.

<sup>340</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1957).

<sup>341</sup> Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, p. 100.

picture of intentionality.”<sup>342</sup> I take this to mean (at least in part) that in an act of self-binding in which, let’s say, I post my intention on some social media website, I thereby infuse an added incentive into my motivational state. Having made public my self-binding intention, I open myself to the possibility that I will be embarrassed or even shamed and lose a measure of credibility within that forum and sphere of influence. In background Brandom goes further in describing the notion of personal autonomy itself as constituting a kind of self-binding which effectively turns on its head the entire picture of self-binding as a possible threat to autonomy. In other words, it is impossible to engage in a self-binding act without an autonomous self!

The only genuinely normative binding is self-binding. One is responsible (normative status) only for that for which one takes responsibility (normative attitude), whether explicitly or implicitly. Only the subject-agent has the authority to make herself responsible. But it is an attitude that institutes the status. It is just that the subject of the attitude and the subject of the status must be identical.<sup>343</sup>

This is an intriguing claim. Whether it is a satisfying bypass or outright dismissal of the issue of intentional choice-limiting as a threat to personal autonomy, speaks directly to the question of authority in self-binding which I will examine in chapter five. Nonetheless, I think Brandom would agree that whatever discursive commitment might be implicit in self-binding can be helpfully analyzed in terms of illocutionary speech acts.

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<sup>342</sup> Robert B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1994); Robert Stalnaker, *Inquiry* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1984).

<sup>343</sup> Robert Brandom, the course, “A Spirit of Trust: A Semantic Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology,” published course lecture notes, University of Pittsburgh, Fall 2013. URL= [http://www.pitt.edu/~brandom/hegel\\_2013/index.html](http://www.pitt.edu/~brandom/hegel_2013/index.html)



### 3.5 ARE ALL SELF-BINDING COMMITMENT DEVICES CREATED EQUAL?

3.5.1 Distinguishing proximal and distal intention. The issue of specific kinds of commitment devices comes up in the context of a prior question. Should we concentrate on a *present* act of self-binding or with the *prior* will to self-bind? How might these be interrelated? Alfred Mele's ideas on motivational strength are helpful here.<sup>344</sup> He has challenged an idea from Donald Davidson and others that when people act intentionally, their action reflects the level of motivational strength they have at that moment in time. "They are at the mercy of whatever desire happens to be strongest at the time. I have argued elsewhere that this is false (Mele 1987, ch. 5; 1992, ch. 4; 1995, ch. 3; 1996)."<sup>345</sup> Mele calls attention to some empirical research offered by physiologist Benjamin Libet to show a lag time between what Libet calls a "proximal desire" and the emergence of a "proximal intention." Read proximal as 'in close proximity in time', immediate, straightaway or at the present moment. These desires and intentions are to be contrasted with the "distal" or those that designate a time in the future, situated at a distance from the origin. These borrowed anatomy terms, proximal and distal, seem to capture a key issue in our self-binding motif. We might say that a proximal desire can be "vetoed" as Libet describes, before it becomes an intention due to the motivational strength of an opposing distal desire and the use of a vetoing or committing device. A self-binding act can then be described as efficacious whenever a proximal desire and subsequent intention is vetoed in favor of a distal desire that

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<sup>344</sup> Mele has been interested in the topic for many years. His 1979 doctoral dissertation was "Aristotle's Theory of Human Motivation." Cf. Interview: Cliff Sosis, "What Is It Like to Be a Philosopher?" URL = <http://www.whatisitliketobeaphilosopher.com/#/al-mele/>

<sup>345</sup> Alfred Mele, "Strength of Motivation and Being in Control," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (July 1997): 319; see also "Self-control, motivational strength and exposure therapy," *Philosophical Studies* 170, no. 2 (September 2014): 359-375; "Motivation: Essentially Motivation-Constitution Attitudes," *The Philosophical Review* 104, no. 3 (July 1995): 387-423.

turns into a distal intention demonstrated in the binding action and culminating in a different outcome from the one anticipated by the proximal desire.

3.5.2 Objections to the use of commitment devices. Daniel Goldstein sees two “nagging concerns” with self-binding devices to the point that in his TED Talk he says that he’s “been working for about a decade now on finding other ways to change people’s relationship to the future self *without using* commitment devices.” The first problem is that a commitment device is just a reminder that you are telling yourself that you have no self-control. He simply disagrees with the premise that taking power away from yourself or intentionally limiting your options can ever be ultimately a good thing since, in his view, it ends up weakening one’s self-discipline. Goldstein sees self-discipline like a muscle that grows stronger with use, while self-binding, to his mind, is more of a crutch which, if used constantly, can effectively weaken self-discipline. A second problem Goldstein sees for the self-binding device is that “you can always weasel your way out of them.” That is to say, there is the human nature tendency to bargain with yourself after you have made your precommitment. This problem, of course, presumes that no device can ever be fail-proof.<sup>346</sup>

There are three problems with Goldstein’s work. 1. He ignores the behavioral motivations that lead some to make good use of these devices while others cannot bring themselves to self-bind in the first place. “I don’t like the way that they [commitment devices] take the power away

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<sup>346</sup> Daniel Goldstein, “The Battle Between Your Present and Future Self”, *TED Talk*, filmed in New York: TEDSalon, November 2011. Goldstein is an American cognitive psychologist (PhD, University of Chicago) who specializes in behavioral economics, testing certain problem-solving techniques and models of bounded rationality in the field of judgment and decision making. Hal Hershfield and Goldstein ran virtual reality experiments where people saw renderings of themselves as senior citizens and increased their intentions to save for retirement, as discussed in Goldstein’s TED talk.  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/daniel\\_goldstein\\_the\\_battle\\_between\\_your\\_present\\_and\\_future\\_self](https://www.ted.com/talks/daniel_goldstein_the_battle_between_your_present_and_future_self)

from you. I think self-discipline is something, it's like a muscle. The more you exercise it, the stronger it gets.”<sup>347</sup> To use a commitment device is not a necessary condition for weakening “will power muscles” if in fact it takes a certain muscular will power to consciously decide to and to actually follow through in using a commitment device. The will to self-bind is, of itself, a type of will power exercise. The key difference is that you are exercising that will during a moment of strength, much like exercise enthusiasts know that there are peak hours of energy and body strength in a given day.

2. He is additionally unclear in his definition of a self-binding device as a crutch. His “commitment device” is only a crutch to the extent that the user’s *intent* is for it to be a crutch. It may well be that the device is a brilliant strategy as in the case of Ulysses. The premise of the mythical story is that there was no human will on earth that could resist the sound of the Sirens’ song, no matter how much Ulysses might have practiced his unbound will power to build up his mental muscles to resist and not use the “crutch” of being bound to the mast. Goldstein’s subtle yet hubristic assumption is that there are no irresistible temptations for anyone at any time. That is, no temptation exists that cannot be resisted merely by training in self-discipline. This leads us back to standard philosophy of action issues concerning intention and desire and self-deception.

3. Goldstein’s other concern is what he calls the ‘weaseling problem’. Since a person can most often weasel out of any commitment device, this presents a deal-breaker or defeater problem for all commitment devices. Here Goldstein conflates the issue of akrasia and the attempt to counteract it. His weaseling problem is actually *the* problem of weak will itself and is not a direct result of engaging in self-binding or the use of a commitment device. Weaseling

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<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

tendencies apply across the board to all manner of self-control challenges and are not restricted to various commitment devices. As it turns out, Goldstein's "other ways" that might be more preferable amount to various forms of psychological self-manipulation which also offer lots of weasel room.

The prior question that Goldstein does not address has to do with whether it is more helpful to simply focus on the nature of an immediately useful commitment device—a temporally-circumscribed act of self-binding or the motivational factors that are in play when a person chooses to use a commitment device. It could be that we find ourselves on the edge of a regress problem where the prior will to self-bind must be taken up as the real issue. An act of self-binding contains these two interrelated issues: necessary conditions for motivational strength to self-bind and the correlate function of self-binding, with function being dependent on the meaning of intention.

Again, to be clear, the act of self-binding is considered successful when the ultimate aim or desired end is achieved. Ulysses, as the *locus classicus* example, hears the Sirens and lives to tell about it. His intention or desired end is achieved explicitly by means of self-binding. Whether the self-binding is a 'one-off' act or a matter of repetitive practice of habit; whether the underlying issue is severe *akrasia* or just the natural and healthy fear that a moment of weakness might occur, the self-binder may take preventative action in advance (self-bind) in order to head-off the undesired consequence. Goldstein's objections mistakenly attack a proven strategy as though the strategy itself is the problem. In every imaginable case of self-binding, what must to be considered is whether the desired end is achieved *because of the self-binding act itself* or because of the antecedent, determined will of the person who chooses self-binding as a strategy. Whether or not someone viewed the act as a crutch and whether or not I could have weaseled out

of it, 1. does not weaken the use of a commitment device as an effective strategy and 2. does not address the antecedent willful intent to choose the strategy in the first place. It is not all clear from these objections that self-binding is somehow culpable in actually weakening one's self-control 'muscles'. Self-binding could turn out to actually serve to strengthen the so-called will-power muscles. I will myself to self-bind which forces the restraint upon me. The result would seem to be the same, as with Hamlet: "Refrain tonight; /And that shall lend a kind of easiness/ To the next abstinence, the next more easy; For use almost can change the stamp of nature,/ And either master the devil or throw him out / With wondrous potency."<sup>348</sup> The antecedent nature of the will to self-bind must be the real consideration, which in turn determines how ultimately effective the self-binding act itself turns out to be. I can build a weak fence which does not achieve its intended purpose, but the culpability for the weakness is not the fence itself or the act of building it but simply fence-builder, so too the self-binder.

If Ulysses is able to easily break free of the ropes; if I can quickly locate the supposedly hidden cake in my house which I had originally desired not to eat; if, as an alcoholic, I can readily find the key to the liquor cabinet; if I can easily discover the password that opens the addictive game then, in all these cases, something has gone wrong with the intent of my self-binding. My original will to self-bind comes into question. If Ulysses' original self-binding will is strong enough then he may not make as much of an effort to break free of the ropes. If my own self-binding will is strong enough, then I do not even search for or only search halfheartedly for the hidden cake, the key or the password.

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<sup>348</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Think for a moment about how the self is engaged in self-binding. It may be that we need no assistance in our self-binding. I burn my own ship without help from anyone else. On the other hand, like Ulysses we may require the assistance of others. His intrepid crew must bind him fast to the mast, fill their ears with wax and then ignore his shouted demands that they untie him. There is a less-heroic, more hilarious example of self-binding gone terribly wrong, though the act is ostensibly well-intentioned but played for laughs. From the Mel Brooks film comedy, “Young Frankenstein” (1974), like Ulysses, this self-binding scene has our hero, Gene Wilder as Dr. Frankenstein, ordering his assistants to lock him inside a room with “the monster” so that Frankenstein can show the world that love truly does conquer all. As an objection to commitment devices I suppose this one could just be a caveat: always have a Plan B or escape clause.

Dr. Frederick Frankenstein: Love is the only thing that can save this poor creature, and I am going to convince him that he is loved even at the cost of my own life. No matter what you hear in there, no matter how cruelly I beg you, no matter how terribly I may scream, do not open this door or you will undo everything I have worked for. Do you understand? Do not open this door.

Inga: Yes, Doctor.

Igor: Nice working with ya.

[Dr. Frankenstein goes into the room with The Monster. The Monster wakes up.]

Dr. Frankenstein: Let me out! Let me out of here! Get me the hell out of here! What's the matter with you people? I was joking! Don't you know a joke when you hear one? HA-HA-HA-HA. Jesus Christ, get me out of here! Open this goddamn door or I'll kick your rotten heads in! Mommy!<sup>349</sup>

3.5.3. Differences in how commitment devices function. There seem to be three differences in how self-binding actions function that might be seen as on a continuum from stronger to weaker. There are bindings that *forbid* the action outright—Ulysses bound to the mast, Cortes’s ships burned, or just the sugary treats dumped into the electric garbage disposal. These are unqualified *prohibitions*. Second, there are bindings that *forfeit* some other desired

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<sup>349</sup> Cf. “Young Frankenstein quotes,” *Internet Movie Data Base*  
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0072431/quotes>

good. These take the form of *penalties* such as forfeiting money or property or even gainful employment should the person give in to the temptation. Or an effective penalty can be public embarrassment, the loss of reputation and dignity all the way to the extreme physical penalties such as the case of the self-severed hands of the Muslim thief in Egypt. A loud alarm, out of reach may forfeit sleep. A letter confessing to addictive drug use which is automatically sent to an employer forfeits employment. Or that same letter published widely so that the person is publicly shamed forfeits dignity and reputation. Third, there are bindings that *forestall*. These kinds are only meant to *put off* and hopefully slow down the hot passion of an impulse by delaying its opportunity for fulfillment. These are common in the financial world where savings may be intentionally set up to be harder to access, forestalling a moment of car fever or yacht fever perhaps. Or there are password-protected, electronic restrictions to internet pornography that may be put in place which require a set period of postponement before the images are accessible.

Another helpful distinction involves what we might designate as *unaided* (1<sup>st</sup> person only) and *aided* (2<sup>nd</sup> person supported) self-binding. Sometimes we need no assistance with our commitment devices. I set my own alarm, I throw the diet-buster pie in the trash all by myself. Other times we may include helpers, often to insure the follow through. The 12-step addiction recovery groups are adamant about communal values of mutual accountability which are implicit in the ‘we’ of the first three recovery steps. In such recovery groups, self-binders get together and aid each other in their mutual self-binding. Creative use of the research tools of social and

communal psychology have advanced clearer conceptions of this complex addiction recovery process.<sup>350</sup>

Admittedly, these distinctions might be overlapping in some instances and might not be that useful except as a starting point toward differentiating types of self-binding actions. Though it seems that we humans keep coming up with new ways to bind ourselves in order to achieve some worthy goal, suffice it to say that not all self-binding actions are created equal.

### 3.6 CORRELATING *PRESENT* ACT WITH *PRIOR* WILL

Should our analysis be strictly focused on the *present* act of self-binding or should we also be looking at the *prior* will to self-bind? Actions like self-binding seem to be full of intention. Whatever the operative mechanism turns out to be—the *prior* will to self-bind or the *mere* will to self-bind—there seems to be the intent by the agent to make self-binding a kind of just-in-case, lock-box species of self-control.<sup>351</sup> Perhaps a case of ‘consent self-binding’ could be seen as preparative for the stronger ‘command self-binding.’

The more intriguing, and possibly more promising, area of scientific inquiry has to do with the actual neural mechanisms and a kind of hierarchical linkage within the human brain itself. The neurological research of Molly Crockett and her colleagues at Oxford and Yale universities is worth revisiting. The possibilities for even more revealing studies seems wide open. Here is a fuller description of their findings:

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<sup>350</sup> Joseph R. Ferrari, Edward B. Stevens and Leonard A. Jason, “The Role of Self-Regulation in Abstinence Maintenance: Effects of Communal Living on Self-Regulation,” in Leonard A. Jason and Joseph R. Ferrari *Recovery from Addiction in Communal Living Settings: The Oxford House Model* 30-39 (New York: Routledge 2011).

<sup>351</sup> ‘Lock-box’ in this context is an allusion to presidential candidate Al Gore’s proposal to supposedly prevent the U.S. Congress absolutely from ever raiding federal Medicare and Social Security funding.



Humans can resist temptations by exerting willpower, the effortful inhibition of impulses. *But willpower can be disrupted by emotions and depleted over time.* Luckily, humans can deploy alternative self-control strategies like precommitment, the voluntary restriction of access to temptations. [We examine] the neural mechanisms of willpower and precommitment using fMRI. *Behaviorally, precommitment facilitated choices for large delayed rewards, relative to willpower, especially in more impulsive individuals.* While willpower was associated with activation in dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC), posterior parietal cortex (PPC), and inferior frontal gyrus, precommitment engaged lateral frontopolar cortex (LFPC). During precommitment, LFPC showed increased functional connectivity with DLPFC and PPC, especially in more impulsive individuals. Relationship between impulsivity and LFPC connectivity was mediated by value-related activation in ventromedial PFC. Our findings support a *hierarchical model of self-control* in which *LFPC orchestrates precommitment by controlling action plans* in more caudal prefrontal regions as a function of expected value.<sup>352</sup> [Italics mine]

These discoveries may turn out to support the thesis that self-binding is less a species of paradox as a special “Frankfurt case” of higher order volitions that come into play in decision-making. Decision Theory itself has been widely viewed as simply a kind of instrumental rationality, as discussed earlier. Or that is, self-binding can be analyzed as one particular means “to achieve certain ends (the satisfaction of preferences, or the realization of valuable states of affairs) given credences, or beliefs, or information, about the probabilities that various means will achieve those ends.”<sup>353</sup> In Decision Theory, or that is, the consideration of the reasoning which

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<sup>352</sup> Molly J. Crockett; Barbara R. Braams; Luke Clark; Philippe N. Tobler; Trevor W. Robbins, and Tobias Kalenscher, “Restricting Temptations: Neural Mechanisms of Precommitment,” *Neuron* 79, no. 2 (July 2013): 391–401. URL= [http://www.cell.com/neuron/pdf/S0896-6273\(13\)00448-0.pdf](http://www.cell.com/neuron/pdf/S0896-6273(13)00448-0.pdf)

<sup>353</sup> Niko Kolodny and John Brunero, “Instrumental Rationality”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed. (Winter 2016). URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/rationality-instrumental/>

underlies an agent's choices, we are simply looking at the "criteria that an agent's preference attitudes should satisfy in any generic circumstances."<sup>354</sup>

In the case of self-binding as it relates to Decision Theory, the process of the binding of the self is seen as a "sequential decision problem" since the action involves multiple steps. A static decision is the easier, cleaner model while self-binding seems to require "continuous rationality over the extended time period" of a self-binding activity. In fact, Steele and Stefánsson, in the essay just referenced, take up the self-binding question in a section entitled, "Was Ulysses rational?" This problematic issue involves the temporal series or sequence of choices that Ulysses has to make in order for his self-binding intention to be effective. They propose a "sequential decision tree" model involving a visualized series of choices in sequence.<sup>355</sup> But in the *locus classicus* reading from Homer, the self-binding Ulysses is rational by *static decision standards*, but he turns out to be irrational by *sequential decision standards*. This problem has in turn, led to three approaches to try and resolve this oddity in Decision Theory—the naïve or myopic approach, the sophisticated approach and the resolute approach. I am not interested here in analyzing the case in this way, since the fact is that very sophisticated, rational decision-makers effectively engage in this activity of self-binding without any regard as to whether their rationality is instrumental or their decisions are continuously rational. What interests me in this writing is less concerned with the theoretical underpinnings of an unusual decision-making process as with the practical execution of this self-binding process. How does it work and why does it not always work?

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<sup>354</sup> Kati Steele, Katie and Orri H. Stefánsson, "Decision Theory", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed. (Winter 2016). URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/decision-theory/>

<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

#### Chapter 4: How Self-Binding Works: Functional Analogues of Self-Binding.

I have proposed some preliminary, hierarchical issues involving one's prior 'will to self-bind' before any specific action is ever taken up. However, the more fascinating issue for me is what we actually do when we self-bind. The above analysis can serve as an apropos segue into the question of how self-binding actually works in the mind—something like a fence. If the fence-building analogue (along with other analogies I will offer) turns out to be a coherent and pertinent claim, it may be because it mirrors the functionality of the actual neurons in the brain. Humans do not build fences like beavers build dams. We look at the priorities and purposes for such a building project. We calculate and plan and then we act. As the action unfolds, so too the intended binding function. Think of this created enclosure as a kind of internal, theoretical space inside our own heads. Next, we declare this enclosed space a good thing or a helpful thing accomplishing intentions, declared or undeclared. We perceive all this, not only *despite* the limiting effect it has upon our future choices but *because of* this very same limiting effect which creates the abstract enclosure that we wanted and envisioned. I do not see these analogues for self-binding as something new or terribly enlightening. The concept behind the act is quite old and deeply familiar in the history of Judaism, for example. Self-binding is linked with the *heshbon* (in Hebrew, something like intelligent life consciousness) of both love and justice as the Jews are urged by their great rabbis to “build a fence around the Torah” in order to uphold and hallow its precepts.<sup>356</sup> Possibly these fence-making thoughts will help in the business of clarifying, and so I introduce them to you in the same spirit as Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto offered in the preface of his *Mesillat Yesharim: The Path of the Upright*. “I have not written this

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<sup>356</sup> Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Mesillat Yesharim*, original publication date 1738 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society 2010), 119.

book to teach the reader anything new. Rather is it my aim to direct his attention to certain well-known and generally accepted truths, for the very fact that they are well known and generally accepted is the cause of their being overlooked.”.<sup>357</sup>

While long a *primary* strategy, highly developed and deliberately practiced across many cultures and epochs of time, self-binding has been rather short on philosophical articulation. That is, from a philosophical perspective, how self-binding works and why it works has not been extensively examined. Having allowed the topic to unfold thus far, I can see a conceptual juncture where the path is not quite as trituated as it needs to be by philosophical standards. While we may have noted any number of scholarly intellectual concerns involved, I have not seen an adequate praxis theory explaining how and why an act of self-binding works. What follows are my own proposed analogous correlations that could prove helpful. I do not claim this analogue (and the other, more tentative ones that follow it) to be perfectly precise or isomorphic in some mathematical sense. Nonetheless, I believe that this particular approach offers some useful compare-and-contrast insights into this somewhat mysterious realm in the philosophy of action. What is this contrapuntal action that we take which seems to be triggered by a troublesome simultaneity of a desire for and an aversion from the same thing? In music, the contrapuntal note is introduced to provide a richer polyphony of tone in a piece of music. Imagine the construction of a fence as this option-limiting act, adding to rather than subtracting from our “well-tempered existence”.<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> Ibid, p. 1.

<sup>358</sup> Keeping with the contrapuntal music reference, I allude of course, to Johann Sebastian Bach’s classic, “The Well-Tempered Clavier” and Robert Schuman’s maxim: “Make ‘The Well-Tempered Clavier’ your daily bread. Then, you will most certainly become a solid musician.” Cf. Robert Schumann, *Advice to Young Musicians: On the Mastery of Music and Living*, trans. Henry H. Pierson (Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Publishing 2012), 7.

#### 4.1 THE FENCE ANALOGUE: SELF-BINDING AS SELF-FENCING

Let's begin this section with a couple of logic-based abductive claims. First, there needs to be a claim concerning the assumed and intriguing link between self-binding and personal autonomy. If, in the domain of human action, humans intentionally employ many widely-observed, self-binding or option-limiting strategies as the means to achieve certain autonomous ends, then the explanation(s) for how these ends are achieved can be linked directly to the means employed. By "autonomous ends" we mean simply those ends which are autonomously chosen by the agent employing the self-binding activity. It is taken as self-evident that option-limiting or self-binding strategies regularly achieve the autonomous ends for which they are employed. The conclusion is that self-binding achieves autonomous ends.

My related claim narrows the focus to that of a specific set of analogical depictions. Since there is within the specific set of observations offered to explain how self-binding might work, a set that involves analogical depictions, therefore the notion of a fence is a salient referent among that set of analogical depictions. The relevant functions of self-binding can be cogently compared by analogical depiction to the functions of a fence. Analysis of the functions of a fence in an analogical depiction will be consistent with and offer some explanatory power for understanding how the activity of self-binding functions. What follows is an elucidation of the features of this explanatory power of the fence analogue.

Turning to the self-fencing correlation itself, self-binding can be viewed as a kind of protection, but in what ways? A fence is an effective image to portray how self-binding works. All these fence-like functions below represent a kind of protective designation of some kind. There is ample precedent to conceptualize self-binding in this way. Beyond the self-evident fact that self-binding is useful for achieving desired ends, the apt philosophical move is to probe the

question of *how* self-binding actually works. So, when the self at T1, binds the self, then the problem of weak will [*akrasia*] is mitigated in that case. Why and how this consequence occurs is the philosophical concern especially as one's conclusions here relate directly to one's assumptions about personal autonomy. If my personal autonomy is to be taken as a kind of "inner citadel" as it has been called by the great Stoic philosopher-emperor, Marcus Aurelius, right up to contemporaries like Pierre Hadot, John Christman and others,<sup>359</sup> then it is important to explore the nature of that protective barrier around the self. I propose to view the role of self-binding in the same way that we routinely consider the common functions of a fence. This move is not new and represents a longstanding religious precedent in Judaism as previously mentioned. From *Mishnah Tractate Avot*, (most widely-known of the 63 tractates of the Mishnah) Chapter 1:1, 17, here is the proper attitude toward keeping the great, revered Torah of the Jewish faith:

Avot 1:1— Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Yehoshua, and Yehoshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples and *make a fence for the Torah*....Avot 3:17. Rabbi Akiba. said ... Tradition is a *fence* for Torah. Tithes are a *fence* for riches. Vows are a *fence* for saintliness. A *fence* for wisdom is silence.<sup>360</sup> [italics mine]

Examples of the above are the self-binding "fences" erected around the keeping of Shabbat in Jewish tradition. One instance would be the question of riding a bicycle on Shabbat. According

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<sup>359</sup> Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1998); John Christman, ed., *The Inner Citadel: Essays on Individual Autonomy* (New York: Oxford University Press 1989); Henry Hardy, "Isaiah Berlin's Inner Citadel," inaugural address of Madrid conference, *Isaiah Berlin: A Liberal in Perspective*, marking the 10th anniversary of Berlin's death, January 28, 2008. Available online: [http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/writings\\_on\\_ib/hhonib/madridpdf.pdf](http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/writings_on_ib/hhonib/madridpdf.pdf)

<sup>360</sup> Attributed to Rabbi Akiva ben Yosef (1<sup>st</sup> cent. C.E.), a leading contributor to the Mishnah and to Midrash halakha. He is referred to in the *Talmud* as Rosh la-Hakhamim "Chief of the Sages". Cf. Robert Travers Herford, trans. and ed., *The Ethics of the Talmud: Sayings of the Fathers* (New York: Schocken Books, 1962), 85.

to a rabbi of the Chabad-Lubavitch tradition, bicycle-riding is forbidden for at least three reasons. The Torah prohibits work-related actions such as carrying objects in public, outside the home. Riding a bicycle might be seen as carrying an object—one's bike. Then, there is also the possibility that the bike could break down (a broken chain or a flat tire) which would require work to repair. Such work would be forbidden on the Sabbath. Riding a bike might also be considered a workaday activity more typically done on the other six days of the week. To keep the Sabbath holy, one is to refrain from one's regular weekday activities.<sup>361</sup> The point to be taken from this example is that the activity that you intentionally prohibit yourself from in self-binding, may not be of itself a bad thing. As a diabetic, I may intentionally avoid walking down a street past a bakery full of sweet-smelling, savory pastries in the window in order to avoid the temptation to go in the shop and buy and devour those mouth-watering morsels. I forbid myself from an otherwise harmless activity of walking down a street as an instrumental means of fencing myself from the forbidden activity of eating a pastry which will be harmful to my health. Let us contemplate by analogy the many ways we employ such fences in our lives.

4.1.1 Designation. A fence serves to designate separation representing property ownership, agreed upon divisions for protection, incarceration, custody, gaming and so on. a) Rather than mere analogy, it appears to me that this designating function of a fence actually serves to define self-binding itself. Self-binding is designating a boundary or at least setting boundary conditions. Obviously, fences serve this function, to designate or delineate important boundaries. b) Fences amount to something like containers. So too are self-binding acts, in that

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<sup>361</sup> Rabbi Dovid Zaklikowski, "Can I ride a bicycle to synagogue on Shabbat?" *Chabad.org Magazine* online, August 2007. URL: [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/547184/jewish/Can-I-ride-a-bicycle-to-synagogue-on-Shabbat.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/547184/jewish/Can-I-ride-a-bicycle-to-synagogue-on-Shabbat.htm)

they serve to contain the self in a certain way and thereby differentiate one self from another self.

c) This raises the question of a non-unified agency—the self in one part functions in a binding role over another part of the self. I address this reductive account later on. In self-binding then, I effectively fence off or differentiate or designate the self that I really want to be and the self that I do not want to be. That is, I may use a self-binding act to “rope off” those attitudes and behaviors that I desire from those that I do not desire.

Recall the above-mentioned medical study of Ulysses contracts or advanced directives concerning health care. “Pre-commitment directives do not function to protect autonomous self-control. They serve in upholding the guidance that is provided by one’s deepest identity conferring concerns.”<sup>362</sup> While I will not try to construe that a self-binding act necessarily has deep identity-conferring properties, it is apparent that there can be a designating aspect to such actions that have the effect of reinforcing and preserving one’s self-identity. “This is who I am, these are the observable properties that belong to me, to my identity as a person distinct from you as a person,” one might say. One way the person accomplishes this sense of a separate, single identity is by voluntarily and intentionally restricting my possible option-set in this way or that. One example is the person who undertakes some large, arduous task that necessarily involves the surrendering of considerable amounts of time each day.

Take the example of a student who aspires to become a competitive swimmer in high school or college. Competitive swimming requires an extraordinary number of layered precommitments beginning with a daily training schedule, a season of prearranged competitions

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<sup>362</sup> Willigenburg et al, “Authenticity Using Ulysses Contracts,” *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, p. 395.



that often involve qualifying events, not to mention the grueling toll that athletic training forces the body to endure. The training schedule, the competition schedule and the actual training regimen all involve certain trade-offs of time preferences and pain-avoidance preferences.

Any parent who has supported a child through such self-binding activities can tell you that these actions which represent a concentrated dedication, end up becoming a part of the self-described identity of the child. When asked about themselves these young people may give their age, their school grade and educational interests, but there will typically be that designation of themselves by their chosen set of self-binding activities. “I am a swimmer,” they will say. “I am a gymnast.” And such identification is inextricably linked to a fenced designation of themselves in a certain way.

Self-binding can be used to set or designate boundaries which can, in turn, be useful for a number of reasons—codependency scenarios; conflict resolution reinforcement; game-playing rules and procedures. All games have rules that include boundaries which require players to ‘self-bind’ in order to participate. American football and international soccer have very different boundary rules applying to an offside or an out-of-bounds call. Players bind themselves or allow themselves to be fenced by these designations.

I think the Stoic notion of the “inner citadel” particularly fits here. Autonomy is a kind of personal designation whereby self-binding is its most exemplary exercise. The claim is that all autonomous persons have the power or capacity to erect or designate a container, a mental boundary, an inner citadel, beyond which no one can pass without her consent. When such internal designations are reinforced by external bindings of the self, you have a paradigm of autonomy in action. Perhaps these next three functions could fall under this depiction of self-binding as a fence-like designation of a certain type.

4.1.2. Preservation. Fences serve to preserve. Growing up on a farm, my mother would require that we fence off certain ornamental bushes, which she wanted to preserve from being eaten by the livestock. In turn, in order to preserve our livestock, we might fence off a section of land, which had the propensity to produce poisonous vegetation. I believe this idea might be the primary motivation for self-binding—to preserve those higher order desires of the self and insure their fulfillment. Self-binding can both prevent harmful or undesired events from occurring and protect or insure that certain desired events actually take place. An alcoholic may desire to preserve sobriety or prevent intoxication. An athlete may desire to preserve strength and prevent weakness. Self-binding as a self-preserving fence can lead to great human accomplishment or avoid great human calamity.

The notion of autonomous ownership comes up under this heading as well. In this inverted act of self-fencing I am declaring who (or whose) I am and who I am not. If my personal autonomy is the leading concern, therefore in an act of self-binding I declare that I belong to myself in this rather enigmatic action. That is to say, whenever I self-bind I demonstrate and validate ownership of my own identity as a person with the capacity to limit myself for my own well-being. I preserve my identity as it were, and in one sense declare a more mature understanding of my own personhood by “abandoning the dream of my omnipotence” by recognizing that my life will go better when I fence myself away from certain otherwise viable options. I preserve a core aspect of who I am, a person with set goals and projects and a measure of drive to achieve these plans by means of self-binding actions where I seem to be required. Fences serve to preserve the things that are enclosed inside them. While no fence (no self-binding action) is unconditionally guaranteed against all intrusion, it can still work wonderfully at times to strengthen that inner sanctuary of individuality that differentiates who we are.

The most useful illustration is again the ‘fence around the Torah’ tradition in Judaism.

There is great meaning in the Rabbinic metaphor of a ‘fence’ that teaches mankind what needs to be safeguarded—what is truly important in life. A fence in Jewish law actually indicates ownership. The Gemara in Bava Batra (42a) describes that regarding an inheritance or other transferring of property, that erecting a fence around the property can claim ownership. In addition, the Gemara in Bava Batra continues (52b) that *“If a man does anything at all in the way of...making a fence...this constitutes s title of ownership.”* By creating fences, the Rabbis are not trying to limit or restrict Judaism with additional stringencies. Instead, the Rabbis are *giving the Jewish people the opportunity to ‘own’* and to ‘acquire’ these Mitzvot. Making Judaism your own, connecting with it deeply and spiritually, is the best way to live a meaningful Jewish life.<sup>363</sup> [Italics mine]

The Stoicism of Seneca also emphasizes this point. That is, in self-mastery we bind ourselves in such a way so that in the act itself we have laid claim to ourselves and thereby freed ourselves.

Almost the very first words of Seneca’s first letter to Lucilius are an exhortation: *vindica te tibi!* “Lay claim to yourself for yourself.” The letters begin with the issue of self-possession, self-mastery. This is a preoccupation to which Seneca returns again and again. The term *vindicare* is one with particular resonance in the context of Roman law, where it is used to mean the assertion of one’s claim to something which is one’s own property.... Seneca regularly highlights the possibility that a slave (or freedman) may be morally superior to his master—more truly “free”.<sup>364</sup>

4.1.3. Privatization. Fences serve to provide privacy behind which I am able to experience a kind of freedom of self-reliant individuation or just a valued sense of quietude. A self-binding person may provide herself with opportunities to fulfill a desire for privacy from prying, paternalistic eyes or the time-consuming duties of attending to social interaction. The fencing role of privatization can encourage healthy self-reliance and self-reflection. I will myself to erect a fence that prevents me from depending on others and forces me to rely on myself alone. And in this private enclosure I may find greater opportunity for feeding the soul through

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<sup>363</sup> Rabbi Roy Feldman, “Build Your Fence,” *Congregation Beth Abraham-Jacob* blog, January 23, 2016. URL= <https://www.cbaj.org/build-your-fence/>

<sup>364</sup> Catharine Edwards, “Free Yourself! Slavery, freedom and the self in Seneca’s ‘Letters’” 139 in Shadi Bartsch and David Wray, eds., *Seneca and the Self* (Cambridge 2009).

quiet reflection. The desire simply to be left alone when I want to be alone can be achieved with a self-binding fence. This is said to be part of the motivation for the ancient monastic impulse—privacy to be with one’s god alone.<sup>365</sup> Or, in a moment of weakened will, a person may be prone to embarrassing exhibitionism when her earlier desire is for privacy in order to avoid some embarrassing and even costly exhibition. Ask any experienced doorman at a five-star hotel about the “minders” who accompany the young adult children from extremely wealthy families or the young, newly-rich celebrities coming through their doors. Chaperones are hired expressly to reinforce the privacy fences of their mega-wealthy employers.

There is something to be said for this self-fencing privacy function as a straightforward way to value solitude. The meaning of the word itself implies a self-enforced quality. Solitude requires a ‘from’ whether there are physically many other human beings in ready proximity or not. The deep solitude of the inner citadel is the way of Stoicism and carries its own mentally self-binding discipline. In my enforced solitude, in my mind, I separate the ‘I’ from the will of other persons so that I experience a profound sense of freedom—an autonomy of the individuated self. But I am thinking more of geographical solitude from the “far from the madding crowd” that represents an intentional physical separating of myself from human contact and interaction. Ester Buchholz offers erudite reflection on this topic in her expansive book on solitude with such chapter titles as “Hermits, Monks and Philosophers: Self-Regulating Solitaires” and “Creativity, Curiosity and Celibacy.”<sup>366</sup> This kind of solitude requires a

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<sup>365</sup> “[In monasticism] an attempt is made to seek the divine in solitude, away from the challenges and responsibilities and pollution of the world.” Cf. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis eds. *Asceticism* (New York: Oxford University Press 1998), 21.

<sup>366</sup> Ester Schaler Buchholz, *The Call Of Solitude: Alonetime In A World Of Attachment* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1997).

searching out and a series of stages where self-binding occurs. In an elegant and wide-ranging analysis, Philip Koch has identified and enumerated these aspects of solitude as 1) physical separateness, 2) social disengagement and 3) reflectiveness.<sup>367</sup> There is so much more that could be noted under this heading. No other philosopher in the last half of the twentieth century offered more inspiration to the self-bound path of solitude than Henry Bugbee and his *Inward Morning*.<sup>368</sup>

4.1.4. Aestheticization. This is such a rich area for examination I will spend a little more time on this topic. First, there must be an admitted distinction concerning a literal fence which is built for no other reason than the fact that it can be viewed as a thing of beauty and the proposed analogue with a self-control strategy called self-binding. The avant-garde free-thinker might consider a physical fence as a beautiful thing while granting no such deference for the internal fence of a self-binding act. As the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, bohemian author, Mary MacLane famously quipped, “I do not see any beauty in self-restraint.”<sup>369</sup> By stark contrast, Greek Orthodox Christians celebrate the life of St. Theodora of Alexandria, “the desert mother”, who was so guilt-stricken over her adultery that she joined a monastery and became an ascetic, known for this prayer: “Forgive me O Lord, that I ruined the beauty of self-restraint.”<sup>370</sup> In between these two poles there is Aristotle and his notion of virtuous action marked by aesthetic balance. We learn self-control by practice, says Aristotle, and an activity of self-binding would be one of

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<sup>367</sup> Philip J. Koch, “Solitude,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, New Series 4, no. 3 (1990): 181-210.

<sup>368</sup> Henry Bugbee, *The Inward Morning: A Philosophical Exploration in Journal Form* (State College, PA: Bald Eagle Press 1958).

<sup>369</sup> Elisabeth Pruitt, ed., *Tender Darkness: A Mary MacLane Sampler* (Austin, TX: Petrarca Press 2014), 124.

<sup>370</sup> John J. Delaney, *Dictionary of Saints* (New York: Random House 2005), 590. See also, “Married Saints of the Church” at <http://www.sprint.net.au/~corners/Sep98/MarriedSaints.htm>

those practices that we learn to habitually repeat in order to really enjoy beauty for its own sake which is a noble thing. For Aristotle, beauty and nobility seem to be interchangeable concepts. What's more, the action itself might even bring us pain, but even this experience of pain can be beautiful if it is accomplishing its purpose inside of us to adorn the truly flourishing life. In fact, it is only the person who is engaging in these practices of high moral character who can see beautiful things to start with.<sup>371</sup> Sometimes we may limit our options, build our fences, just to see what beauty might come of it.

Robert D. Richardson included in the flyleaf to his “intellectual biography” of Thoreau, these words attributed to Goethe: “To live within limits, to want one thing, or a very few things, very much and to love them dearly, cling to them, survey them from every angle, become one with them—that is what makes the poet, the artist, the human being.”<sup>372</sup> Our self-binding then, may be intended as a technique which expressly limits, contains or cordons off a site in order to enhance the appeal or quality of an aesthetic experience. While the fence itself has long been used as an art object, this is not the function that I am specifying here. It is not as though Ulysses wanted his men to tie him with beautiful velvet ropes. Having been bound to the mast, Ulysses is fenced expressly in order to experience the other-worldly timbres of the Sirens—a thing of

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<sup>371</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.8. Aristotle goes on to explain in chapter 8 of Book 9 that the true lover of self always desires that which is noble or beautiful. “For those then who busy themselves in an exceptional degree with noble actions [which] all men approve and praise [and] strive toward what is noble and strain every nerve to do the noblest deeds, everything will be as it should be for the common good, ...” Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1169a 5-10. J.L. Ackrill, ed. *A New Aristotle Reader* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1987), 455.

<sup>372</sup> Robert D. Richardson, *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Los Angeles: University of California Press 1986); also philosopher-poet Troy Jollimore, who earned his 1999 PhD in Philosophy from Princeton under the direction of Harry Frankfurt and Gilbert Harman, and included this Goethe quote in the flyleaf of his 2011 book, *Love's Vision* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2011).

beauty only available for a living eyewitness to report, by means of a willingness to be bound. This aesthetic image of the irresistible beauty of the human voice serves also to introduce a corollary notion of reverential distance, which a fence can create. Let yourself come too close and you lose, not your life as with the deadly Sirens, but rather the sublimity of the beauty itself. Thus, the need is for you to happily allow yourself to be bound or fenced. The self-binding is meant to enable and enhance the aesthetic enchantment. Unlike the more typical aim of self-binding fences, there is no loathsome propensity from which to be bound in this case, only a lost perception of beauty, if you do not self-bind.

There are fences that are put in place for no other reason than aesthetic ornamentation to add to the appreciation of whatever is contained within. An artist circumscribes some or several aspects of the means, the medium or the amount of time involved, not for a pragmatic outcome. There is aesthetic intention in the option-limited features of the production. Such artistic self-limiting can end up being an action taken purely for the sake of art or some subjective conception of beauty. By extension, even the simple beauty of a composed, flourishing life self-limited in some way illustrates this aspect of self-binding by means of the fence analogy. From those who choose merely not to own a television set or pay a fee for a home internet connection to the full-blown “post-materialist” social movement of those who determine to live off-grid, self-sustaining or self-sufficient lifestyles, these would be examples of intentionality in pursuit of what they deem a beautiful life.<sup>373</sup> The so-called tiny house movement also comes to mind, where the testimonials may include those with the means to build any size or style house they

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<sup>373</sup> Helene Cherrier and Jeff Murray, “Drifting Away From Excessive Consumption: a New Social Movement Based on Identity Construction,” Susan M. Broniarczyk and Kent Nakamoto, eds, *Advances in Consumer Research* 29 (Valdosta, GA: Association for Consumer Research 2002), 245-247.

might desire yet intentionally choose to limit themselves to no more than 100 to 400 square feet for no other reason than the aesthetic experience that a tiny house might represent.<sup>374</sup>

An artist's self-imposed constraints related to: subject matter, tools, resources, or time at her disposal are quite common. This is a huge area of academic consideration in the artworld.<sup>375</sup> Technical examples include the following: a painter imposing the constraint of a smaller canvas, a poet writing under the constraints of sonnet form over free verse, a composer producing a sonata instead of a symphony and so on. Igor Stravinsky wrote these, likely hyperbolic words, in a letter to a friend: "The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit."<sup>376</sup> Another music example is composer Philip Mantione's article on self-imposed limitations. Before offering examples, he starts with this premise:

You intentionally restrict yourself to a greatly reduced field of possibilities. By doing so, you are forced to make the most of a less than optimal situation. You can no longer depend on certain techniques or methods that may have become habitual or routine. You're forced to be creative with limited resources. As a result, you learn everything there is know about this limited palette, things you would not have bothered with otherwise. The payoff is when you lift the limitations and find your vocabulary and skill set has expanded in ways you could not have predicted.<sup>377</sup>

Accomplished athletes talk about the sheer joy of the regimented, harsh bodily discipline itself as a thing of beauty. The painter and illustrator, Leanne Shapton, in her best-seller on the grueling

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<sup>374</sup> Cf. Ryan Corson, "Tiny House statistics," March 2016. URL=

<http://restoringsimple.com/tiny-house-statistics/> <http://restoringsimple.com/tiny-house-statistics/>

<sup>375</sup> Patricia D. Stokes, *Creativity from Constraints: The Psychology of Breakthrough* (New York: Springer 2005). Berys Gaut and Paisley Livingston, eds., *The Creation of Art: New Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2003). See especially Noel Carroll's essay, "Art Creativity and Tradition," p. 217 and Jerrold Levinson's, "Elster on Artistic Creativity," 235-256.

<sup>376</sup> Robert Craft, *Stravinsky: Chronicle of a Friendship, 1948-71* (London: Alfred A. Knopf 1972), 195. Also quoted in Jonathan Cross, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Stravinsky* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2003), 152.

<sup>377</sup> Philip Mantione, "The Benefits of Self-Imposed Limitations," *Pro Audio Files* blog, August 5, 2017. URL: <https://theproaudiofiles.com/benefits-self-imposed-limitations/>



athletic discipline of competitive swimming has these lines from a chapter entitled, “Practice”:  
“[T]he difficult will become easy, and the easy habitual, so that the habitual may become beautiful. ... Artistic discipline and athletic discipline are kissing cousins, they require the same thing, an unspecial practice: tedious and pitch-black invisible, private as guts, always sacred.”<sup>378</sup>

Within each of these genres there are further internal constraints possible. In a chapter entitled “Constraints and Conventions in the Arts”<sup>379</sup> Elster calls these “intrinsic” and “imposed”  
Observers stand in awe of such examples where artists intentionally limited themselves for the sake of art and then create some work of art made all the more remarkable due to self-imposed constraints.<sup>380</sup> One salient example of self-limiting for art’s sake or aesthetic circumscription are the “six-word memoirs” from an online storytelling website by Larry Smith and Tim Barko inspired by a proverbial, anecdote involving Ernest Hemingway.

Supposedly Ernest Hemingway was the story author, who bet some friends that he could write an entire story in just six words. Of course, it seems an impossible feat: how do you introduce characters, explain their relationships, and tell a tale about them in just six words? Here’s how Hemingway did it: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.” ... It certainly provides a lesson about working with constraints. With such an extreme brevity limitation, not only did Hemingway have to choose his words carefully, but he also had to craft them in a way that imbued the silence around those words with the rest of his story, since he’d run out of words to tell it.<sup>381</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> Leanne Shapton, *Swimming Studies* (New York: Blue Rider Press 2012), 225, 226.

<sup>379</sup> Elster, *Ulysses Unbound*: 191-196.

<sup>380</sup> Michael M. Biskjaer and Kim Halskov, “Self-Imposed Constraints as a Creative Resource in Art and Interaction Design,” conference paper presented at the *Second International Symposium on Culture, Creativity and Interaction Design* (Northumbria University, Newcastle UK, July 4-5, 2012). URL: <https://ccid2.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/biskjaer-halskov.pdf>

<sup>381</sup> Belle Beth Cooper, “Proof that Constraints Can Actually Make You More Creative”, *Fast Company*, March 10, 2014. URL: <http://www.fastcompany.com/3027379/work-smart/the-psychology-of-limitations-how-and-why-constraints-can-make-you-more-creative> An article originally published at Cooper’s *Buffer App* blog, “The Psychology of Limitations: How and Why Constraints Can Make You More Creative”, February 26, 2014. Also see her blog:

Smith and Barko's six-word memoirs are compelling for the same reasons that any work of art grips us with the rare ability of the artist to so severely limit some aspect of the creation of the piece and still achieve an aesthetically-pleasing result. The fact of the limitation becomes an intrinsic dimension of the art itself. Thus, the aesthetic fence is a thing of self-bound beauty.

Microscopic sculpture, sometimes labeled "nanoart", almost beyond comprehension, is done in pencil lead inside the eye of a sewing needle, or tiny ships carved inside bottles no larger than a human thumb, or tiny origami the size of a match head, or art "carving" of intricate detail in a single, dead brown leaf, or sculptures created from a single toothpick.<sup>382</sup> A very well-known example of aesthetic self-imposed constraint from another art genre would be photography. There are numberless photography contests that place numerous constraints on the contestants including subject matter, time limitations such as only within the 24-hours of a specified day, or even limited to certain times of day such as sunrise or sunset, the type of photographic equipment used, etc. All of these constraints are meant to enhance both the creative process and output. Some go so far as to claim that the self-imposed constraints actually

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<https://blog.bufferapp.com/7-examples-of-how-creative-constraints-can-lead-to-amazing-work> ; *Six Word Memoirs* has turned into something of a movement with a series of sequel books, a YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/user/SmithMag/>, and an autobiographical storytelling blog, <http://www.sixwordmemoirs.com> with a set of K-12 educational materials.

<sup>382</sup> Cf. Kristi Harrison, January 26, 2012 in *Cracked.com* online magazine. URL=[http://www.cracked.com/article\\_19681\\_8-amazing-works-art-you-need-microscope-to-appreciate.html](http://www.cracked.com/article_19681_8-amazing-works-art-you-need-microscope-to-appreciate.html)

heighten rather than hamper the creative process.<sup>383</sup> The mandala sand art unique to Tibetan Buddhism is one of the more startling examples of aesthetic self-binding. It is all the more apropos since it originated among Buddhist monks already under self-constrained living conditions practicing a harshly-persecuted religion within the exotic yet extremely constrained and politically-controlled nation of Tibet. One intriguing aspect is the claimed healing and purification powers of the mandala whether creating it or just staring at it.<sup>384</sup>

Considering all of the above, here then, is an interesting claim which is in direct disagreement with the widely-assumed notion that absolute or maximal autonomy in every aspect of life is to be the ideal position for realizing the potential of fully creative human agency. The list of examples of the fence-like functions for self-binding for aesthetic purpose could go on and on. There must also be some consideration of the resistance to opportunities to erect a self-binding fence regardless of its function.

#### 4.2 THE FENCE CONTUMACY: WHY *NOT* A FENCE? Self-binding as self-erasing

The predictable converse issue of resistance and refusal must be addressed. Why do humans resist self-binding, particularly when it might be in their best interest to employ such a proven strategy? Now we have come full circle in a return to that potentially negative and self-destructive aspect of personal autonomy. This is the assumption that any curtailing of options

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<sup>383</sup> Cf. Marie Laigneau, "Self-imposed constraints, the key to creativity", URL=<http://marielaigneau.com/blog/2014/6/24/w0c0taqrnxnvluj19r7svkvpg7hgayv> Laigneau proffers some philosophical analysis of her photographic art.

<sup>384</sup> Alison Lesley, "5 Things You Didn't Know About This Tibetan Art Form Seen In 'House Of Cards'", *World Religion News*, 26 March 2015. URL=<http://www.worldreligionnews.com/religion-news/buddhism/5-things-you-didnt-know-about-this-tibetan-art-form-seen-on-house-of-cards>

whatsoever is just bad by definition, even if ostensibly I am the one doing the curtailing. The underlying assumption seems to be that my identity is somehow inextricably connected with an absolute freedom to choose among a maximized list of options. That is, I may not actually *be* omnipotent but at least I *feel* omnipotent somehow by retaining this vast field of options from which to choose. So, if my identity is tied up in this mindset, and you take away or I myself take away any of these options, then it feels as though part of my identity is being erased. Despite self-binding being such an effective tool for governing oneself, not everyone will employ such fence-building strategies. In attempting to offer responses to this objection the philosopher is drawn deeper into the mysteries of human motivation itself. The question, why do we not self-bind, is a species of the family of questions surrounding why humans are so often weak-willed, which is found in that class of concerns we may call motivation or will, which is found in the expansive kingdom of the philosophy of action and human agency. It could be that this option-limiting strategy, so long and so widely employed, reflects a universal human admission of non-unified agency.

The very nature of self-binding seems paradigmatic of a non-unified human agency reflected in the old idiom “to be of two minds.” To modify a famous line from Shakespeare “Let me not to the marriage of TWO minds, admit impediments” [Sonnet 116], especially when the two minds happen to be found inside the same body! Ancient Greek has the word δίψυχος (dipsuchos, pronounced di-psookos), means literally to be of two psyches or two souls.<sup>385</sup> The coining of the word itself reflects an attempt to put a finger on this natural condition of human

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<sup>385</sup> See entry “δίψυχος,” Henry G Liddell, Robert Scott, Henry S. Jones, and Roderick McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (New York: Oxford Clarendon Press 1940). URL: <http://lsj.translatum.gr/wiki/δίψυχος>

agency as being divided or non-unified. Exposing this intuition about human nature has been a favorite subject in poetry, painting and sculpture since ancient times. The Roman poet Juvenal used the term “*alia facies*” or halved faces to describe what we feel inside or even see when we look at ourselves or at others.<sup>386</sup> So, we want a fence, but “something there is that doesn’t”.<sup>387</sup> We seem to be naturally drawn toward and yet resistant of self-binding actions. Perhaps we will never plumb the depths of the human heart as so many ancient sages have lamented. We can however, take a look on the “other side of the self-binding fence” and offer some reasons why we tend to resist actions that bind us.

4.2.1. Too costly. Effective fences can be quite expensive. Effective self-binding levies its costs in mental calculation, in time, and in emotional energy. Whenever there is a price or cost involved with anything, economists step in to tell us that there is room for some cost-benefit analysis. There are clear costs associated with self-binding. Our valuation of nearer versus more distant goals (the notion of hyperbolic discounting or the human tendency to discount the value of a future goal) creeps into the picture. Popular weight loss plans (strategies that fence us away from certain foods or given amounts of food) charge money, sometimes a lot of money, forcing us to make personal value determinations. Diet plan companies invest in consumer perception research that tells them the maximum amount a consumer will pay for the goods and/or services offered. Charge too little and consumers will equate inexpensive with inferior quality. Charge too much and most consumers will be priced out of the market. A cost-benefit calculation involves a willingness to self-bind in two ways—to give up part of your paycheck and to give up

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<sup>386</sup> Juvenal, *Satire 15*, l. 57, in Susanna Morton Braund, trans. *Juvenal and Persius*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2004), 492.

<sup>387</sup> Robert Frost, “Mending Wall,” in *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged* (New York: Holt, Rinhart and Winston 1969), 33-34.

a portion of your time. When either of these is judged too costly, people opt out of these kinds of self-binding commitment devices.

The issue in self-binding seems less about a financial cost and more about one's own will to act in light of the perceived value of some distant goal. Just the mental and emotional energy required to implement the chosen self-binding device is clearly a human cost and must be involved in calculating the value of the distant weight-loss goal. Costs in time spent planning and actually implementing one's plan can tend to weaken the will to self-bind. Just the hassle and stress (costs) of limiting one's options or imposing restraints upon the self can trigger a kind of built-in resistance or weakening of the will to self-bind.<sup>388</sup> Economist George Ainslie sees cost issue in self-binding as a kind of utility-valuing problem.

[C]onventional utility theory calls for ... the availability of objective ways of measuring time and value. [But] such adjustment seems to occur irregularly, sometimes not at all. It usually takes some kind of effort (sometimes called "willpower") to evaluate a lesser present good as less desirable than a greater one in the future. ... as it gets closer [in time], the goal often seems to get more valuable. Insofar as the person fails to make this corresponding correction in value, poorer goals that are close can loom larger than better, distant goals. She fails to develop a faculty for "utility constancy."<sup>389</sup>

There is an ongoing debate in psychology and behavioral economics over "willpower depletion" and the long-held view that willpower is a limited resource.<sup>390</sup> Whether or not the willpower to

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<sup>388</sup> Ezzie Hutchinson, "The Stress of Dieting," *Nature Reviews: Neuroscience* 12, no. 2 (February 2011): 59. Cf. George Loewenstein, "Willpower: A Decision-Theorist's Perspective," *Law and Philosophy (Addiction and Responsibility: Part II)* 19, no. 1 (January 2000): 51-76.

<sup>389</sup> George Ainslie, "A Research-Based Theory of Addictive Motivation," *Law and Philosophy* 19, no. 1 (January 2000): 91.

<sup>390</sup> Roy Baumeister is a leading researcher in this field. For a helpful bibliography of research, see the American Psychological Association's online article, [unnamed author], "Is Willpower a Limited Resource" in *What You Need to Know About Willpower: The Psychological Science of Self-Control*, ND. URL: <https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/willpower-limited-resource.pdf> Also see a 2010 study challenging the standard view, cf. Veronika Job, Carol S. Dweck, and Greg M.

self-bind is a limited resource is irrelevant to the point that there are costs involved and they can constitute a very real reason why some people may make the rational choice not to go this route.

4.2.2. Too confining. Another reason we do not want to build a fence is this feeling of confinement that a fence might occasion. Here again there is this double-minded ambivalence in human nature toward the concept of freedom. We seem to go from “I can fence me in, but I do not want *you* to fence me in,” to “I do not think I will ever have the desire to fence *myself* in.” And so we love to sing along with the old Cole Porter tune: “Oh, give me land, lots of land under starry skies above / Don't fence me in / Let me ride through the wide open country that I love / Don't fence me in!”<sup>391</sup> On the other hand, our intuition conversely tells us that a world without fences can be full of chaos and misery. From the folk to the French, one of Rousseau’s famous aphorisms says that “Liberty is a food easy to eat, but hard to digest; it takes very strong stomachs to stand it.”<sup>392</sup>

Clearly here is the place where our cherished personal autonomy clashes with the intense yearning we may have for some other desired end.<sup>393</sup> It is this recognition that Ulysses cannot stand unconfined, free of his shackles and listen to the song of the Sirens without destroying himself in the process. When we build self-confining fences we are acceding to another power, which is an act that rankles our cherished sense of personal autonomy. E.M. Forster mused about

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Walton, “Ego Depletion—Is It All in Your Head?: Implicit Theories About Willpower Affect Self-Regulation,” *Psychological Science* 21, no. 11 (November 2010): 1686-1693.

<sup>391</sup> Robert Kimball, ed., “Don’t Fence Me In” by Cole Porter and Robert Fletcher, *The Complete Lyrics of Cole Porter* (New York: Knopf 1983), 81.

<sup>392</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Government of Poland*, trans. Willmoore Kendall (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1985), 29.

<sup>393</sup> Recall a portion of the opening quotation from Frankfurt: “They [children] cannot permit themselves to be satisfied, because to do so would be to concede a limit to their demands. It would mean abandoning the dream of omnipotence.” Frankfurt, *Synthese* 1982.

this: “It makes a difference, doesn't it, whether we fence ourselves in, or whether we are fenced out by the barriers of others?”<sup>394</sup> Autonomy resists heteronomy. I look out from my backyard deck at the rough, open Thomas Hardyesque pastoral scene, wild and overgrown with scrub and underbrush. I prefer not to see a fence between this compelling landscape and me. It feels confining. I wish, like Robert Frost, for an open, unobstructed view because “something there is that doesn't love a wall.”<sup>395</sup> I believe it is this twin-yearning for an unattainable measure of personal autonomy coupled with a utopian yen for the “peaceable kingdom”<sup>396</sup> that resists a fence as too confining. We resist self-binding because we want it both ways—freedom *from* confining restrictions and freedom *to* enjoy activities that can only be achieved by means of self-confining strategies.

4.2.3. Too concealing. Similar to confinement is concealment. Here is where the self-refining practice of introspection is seen incongruously as a vice. This resistance to self-binding involves another aspect of our tendency toward defiant self-reliance. Having a fence in place may be an admission that I have something to not merely confine but actually hide. It might be something that I am forced to tacitly admit needs to be limited by the existence of a fence that I've intentionally erected for its concealment. Self-deception is the issue with this type of resistance to self-binding. Richard Holton calls it an addictive “self-signaling”.<sup>397</sup> The fence, in

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<sup>394</sup> E.M. Forster, *A Room with a View*

<sup>395</sup> Ibid, Frost.

<sup>396</sup> The “peaceable kingdom” utopian vision, from the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, is treated in Frederick Garber, *The Autonomy of the Self from Richardson to Huysmans* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1982: 18. In analyzing Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Heloise*, Garber philosophically explores the subjects of autonomy, authenticity and the yearning to return to the biblical Garden of Eden.

<sup>397</sup> Richard Holton, “Addiction, Self-Signaling and the Deep Self.” *Mind and Language* 31, no. 3 (June 2016): 300-313.



this ironic way, may betray a certain vulnerability or weakness, even subterfuge or deception. On the Aristotelian chart of virtues, this might be seen as an excess of integrity.<sup>398</sup> “Friend, what are you hiding behind that new fence,” asks the neighbor. Thus, the social pressure can be great against a fence that appears too concealing, and approving instead of having no fence at all, giving the public an impression of openness with nothing to hide.

It is a grotesque version of naïve authenticity illustrated in the cartoon character Popeye’s “I yam what I yam” adage. “I have nothing to hide,” proclaims the pugnacious, self-deluded drug addict. In effect he is saying, “I refuse to surrender my autonomy to some recovery program that conceals who I really am. Yes, I am a drug user and I am causing problems for myself and those around me but I can stop doing drugs on my own accord, anytime I decide to stop.” The laudable urge to be authentic has turned into a repugnant compulsion that resists any suggestion that constraining and thereby somewhat concealing a darker part of the self is a good thing. This is the telltale line of an addict. In this sense, stooping to build a self-binding fence appears to conceal my *true* self, dark or not. This is the person who can’t bear to admit to herself that some part of her appetite needs to be curtailed. Self-delusional proclamations twist the virtue of liberty into a license to become an open wanton in the Frankfurt sense. For some, to admit that they need an internal fence is equivalent to concealing a weakness which is seen as an affront to one’s freedom to ‘let it all hang out’—a ‘warts and all’ kind of defiance of cultural convention. These self-proclaimed free agents resist self-binding out of a misguided over-valuing of personal autonomy, as though a libertine flaunting self-disclosure is supposed to be a virtue.

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<sup>398</sup> The very best analysis of integrity as an Aristotelian virtue that I know of is Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1996), 162-163. Here she considers an excess of integrity a vice that she labels as a certain kind of naïveté.

4.2.4. Too crutch-like. At this point it becomes obvious that all three of the previous reasons to resist self-binding are mere variations on a kind of Faustian dream of godlike knowledge and power over the self.<sup>399</sup> Whenever a person senses the necessity to self-bind, there can be a natural aversion towards the essentiality of such action as a betraying of personhood itself, as though this very admission of itself, amounts to a diminishing of the self. This appears to be Daniel Goldstein's thesis in aspiring to move people away from commitment devices to what he might call, pure self-discipline. The *Decision Science News* website that he edits views commitment devices as ultimately harmful to self-discipline over the long run.<sup>400</sup> I have earlier given reply to the arguments that he makes. I proposed that rather than crutch-like, the commitment device can be seen more as a strengthening buttress to one's resolve. The crutch-like criticism betrays an unwillingness to finally abandon that old dream of my omnipotence. Admitting powerlessness is the very first step in the acclaimed twelve-step method of addiction recovery.

Under this objection, the building of a fence, the use of a commitment device, is equivalent to admitting to the world that we need a fence or a crutch, that we cannot stand on our own two feet and walk around without these self-binding, crutch-like devices to assist us. We resist a self-binding act because our human nature is not to have to admit that we actually need the crutch in order to achieve some aim. I have built a fence around my property because I own two terriers who seem to be genetically incapable of staying in their own master's yard. It is inborn in this breed to immediately spot and be distracted by the movements of smaller animals

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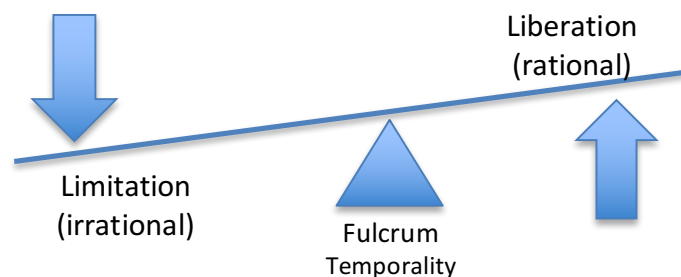
<sup>399</sup> Robert C. Tucker, "The self as god in German philosophy," in *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* 31-44 (New York, Cambridge University Press 1972).

<sup>400</sup> Cf. Daniel Goldstein, "If you bet that you'll lose weight, do you regain it when the bet is over?" June 6, 2012. <http://www.decisionsciencenews.com/?s=commitment+device>

nearby. They are otherwise well-trained and obey my commands under ordinary circumstances. But they need that fence to help them with this inbred impulse and the temptation to ignore their master's shouted commands. My neighbor, who owns a highly intelligent and wonderfully attentive and obedient shepherd breed, may look with disdain on my need for such a 'crutch' as a fence since his own mutt obediently remains in his master's yard, sitting patiently on his master's deck apparently without the need for a fence. But most humans are more terrier than shepherd in our behavior patterns. Under this 'too crutch-like' heading, what the self-binding fence represents is an ungodlike admission of my human limitations, my lack of omnipotence. The consolation is there from ancient mythology--even Ulysses occasionally required a self-binding act along the way on his heroic journey.

#### 4.3 THE LEVER CORRELATION: maximal autonomy versus optimal autonomy

Here is a diagram of another image of a functional correlation for self-binding.



Let the down arrow represent the self-binding action. The “weighting” action of binding the self, if seen as limiting certain options that might otherwise have been available to a *maximally autonomous person*, can be characterized as “irrational” only if we take maximal autonomy to offer a higher value than any alternative. Maximal autonomy may turn out to be *not* as valuable as what I will call “optimal autonomy”. One of the instruments in the *optimally autonomous* person's toolbox (in addition to the functions of a fence) could be this other paradigmatic image of a lever as helpful way to conceptualize what self-binding does. In self-binding we are trying at

T1 to leverage a personal capacity toward an autonomous end at T2. So, we try to expertly place the “fulcrum of temporality” to gauge just the right amount of pressure to lift what we could not have lifted otherwise. The self-binding becomes the wheel-barrow (to use a standard example of a fulcrum) that can carry us to where we want to be. It may seem like an irrational picture for me to be lifting the very wheel barrow in which I sit or it may feel just plain backwards to put my weight down on the limitation end of the lever where the force required is much lighter, but when a lever is positioned in just the right place against a well-placed fulcrum with just the right amount of force, then our self-binding or option-limiting action lifts us in such a manner that liberates us, a rational aim, to do more than we might have achieved otherwise. So, the self-binding act becomes yet another image of the ancient Archimedean “place to stand”.<sup>401</sup>

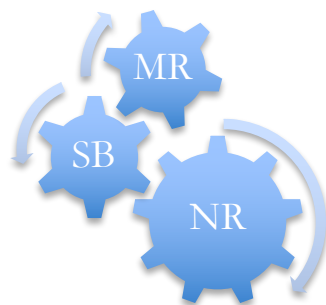
So, the instrumental rationality lying behind self-binding is the need for an extra boost to assure that one’s will at T1 is actually accomplished at T2. When the ‘lift’ required to produce some intended action (or prevent an action) seems too overwhelming it is helpful to have a “labor-saving device.” Or to be more specific to the analogy, when there’s a chance that in the process of the ‘lift’ (that is, following through with the desired action) the metaphorical arms and back grow weak, this self-binding expedient may be seen as analogous to the function of a lever. As a lever-like, lifting instrument, self-binding ideally serves to steady the action load and move it in the intended direction, ultimately liberation. There might also be some other parallels to consider concerning how and when *not* to use a lever.

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<sup>401</sup> This remark of Archimedes, “Give me a place to stand and I will move the earth,” was quoted by Pappus of Alexandria in his *Collection or Synagoge*, Book VIII, c. CE 340, Greek text: *Pappi Alexandrini Collectionis*, translated and edited by Friedrich Otto Hultsch (Frankfurt, Germany: Berolini, Weidmann 1878), 1060.

#### 4.4 THE GEAR ASSEMBLY CORRELATION: wheel-in-pinion self-binding

Gears of all kinds fascinate me. So, this particular analogy came to mind naturally when I was thinking about what physical mechanisms are used to generate power for movement which is what the aim of self-binding essentially amounts to. We are trying to understand how a self-binding action, despite turning like a gear in an unexpected direction (one which seems to restrict personal autonomy in a certain way), is able to work hand-in-hand (wheel-in-pinion, that is) to augment some reasoned action. First we remind ourselves of why such a “self-binding gear” might even be useful which is where the functions of a fence can be helpful. Then, we recall the all-too-human problem of weakness of will. In weakness of will (or *akrasia*) I picture a coming apart of normative reasons (NR) from those all-important motivating reasons (MR) to the point that the propulsion for desired action comes to a frustrating halt. The MR and NR gears do not engage so the agent’s engine sits idling as though stalled by weakness of will. Along come some enterprising ‘mechanics of the human will’ (ordinary folk) without benefit of any specialized theoretical knowledge of human action. They simply insert another little invertible action gear into the assembly that reconnects motivating and normative reasons. A few turns from a newly-inserted, ‘self-binding action gear’ and voila, the wheels turn and the desired action starts up.



Internal view of how the inverted yet reasoned action of self-binding occurs.

An enhancing serendipity that emerges from this little image is the seemingly opposite and renitent direction that the self-binding action gear turns—which is counterclockwise to the propelling action intended by the agent. The appearance of the self-binding action working

contrariwise turns out to be only an illusive one. As it happens when self-binding is effective the action we take works together with our motivating reasons to turn the all-important normative reasons wheel which in turn leads to the desired action.

#### 4.5. THE AERODYNAMICS CORRELATION: sails and wings

The aim of a self-binding event can be seen as an attempt to move oneself from point A to point B in the quickest and easiest way possible despite encounters of natural resistance like weakness of will or the inability to resist temptation at certain times. If I have already set up the obstructing component in advance, the movement toward my goal oddly becomes easier and quicker. Since I cannot eat the dessert that has already been thrown out, I am one little step closer to my weight-loss goal. I gain lift and velocity as it were by setting my sail or my wings just so, in a way that binds me yet also allows me to move in a pre-set direction. At this point we only need remind ourselves in the most rudimentary way of the physics of Bernoulli's equation or Newton's third law of motion and theory of air resistance or Helmholtz law related to a bound vortex from a flow field over a finite wing or just the induced drag coefficient of a finite wing. Even Aristotle and Archimedes gave us the early fundamental concepts of continuum, drag, and pressure gradients.<sup>402</sup> Please understand that I know hardly anything at all about aerodynamics except the grade school explanation of how the thicker forward part of a wing's curvature can be thrust along into the air at such a velocity that combined with the air flow over the thinner rear portion can create a lift under the wing itself.<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>402</sup> John David Anderson, *A History of Aerodynamics and its Impact on Flying Machines* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1997).

<sup>403</sup> Even with this simple aerodynamics concept there is some misunderstanding about how the air pressure difference that provides the lift actually occurs. But for our analogue purposes the *intentional resistance* provided by an expertly-shaped wing or sail, makes the point we need. Cf. Holger Babinsky, "How Wings Really Work," *Research Horizons e-bulletin*, Cambridge School

Now, by correlation, think of the obstacle that we place in our way (the self-binding device) as the forward curvature of a wing that forces air in a certain direction. Next is the impulsive energy we bring along into a circumstance where ordinarily our will to resist temptation lets us down. But in the case of a well-proportioned self-binding device, using our impulsive passion for velocity, the self-binding resistance combines to give us “lift” as it were, to more quickly achieve whatever goal we’ve set for ourselves. Our passion (thrust velocity) running headlong into this pre-set design of our own making, suddenly sets us sailing or flying. The physics of sailing are quite similar and the physics of both flying and sailing also provide an added correlate of paradox, the autonomy-heteronomy puzzle, that I have alluded to already. That is, how is it that an object which is heavier than air can actually be lifted and fly along through the air or how is it that an object can use the wind to propel itself in the opposite direction of that same wind?<sup>404</sup> How is it, when I intentionally put in place an obstacle which impedes my choices on my otherwise autonomous path, that this self-binding act serves to propel rather than impede my intended progress? Yet, there it is. I’m using self-binding obstacles (expertly shaped wings) to fly past the temptation obstacles (those weak-willed impulses that weigh me down).

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of Technology, Department of Engineering. URL= <http://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/how-wings-really-work>

<sup>404</sup> John D. Norton, “The Paradoxes of Sailing: The Physics of Sailing and the Import of Thought Experiments,” in Patrick Goold, ed., *Sailing, Philosophy for Everyone: Catching the Drift of Why We Sail* 148-163 (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell 2012).

#### 4.6 THE MARTIAL ARTS CORRELATION: using one's own vulnerabilities

This sixth analogy may be dancing along the edge of the mystical but I think it is simple and practical enough to offer a helpful illustration of how self-binding really works in everyday life. One primary purpose of martial arts training (ancient to contemporary) is to offer proven defensive techniques for defeating or at least defending oneself against an opponent of far greater size and/or strength.<sup>405</sup> The core aim in these “soft technique” grappling moves is to use an adversary's own power, energy and momentum in a way that nullifies the aggressor's action or even defeats an opponent. The first step is determining not to directly oppose your opponent, strength for strength, like two rams butting heads. Instead, the defender is trained to yield or meet the attacker's force with no resistance, yet in the same moment, a defender actually moves to direct the attack itself by using her own “adjacent force” which redirects the weight and energy of the attacker's action like a projectile glancing off a surface without damaging it. Practitioners may often call this technique “the way of suppleness” 柔道 . In the ancient martial arts philosophy of judo an early aspect of training involves “the art of falling”. All martial arts disciplines offer some form of this type of training, which goes by any number of Asian language terms.<sup>406</sup>

Autonomous self-binding then might be seen as giving way to the akrasia in a manner that conquers the akrasia. Here then is a readymade illustration of how self-binding actually works. Think of the self as partitioned into a kind of martial arts, caged arena with two

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<sup>405</sup> Peter Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts: From Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2012), 220ff.

<sup>406</sup> Graham Priest and Damon Young, eds., *Martial Arts and Philosophy: Beating and Nothingness*, Popular Culture and Philosophy series, Vol. 53 (Chicago: Open Court Publishing 2010), 264-267. See also Stanley E. Henning, “Academia Encounters the Chinese Martial Arts,” *China Review International* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 319-332.



adversaries faced off against each other. Let us further imagine that the cage matches in this arena only occur when a person's will seems to be divided and in conflict with itself. As a defense against a temporary irrationality in "the heat of passion" (a kind of counter will that appears invincible) along comes this perfectly rational, martial arts-style maneuver of the rational will. Think of this other irrational, aggressor self in such a "hot state", Elster's term, as your stronger opponent in a martial arts contest of wills. At T1 your cooler state anticipates this seemingly overwhelming, powerful move by the hot state self at T2. Instead of meeting it head-on, the earlier, cooler self simply sidesteps all that energy with a precommitting or self-binding move. Then, at that T2 moment when the self recognizes that it has been out-flanked, that the irrational desire cannot possibly be satisfied, then it happens that all this energy and momentum wanes and the apparitional strength of the other self evaporates. Of course, the ultimate aim, as with any martial arts contest, is to have honed this self-binding skill so that by habitual practice you are able to wear down and eventually defeat your opponent (your irrationally-impassioned future self). The idea is that in time, after a number of defeats and a lot of spent energy, your opposing self loses energy to even muster the desire to step into the ring and try yet another attack.

An elegant aspect of this view of self-binding is its Tao-like balance of energies. Put simply, it takes a lot more energy to resist a temptation directly than it does to serenely avoid the temptation in advance.<sup>407</sup> Even when successful in defeating an irrational passion "strength for strength" all that spent emotional energy can so exhaust a person they have little reserve left for

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<sup>407</sup> The virtue of balance in Chinese philosophy is close in to the 'mean' of virtue in Aristotle. Confucianism has a "dao of desire gratification". Cf. Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press 1992), 335ff.

accomplishing other day-to-day projects and goals.<sup>408</sup> But self-binding offers a way to anticipate the rise and fall of emotional energy and counter it with a simple, binding maneuver. To accomplish this way of behaving towards oneself appears to require some measure of humility which is a valued character trait in classical martial arts training. It is said that the founder of Judo, Jigoro Kano, liked to say that “ju” of Judo is the way of gentleness and is in contrast to strength. Even in the Chinese classics such phrases as “gentleness turns away strength” can be found. The “do” of Judo, explains Master Kano, is not the sense of the word “way” that means a street, but the sense of the word denoting a spiritual path. For Kano, the essential root meaning of the Japanese word “judo” meant the way of humility. If respect and affection towards others are lost, then humans are no more than animals. Hence, the “bowing” etiquette is extremely important, just as the pictographic character script for judo indicates.<sup>409</sup>

Philosopher Thomas Nadelhoffer has had a lifelong interest in the martial arts, particularly Jiu Jitsu, calling himself “the grumpy grappler” on his blog dedicated to the sport. He was recently asked to write a commissioned piece for *BJJ Eastern Europe* (a Brazilian Jiu Jitsu journal) on a “topic that is near and dear to my personal and professional heart--namely, the role that humility can and should play in jiu jitsu. In [the article] I discuss some of the research I have been doing on humility during the past few years and how it relates to the problem of ego in

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<sup>408</sup> Cf. Carolien Martijn, Petra Tenbult, Harald Merckelbach, Ellen Dreezens, and Nanne K. de Vries, “Getting a grip on ourselves: Challenging expectancies about loss of energy after self-control,” *Social Cognition* 20, (December 2002): 441-460; Mark Muraven, Dikla Shmueli, and Edward Burkley, “Conserving self-control strength,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 91, no. 3 (September 2006): 524-537; Nicholas Freeman, “Self-Control Conservation: A Proactive or Reactive Strategy?” *Journal of Articles in Support of the Null Hypothesis* 7, no. 2 (January 2011): 57-68.

<sup>409</sup> Shinichi Oimatsu, “The Way of Seiryoku Zenyo–Jita Kyohei in Judo,” *The Bulletin for the Scientific Study of Kodokan Judo* VI (1984). Stable URL: <http://judoinfo.com/seiryoku2/>

jiu jitsu.”<sup>410</sup> There is a clear message from the martial arts for seeing how self-binding works. To possess the strength to bind another in combat, one must first have the humility to bind the self in practicing the techniques of martial arts training.

Finally, to use yet another metaphor from Plato that I alluded to earlier,<sup>411</sup> in practicing the disciplines of martial arts training, it is as though you are the captain of a well-constructed, properly ballasted ship. Seeing a storm in advance (or recognizing a move by an opponent) and knowing you’ll run out of fuel trying to speed in the opposite direction or trying to maneuver around it (making an ineffective counter-move), instead you intentionally turn your ship directly into the wind to avoid being capsized by the waves. You intentionally own or bind, and then in turn *use*, the strength and weight of your opponent (in Plato’s example, the potentially capsizing waves; in our case, the anticipated, overwhelming urge) to accomplish a desired end—to prevent or to permit. Your action at T1 allows you to sail on at T2. Deliberately recognizing that your true “opponent” is yourself, your counter-intuitive move is to temporally use your own anticipated weakness to your advantage which is an important strategy in martial arts combat. The word advantage, from the Old French via Latin, means to be in a position of being in advance of another. Temporality and temperament are the keys. Foreseeing in advance an opponent’s move (or that is my own vulnerability) I can forestall defeat less by controlling and more along the lines of corralling the unwelcome desire. When one self-binds in advance of an anticipated weaker temperament, one gains an advantage over the self.

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<sup>410</sup> Cf. Thomas Nadelhoffer, “2 Ways To Humble An Egocentric Training Partner/Student,” *The Grumpy Grappler* blog (August 10, 2017). URL: [http://philosophycommons.typepad.com/the\\_grumpy\\_grappler/2016/06/ego-humility-and-jiu-jitsu.html](http://philosophycommons.typepad.com/the_grumpy_grappler/2016/06/ego-humility-and-jiu-jitsu.html) ; see also <http://www.bjjee.com/articles/2-ways-to-humble-an-egocentric-training-partnerstudent/>

<sup>411</sup> Plato, *Republic* 6.887d-888.

## Chapter 5. Autonomy and Self-Binding: The Central Question of Authority

Authority and autonomy is the issue Robert P. Wolff takes up in his book, *In Defense of Anarchism* which is more precisely a defense of philosophical anarchism. Put simply, authority is the right to be obeyed, but “Obedience,” says Wolff is not a matter of doing what someone tells you to do. It is a matter of doing what he tells you to do, because he tells you to do it.”<sup>412</sup>

The inevitable progress leads to a conflict between autonomy and authority: 1. Authority is the right to be obeyed. 2. Obedience is doing something because someone tells you to do it. 3.

Autonomy is self-legislation—never doing something just because someone tells you to do it. 4.

Therefore, for authority to exist, autonomy must be forfeited. In an early review of Wolff’s work, Stanley Bates puts it succinctly:

A central problem, perhaps the central problem, of political philosophy from Hobbes, through Locke, Hume, Rousseau, Kant, Mill, and on to the present day has been to specify the limits of legitimate authority. Of course, we can read Wolff as saying that there is no way to do this—that authority is an all-or-nothing entity -but the question is, why should we accept this claim of his?<sup>413</sup>

This alleged conflict puts the piquant question of authority in self-binding front and center. I believe it is of central importance in comprehending self-binding as it relates to autonomy. Why? Because, if the ‘I’ or the first-person self is the one vested with the authority to self-bind, yet this selfsame vested authority can turn and surrender its own authority in the act of self-binding, then we owe some explanation concerning which authority is predominant. Of course, the antecedent discussion here is determinism versus free will, for which there is no philosophical resolution in sight. Roughly taken up, the more novel idea (by 17<sup>th</sup> century standards heavily influenced by Scholasticism) is that since humans are necessitated in their

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<sup>412</sup> Robert P. Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism* (New York: Harper & Row 1970), 9.

<sup>413</sup> Stanley Bates, “Authority and Autonomy,” *Journal of Philosophy* 69, no. 7 (April 6, 1972): 175-179.

actions by previous causes (either by the notion of a supreme being or due to millions of years of biological evolution as contemporary thinkers employ this science to defend determinism) then it is incoherent to claim that any act can be prevented or insured by a human agent. Bishop John Bramhall was known for his vigorous philosophical disagreement with Thomas Hobbes on this point.<sup>414</sup>

As it relates to this writing, it was Bramhall who clearly laid out the problem of authority that has serious implications for defending a coherent place for self-binding. For Hobbes and the materialist position there is really so such thing as an immaterial ‘will’ as such. “[A]lthough there are wills for Hobbes, a will is not a distinctive kind of mental operation, different from a desire; wills rather constitute a subclass of desires.”<sup>415</sup> If this is the case, then the very notion of a desire (or a set of desires) to bind oneself in such a way that particular desires are avoided or assured in their eventual fulfilment, cannot be a matter of advance deliberation since the desires themselves are not deliberative by nature. Furthermore, humans (in their natural state) are in this constant state of war with each other because they *cannot, by themselves*, control this incessant conflict occurring inside themselves. According to Hobbes, we are without any self-sovereign capacity and are in need of the sovereignty of the social contract necessarily in need of coercive enforcement by a sovereign monarch. These ideas necessarily flow from Hobbes’s famous

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<sup>414</sup> There is extensive discussion of what necessitates authority over a person’s life in Vere Chappell, ed., *Hobbes and Bramhall* 1999. Hobbes represents in contemporary terms a compatibilist view while Bramhall defends an incompatibilist or more properly a libertarian position. As such, the two have very different solutions to the issue of liberty and authority, both personally and politically.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid, p. viii.

pronouncement that the life of man in his “natural state” is one of “continual fear and danger of violent death; ... solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”<sup>416</sup>

Hobbes’ well-known solution is to convince us that some kind of societal agreement is in order, one which necessarily requires enforcement by assigning sovereignty to a paternalistic, human monarch. The irony here, or perhaps outright contradiction, is that Hobbes’ central claim assumes a capacity to bind ourselves to a societal agreement, a capacity which he denies is individually possible. Humans in their natural state simply cannot control their desires—a flat denial that self-binding is even possible in isolation from society. Seen in such a stark light, Hobbes’ view directly challenged the Scholastic tradition of the Jesuits, particularly their counterparts in the monasteries which were built on the Benedictine premise that individual self-binding was both possible and necessary to righteous living. The existence of such a community of self-binders only assumed and reinforced the original, individual capacity. The Irish Bishop Bramhall, in defending this tradition, challenges this supposedly undeniable claim suggesting that Hobbes offered no proof that humans have ever been in such a state, lacking society of any sort, all the way back to the biblical Adam.<sup>417</sup> Nonetheless, Hobbes’ notion of this human need for sovereignty is the central theme of *The Leviathan*. “In short, Hobbes is saying, a life without the security provided by government is not worth living.”<sup>418</sup>

So, if persons lacking self-sovereignty in their natural state, are in a constant unwinnable war, both within and without, who then has a rightful claim to sovereignty over human action? Immanuel Kant would come after Hobbes and uphold the radically different conception of so-

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<sup>416</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: With selected variants from the Latin edition of 1668*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing 1994), 76.

<sup>417</sup> Bramhall, p. 76.

<sup>418</sup> Glen Newey, *Routledge Guidebook to Hobbes’ Leviathan* (New York: Routledge 2014), 2.

called transcendental idealism whereby the intrinsic categories of the individual mind give us the practical reasoning to sovereignly self-legislate the moral law to which we bind ourselves as the most logically rational action. Kant's transcendental argument claimed that our practical reason tells us that there are necessary conditions for action statements or for an action itself to be intelligible. Thus, it is claimed that the notion of a social contract is even better grounded in Kant's more enlightened understanding of human nature. But as I have noted, it is this Kantian view of autonomy that must be either harmonized or modified in order to account for self-binding's alleged irrationality since it may appear to undermine personal autonomy. There is at least an impetus to accommodate the inversion of the normal sense of autonomy that takes place when a person intentionally limits options, thereby rejecting certain desires in favor of other desires which might be perceived as a threat to one's autonomy. How it comes about that I, within myself, can arrange my affairs so that certain desires win out, is the curious problem that self-binding poses.

My authority over myself would seem to be self-evident. But why it is even necessary to speak of myself in this way, as though some kind of *internal authority* needs to be identified at all, is the issue that needs to be addressed. More to the point of this section, an investigation into the source of my own assumed authority over myself goes to the heart of the problem: can I, by an act of self-binding, threaten my own authority over myself or that is, my autonomy? If autonomy means self-authorizing, then the authority and its object should be easy enough to describe. Yet, as we've noted from Plato onward, this is not as simple as it seems. A famous line from John Winthrop's "Little Speech on Liberty" illuminates the problem from a political perspective. "[L]iberty is the proper end and object of authority.... This liberty is maintained and

exercised in a way of subjection to authority.”<sup>419</sup> But in the internal politics of the self, how is it that I liberate myself by putting myself in subjection? Subjection seems to necessitate some authoritative ‘other’ in the equation. Yet, in the case of self-binding, there is no ‘other’ except the non-hegemon assistant and this is the crux of the issue. In the case of self-binding we seem to be proposing that I, as the authority, can authorize the placing of myself in subjection to myself which appears to be a nonsensical idea, an irrational proposition. More than any other example of self-control, self-binding brings this authority issue front and center. I am *both* the authorizing subject and the subjected object.

Per Plato, this makes no sense.<sup>420</sup> And to make no sense, per Davidson, is a non-starter proposition for explaining an action. That is, “Nothing can be viewed as a good reason for failing to reason according to one’s best standards of rationality.”<sup>421</sup> Yet humans seem quite comfortable with this state of internal affairs, that is until some dissonant voice undermines certain desires with a competing, even opposite, set of desires. With the prospect of self-binding we are still always left with a choice as to which desires we want to win out. “What’s the alternative? From the experiments that I have described above, the most obvious conclusion is that when an authoritative ‘external voice’ gives the orders, most of us will jump to attention.”<sup>422</sup>

Furthermore, the authority issue speaks directly to the practical problem of the will. That is, the concern is over which “authority” (or that part of the self that may be viewed as authoritative over the whole) provides not only the necessary desire to self-bind but also the will

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<sup>419</sup> Francis J. Bremer, “John Winthrop’s Little Speech on Liberty” in *John Winthrop: America’s Forgotten Founding Father* (New York: Oxford University Press 2003), 364.

<sup>420</sup> Plato, *Republic*, Book IV [430e]. “... isn’t this expression ‘self-control’ ridiculous!”

<sup>421</sup> Donald Davidson, *Problems of Rationality* (New York: Oxford University Press 2004), 211.

<sup>422</sup> Dan Ariely, *Predictably Irrational*, p. 116



to follow through on that desire. To raise these issues concerning the germane or dominant authority in self-binding cases opens the door for several possibilities. When a kind of third-person hegemon is enlisted to assist (but not rule) in the self-binding as in Homer's mythical tale of *Ulysses and the Sirens* this is yet another authority "player" to consider. Authority sourcing is clearly a concern in Kant, and it is at the heart of the human autonomy puzzle that a sense of *freedom* can be realized by means of *slavery* broadly defined. If there is an enslaver, other than the enslaved in a self-binding case, then the one or ones playing this role must be taken into account. The truly *self-binding* action entails clear consent to be coerced by some coercing authority even if no other authority can be discerned other than oneself. In the case of self-binding, a person remains autonomous, or in charge of her action, even while consenting to herself or to some 'other' to whom authority has been ceded for a limited duration. The intentionally ceded authority over the specified action appears to shift in limited ways, most often temporally limited. Ulysses' men were given authority to take certain actions on behalf of their commander—bind him to the mast, stop up their ears, keep rowing past the storied island of temptation. But after the danger of the singing Sirens is past, Ulysses' men do not continue to keep him bound to the mast. Their temporary authority is ended at that point. Self-binding then can involve both external and internal authority. Again, take the case of the dieter throwing out the cake. There is no coercion here, only the effective removal of a specific temptation. But what if we add a step? Say, the dieter commands the housemaid to trash the cake. In such a case the housemaid is the one who takes the authorized binding action (trashing the cake) but we need not say that the housemaid is exerting any authority at all with respect to the dieting owner of the house. Below are three areas of concern that arise in authority-sourcing for self-binding and the hazards of paternalism.

## 5.1 AUTHORITY AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

We might depict the issue in this way: cultus as psychopathology versus cultus as transcendent consecration. Of course, discovering freedom through slavery is an ancient concept or practice, thoroughly vetted for its effectiveness, and still widely practiced in all kinds of contexts. Yet, it remains difficult due to this issue of the relevant authority. Its roots can be found in many religions—Confucianism, Buddhism, Stoicism, Hinduism, and Judaism, not to mention Christianity. Hegemonic coercion by a religious figure in a position of authority will always be at issue whenever the command comes down for disciples to self-bind or ostensibly self-impose certain constraints upon themselves. Philosopher Ben Colburn offers a helpful set of “imaginary biographies, to show some of the different ways in which people might succeed or fail, in living autonomous lives.” The issue of authority, including religious authority comes up over and over in these imagined scenarios.<sup>423</sup>

## 5.2 AUTHORITY AND DIMINISHED CAPACITY

Human in society have always recognized that there are times when another authority should intercede in the lives of persons with some diminished capacity of autonomy who poses a danger to themselves and others. The more nuanced discovery is that this notion of authoritatively interceding for another can be turned inward when one allows a kind of self-authorizing intercession. If a person can so separate one’s self internally in such a way that one part of the self is capable of binding another part of the self at least temporarily, then the person discovers an effective therapeutic technique. Addiction recovery therapies or the prickly issues involved with counseling and suicide intervention are the first that come to mind. But authority is

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<sup>423</sup> Ben Colburn, *Autonomy and Liberalism* (New York: Routledge 2010), 32-37.

again at issue. For the techniques to be effective for encouraging self-binding without violating the personal autonomy of the individual, the psychological therapist or medical professional cannot be seen as the sovereign authority.<sup>424</sup>

In certain medical cases of diminished mental capacity and of course, end-of-life decisions, authority over one's own palliative care and advance directives for when to end medical life-support measures, self-binding has become a widely practiced convention with patients facing diminished cognitive capacity or terminal illness. Despite its many beneficial strategies and protocols, perhaps medical ethics, more than any other field, wrestles with the issue of authority, self-binding and paternalism.<sup>425</sup>

### 5.3 AUTHORITY AND THE STATE

Finally, we return to the issue of public policies that encourage self-binding without coercing citizens to self-bind. While coercion seems to nullify the very idea of self-binding, there is this niche of an advocacy role that democratically-governing authorities are still trying to figure out—how to be the nudging State without turning into the nanny State. The authority issue is especially acute when it comes to the subject of libertarian paternalism. How will the social contract with the State turn into a matter of self-binding and not coercive paternalism? In political philosophy, the so-called Social Contract is simply a collective agreement to self-bind. Citizens agree to give up certain freedoms in exchange for certain other goods. I agree to laws that coercively require me to drive my car on the left or the right side of the road, for example.

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<sup>424</sup> The February 2009 issue of *The American Journal of Bioethics* has no less than 7 articles under the heading of the “Conceptualization of Autonomy” all with the upfront assumption that the patient must ultimately be the final authority in any therapeutic relationship.

<sup>425</sup> Danny Scoccia, “The Right to Autonomy and the Justification of Hard Paternalism,” in Christian Coons and Michael Weber, eds., *Paternalism: Theory and Practice* 74-92 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

This legal restriction in turn provides greater freedom of movement for all. Extrapolate to the larger whole of binding agreements and laws and the commensurate freedom which is achieved from this option-limiting endeavor and you begin to see a foundational principle of the political animal called homo sapiens. When an entire population of people (one with a distinct, identified ethnicity; a tribe, let us say) binds themselves according to customs and traditions that they hold in common, there is a social contract that holds them together as distinct from other populations.

As it turns out this is the etymology of the Greek word *autonomía* as the ancient designation for Greek city-states saw themselves in political relation to other city-states. The populace agrees to or binds itself collectively and thereby accedes power to the city-state's government in order to remain an autonomous or self-governing state. The etymology of the word 'autonomy' is helpful to compare and contrast this social agreement mechanism (social contract or self-binding contract) with the internal self-binding mechanism of the individual. Two separate entities are required—one to bind, the other to agree to be bound.

Taking this practical application another step, there is the further parallel in contemporary political science. Something different occurs when the vested authority decides to modify the “choice architecture” or exploit the so-called “endowment effect,” to use the terminology of public policy experts in order to *nudge* citizens to do things that are judged to be conducive to their own well-being.<sup>426</sup> Advocates of nudging are always quick to caution that the nudging they propose is to be done without direct coercion. So, in the case of the State and self-binding there is need for a brighter line drawn to signify when giving government a license to manipulate our

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<sup>426</sup> Richard H. Thaler, Cass R. Sunstein, and John B. Balz, “Choice Architecture” in Eldar Shafir, ed., *The Behavioral Foundations of Public Policy* 428-439 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2012).

actions for our own well-being is no longer autonomous self-binding and has turned into hegemony. In order to apply the nudging thesis to personal autonomy and self-binding, consideration must be given to conditions that give rise to persons giving up their personal autonomy.

A current debate descends from an ancient philosophical discourse on a government authority's manipulation of desire and belief. In contemporary philosophy, this is Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein's popular notion of the "nudge".<sup>427</sup> Neil Levy proposes to set limits on nudging in light of respect for each individual's rational capacity and personal autonomy. He offers an eloquent philosophical defense of "nudges to reason" wherein a nudge to self-bind can be seen as concurrently respecting human freedom and autonomy.

Nudges to reason are therefore appeals to our deliberative capacities. But if appeals to these mechanisms are appeals to our deliberative capacities, we should not think that, in so appealing, we fail to treat one another as responsible or autonomous agents. Nor should we think that appeals like limit our substantive freedom; our freedom consists in the capacity to respond and react to reasons (Fischer & Ravizza 1998). Appeals to these capacities therefore enable responsible decision-making on the part of the agents whose capacities they are. As far as this set of interlinked considerations (autonomy; responsibility; dignity; freedom) are concerned, there is no reason to worry about nudges to reason.<sup>428</sup>

Even with a rational, evidence-based nudge, further consideration is needed in discerning the proper, relevant authority for this currently popular concept. Reasonable, rational people may differ over the same rational evidence. The concern is that autonomous choice to self-bind might be taken away in the paternalistic nudge to self-bind. On the other hand, my prior awareness of and tacit consent to being nudged in this so-called libertarian paternalistic way might be

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<sup>427</sup> Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth and Happiness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 2008).

<sup>428</sup> Neil Levy, "Nudges in a Post-Truth World," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 43, no. 8 (August 2017). URL= <https://jme.bmj.com/content/43/8/495>

equivalent to a kind of self-nudging. The difficulties surrounding self-binding and paternalistic authority remain a perplexing issue.<sup>429</sup> Clearly identifying the authority in self-binding is problematic.

Just think of what's happening here. People have learned that they can intentionally give themselves over to be temporarily directed in some way by an authority and thereby, with this action, achieve 'freedom from' (negative) or 'dominance over' (positive) some very real obstacles which are debated every day in public policy circles—healthcare, housing, mass transit, environmental concerns to name a few. This is a grand riddle of human experience and an intriguing problem in the philosophy of action. Self-binding is clearly practical yet according to our revered principles of personal autonomy, a seemingly irrational act. A challenge for philosophy is to attempt an explanation for why this practice works, how it works despite this authority conundrum and finally whether it might be problematic for some conceptions of human dignity that shun any practice that appears to curtail human freedom.

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<sup>429</sup> Recall the opening quotation from Harry Frankfurt: "The suggestion that a person may be in some sense liberated through acceding to a power which is not subject to his immediate voluntary control...remains...relatively unexplored," *Importance of What We Care About*, p. 266.

## Conclusion

With this dissertation, I have demonstrated how self-binding actions can be extraordinary demonstrations of human resourcefulness in overcoming obstacles and achieving goals. We have seen— a) How self-binding sheds light on the age-old question of agency wherein a single instance reveals an integrating action which identifies with certain desires while simultaneously disavowing others. By assimilating certain aspects of Reader’s “philosophy of need” where the self is both agent and patient, I have shown how an act of self-binding exhibits Reader’s thesis. b) How self-binding can be viewed as a paradigmatic tool for assessing the strength of one’s own personal autonomy understood in part as a capacity. c) How self-binding actually does its work. In contemplating the fence analogue, we get a clearer picture of the self-binding experience. d) How vagueness in discerning the authority in self-binding can have undesirable consequences.

Self-binding has much to offer to those suffering from the misery of a weak will or the bane of addiction. Given the limited philosophical work done in this area, what I have written is a preliminary investigation which likely raises more questions than it answers. Such is the nature of a prolegomenon. But I believe I have proposed some good places to start such an investigation and uncovered and developed a few key insights that will serve as a helpful contribution in this area of philosophy of action. There is an old proverb, “Who won’t be ruled by the rudder must be ruled by the rock.”<sup>430</sup> The real-life significance of self-binding is in its rudder-like efficacy. Societies that, in the name of liberty and autonomy, tout the bohemian value of a rudderless existence invite rule by rock. Edmund Burke concurs. “Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more

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<sup>430</sup> “Rule” in Jennifer Speake, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* (New York: Oxford University Press 2015), 272.

there must be without.”<sup>431</sup> Self-binding is a tactical weapon wielded by surrendering power.

Abraham Heschel captured this familiar intuition: “Self-respect is the root of discipline: the sense of dignity grows with the ability to say no to oneself.”<sup>432</sup> Also, Sir Walter Scott: “Teach self-denial and make its practice pleasure, and you can create for the world a destiny more sublime that ever issued from the brain of the wildest dreamer.”<sup>433</sup>

I am under no delusions as to what this writing might do to encourage more self-binding and not less. Historian Amanda Foreman is realist: “If everyone followed through on their resolutions, the consequences for humanity would be dire: The fast-food industry would collapse, the gym would become unbearably crowded, and lifestyle magazines would have nothing left to say.”<sup>434</sup> Since Homer’s Ulysses has been our self-binding paradigm, you will permit me these apropos lines from Tennyson’s *Ulysses* to close.

I am become a name; / For always roaming with a hungry heart / ... And this gray spirit yearning in desire / To follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought. ... / Come, my friends, / 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world. / Push off, ... for my purpose holds / To sail beyond the sunset, ... / Of all the western stars, until I die. / It may be that the gulfs will wash us down: / It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles, / And see the great Achilles, whom we knew. / Though much is taken, much abides; and though / We are not now that strength which in old days / Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are, / One equal temper of heroic hearts, / Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.<sup>435</sup>

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<sup>431</sup> Edmund Burke, “Letter to a Member of the National Assembly” (1791) in *The Works of Edmund Burke* 555, Vol. 2 (London: George Bell & Sons, 1901).

<sup>432</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Wisdom of Heschel*, selections by Ruth Marcus Goodhill (New York: Farrar, Straus & Geroux 1970), 95.

<sup>433</sup> Sir Walter Scott, in Samuel Austin Allibone, ed. *Prose Quotations from Socrates to Macaulay* (Philadelphia: J.J. Lippincott & Co. 1876), 642.

<sup>434</sup> Amanda Foreman, “Resolved: No More New Year’s Resolutions,” *Wall St. Journal* (January 10, 2014). URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/resolved-no-more-new-year8217s-resolutions-1389404744>

<sup>435</sup> Alfred Lloyd Tennyson, “Ulysses,” in *Alfred Tennyson: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, The Oxford Authors 80-81 (New York: Oxford University Press 2000).



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