**On the Rationality of Vow-Making**

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**Abstract:** I offer a philosophical account of vowing and the rationality of vow-making. I argue that vows are most productively understood as exceptionless resolutions that do not have any excusing conditions. I then articulate an apparent problem for exceptionless vow-making:how can it be rational to bind yourself unconditionally, when circumstances might change unexpectedly and make it the case that vow-keeping no longer makes sense for you? As a solution, I propose that vows can be rational to make only if they are implicitly conditional on a personal identification or social role that is itself escapable.

1. **Introduction**

We make vows or oaths of many different kinds. Some vows concern professional or civic obligations. For example, doctors recite the Hippocratic Oath, witnesses swear to tell the truth in the courtroom, and military service members take oaths of enlistment. Other vows have to do with religion: Buddhist Bodhisattvas vow to attain complete enlightenment for the sake of all rational beings, while some Christians vow to remain sexually abstinent until marriage. Still other vows affirm our affiliations or formalize our commitments: couples make marriage vows to each other, and immigrants take oaths to become naturalized citizens. Even Boy and Girl Scouts swear Scout Oaths to uphold certain principles. Other vows are aimed at attaining personal goals, such as vows of revenge or sobriety. Although these practices of vowing vary greatly, they all have something in common. Each vow is an attempt to bind oneself to behave in some way in the future, come what may.

Understood as such, vows are an important part of our lives: we use them to help us reach our most challenging goals and solidify our most important commitments. To successfully do this, vows must bind us in an unconditional and exceptionless way. However, this raises a puzzle about the rationality of vowing. How can it be subjectively rational to make an exceptionless commitment, and to be set on acting in certain ways or maintaining certain standards in the future no matter what happens? Circumstances can change, and values can undergo permissible shifts. These changes might make it the case that it no longer makes sense to maintain your vow from your present perspective; someone who loses her faith in her late 20s should not remain bound by her teenage vow to remain sexually abstinent until marriage for religious reasons. Does it follow that her attempt at unconditionally vowing abstinence was irrational in the first place, and that any attempt at exceptionless vowing is likewise irrational?

In this paper, I offer an account of vowing that avoids this charge of irrationality. I first articulate the role I take vows to play, and explain how vows differ from nearby related phenomena such as promises (including promises to oneself), intentions, and resolutions. I argue that vows are best construed not as any of these phenomena, but as exceptionless resolutionsthat do not have any excusing conditions. I then argue that an exceptionless vow is rationally permissible to make only if it implicitly conditional on maintaining a certain social role or form of personal identification. If the circumstances change in relevant ways, the vower can avoid having to act as vowed without thereby violating her vow by abandoning the role in question. Finally, I respond to objections, including addressing purported cases of permissibly breaking a vow without abandoning the role it was conditional on.

1. **What Vows Are**

Two important points of clarification are in order before I say more about what I take vows to be. First, most vows involve both a public expression or statement—which can bind regardless of an agent’s inner mental state, as with a courtroom witness who swears to tell the truth—and a private commitment, which is determined by the agent’s mental state. My focus is on what this private commitment consists in and on when it is rational to take on such a commitment, rather than on the moral, legal, or institutional obligations that are incurred by declaring (sincerely or otherwise) that you have made a vow. Second, I am using the term ‘vow’ in a stipulative way to refer specifically and exclusively to the intrapersonal, robust, exceptionless sort of commitment that I describe below. While I take this to be a natural stipulation based on the kinds of cases to which we typically apply the term, I recognize that English speakers might sometimes use ‘vow’ in other ways (e.g., to refer only to commitments that are formalized in institutional contexts such as the military or legal system, or that are religious in nature).[[1]](#endnote-1) My intention is not to offer a conceptual analysis of the word ‘vow,’ and it is possible that what I say about vows may diverge from how people sometimes use the word in ordinary conversation.

Moreover, while vows as such have not been extensively discussed in the philosophical literature, the other philosophers who have addressed them do not always carve up the relevant normative phenomena in the same way that I do. For example, Kyle Fruh (forthcoming) argues that promises, oaths, and vows are all commitment devices, but that oaths are distinct from ordinary promises in having no counter-party or promisee, while vows are distinct in being about especially important matters.[[2]](#endnote-2) While this framework is useful for some purposes, it does not capture what I am interested in, which is a puzzle that arises from the voluntary undertaking of a self-imposed, exceptionless, rational commitment to behave in some way in the future. Focusing on the *importance of the content* of a self-commitment does not closely track with this question, while focusing on the *degree of robustness* of the commitment itself (which is often correlated with the importance of the content) does. However, the terminology we use to capture the kind of commitment that I am focused on is not crucial; someone with an alternate conception of how to differentiate between vows and related forms of self-commitment could see me as addressing whichever of those rational self-commitments are exceptionless.[[3]](#endnote-3)

As already noted, the sorts of pledges we typically call ‘vows’ usually involve strong forward-looking commitments to behave in certain ways or maintain certain attitudes in the future. They have a degree of robustness that exceeds that of ordinary plans or intentions. Vows seem especially serious, and we often criticize vow-breakers more sharply than we do people who abandon ordinary intentions or resolutions. We’re also inclined to apply the terminology of vowing (or the synonyms of *swearing* or *oath-making*) to all of the cases described in the first paragraph of Section 1. In short, there seems to be some core phenomenon that occurs with all cases of vowing, even if otherphenomena co-occur in some cases.

What might this phenomenon be? Some vows are not interpersonal, even if they are public—that is, they are not made *to* anyone who is in a position to accept the promise. For example, it is far from clear to whom most professional oaths are made. Consider a physician’s Hippocratic Oath.[[4]](#endnote-4) It cannot be made to one’s actual patients, since these doctor/patient relationships do not exist yet. And one’s potential future patients are not in a position to accept the oath, which binds regardless of whether they are on board with it. Nor can the medical profession as an institution plausibly be considered capable of accepting a promise, except by a concept-straining stretch. Moreover, some vows are not made to anyone (or anything) else at all. Vows of revenge can be private (e.g., Arya Stark in *Game of Thrones* privately vows to kill the people who murdered her family members). And many vows of sobriety are entirely private as well. It follows that vows are not essentially interpersonal.

Can vows be understood as a kind of promise even if they are not always interpersonal? Perhaps private vows or those without a clear recipient are best construed as promises made to oneself: maybe Arya promises herself to seek out her family’s murderers, and physicians promise themselves that they will respect patient privacy, in which case all vows could involve promises: some made to others, and some made to oneself. However, I do not think that this is the most helpful way to conceive of vows. If non-interpersonal vows are indeed promises, they are non-standard in two important ways. First, since promises are moral obligations, inappropriate breach of promise always involves some form of moral censure, while inappropriate vow violation fundamentally involves censure of a rational sort. To illustrate, consider two versions of the following example. Suppose Alma is a talented philosophy graduate student struggling with feelings of burnout and self-doubt while preparing for her dissertation qualifying exam. While she is very likely to make a meaningful and personally fulfilling contribution to the discipline if she completes her Ph.D. and seeks an academic job, there are other equally valuable careers she could successfully pursue if she decides to quit. Assume that it is independently morally and prudentially permissible for Alma to either remain enrolled or quit.

In Version 1, Alma’s best friend Bart is also enrolled in a challenging graduate program. Recognizing that their feelings of frustration are normal, and most likely can be overcome, Alma and Bart promise each other that they will not quit before completing their qualifying exams. In Version 2, Alma decides that she wants to remain enrolled, and bolsters her resolve by solemnly and privately vowing to complete her exam. If Alma in Version 1 feels frustrated with her progress and quits, she could be appropriately subject to moral censure: she has wronged Bart by breaking a promise to him, and (all else being equal) it would be appropriate for Bart to blame her, and for Alma to feel moral guilt. If Alma in Version 2 similarly quits, she may be subject to *rational* censure—others might think her imprudent or foolish, and she might berate herself for being weak-willed or for not adhering to her goals—but she has not done anything *morally* wrong.[[5]](#endnote-5) If the censure connected to vow violation is essentially rational, it will not be very useful to analyze vows by appealing to the concept of promising, which fundamentally involves censure of a different, moral sort. At best, an analysis of vows as promises would have to be to some extent analogous, disjunctive, or revisionary. We can avoid this if we seek an analysans that is at base a rational concept.

Second, at least paradigmatically, promises always have two parties: a promisor who makes the promise, and a promisee to whom the promise is made, and who must accept the promise and retains the power to unilaterally release the promisor.[[6]](#endnote-6) It is part of the structure of a promise that the promisee is able to release the promisor from the promissory obligation at will, or at any time and for any reason. If release occurs, the promise no longer has anyhold over the promisee; there is no moral “remainder” in the way that there might be when a promise is outweighed.If we construe self-promises as genuine promises in a straightforward way, it follows that promisors (acting in their capacity as promisees) can release themselves from their promises at will, with no moral remainder. If private vows are best understood as self-promises, it will follow that vowers can unilaterally release themselves from their vows in the same way. But self-release seems problematic, if not incoherent; many philosophers have argued that any obligation (promissory or otherwise) that you can unilaterally release yourself from is not reallyan obligation at all.[[7]](#endnote-7)

A number of other philosophers have rejected this idea, and argued that the possibility of self-release does not undermine the plausibility of self-promises—for example, because release at will is not an essential part of all promises (Rosati 2011), or because unilateral release from a promise is sometimes permissible (Habib 2009).[[8]](#endnote-8) I am skeptical that these arguments succeed.[[9]](#endnote-9) However, even if it is possible to make genuine promises to the self that permit of self-release, such promises are not a good candidate to ground an analysis of vows. For if they are to strongly bind us against temptation and other barriers to action, vows cannot involve unilateral self-release. There might be independent ways to bolster a self-promise to avoid self-release. But it will be simpler and more productive to analyze vows by appeal to some other kind of normative phenomena that more directly enables strong and unwaiveable self-binding.In sum, standard promises (which are moral, interpersonal, and subject to release at will) are unlikely to provide the best conceptual tools to analyze vows (which are rational, fundamentally intrapersonal, and not subject to release at will) in a straightforward way.

How then should we understand the private commitment incurred by vows? Vows are a mechanism by which to rationally bind ourselves to future actions, and we can do so in more or less strong ways. Intentions are a future-directed mental state with a certain amount of inertia or stability, as Michael Bratman and others have argued (Bratman 1987: 18–20). If I intend to go to a concert tonight, I have settled the matter of what I am going to do. I should not continue to engage in deliberation about it, or revise my plans haphazardly. But intentions don’t bind very strongly; I can permissibly change my mind about going to the concert because I become tired and feel like staying in, or because a friend invites me to go to the pub instead.

To bind myself to a future action more strongly, I can form a resolution, understood as an intention that is especially robust and resistant to revision, and that therefore displays a greater level of commitment; think of the resolutions that people tend to form at the start of a new year. The particular account of resolutions we adopt is less important than their functional role: resolutions are necessary to help us avoid temptation and act in line with our best judgment when we might otherwise be tempted to inappropriately abandon our plan or akratically act against it.[[10]](#endnote-10) For example, suppose I resolve to completely refrain from drinking for a month for health reasons. I should maintain this resolution even if my friend offers me a pour from an excellent bottle of wine at dinner, and I find myself strongly desiring the wine; resolutions enable achievement of your deeply valued and long-term ends, even when you are tempted and your day-to-day preferences change.

All else being equal, we are narrowlyrationally required to adhere to our resolutions. By narrow, I mean the sense of rationality concerned with effectively attaining our ends, rather than a broad sense of rationality concerned with performing the best overall actions. It can be rational in this narrow sense for the mob underling who is trying to advance in rank to kill the snitch as he has resolved to, as this helps him best attain his endorsed end of proving his loyalty and impressing the boss—even though killing the snitch is clearly impermissible, all-things-considered. But resolutions do not narrowly rationally bind us at all costs. For example, suppose I am at the party of a friend who belongs to a culture in which refusing a drink from your host is considered extremely rude. My friend’s mother brings out a bottle of expensive champagne and offers me a drink, and will be deeply offended I refuse. In such a case, it seems permissible for me to abandon my resolution to avoid drinking. I care about my health, and maintaining my resolution supports this concern. But I also care about the feelings of my friend’s mother, and abandoning my commitment to the former is in this case necessary for maintaining my commitment to the latter.

Vows (as I am conceiving of them—and remember, this terminology is stipulative and not essential to my account) narrowly rationally bind us in an even stronger way, for they are not subject to similar excusing conditions. If I have *vowed* to refrain from drinking—say, for religious reasons, or in a show of solidarity with my pregnant partner—then an offer of champagne at my friend’s party is not a good excuse for me to violate my vow. We generally make vows about those goals that we take the most seriously, and that we are most strongly set on maintaining despite whatever temptations or challenges come our way. To fulfill this role, vows are best understood as resolutions that are even more resistant to reconsideration than are ordinary resolutions. This is a matter of degree: resolutions are intentions that bind us more strongly, and vows are resolutions that are more strongly binding still.

The primary difference between vows and resolutions is in what counts as a legitimate excuse. Vows are resolutions without excusing conditions, or that you are required to carry out no matter what. Of course, circumstances beyond your control can prevent a vow from being fulfilled; the man you vow to kill in revenge might die of natural causes before you can do so. You might also act against a vow accidentally: on the TV show *30 Rock*, Floyd is successfully maintaining a sobriety vow until he eats salmon that comes with a sauce that he does not realize contains alcohol. In saying that vows are not subject to excusing conditions, I don’t mean to rule out cases in which a vow becomes impossible to fulfill (for some reason other than the vower’s negligence or wrongdoing) or is violated accidentally as potentially legitimate excuses.

An (imperfect) analogy is the following. *Pro tanto* duties such as the duty to keep our promises obligate us to act, but are sometimes subject to legitimate excuses, such as needing to satisfy a more important conflicting duty. Categorical duties such as the duty to refrain from torture—assuming such duties exist—obligate us absolutely; there cannot be a legitimate excuse for torturing someone. Resolutions are akin to *pro tanto* duties, while vows are akin to categorical duties. Rational vow-makers will not waver in their dedication or change their mind about what they have vowed to do, even if they are subject to fatigue, temptation, and the like. However, the stringency of vows raises an important question: given the unpredictability of life, how can it ever be rational to bind yourself to a future course of action without exception in this way?

1. **An Apparent Problem for Exceptionless Resolutions**

Vows must be without exception, lest escape be too easy: we make vowsbecause they bind us more stringently than do ordinary resolutions or other forms of self-commitment. But binding yourself in an exceptionless way seems like setting yourself up for potential rational failure. For your circumstances—or you—might change in an unpredictable way, such that maintaining your vow no longer makes sense for you.

One way in which a vow can cease to make sense is if one’s external circumstances change unexpectedly. For example, suppose Kim is elected to the office of county clerk in a rural county in a conservative U.S. state in the early 1990s.[[11]](#endnote-11) The county clerk is responsible for issuing marriage licenses. Kim has a strong religious objection to same-sex couples being married. When she becomes a clerk, marriage rights are reserved for opposite-sex couples only, and the political and cultural landscape is such there doesn’t seem to be any chance that this will change in the foreseeable future. Kim takes an oath of office, and vows to uphold the law.

Kim remains a county clerk until June of 2015, when the Supreme Court rules that the right to marriage for same-sex couples is guaranteed under the 14th Amendment. Issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples is not a duty that Kim is prepared to carry out; she would not have vowed to uphold the law in the first place had she known that the law would someday require her to do this. Was her vow irrational to make, given that it put her in the position of having to choose between violating a vow or acting in a way that she takes to be impermissible?

Alternatively, a vow may cease to make sense if the vower herself undergoes a deep change in values. For example, suppose Christina is a young Southern Baptist who believes for religious reasons that sex outside of marriage is deeply wrong. Christina vows to remain abstinent before marriage. However, over the next several years, Christina undergoes a deep ideological shift. After much careful study of the sociology of religion, she comes to believe that religious prohibitions on premarital sex are nothing more than a patriarchal attempt to control women’s bodies, and becomes an Episcopalian. Christina is unmarried, and decides that she would like to have sex. Was her abstinence vow rational to make in the first place, given that it put her in the position of having to choose between violating a vow and acting against what she now takes to be her best interest?

This question is about what is subjectively rational by the vower’s own lights, and so should not depend on our assessment of what Christina has the most objective reason to do. I aim to assess the rationality of vow-making as a structural feature of vows, independently of the rationality of the content of particular vows. To ensure that our intuitions are not being illicitly swayed by an assessment that Christina’s chastity vow was foolish or harmful, we should also consider a case involving different values. Suppose Dana is an effective altruist who believes that it is morally mandatory to share her wealth with the least well-off people in the world. She vows to give away 70% of her income to effective charities, and live frugally off the remaining 30%. After much reflection, she comes to believe that the demands of effective altruism are implausibly high, and that she has a moral duty to collect wealth for her children to inherit after her death instead. Was Dana’s vow rational for her to make in the first place, given that it forces her to choose between violating a vow or acting against what she now takes to be her children’s best interests?

1. **When is Vow Making Rational?**
   1. ***Permissible content***

A vow is irrational to make if the content of it is itself irrational. One way in which the content of a vow can be irrational is if it concerns an end that is itself deeply imprudent or inconsistent with the agent’s standing commitments. For example, suppose Eric makes his living as a voice actor. He is contemplating joining a non-cloistered religious order that requires new members to maintain a year-long vow of silence. This vow would be deeply imprudent for Eric; he would be unable to support himself and make a living if he adhered to it.

A vow can also be irrational to make if the end in question carries too great a risk of being deeply imprudent or morally impermissible by your own lights.To illustrate, consider the biblical story of Jephthah:

And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord, and said, “If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord’s, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering.” . . . Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah; and there was his daughter coming out to meet him . . . When he saw her, he tore his clothes, and said, “Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow.” (Judges 11:30 – 31; 34 – 35 NRSV).

Assume that there are some creatures that Jephthah reasonably believes it would be permissible to kill as an offering in exchange for a military victory, and that there is a chance that one of these creatures will be the first to come out of his house. So there is a chance that Jephthah’s vow will require him to do something he takes to be permissible (e.g., sacrifice a livestock animal). But there is also a chance that the vow will require Jephthah to kill one of his own family members, and he should surely recognize that one of his relatives might be the first one to greet him after a long absence. Jephthah’s vow is irrational, because it is irrational to commit yourself to doing something that is fairly likely to involve an outcome you take to be seriously morally wrong.[[12]](#endnote-12) Note that the narrow subjective rationality of *making* the vow might come apart from the rationality of *keeping* the vow. By Jephthah’s own lights (let’s assume), vows to God are absolutely binding, and are therefore inescapable.

This does not imply that vows that are inconsistent with some of your current values are irrational, so long as they are in line with other values that you more strongly endorse upon reflection. For example, suppose a steak-lover from a ranching community who eats beef every day becomes convinced that he should give up beef for environmental reasons, and vows to do so. This vow is inconsistent with his current community and culinary values. But it is consistent with his environmental and moral values, which he takes to be more important. Nor does this imply that there is zero room for doubt in rational vow-making. For example, suppose Fatimah is strongly morally opposed to drone warfare, and lives in a country that is not currently engaged in any military conflicts using drones. She enlists in the army, and vows to obey future military orders. This can be rational even if Fatimah recognizes that there is a very small chance that her country will engage in drone warfare in the future (say, because a minority political party unexpectedly manages to gain control of the legislature). But it cannot be rational if Fatimah’s country is on the brink of war, and the political party that endorses drone warfare is somewhat likely to win an upcoming election.

The oath of office made by Kim Davis, the real-life Rowan County, Kentucky clerk who refused to issue marriage licenses because she did not want to issue them to same-sex couples, is irrational in the same sort of way that Jephthah’s vow is. While Davis had been the chief deputy clerk since 1991, she did not become the county clerk until January of 2015, when she was elected for a 4-year term. Although it might have been unreasonable to expect Davis to predict that same-sex marriage would eventually be legal in Rowan County back in 1991, by January 2015—when *Obergefell v. Hodges* was already pending before the Supreme Court—she should have recognized that there was a very good chance that the Supreme Court would extend marriage rights to all couples. Her vow was risky in the same way as was Jephthah’s: it risked requiring her to perform an action she believes to be immoral. Assuming that she was not acting strategically for an ulterior political motive, it was irrational for Davis to make this vow in the first place.

* 1. ***Conditional role-based vows***

On the face of it, vows are unconditional: Kim vows to uphold the law, full stop, just as Dana vows to give away 70% of her income, period. However, I propose that rational vows are better construed as being implicitly conditional on the agent’s remaining in a certain social role or maintaining a certain form of personal identification, strong value-based stance, or commitment. For ease of discussion, I will refer to anything on which a vow can be conditional as a ‘role;’ this is meant to include forms of personal identification or commitment that are not tied to particular or concrete social roles.

Under this view, vows are indeed exceptionless in that they bind us no matter what. But for these exceptionless vows to be *rational*, they must bind only for so long as the agent remains in the role associated with the vow. So Kim’s vow is to uphold the law, full stop—for so long as she is a clerk. Christina’s vow is to refrain from premarital sex, period—as long as she is a Southern Baptist. And Dana’s vow is to give away 70% of her money—so long as she identifies as an effective altruist.Similarly, married people vow to remain absolutely faithful to their spouses, but only for so long as they remained married; a priest vows to remain obedient and chaste without exception, but only for so long as he is a priest. Arya’s revenge vow is implicitly conditional on identifying with a worldview that values vengeance; were she to have a massive change of heart and come to see mercy as a paramount virtue instead, she would abandon her identity as a revenge-seeker and thus escape from this vow.[[13]](#endnote-13) Sobriety vows are likewise implicitly conditional on the vower’s self-identification in some way (e.g., on identifying as a devout Mormon, or as a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, or simply as an alcoholic in recovery).Were a sobriety vower to genuinely and for sufficiently good reason abandon this identification—say, a Mormon who loses his faith and then clear-sightedly endorses the idea that being completely sober isn’t important after all—he would escape from his vow to avoid drinking alcohol.

There is debate in the meta-ethics literature about whether conditional obligations (of the form ‘If p, then S is obligated to Φ’) have narrow logical scope (p→obligated(Φ), such that whenever the antecedent of the conditional holds, the agent is rationally required to satisfy the consequent) or wide logical scope (obligated(p → Φ), which is logically equivalent to obligated(~p ∨ Φ), such that the agent is obligated to avoid the state of satisfying the antecedent but not the consequent, which she can do either by giving up the antecedent or by satisfying the consequent). I am not taking a stand on the broader debate about whether conditional rational requirements in general have wide- or narrow- scope, but am claiming only that rational vows are narrow-scope conditional obligations, where the antecedent is maintaining a particular role, and the consequent is acting as you have vowed to. So Kim’s oath of office has the logical form: Remain in office → obligated(uphold the law), while Christina’s vow of chastity has the form: Remain a Southern Baptist → obligated(refrain from sex), etc. An official who quits her job is not obligated to uphold the law, just as someone who loses her faith is no longer required to remain sexually abstinent. Rather, the obligation no longer applies, because the antecedent of the conditional is not satisfied. If the conditional were interpreted in a wide-scope way, an official’s quitting her job would count asone way to satisfy her oath of office, which doesn’t seem plausible.

As Lord (2011 and 2013) notes, escaping from a demand is distinct from both violating it or complying with it. To escape a demand is to make it the case that the demand no longer applies to you at all. Narrow-scope conditional demands have a structure that is escapable. To illustrate with Lord’s example, suppose the law states that if you are on the sidewalk, you may not ride a bicycle. You are on the sidewalk with a bicycle. You can satisfy this legal requirement by walking your bike, violate it by riding your bike, or escape from itby leaving the sidewalk and going into the street, thereby making it the case that the law no longer applies to you. Someone who abandons the role associated with her vow escapes from the requirement to act as vowed in the same way that the bicyclist who moves to the street escapes from the law.

This conditionality allows us to circumvent the potential irrationality of exceptionless vowing. An exceptionless vow is permissible to make, so long as you are prepared to abandon the role the vow is conditional on should the circumstances change unexpectedly, or should your values undergo a major (permissible) shift. Whether such escape is permissible all-things-considered depends on whether the relevant role may be permissibly abandoned; moving your bike into the street is no big deal, but escaping from a vow won’t always be so easy.

Consider how differently we assess those who fail to keep their vows after they have abandoned their roles compared with those who fail to adhere to their vows while maintaining their roles. A person in a monogamous marriage who sleeps with someone else is branded a cheater, but a divorced person who does so is not. This is because once you abandon the role associated with the vow, it no longer binds you. Maybe the spouse should not have gotten divorced in the first place. But once the divorce goes through, the marriage vow no longer binds, and the ex-spouse does nothing wrong if she fails to adhere to it. It follows that making a vow need not involve setting yourself up for potential rational failure. For if your vow is conditional on a role, you can avoid violating it when your circumstances or values change by abandoning that role.

To illustrate how this works, return to the case of Kim Davis. Because Kim’s vow was conditional on remaining in office, she has three options when same-sex marriage is legalized: (1) satisfy her vow by upholding the law, (2) violate her vow by refusing to issue marriage licenses, or (3) escape from her vow by quitting her job and ceasing to be a county clerk. Kim is unwilling to pursue option (1).[[14]](#endnote-14) Option (2) involves violating a vow, which is rationally problematic. If the vow is also a promise made to another party—as oaths of public office plausibly are—violating it also counts as promise-breaking, and is morally problematic as well. It follows that the only good option for Kim is the third: escaping her vow by quitting her job.

Kim’s oath of office was rational for her to make in the first place only if she was prepared to quit her job if enforcing the law became intolerable to her. It is irrational to make an exceptionless vow to uphold the law, recognize that there is a chance that the law will require you to do something take to be intolerable, yet be unwilling to quit to escape from this vow if the law changes. A willingness to do something as drastic as quit your job if carrying out your professional vow becomes intolerable might seem like an overly harsh demand, but it isn’t really. For professional vows are made only about issues that are at the very heart of a profession, and people unwilling to uphold them are not well-suited to remaining in their professional roles. Importantly, this does not rule out conscientious objection in the workplace. For example, in the modern Hippocratic Oath, physicians swear to “not play at God.” Maintaining this vow is compatible with conscientiously refusing to perform particular duties; indeed, some doctors conscientiously refuse to provide certain services because they believe that the services involve “playing God” and therefore contradict the Hippocratic Oath.

1. **Objections and replies** 
   1. ***Are all vows really exceptionless?***

One might worry that there are cases in which it is narrowly rational to fail to act as vowed *while remaining* in the relevant social role. Such cases would be counterexamples to my claim that permissibly failing to keep a vow requires abandoning the role on which the vow is conditional. For example, consider

section.ssed in thsi reted to include personal identifications of the sort i'. one glass of wine.eting that he had not been sobe**Opening the marriage:** Mr. and Mrs. Smith get married, and include sexual fidelity as part of their marriage vows. Years later, they re-evaluate their stance on monogamy, and agree that a non-monogamous marriage is better for them both. They remain married, but no longer adhere to their vows of sexual fidelity.[[15]](#endnote-15)

On the face of it, this seems like a case where the vower remains in the role (e.g., remains married), and yet permissibly violates one of the vows that is conditional on that role. However, this is better construed as a case of leaving one role and then entering another. The Smiths’ vow of sexual fidelity is conditional not just on their being married, but on their being in a *monogamous* marriage*.* When the Smiths decide to open their marriage, they exit one role (that of being in a monogamous marriage) and enter another (that of being in an open marriage). In moving from a closed marriage to an open marriage, the Smiths stop participating in one institution (traditional marriage) and begin participating in another of their own making, with new sexual vows that they negotiate together at that point.

One might worry that this is an implausible account of marriage roles. But I’m not claiming that the Smiths cease to be married when they switch from a monogamous to a non-monogamous marriage. For it is possible to exit a particular *kind* of marriage role without abandoning your role as a spouse. The same thing might happen with a couple who have a hierarchical view of marriage and start their marriage with the wife vowing to obey her husband, and then come to have more progressive views about gender roles. They abandon one kind of marriage role (say, biblical marriage) and enter into a new one (say, egalitarian marriage) without thereby abandoning their status as a married couple. Granted, we must use good sense in determining when we can plausibly be said to have switched marriage roles rather than abandoned particular marriage vows, lest we run into ridiculous results. This will be constrained by our understanding of the importance of various marriage commitments: those practices that are most foundational to a marriage will be those that delineate different kinds of marriage role. Practices surrounding sexual monogamy and gender hierarchies are (at least in many cases) seen as foundational to what kind of marriage you are in. Other purported shifts in marriage commitment are not. For example, suppose I vow to always support my spouse, but I fail to defend their mediocre cooking against my parents’ criticism of it. I cannot claim that I have not violated my vow of support, but simply abandoned one marriage role (that of fully supportive spouse) and entered into another (that of spouse-supportive-of-everything-but-criticism-of-cooking). To reconceptualize a marriage role is to deeply alter something about your perceived self-identity. The person who goes from a monogamous to a polyamorous or from a hierarchical to egalitarian marriage plausibly does this; the person who stops defending their spouse’s cooking does not.

Sometimes, it’s not plausible to claim that a role has been altered when a seemingly permissible violation of a vow occurs. Consider the following case:

**Falling planter:** Greta belongs to a religious order that requires members to take a strict vow of silence. One of the other monks is absorbed in prayer beneath a balcony. A heavy stone planter teeters on the edge of the balcony. Greta notices that the planter is about to fall and smash into the praying monk. The only way to warn him in time is to loudly shout “Look out!”

Clearly, Greta should call out to the monk. But it doesn’t seem plausible that Greta ceases to be a monk. Has she permissibly violated her vow? I don’t think so, for two possible reasons. First, it’s plausible Greta’s actions don’t actually count as a vow *violation*. When assessing whether a vow has been kept, the reasons for which the vow was made matter. The point of Greta’s vow of silence is maintaining discipline, and it is in no way undisciplined to call out to someone in danger. Greta has remained disciplined, and so has upheld the spirit of her vow.section.ssed in thsi reted to include personal identifications of the sort i'. one glass of wine.eting that he had not been sobe Alternatively, perhaps Greta’s shouting is a *narrowly irrational* violation of her vow of silence that is *broadly rational.* Maybe Greta acts irrationally in the narrow sense in breaking her vow and failing to attain her endorsed goals, but does what is morally required all-things-considered by saving someone from serious injury—thus acting rationally in the broad sense of doing what makes most sense overall. Sometimes, we have good reason to be narrowly irrational.

* 1. ***Does my account capture the phenomenology of vow-making?***

One might worry that my proposal is implausible because we do not always explicitly assume that our vows are conditional on maintaining certain roles or personal identifications. For example, many marriage vows include the phrase, “until death do us part,” while very few include a caveat like “. . . unless the marriage becomes intolerable to me, in which case we’ll get a divorce and these vows will no longer bind.” Similarly, when young Christina makes her abstinence pledge, she likely assumes that she is going to refrain from sex *in all possible circumstances;* surely she does not think “I swear to avoid pre-marital sex . . . unless I lose my faith.”

However, this isn’t a problem for my account. Vowers can engage in conditional role-based vowing without confusion or self-deception even if they are not always occurrently aware of the fact that their vow is conditional. A vower’s willingness to abandon a role should the need arise does not have to be an explicit part of the content of the vow, so long as the vower recognizes the implicit conditionality of the vow upon reflection. Psychologically, a vow might bind less effectively if we dwell on the conditionality inherent in it, which is probably why people making marriage vows generally don’t say anything explicit about the possibility of divorce. But people making rational marriage vows must recognize upon reflection that divorce is a possibility, even if a distant one—and grant that if they get divorced, they will no longer be required to maintain their wedding vows.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Furthermore, keep in mind that I am not proposing that a vow must be conditional on a role *in order to count as a vow,* but only that it must be so in order to be *rational to make*. People do sometimes make completely unconditional vows, in a couple of ways. First, a vow might not be conditional on a role at all. Christina might irrationally vow to refrain from sex while unmarried *no matter what*, even ifshe loses her faith at some point in the future—for from her present perspective, she believes that premarital sex is impermissible for everyone, no matter what their religious beliefs.[[17]](#endnote-17) Second, a vow might be conditional on a role that is absolutely inescapable. This would be the situation of someone who got married in a jurisdiction that did not permit divorce under any circumstance. But entirely unconditional vows like these are narrowly irrational; they are a commitment to allowing the dead hand of your own past to constrain you in the future even if your values shift. And we should not let our former values have such sway over us.

What if an unconditional vow is made with the specific aim of counteracting a future shift in values? For example, suppose Harvey is a devout Christian who is about to leave his small homogenous town and move to a big multicultural city. He knows that people sometimes lose their faith when exposed to new perspectives. And so he makes a vow to read the Bible every day and attend church every week—no matter what, *even if he loses his faith.* Harvey’s aim is preventing a shift in belief: he assumes that by regularly reading the Bible and attending services, he is more likely to sustain his current beliefs, or to return to them if he ever veers away from them. Following David Owens’s discussion of “prophylactic promises” (2008) that are made to increase the likelihood that the promisor will attain the promised action, call a vow like Harvey’s a “prophylactic vow.” Are prophylactic vows rational to make?

Harvey’s prophylactic vow is narrowly irrational to make: it is an overly stubborn commitment to performing an action in the future even if doing so no longer serves your ends or makes sense from your own perspective. However, *if* making a narrowly irrational vow in fact prevents value shift, and *if* such value shift would in fact be bad, it might be best all-things-considered to make a narrowly irrational vow. For example, suppose Dana the effective altruist decides she is going to become a stockbroker, and earn more so that she can give more. She recognizes that surrounding herself with stockbrokers might cause her to succumb to the capitalist values of those around her, and to value owning luxury cars more than doing the most good. So Dana vows to give away 70% of her income each month no matter what—*even if* she decides that effective altruism is misguided—because she thinks that the act of monthly giving will help prevent her values from shifting. If effective altruism is an independently valuable goal, and if giving money away can help one remain an effective altruist (or become one again after capitalist corruption), it might make sense for Dana to make such a vow—not because doing so is rational *qua* act of vow-making, but because it increases the chance that she will attain an independently valuable goal. Harvey’s and Dana’s vows are psychological tools that do not primarily aim at attaining the vowed ends (e.g., reading the Bible regularly or giving money away), but at achieving some further good that would otherwise be difficult to attain (e.g., bolstering faith in adverse circumstances or maintaining effective altruist values). There might be other cases in which it makes sense to make an irrational vow in the service of some further goal. Unconditional marriage vows might be like this for some people: perhaps the only psychologically realistic way for them to fully invest in a romantic relationship is to pledge their love and fidelity unconditionally. If this sort of romantic commitment is valuable to them, it might be worth making an irrational wedding vow to attain it.section.ssed in thsi reted to include personal identifications of the sort i'. one glass of wine.eting that he had not been sobe

* 1. ***Does my account make escape from vows too easy?***

One might worry that this account makes vows too easy to escape from. If all it takes to escape from a vow is abandoning a role, then maybe vows won’t bind us very strongly after all; vowers will be inclined to simply abandon the role in question if the going gets tough. However, we either cannot or should not unilaterally shed most of our social roles and personal identifications on a whim. There are good independent reasons to maintain the roles associated with most vows. If abandoning the role is itself problematic, then escape is not a permissible option, and the vow can be satisfied only by acting as vowed. My view has the flexibility to explain why some vows are fairly easy to permissibly escape from while others are not.

In general, the harder it is to exit a role, the more carefully one should enter into a vow that is conditional on that role. Because the cost of quitting the Boy Scouts is very low, it is permissible to join the Scouts on a whim, and to take the Scout Oath while expecting that you very well may quit if you decide that being “physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight” as the oath requires is intolerable to you.[[18]](#endnote-18) Other roles cannot be abandoned as casually, such as being a member of a profession, being married, or holding a public office. It sometimes makes sense for someone to quit a job, leave a marriage, or resign from public office, but there must be good reasons for this; the costs to self and others are too high to permit casual abandonment.

Other roles are even harder to abandon; for example, it is difficult to renounce one’s citizenship, and it can be psychologically stressful to alter one’s fundamental moral beliefs. Moreover, the maintenance of some roles might not be in your volitional control; it’s not clear whether you can abandon religious faith at will, even if you want to. Accordingly, there will probably not be many cases in which it is permissible all-things-considered to escape from a citizenship oath, moral pledge, or religious vow by abandoning the relevant role. Finally, there might be forms of personal self-identification that should never be abandoned, such as identifying as a non-abuser of alcohol. Accordingly, there will likely be no cases in which it is permissible all-things-considered for an alcoholic to escape from a sobriety vow by giving up the relevant form of personal identification.

Ultimately, exceptionless vow-making is rational when the content of the vow is rational, the vow is conditional on a role, and you are able to abandon the role and thereby escape the vow should the circumstances or your underlying values change in a relevant way. This exit strategy will not always be permissible, all-things-considered. Some roles should only be abandoned in extreme circumstances, and others should not be abandoned at all, which means that some vows can be permissibly escaped from only in extreme circumstances, and others can never be permissibly escaped from. The more robust and resistant to abandonment the role affiliated with a vow, the more strongly the vow will bind overall.[[19]](#endnote-19)

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1. In some times and places, all vows were thought to involve God: private vows were promises between the individual and God, while interpersonal vows were promises made to another person with God as divine guarantor. For example, Thomas Aquinas argues that “a [vow](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15511a.htm) is a promise made to [God](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06608a.htm) about something acceptable to Him.” (ST II-II, Q. 88, Art. 1). In contemporary Anglophone society, vows or oaths are frequently presumed to have religious significance. For example, courtroom witnesses in the United States who choose to omit the phrase “so help me God” from their swearing-in go on to *affirm* that they are stating the truth, while those who do not omit the phrase must *swear* to it. In the United Kingdom, sworn testimony made in the name of a deity or holy book is called an *oath*, while the secular equivalent is an *affirmation* (see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sworn_testimony>). However, there is no principled reason why a strong self-commitment device must be religious or rely on a divine enforcement mechanism, which means that a religious context or content is not an essential part of the core phenomenon of vowing that I am trying to capture. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Fruh argues that an adequate theory of promising should be able to explain the neglected “sibling phenomena” of oaths and vows, as well, and that such a theory is preferable to theories that do not accommodate oaths or vows. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. While my present focus is on rational commitments, similar concerns arise regarding promises, which involve a non-waivable commitment to morally bind yourself to another person to act in a certain way in the future (so long as they want you to do so). See Liberman (forthcoming) for an account of when it is morally permissible to make promises that you are uncertain you will keep in the future. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For a detailed defense of the claim that the Hippocratic Oath does not plausibly have a promisee or counter-party, see Fruh (forthcoming). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Our intuitions about these forms of censure may be muddled for two reasons. First, because the same speech act (e.g., saying “I do” during a wedding) can signal *both* the swearing of a vow *and* the making of a promise (see Liberman (manuscript)), it will often seem to us as though vows impose moral obligations. And second, vow violation can involve moral censure in particular cases: if the vow is about moral content (e.g., abandoning a vow to stop eating meat for ethical reasons), or if we assume a moralized conception of self-control (e.g., presuming that failure to stick to your goals, whatever they are, is a sign of bad moral character), or if violating the vow has further morally relevant consequences (e.g., abandoning a military oath to obey the orders of your superior officers and putting your fellow soldiers in danger by doing so). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. It is possible to construe non-standard cases of promising as involving only one party. For example, Albrecht (2018) argues that “graveside promises” (made to promisees who are already dead) can be understood as genuine cases of promising in which the promisor can “act as a proxy—as someone who stands in a relation of responsibility for another’s moral and personal development—and accept the promise on behalf of the deceased” (470 – 471). Albrecht extends this analysis to cover promises made to the self, arguing that self-promising makes sense only when it is “appropriate for one to act as a proxy for oneself—when one needs to act in a special way to promote one’s moral and personal development” (479). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For example, Hobbes argues that the political sovereign is not bound by his own commands because it is not “possible for any person to be bound to himself, because he that can bind can release; and therefore he that is bound to himself only is not bound” (*Leviathan* II-26: 198). Likewise, Marcus Singer argues that “a ‘duty’ from which one could release oneself at will is not, in any literal sense, a duty at all” (1959: 203). And Alison Hills notes that “a normative requirement to Φ should be valid whether or not you want to Φ, for a normative requirement is a reason to act which holds whatever you desire. If you could release yourself at any time from a duty to the self, that duty would not be a genuine normative requirement; it would not be a genuine duty at all” (2003: 133). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See also Dannenberg (2015), who offers an alternative understanding of the core feature of both self- and other-directed promises. He argues that “the activity of promising oneself can thus be thought of as a kind of deliberate undertaking by the promisor to value something, and to keep valuing it” (162), such that “to break a promise to oneself is then to act against a value that one has deliberately authored and actively cultivated as one’s own” (163). Similarly, “making a sincere promise to another requires undertaking to value, and to continue valuing, something like the other’s distinctive point of view” (163). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The arguments in these papers are rich and nuanced, and I cannot do them justice here. However, I can offer a very brief and sketchy overview of why I am not optimistic that they will succeed. First, Rosati offers a case in which release at will from an interpersonal promise is impermissible and makes no normative difference, because the promisor is independently obligated to do the promised thing (e.g., refrain from torturing a third party). However, I think that release changes the nature and directedness of the obligation (i.e., the promisor who tortures anyway after he is released from his promise to refrain is both cruel *and* untrustworthy, and wrongs both the promisee and the third party), which is enough of a normative difference to establish that the possibility of release is an important part of all promises. Second, to accommodate release, promissory duties to oneself must be unproblematically waivable in general and without moral remainder. But this is not so in the cases that Habib addresses, which involve waiving duties that are conditional on roles by exiting that role (e.g., waiving the duty to grade papers by quitting your job as a professor). While I agree that this is a way in which we can escape from obligations (and I argue in Section 4 that this is a means of escaping the rational obligation incurred by a vow), this is not the sort of waiving that is typically involved in promissory release, which is non-role based and is at-will. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For more on the role of resolutions in enabling us to resist temptation by preventing us from overhastily revising our intentions, see Holton (2009). See also Liberman (2016) for a criticism of (and alternative to) Holton’s account. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. This example is based on the real-life case of Kim Davis, the county clerk of Rowan County, Kentucky, who refused to issue marriage licenses after the *Obergefell v. Hodges* Supreme Court ruling that legalized same-sex marriage in all U.S. states. The real Kim’s circumstances did not change unexpectedly; see Section 6.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Aquinas cites Jerome as making a similar observation about Jephthah’s vow, noting that his vow “could have an [evil](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05649a.htm) result if, as indeed happened, he were to be met by some animal which it would be unlawful to sacrifice, such as an ass or a human being. Hence [Jerome](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08341a.htm) says: ‘*In vowing he was foolish, through lack of discretion*, and in keeping his [vow](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15511a.htm) he was [wicked](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05649a.htm)’” (ST II-II, Q. 88, Art. 2, ad. 2; my emphasis). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Or perhaps Arya’s vow of revenge is conditional on her identifying *as a Stark;* she’s taking revenge on the people who killed her relatives. If she were to completely shed her identity as a Stark—say, by voluntarily abandoning her name and all family ties to join an order of faceless assassins—then her revenge vow would no longer apply to her. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Whether this unwillingness is reasonable is a separate question; a charitable interpretation of Kim’s behavior might be that her religious views about sexuality are so deeply a part of her practical identity in Korsgaard’s (1996) sense that to give them up would be a kind of death for Kim. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Thanks to Joshua Stein for suggesting this case. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See Liberman (manuscript) for a more detailed account of when it is permissible to make wedding vows and promises you are not certain you can keep, including a more detailed account of how wedding vows are conditional on maintaining the role of spouse. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Thanks to Kathryn Lindeman for pressing me on whether abstinence vows are actually unconditional. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. <http://www.usscouts.org/advance/boyscout/bsoathlaw.asp> [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Thanks to Facundo Alonso, Joshua Crabill, Julia Driver, August Gorman, Carolyn McLeod, Mark Migotti, Joshua Stein, the winter 2016 Rotman Institute Postdoc Work in Progress group at Western University (Tommaso Bruni, Lucas Dunlap, Alkistis Elliott-Graves, Robert Foley, Elina Pechlivanidi, and Catherine Stinson), and anonymous referees for this journal for helpful discussion of this paper, as well as to audiences at SLACRR 2016, the 2016 Canadian Philosophical Association annual meeting, Tulane University in 2018, and Southern Methodist University in 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)