I. Introduction: Nietzsche and the Right to Make Promises

My grandfather was a rancher in rural Idaho where for nearly forty years he raised cattle and made his living buying, selling, and trading with other men. He was a modest commercial success in a difficult, sometimes brutal business, but this was not his proudest achievement. What he prized far more was the reputation he earned among his peers as a man who could be counted on to deal honestly, and to honor his word no matter what. To live by his word was paramount, and it was evident to anyone who knew him just how much pride he took in doing so. Within his local community, and reaching considerably beyond into an extended network of ranchers, traders, and businessmen, the deals he made, big or small, were sealed only with a word and a handshake. His good name was all he ever needed in conducting both his professional and personal affairs.

In the opening of the second essay of The Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche speaks of those with “the right to make promises,” of those who “stand as their own guarantors.”1 My grandfather was evidently such a person. He earned the right to give his promise to others and have it suffice. To ask him for anything more than his word as seal, bond, or collateral was to deny him what was properly his: not just a slight or an insult, but a failure to give him his due.

While my grandfather was in many ways extraordinary, what he exemplifies has a place in nearly everyone’s experience. We may tend to promise less ceremoniously, and most of us regard promising as less

1. These expressions appear in the Kaufmann (1967) translation, on which I rely throughout. The more recent Clark and Swenson (1998) translation uses “permission” rather than “right,” and where Kaufmann writes “standing security for one’s own future” and “standing as one’s own guarantor,” Clark and Swenson prefer variations of “vouching for oneself.” I offer no opinion concerning which translation provides a more faithful rendering of Nietzsche’s text; I rely on Kaufman because it is better suited for my purposes of appropriating and developing Nietzsche’s ideas in the context of more recent discussions of promising among moral philosophers. The term “permission” seems too weak to capture the sort of privilege, power, and authority that accrue to a person of her word; I will argue that rightful promisers possess something more along the lines of what many would designate a “claim right,” corresponding to an obligation on the part of others to take them at their word when they see fit to give it.
central to the way we live our lives today. But we are nevertheless in this respect like him: when we are prepared to give our word that we will do something, we think it ought to suffice. We think our promises should provide others with a measure of security about what we will do — in many cases, as much security as anyone else has reason to want or need. We think this because we regard ourselves as people of our word: people careful to make only promises that we can keep, and committed to honoring the promises that we make. We expect others to recognize this by treating our word as good. Like my grandfather, in other words, we believe that as people of our word, we have a right to be taken at our word when we see fit to give it: a right to make promises.

Such a right barely registers in recent discussions among moral philosophers, however. In one sense, this is not surprising. We tend to make a fetish of moral obligation, taking it for granted that the mark of a bona fide promise is that the promiser generates a new obligation to perform. Thought about promising, then, begins and ends with telling the story of that obligation: the job of the moral theorist is to explain how and why some act of the promiser’s becomes morally required via her communicating her intention for it to be so, and to categorize the kind of wrong perpetrated if she then fails to act as she ought. Despite the evident fact that to be on the receiving end of a good promise is to find oneself with a new and special sort of reason to believe in and rely upon another, it has been notoriously difficult to find a proper place for this truism within any story about promising so conceived. For one thing, it has long been argued that such a belief cannot be among the necessary conditions for obligation’s generation, on pain of a familiar problem about circularity. And since it is evident to most that promise-breaking is a blameworthy offense whether or not a promiser was taken at her word, belief cannot be essential to promissory obligation’s ground either.

Some moral philosophers have heroically tried to solve these problems, or else bite bullets, offering theories that analyze the wrong of breaking promises in terms of frustrated beliefs, let-down reliance, or violated trust. But in the main, most remain unconvinced. Instead, they take another tack. Familiar arguments show decisively that believing and relying are not necessary for generating a new obligation. And since the proper job of the promising theorist is to explain how obligation materializes, taking someone at her word therefore becomes peripheral: a matter of counting on a promiser to meet her new obligation once it exists. But then, counting on someone to do as she is morally obliged appears to be a perfectly general matter, and so questions about why and how we ought to take others at their word would seem to present no special concern for someone with a theory of promising to peddle. Indeed, to the extent that counting on another to act as she is obliged looks to many to be the sort of thing a reasonable person does in light of her evidence that a certain thing will happen, moral philosophers may think themselves able to outsource such questions altogether, to something more like epistemology than ethics.

We find a fundamentally different picture of promising in Nietzsche’s brief but suggestive remarks in the Genealogy. Nietzsche is clearly not interested in explaining how someone who says “I promise” comes to deserve moral blame if she fails to perform, much less in locating the place of broken promises in any taxonomy of wrongdoing. For Nietzsche, the mark of a bona fide promise is that it will be kept, come what may. His treatment quite evidently aims to uncover what people must come to be like, and how they must come to treat

2. In this paper I will use “giving one’s word” and related expressions in a narrower than usual sense, to cover only interpersonal promising, i.e. giving one’s word that one will do (or not do) something.

3. Much of the contemporary discussion traces to Prichard (c. 1940).

4. I discuss this familiar circularity problem in greater detail in section III.

5. In the recent literature, Scanlon (1998) is the standard-bearer for such views. Before him, MacCormack (1972) defends the reliance view, as does (arguably) Thomson (1990) (though she may also be read as a “rights-transfer” theorist, insofar as what is fundamental is not actual reliance, but the right to rely). Trust as the ground of obligation is defended in Friedrich and Southwood (2011). See also Kolodny and Wallace (2003) for a “hybrid” account, in which there are two distinct wrongs, one involving violating the norms of a social practice, the other involving frustrating expectations.
and regard one another, if they are to make one another promises like that: the sorts of promises on which anyone can unflinchingly rely. For such promising to thrive, he can be read to say, people must know in themselves and recognize in their peers the kind of foresight and self-control that ensures that they give their word only when they know they will keep it, and the particular sort of strength of will needed in order to honor their word whenever they give it. Among such people, a person’s word is something that others come to recognize as deserving of respect and trust. And so, to meet another’s promise with anything less is to deny her the status of promiser — it is a refusal to treat her as someone who possesses those qualities of temperament and will that make her fit to “stand security for her own future.”

When a person offers you her word that she will do something, on this Nietzschean way of thinking about it, she is therein claiming a certain status for herself. Accepting her word as a sound and sufficient basis for believing and relying is a matter of honoring that claim. A would-be promiser will in fact be providing such a reason just in case she really does possess the sort of character that makes her promise any good. In other words, by saying the words “I promise” or their equivalent, a person therein presents herself to you as able-cum-entitled to make you a good promise; you must determine whether to acknowledge her as the kind of person she claims to be, by treating her word as the sort of reason she offers it as.

So construed, clearly the right to make promises cannot be part of any universal charter. If making promises were simply a matter of exercising an ability to generate new moral obligations, we might imagine that we ought to recognize one another as equipped to do so simply in virtue of our shared humanity. But Nietzsche’s right to promise is the sort of right that must be earned, through the cultivation of the sort of character required if one’s word is to bear the weight of the beliefs of others. More than a mere normative power in our modern, technical sense, the power made manifest in a good promise is in the first place psychological and material, “a power over oneself and over fate.” This psychological and material power entitles a promiser to the recognition of others, in the form of their willingness to take her at her word; only in that way is she acknowledged as one of those “who give their word as something that can be relied on because they know themselves strong enough to keep it.”

I imagine that some will find these Nietzschean ideas about a right to make promises neither here nor there. So Nietzsche has a rather different ideal of promising to offer us — so what? Why should we let these ideas influence our own “morally enlightened” thought about the activity? After all, few fancy themselves the supramoral, sovereign individuals that Nietzsche seems to say the “animal with the right to make promises” has to be. The ideals and norms that guide the way we promise surely have softer edges, countenancing the fact that we are both more fallible and more forgiving. Nor does Nietzsche himself seem concerned in the right sort way with the value of such people

to voluntarily incur an obligation, making her the fitting target of attitudes like blame and resentment if she does not act as promised. (Darwall is not interested in reconstructing Nietzsche’s own view about the right to promise, and in the accompanying footnote he acknowledges that what Nietzsche has in mind is something else entirely, i.e. the right to stand security for oneself.)

7. The passages quoted in this paragraph appear in Nietzsche (1967), 60.

8. There has recently been some controversy over whether the passages about promising and the ‘sovereign individual’ that launch GM II should be taken to represent Nietzsche’s own ideals. Hatab (1996), Acampora (2004), and Leiter (2011) all argue that Nietzsche should be read as mocking the sovereign individual. A survey of the literature indicates that this reading has not won many converts, however. Discussion of these passages that locate the ideal squarely within the broader framework of Nietzsche’s work (thus lending support to the traditional, straightforward reading of the text) can be found in Anderson (2006), Miles (2006), and Migotti (2013). For related and illuminating discussion of Nietzsche’s views about promising, see Ridley (2009) and Migotti (2013).

6. Darwall (2011) glosses Nietzsche’s notion of a right to promise as follows: “When we accept a promise from someone, we treat him as having the authority or ‘normative power’ to make promises and thereby become answerable to us in the distinctive way that promisers are to promises” (268). Darwall’s construal makes it possible to regard promising as a universal right (at least among competent adults). But, so understood, the recognition due a promiser is compatible with regarding her word as more or less worthless, since recognizing her right to promise evidently means only seeing her as entitled
to one another. The characteristic attitude that Nietzsche’s righteous promisers display towards each other appears to be a combination of veneration and fear; worse, they seem to despise everyone else. This is, at best, a peculiar way of capturing the inherent ethical appeal for us of living alongside others devoted to achieving and maintaining our status as people of our word in one another’s eyes.

There are, in short, outright failures in Nietzsche’s treatment to capture much of what we think most important in promising, and any credible defense of anything like Nietzsche’s idea that promising involves claiming a right will have to be amended and extended considerably beyond what he says. But acknowledging the shortcomings of Nietzsche’s own treatment should not lead us to overlook the fact that he is onto something fundamental. His discussion invites focus on a dimension of how promising works and why it matters that is too often overlooked: when we promise, we regard ourselves as entitled to provide others with sound, reliable beliefs about what we will do.9 In

9. While it is the aim of this paper to shift focus away from the familiar question of the ground of the promiser’s obligation, it is important to stress that the ideas on offer have clear implications for that question. Indeed, it is natural to think that it is precisely when and because a person’s right to promise is recognized, i.e. when she is taken at her word, that a promiser becomes bound to another to do as she promised in the particular way we pick out with the pleonasm that, having made a promise, a person has a new and special kind of obligation to keep her word. Of course we can maintain that some sort of promise was made when a promiser was not taken at her word; the important point is simply that such promises are recognizably degenerate vis-à-vis a familiar ideal of promising according to which the telos of a promise as such is the promise to another of a special kind of reason for belief and reliance and, through the success of that very provision, the undertaking of a special sort of responsibility by the promiser to ensure its truth.

It is sometimes assumed that each and every morally significant promise obligates its maker in the very same way, and that analyzing “the” wrong of breaking a promise will therefore reveal the nature of how any promise, as such, binds. I think this assumption unfounded and have questioned it in Dannenberg (2015). Rejecting it allows us to say, among other things, that though a person may in some way become morally obligated by her promise even when she is not taken at her word, she is not bound in the same way as when she is believed, since the basis of promissory obligation when all goes well lies in the responsibility that the promiser assumes for her audience’s belief. Moran (2005) makes a similar point: see especially p. 24. See also fn. 13 of this paper.

the following, I hope to convince you of this, to provide (some of) the crucial elements lacking in Nietzsche’s own discussion of the right to make promises, and to explore some further implications that thinking about promising in this way has for our ongoing ethical thought about the activity.

II. The Right to Be Taken at One’s Word

I will begin with an idea I hope proves familiar: when you are willing to give someone your word that you will do something, you do not regard her as simply free to do with it as she will. Rather, you expect that she treat your word as good, that she take you at your word. My aim in this section is to anchor this familiar expectation in some ideas about providing another with a distinctive sort of security or peace of mind by making her a promise, and the sort of character presupposed in undertaking to do so. The intuitive idea is that in solemnly offering your promise to another, you present yourself to her as a “person of your word,” and expect the person to whom your word is offered to acknowledge you by treating your word as good, i.e. by taking you at your word.

Consider first what it is like to learn that someone is not prepared to take you at your word.10 You offer to drive the widower who lives

10. Colloquially, this expression names a package of admirable character traits, which underwrite more than just the making of good promises. A person of her word is someone disposed to sincerity, good judgment, accuracy in her beliefs, circumspection, a reliable memory, self-control, self-knowledge, strength of will, etc.; as a result, she is someone whose promises, solemn assertions, oaths, guarantees, pledges, vouchers, and the like can all be “taken to the bank” by her audience. While I focus especially on the case of promising, my discussion might be extended in a straightforward way to cover other types of speech-act and related forms of commitment too, thereby offering some sense of the unity of word-givings. For discussion of the relationship between promising and asserting and/or warranting, see Austin (1946), Migotti (2003), and Watson (2004). For a discussion of telling that also briefly touches on promising and presents important parallels with many key points I develop in this paper, see Moran (2005). See also Lawlor (2013) for a related account of the speech act of assurance.

11. Austin (1979) observes that “If I have said I know or I promise, you insult me in a special way by refusing to accept it.” (100). Surely Austin does not mean
next door to his upcoming doctor’s appointment, and later learn that he has gone to the trouble of reserving a taxi “just in case you change your mind.” Despite promising to go to a concert with her next month, your best friend contacts your other friends to ask that they not make any conflicting plans with you for the evening in question. At lunch with a colleague, you realize that you have left your wallet behind in your office and ask to borrow twenty dollars; he says that he would be happy to lend it to you, but only if you will write out an IOU.

These and similar failures to simply take you at your word will, I assume, tend to matter to you. Depending on the details, a number of responses might seem called for: you might get upset, indignant, or take offense. Or you might just adopt a posture of considered indifference, resolving not to bother making promises with such a person anymore. But why exactly should someone’s making a backup plan, checking up on you behind your back, or insisting on “getting it in writing” matter to you at all, let alone elicit these kinds of reactions?

The natural place to turn is to the familiar idea that the point of offering your promise is to engender in another a new, reliable belief about what you will do. Clearly such beliefs have gone missing in the examples above. Whatever one thinks about their role in explaining what one does wrong in failing to keep a promise, undeniably your aim in making paradigmatic promises like these involves them. In each instance, you meant to be giving the other party good grounds for forming a certain belief: that you will provide a ride, show up for the concert, pay back the loan — so that she might rely with confidence on your doing these things. You take yourself to be able to do precisely that through the provision of your word. By making a backup plan, checking up on you, or insisting on getting it in writing, another makes it clear that she does not see it that way.

But putting things in terms of reliable beliefs does not yet tell the whole story. Importantly, reliable beliefs can be generated by a promise in better and worse ways. Imagine that someone who has burned you in the past is trying to make you a promise. Each year you are charged with finding volunteers to read papers for an essay prize. One of your colleagues offers to help out, but you know better than to count on him — whenever he takes a batch of papers, he returns them late, or not at all, always with some feeble excuse. Perhaps sensing your reticence, he offers, “This year I’ll get them back to you on time, I promise.” Recalling similar, empty commitments in the past, you are just about to tell him where he can stick his “promise,” when you notice that the dean has overheard the exchange. Realizing that he is aware of her too, it occurs to you that if you play along, he will regard himself obligated to help you; and though that alone might not mean much to him, you reason, it will almost certainly prove effective in this case, since it will harness his strong desire for the dean’s approval. He would not want her finding out that he broke a promise, even one he made to you. So you decide to play along and “accept” the promise, believing it very likely that he will “keep” it; indeed, you even turn down other offers of help.

I will not try to render a verdict on the “all things considered permissibility” of treating another’s word in this way; nor need we consider the moral reasons he might have to deliver despite the “extra step” you took in forming your belief. Instead, we can simply register how
your rationale will be objectionable from his point of view. There is an undeniable element of manipulation in your strategy. He is plausibly entitled to expect that you would either take him at his word, or else come out with what you think. Had you done the latter, pride might have led him to be unwilling to make you the promise. Alternatively, he might have been willing to listen to what you had to say about his past failings, and asked you for a chance to restore your trust in him. These outcomes are, from the point of view of your aim of simply securing his performance by means available, perhaps less optimal than relying on the strength of his ulterior motive to impress the dean. Yet I think the ethical pressure to prefer them is evident.

The moral to draw is that we must not conflate what we ordinarily take ourselves to be entitled to when we give our word with the mere formation of a belief that we will do as we promise, nor with reliance on that belief. We do aim to induce sound, reliable beliefs in another when we make her a promise, but in order to be taken at one's word, it is clear that she must believe and rely for a particular kind of reason: namely, precisely that reason offered her in the form of the promise itself. And for someone's word itself to serve as an adequate reason, she must be a certain sort of person. Inter alia, she must possess a sufficient degree of foresight, self-control, and strength of will, so that she is the sort of person who gives her word only when she knows she will be able to keep it, and who will keep her word once she gives it to you. To

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14. The importance of being able to make remedial promises in order to rehabilitate one's reputation is discussed by Shiffrin (2008, 488–89). See also fn. 26, below.

15. Nietzsche gives us the evocative expression "memory of the will." In Dannenberg (2015) I appropriate the expression as a term of art for the particular kind of strength of will required if one is to sustain one's voluntarily undertaken commitments in the face of pressures that could otherwise lead to forgetting or abandoning them. I argue there that memory of the will, so conceived, is essential to making and keeping both promises to ourselves, and to one another.


17. Or, as Nietzsche's darker version of collateral, he can relish in destroying it, a primitive kind of "compensation" for his disappointment.
of interaction, bizarre — indeed, so bizarre that if you were to attempt one of them, he might reasonably wonder about what kind of person you are, that it should even occur to you to respond to his unease by, for instance, letting him hang onto your heirloom in order to neutralize your threat-advantage?

The evident answer is that making it a matter of your word that you will keep his secret is entirely different in spirit, precisely because he is to take your word for it. Your promise differs not (only) in its predictive value for him — indeed, the aforementioned alternatives might be perfectly fine, from that point of view, and maybe in some cases even better. Rather, the distinctive point of easing his mind by means of the promise appears to lie in something about the particular way you mean to assure him. If he can take you at your word, he is not left to regard you as someone about whom he must think strategically, calculating and predicting your likely moves as he otherwise might. The way your promise is to assure him is not like that at all.

The distinctive sort of assurance provided by an effective promise can be illuminated, perhaps, by considering an important difference among various sorts of thoughts that, if he were able to think them, might have worked to relieve his concern in the first place — ways he might have tried to assure himself. Consider the way thoughts like

1) she won’t expose me, if she does it will ruin her too
or
2) she won’t expose me, if she does she knows what I will do to her

can soothe him. These thoughts operate on his unease by, in effect, showing that he need not depend on your having any concern for him at all. Any worries he might have had about whether you care about him and his privacy are silenced, by showing them to be beside the point.

There is thus an evident contrast between these thoughts, and a thought like:

3) she won’t expose me, she knows what that would mean for me.

This thought can relieve his concern, when it can, precisely because, and only to the extent that, he feels that he can count on you to share in his own concerns about his privacy and be motivated accordingly. Not only does such a thought fail to eliminate his dependence on your bearing any good will toward him in the manner of thoughts 1) and 2); it would appear to enhance that very dependence. The more comfort he takes in the thought, the more vulnerable to feeling betrayed and foolish he is should you prove indifferent to him after all. And yet, this sort of thought can ease his mind. It can ease his mind despite making him, in one obvious respect, more vulnerable to you. It can ease his mind precisely by making him, in that respect, more vulnerable to you.

This difference is also present in the sort of assurance your promise aims to induce. Something like

4) she won’t expose me, she gave me her word

characterizes the kind of palliative thought your promise is meant to put him in a position to think. It is a thought whose efficacy depends essentially on his recognizing in you certain salutary character traits. In that way, thought 4) is like thought 3), and the sort of peace of mind it aims to afford is thus distinct, and in an evidently desirable way, from that of thoughts 1) and 2). On the other hand, like thoughts 1) and 2), and unlike 3), he need not attribute to you any antecedent concern for his privacy in particular in order to be assured. Provided that he takes you for a person of your word, then, once you make him the promise, he shall be able to rest easier knowing you will not let him down by revealing his secret, whether or not he otherwise has reason to think that he and his privacy are among the things that matter to you.

The distinctive value of your promise as a vehicle of assurance thus appears to involve the provision of the sort of peace of mind and security afforded him by a thought like 3), but in a way that does not assume that he is already in a position to attribute to you any of the
particular motives otherwise required for him to think such a thought: in this case, any special concern for him and his privacy. Put another way, the point of the promise is to assure him by enabling him to trust in you to keep his secret, independently of any grounds he may have had or lacked for trusting in you to do so prior to your making it.

The distinction between mere belief (in the sense of prediction on the basis of evidence) and/or reliance on the one hand, and versions of these attitudes rooted in some more fundamental, positively-valenced assessment of another’s character or will, is familiar from the literature on trust. The upshot of the last several paragraphs serves to vindicate the intuitive thought that the characteristic aim of making a promise is to foster not just any kind of belief, but trusting belief specifically. Taking someone at her word is recognizably a form of trust precisely because one’s forming of the belief that she will do as promised, and one’s willingness to rely on that belief, emanate from a more fundamental evaluation of her character or will, which serves as one’s ultimate basis for believing her.

If this line that I am pursuing is correct, then should a person prove unwilling to take you at your word, this ordinarily runs counter to the very aim you have in giving it. This would be enough to frustrate you. But the additional, crucial observation that gets beyond mere frustration to attitudes like indignation and offense is that the other person’s unwillingness to take you at your word in effect denies that your word has the relevant kind worth it would need to do its job. And this, in turn, is a denial of you — a denial that you are a person of your word, a person capable of making a good promise and, in that sense at least, a genuine promiser.

This is precisely why reactions like those considered in the earlier cases are apt. Making a backup plan, excessive checking up, insisting on getting it in writing, or relying only on the basis of the attribution of an ulterior motive — all indicate a denial of the distinctive value of your word itself as a vehicle of this special form of assurance, and so of you as the sort of person fit to give it. The point of your promise is that you will not change your mind, will not be forgetful or careless, and will not require any additional motivation to do as you promise. You will not because you have made a promise, and you are the sort of person who keeps your promises. The value of your word as a source of assurance is understood by you to issue from precisely these facts about your character, and so distrustful behavior that presumes otherwise constitutes the rejection of the very thing you claim about yourself in solemnly offering your word to another.

III. The Decision to Take Another at Her Word

What emerges from the discussion thus far is a foundational part of the ethics of promising, at the heart of which lies the idea that someone who gives her word only when she can keep it, and who is committed to honoring her word whenever she gives it, can lay claim to the trust of others when she promises. In order to acknowledge another as a genuine promiser — a person of her word — one must be prepared to take her at her word when she sees fit to give it. You must, that is, be willing to believe in her and rely on her to do as she promises, on the strength of her word itself. To do anything else is to fail to treat her in the manner befitting someone with those qualities of temperament and will that render her promises any good: it is to deny her the right she claims when she undertakes to give her word to you, the right to make you a promise.

So understood, the decision to accept or reject someone’s promise cannot be, at least among the conscientious, a simple prediction aimed at determining what it would be prudent or reasonable to believe or expect that she will do. Rather, your decision is a matter of recognizing her as one who possess this right: you must determine whether the person offering you her word can claim your trust. The aim of this section is to further illuminate the character of this decision to take another at her word, in response to various challenges and questions that may arise when thinking about the acceptance of a promise in this way.

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I begin with a well-known problem. Views about the ground of promissory obligation that maintain that some sort of belief is essential to explaining how a promiser is bound are said to confront a serious difficulty, arising from the apparent circularity involved in forming the requisite belief. Though I have not been focused on the ground of the promiser’s obligation, I have been arguing that a certain kind of belief is absolutely vital to our conception of accepting a promise. I therefore seem to face the same difficulty as so-called “expectation theorists” of promissory obligation: how is it that in conscientiously deciding to take another at her word, a person reasonably forms the belief that the promiser will do as she promises, when it is the existence of that very belief that will subsequently motivate a good promiser to keep her word?

Suppose you offer me your promise that you will bring a bottle of wine to dinner tomorrow. I must decide whether to take you at your word, which I have argued requires forming a belief that you will bring the wine. But in order for such a belief to be reasonable, it may seem as though I must first consider whether you are actually likely to do it, which I can do only by attempting to predict whether you will in fact be motivated to do it when the time comes. And precisely because I realize that, as a conscientious promiser, your motive to bring the wine will be that, having made me a valid promise, you will be bound to do so, I now seem to be in trouble. For if I think things through, I will see that whether you will owe it to me to bring the wine, and so be motivated, depends upon my first accepting your promise by forming the very belief I am considering. Thus, it seems that I must first get myself to believe that you will bring the wine, so that you will then owe it to me to bring the wine, in order that I have reason to believe that you will bring the wine … and so we have our circle. The problem is standardly attributed to Hume (1978); for discussion, see Anscombe (1981), Prichard (c. 1940), Scanlon (1998), Kolodny and Wallace (2003).

Scanlon (1998) thus refers to this as a “can’t get started” problem. His solution is to argue that the promiser is already bound by other moral principles when she attempts to obligate herself by way of the promise, and these provide the other party with a basis for belief. That solution is criticized by Kolodny and Wallace (2003), who argue that only a practice-based promissory obligation will suffice to explain how belief can be reasonable in all circumstances where promises are accepted. Both solutions, however, agree in construing the form of thinking involved on the part of the one to whom the promise is made in essentially strategic terms. I mean to offer a distinctive alternative. Together, these two themes comprise the heart of so-called “assurance” views of testimony, and familiar readers will see many parallels. First, in taking another at her word the primitive assessment is not of the content asserted or promised, but rather of the person. Second, this assessment must not be reduced to consideration of empirically available evidence. See especially Moran (2003), e.g. p. 2: “primarily I want to examine the relation of believing where its direct object is not a proposition but a person… it is the speaker who is believed, and belief in the proposition asserted follows from this.” Also worth noting is that while Moran here puts things in terms of believing the speaker, and later, on p. 16, speaks of the requisite attitude of audience to speaker that licenses treating the speaker’s word as a valid epistemic reason as one of “belief in his knowledge and trustworthiness” (my emphasis), elsewhere the emphasis is more clearly on the speaker’s request to be recognized or acknowledged as someone who can invest his utterance with a certain epistemic import for her audience. The basic attitude displayed toward the speaker is thus both epistemic and ethical.

19. The problem is standardly attributed to Hume (1978); for discussion, see Anscombe (1981), Prichard (c. 1940), Scanlon (1998), Kolodny and Wallace (2003).

20. Scanlon (1998) thus refers to this as a “can’t get started” problem. His solution is to argue that the promiser is already bound by other moral principles when she attempts to obligate herself by way of the promise, and these provide
sort of reasoning that leads to worries about circularity. Instead, by determining that I shall acknowledge you as someone who has the right to make me a promise, I proceed precisely by treating what you offer — your word — as sufficient grounds for believing you will bring the wine.

Of course in stressing that promissory beliefs are not supposed to be arrived at via considering one's evidence, I do not mean to suggest that making up one's mind to take another at her word is properly done by ignoring pertinent information about such matters as, for instance, how she may have comported herself in the past, or how likely she is to be able to do the thing she promises. Clearly such considerations are relevant, and I would be a fool to believe you if half the time you promised to bring something to dinner you forget all about it, or if you were promising to bring not wine but the elixir of youth. The point is not about whether these sorts of considerations figure in my thinking, but how. Insofar as such matters undoubtedly reflect something about what kind of promiser you are, it makes sense that I should bring them to bear on the question of what sort of response you and your word deserve from me. The important point is that they serve not as the direct basis for a prediction about your likely conduct. Rather they speak to the question of your character and competence as a word-giver, and this explains their relevance in my assessment of whether or not to grant to you the right you seek to exercise.

At this point, however, one might begin to wonder whether this picture of conscientious word-taking runs afoul of an important epistemic norm. Taking someone at her word as I have characterized it may seem to involve a rationally illicit "decision to believe," made on the basis of what are essentially ethical rather than epistemic reasons. Defusing this worry begins with reminding ourselves that the sort of judgment we make in determining that a person is trustworthy is rather complex. One dimension of this complexity involves the various sorts of reasons we can have for making such judgments about another person, which clearly involve a mix of practical and/or ethical considerations on the one hand, and on the other hand more straightforward sorts of observable information about the qualities and traits of the person being evaluated. A second dimension of complexity concerns the role of these judgments within the network of our other attitudes, including especially the way that they form a basis for many of our other beliefs.

In may be useful to consider another kind of example, in which we feel ourselves under pressure to form beliefs on the basis of recognizably ethical concerns about what others deserve from us. Consider what happens when someone sincerely professes to have acted for certain motives or reasons: suppose, for instance, that a man tells you that he became a doctor because he wanted to help people. In a familiar sense, you may find yourself facing a decision about whether or not to believe him, since you might also recognize what you could justifiably treat as grounds for various alternative explanations according to which what he really wanted was quite different and opaque to him. Perhaps much of his behavior is consistent with his being moved by a love of prestige, or a sublimated drive to please his overbearing mother. Such alternatives will often enough be supported by the facts in such a way that were you to believe one of them, you could reasonably point to plenty of evidence in defense of your belief.

Assuming that you think him sincere, however, any such “therapeutic” dismissal and/or reinterpretation of his avowed reasons necessarily involves denying him the sort of self-understanding and mastery of his own psyche that entitle a person to speak with a certain ( defeasible) authority when it comes to the explanation of his own actions. His sincere recital of his reasons can therefore be understood as making a kind of claim on certain among your beliefs about him and his actions, subtended by a claim to possess a familiar and ethnically significant form of psycho-practical competence.

Of course in some cases what a person reports his reasons were will simply be irreconcilable with the other available evidence that is staring you in the face, and so there will be no choice but to reject his own explanation. In other cases, there will be little if any friction between what someone says and the observable facts. But in some cases, there is quite clearly a need for something we might as well call a decision to believe: one must choose whether or not to grant to another the basic kind of competence presupposed in his report, and therein to treat his self-ascription as a basis for one’s belief, therein discounting the force of would-be evidence for competing hypotheses. The choice to grant him that sort of competence cannot itself be understood as merely a matter of assessing one’s evidence for “what sort of person” he is, though of course it is a choice made for reasons, and is to some extent beholden to the observable facts about him. Even supposing that one’s reasons for the choice could be neatly sorted into categories like the ‘ethical’ and ‘epistemic,’ these various sorts of considerations surely must interact if we are to make any sense of how such choices are soundly made and subsequently defended. Supposing that you do decide to believe him, were you then challenged to account for that belief, you can imagine saying something like, “I know there may be reasonable alternative explanations, but I think it would be disrespectful not to take his own description at face value, especially when he speaks in the measured and articulate way of someone who is quite reflective and self-aware concerning why he did it.”

My proposal is that we conceive of the decision to take a person at her word when she makes you a promise along similar lines, insofar as it is a decision that involves making a certain sort of judgment concerning another’s character, and what sort of treatment or regard it entitles her to, including her entitlement to certain beliefs from you formed on her authority. Such a decision is no doubt beholden to certain observable facts about a person, but not entirely determined by those facts, and clearly not independent of one’s practical and ethical concerns for how another ought to be treated. So, if indeed there is a sense in which you do decide to form the belief in what another promises on the basis of ethical reasons, this sort of “decision to believe” proves to be no more (nor, I suppose, less) problematic than other important instances in which considerations of ethics and epistemology intersect in our arriving at our beliefs about other people and their reasons, motives, and conduct.

In many cases, of course, when one is offered the word of someone whose good character is familiar, it is relatively straightforward how all of this goes. You will often be confident, perhaps with little or no reflection, that another deserves your trust, and so there will be little question of whether or not you are to take her at her word when she gives her promise. Hopefully, this describes the majority of the promises most of us make and accept – especially those made among friends, colleagues, relatives, and intimates, whose status as people entitled to make each other promises is rarely in doubt.

On the other hand, on those occasions where you take yourself to have ample grounds for refusing someone’s promise, there is pressure to do precisely that, regardless of any upside you happen to see in “playing along.” Nietzsche is quick to remind us that some who pretend to have the right to promise will in fact be too foolish, capricious, forgetful, or deceitful to offer you their word as anything worth counting on. His prescription for such promisers is characteristically harsh: those with the right to make promises are “bound to reserve a kick for the feeble windbags who promise without the right to do so, and a
rod for the liar who breaks his word even at the moment he utters it.  

While the violent imagery may be overkill, Nietzsche nevertheless expresses a basic insight. Properly made, the decision to reject another’s word because she is undeserving of your trust is no mere matter of prudence, but of ethics; the fitting reaction to such a promise is a familiar form of outrage felt and expressed on behalf of all who take promising seriously. A “promise” from someone unfit to make it turns out to be more like a forged check or a counterfeit note, insofar as your reasons for rejecting it are not exhausted by the fact that it is of little or no value to you. When the unrighteous attempt to promise, they claim something to which they are not in fact entitled, pretend to something they are not. In so doing, they offend against those who earn and keep their right to make promises to one another, threatening to undermine the economy of trust righteous promisers work to sustain.

In sum, then, you should not (at least where other things are equal) “take” the word of someone unless you are prepared to take her at her word. Indeed, a conscientious person will tend to feel some sense of dishonor if she finds herself pretending to accept a promise despite thinking the promiser unfit to give it — a sense that she lowers herself by looking the other way, indulging another’s pretense, or even manipulating that person. When confronted with the word of someone you deem undeserving, the virtuous choice is ordinarily to refuse what she offers, perhaps explaining your reluctance to trust her and suggesting some sort of remedial path instead.

I have so far focused on promises made between people who are familiar enough with one another’s character. But taking others at their word is equally important to understanding how promises serve as indispensable vehicles of assurance between relative strangers. Indeed, there is a longstanding tradition of thinking that promising earns its keep as a social institution precisely because it enables strangers to assure one another in situations where it would otherwise be difficult or impossible. At the same time, an air of mystery can sometimes seem to surround such promises in particular: how is it that we can intelligibly choose to take a stranger at her word, knowing next to nothing about her? This air of mystery survives, even when the decision to accept another’s word is properly conceived as the decision to recognize her as a person of her word. For surely that decision must still have some basis. Yet when dealing with a relative stranger, what might that basis be?

An example will help to fix ideas. You are out of town on a day trip, when you get a flat tire. You bring your car to a local mechanic to have the tire fixed, and when the car is on the lift she discovers that your brake pads also need replacing. The situation is not an emergency, she informs you as she takes you under the car to show you the worn-out pads, but the work should definitely get done sooner rather than later.


25. I imagine this claim might still seem counterintuitive, despite the above discussion. I readily admit that we often do look the other way when we deem someone less than worthy of the trust she invites, accepting (in the thin sense) her promise despite being unwilling to count on her. But is this an accurate indication of what we think, on reflection, we really ought to do? It seems more likely that it betrays the discomfort we often feel in denying someone’s claim to be entitled to give her word. As with many other kinds of unpleasant social interaction, we are all too good at finding ways to rationalize in such circumstances. Moreover, insofar as the right to make promises is situated within other structures of social power and authority (a point to which I will return in the next section), it may often be difficult, impossible, or dangerous to refuse someone’s word, even when you deem her unfit to give it.

26. In most cases, perhaps someone whose word you are not prepared to accept is still entitled to an explanation. And I agree with Shiffrin (2008) that there must be a way for someone who has lost her credibility to earn it back. But Shiffrin evidently holds that rehabilitation will be possible only if a reprobate promiser is able to make and keep a promise in just the way a promiser in good standing does, i.e. by producing a promise’s characteristic moral obligation, and then fulfilling that obligation in the characteristic way. I maintain that a promise made by someone who is deemed untrustworthy is a degenerate sort of promise — and one aspect of this degeneracy is that it will often be impossible for others to accept her promises in the usual way, i.e. by taking her at her word. In this respect, such promises may be more like those we accept from children, a matter of training more than (full) trust, unless and until the promiser (re)establishes herself as someone with the right to give her word.
You have a long drive home, much of it on narrow, winding roads, and you would really feel safer getting the brakes done beforehand. But you absolutely must be home by nine, and you know the drive will take you at least three hours. You would rather not spend your afternoon anxiously waiting to see whether or not your car will be ready in time. Explaining all of this to the mechanic, who senses your anxiety about the situation, she replies with the evident aim of assuring you, “Don’t worry, I can start the job right now; it won’t take long, and I will definitely have it done for you with plenty of time to spare. I promise.”

I take it that we do, at least sometimes, form the belief that another will do as she promises in such circumstances. When this belief is misconstrued as a prediction about what another person is likely to do, formed on the basis of the available evidence, it is easy to find this a bit mysterious. After all, there are quite clearly countervailing considerations that would seem to make for “reasonable doubt” from the point of view of a clear-eyed believer. Notably, there is a very salient self-interested reason for her to tell you what you want to hear regardless of whether or not she is certain she can make good: presumably, she has an interest in getting your business.

Of course one way to try to overcome the problem is to look harder at the evidence on hand. No doubt there will sometimes be reasonable inferences that you might be able to draw from the observable facts, which could help to silence your doubts. You might, for instance, infer from her clean shop and expensive looking tools that the mechanic is running a profitable business. You might then reason your way into the belief that your car will be done on time, because it is unlikely that she would jeopardize the bottom line by attempting to manipulate a new customer. Crucially, however, any belief so formed would still essentially embody the strategic form of thinking I have been inveighing against throughout this paper. But perhaps this is the best we can do in the circumstances: in situations like this, you cannot intelligibly decide to take another at her word, and have to settle instead for sound strategy.

I think this an unwelcome result. In order to avoid it, we must find a way to make sense of the idea that you might decide to treat the mechanic as a person of her word, despite your evident lack of familiarity with her character in particular. The challenge is thus to identify an intelligible basis for a decision to recognize her claim to be entitled to make you a promise, despite the fact that her particular “credentials” are ex hypothesi unfamiliar.

At this point, I think we should consider the extent to which, where the right to make promises thrives, what might otherwise seem a sensible default posture of distrust in our dealings with relative strangers can in effect be reversed. That is to say, where people generally internalize the ideals and values of promising — where having and exercising the right to offer one’s word to others as a sound and sufficient reason is integral to any healthy person’s sense of who she is — you may become generally justified, within reason, in treating a stranger as someone able-cum-entitled to make you a promise. Just as, where certain ideals of character prevail, it can make good sense to rely on the kindness of strangers, it can also make good sense to default to treating strangers as people of their word, unless and until you find you have good reason to regard them otherwise.

Of course the fact that you can treat the mechanic’s promise as a reason to believe that she will finish your car on time does not guarantee that you will, or that you should. Let me stress that, so construed, a promise is no magical device for generating trust from thin, mistrustful, air. Quite the contrary, I am suggesting that the ideal of being a person of one’s word must be both widespread and internalized. Moreover, I am assuming that you, in your role of recipient of a stranger’s promise, will have sufficiently cultivated a capacity for and disposition toward trusting in situations like this one, so that you might be able to see the mechanic’s sincere offer of her word not as a cynical ploy, but as an earnest attempt to invite your trust. My suggestion is that in that sort of climate, but only in that climate, it can make sense for you to decide

27. Jones (1996) argues that the sensible default when it comes to trusting others will be a function of the social climate.
to take a stranger at her word when she offers it, even if you know very little about her.

This reveals, I think, a crucial part played by the system of attitudes and values that philosophers often refer to as our "social practice of promising." At the heart of this system lies a widespread and internalized commitment to the ideal of being people of our word in each others’ eyes: we are people who generally prize and work to sustain a right to make promises to one another, and we cultivate in ourselves and encourage in one another the character traits that such a right requires. "Person of her word" is, in other words, a part of any healthy person’s self-conception: a description under which the well-adjusted and socially intelligent person values herself. And precisely because this is so, in our community we are not necessarily doomed to cooperate with strangers only by bringing about the artificial alignment of more “reliable” motives. Of course you could insist on getting the mechanic to sign a contract, or ask her to let you hold onto something valuable as collateral. But you evidently have another option — she can offer her solemn promise, and you can choose to take her at her word. Something recognizable as valuable is thereby realized. You two are not left to treat one another as adversaries, strategically forming predictions only on the basis of attributing to one another less admirable motives like self-interest, or fear.

Of course just because the fact that certain ideals have generally taken hold cannot ensure that your trust will necessarily be well placed. If you are like me, then you have had the experience of deciding to take a stranger at her word, only for it to turn out that you were wrong about her. But presumably you cannot be wrong too often, or else you will lose the ability to trust in such circumstances — you will, that is, revert to a default posture of inherent distrust in your dealings with strangers.

This brings me to one final point. Quite clearly, in order for promising to thrive in any sizeable group, people must develop the capacities and skills needed to be good word-takers too. A sensible default posture of trust, available when others tend to be worthy, is just part of the story. People must cultivate in themselves the ability to take others at their word when they deem them earnest, even as they remain aware that not everyone has the right to make a promise, and that some will want to claim that right without deserving it. People thus need a healthy trust in their own ability to be attuned to the difference between sincerity and guile, and between a measured offer of one’s word and a careless one. I do not pretend to have offered any technique (much less an infallible one) for weeding out the trustworthy from the tricksters, even in the best of circumstances. But quite clearly, striking a balance between taking others at their word when they are deserving without sliding into the kind of gullibility that can easily be exploited by those who would promise without the right to do so will likewise be possible only where valuing one’s status as someone with the right to make promises is widely internalized, where promises are generally kept, and where one’s status as a person of one’s word is a central element in the prevailing conception of good character.

The possibility that you and the mechanic can realize, to foster your trust in her through giving her word to you, is thus something that the community as a whole helps to make possible. The ideals and norms that guide us as individual promisers draw support from these considerations about how it is that a shared and mutually recognized devotion to them enables the members of our community or group to relate to one another. In that way, at least, I am aligning myself with those who argue that in order to fully explain and defend the norms and ideals that guide us as individual promisers, we must appeal to something thoroughly social. But my appeal, I stress, is not of the standard form: namely, I have not argued that we must invoke something like a practice in Rawls’ technical sense in order to explain or categorize the wrong of a broken promise. Whatever one’s views about the answer to that question, it seems to me, what I have tried to show is that we realize the full value of the activity of making promises at their word when they deem them earnest, even as they remain aware that not everyone has the right to make a promise, and that some will want to claim that right without deserving it. People thus need a healthy trust in their own ability to be attuned to the difference between sincerity and guile, and between a measured offer of one’s word and a careless one. I do not pretend to have offered any technique (much less an infallible one) for weeding out the trustworthy from the tricksters, even in the best of circumstances. But quite clearly, striking a balance between taking others at their word when they are deserving without sliding into the kind of gullibility that can easily be exploited by those who would promise without the right to do so will likewise be possible only where valuing one’s status as someone with the right to make promises is widely internalized, where promises are generally kept, and where one’s status as a person of one’s word is a central element in the prevailing conception of good character.

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to one another when and because we generally come to embrace and internalize a common ideal of character. We prize living together as people of our word, people who generally recognize and exercise a right to make one another promises.

IV. Promising and Its (In)justice

I have been developing an insight about promising found in Nietzsche, that promising is something we do by right. I have argued that in offering another one’s word, one claims to be a person of one’s word: someone who, in virtue of her character, is able-cum-entitled to provide others with a distinctive kind of reason for belief. For this right to promise to be recognized, one must be taken at her word. Her promise must be accepted as itself a sound and sufficient basis for the belief that she will do what she promises. Moreover, I have claimed, where the ideals and norms that constitute such a right are widely championed and internalized, treating others as people of their word becomes a sensible default. Even a stranger can be taken at her word where the right to make promises thrives. The result is that we are, to a certain extent at least, able to live together as people of our word: people who exercise and recognize a right to make promises to one another.

In this final section I want to turn to some of the practical consequences of these ideas, some of which turn out to be quite radical. My aim is not to offer anything like a systematic treatment. Rather, I merely want to indicate some of the pressing questions and problems brought to light, many of which are distinctively social or political in character, if what I have argued in this paper is in the neighborhood of the truth. Answers and solutions will have to wait for another day.

The first point concerns the distribution of the right to promise. Social scientists often remark that trust is an important form of “social capital,” the sort of thing that provides a society and the individuals within it the means for achieving a variety of desirable ends. Insofar as I am right that our practice of promising provides us with new ways and opportunities to trust in one another, this implies that there will be growth of that kind of capital, and that alone might seem to provide us with compelling reason to continue to embrace and sustain our practice. But as with other forms of capital, growth is not the only end. We also have reason to concern ourselves with the ways in which trust is distributed throughout our society, and the way that our collective attitudes and conduct might lead directly or indirectly to schemes of distribution of an important good that might be less rather than more fair.

In offering his mature account of promises in A Theory of Justice, Rawls makes it a condition on the bindingness of a promise that the practice as a whole be just, i.e. that it meet the standards of our conception of justice.29 But his discussion is hamstrung by a flawed assumption: focused on Prichard’s problem, Rawls takes it more or less for granted that the only valuable “good” distributed by our practice of promising is the ability to obligate ourselves. He then offers some brief remarks about what parties in his original position might have reason to accept concerning the conditions under which a promise obligates its maker, such that nobody’s liberty is unduly constrained by the practice. It is not so difficult to imagine that our practice can provide everyone with the means for obligating herself on terms that are in this way fair. But it surely does not follow that the recognition of a person’s right to stand security for herself is everywhere recognized on the basis of characteristics that are not arbitrary from a moral point of view. This, it would seem, is the real question of promising’s justice, and contemporary moral theory has done little to address it.30

As Annette Baier points out, Nietzsche’s own version of the right to promise was a right of the elites.31 The point is not merely of interest for interpreting Nietzsche. Certainly, at earlier stages of our own history, the right to promise both depended upon and reinforced imbalances of power that were integral to regimes of oppression and subjugation.

29. Rawls (1971); the discussion appears at pp. 344–50.
30. Though it has begun to: see, for instance, Fricker (2007).
31. Baier (1986), 246–47. The discussion of Nietzsche occurs as part of Baier’s critique of traditional moral philosophy’s selective attention concerning both the nature and value of trust.
particularly of women and minorities. The point hits close to home. The erstwhile hero of my own story, my grandfather, was all but exclusively concerned with keeping the promises he made with other white men who owned property: what mattered to him was his status as a man of his word in their eyes alone. Promises made to women or the itinerant laborers he regularly employed would have been in a different category, if he even bothered to make them at all. He was under considerably less pressure to make promises to these people, to keep them when and if he did, or to recognize them as having any right to make promises to him. A broken promise to, for instance, one of his daughters, would have meant something different in how others saw him, and how he would have seen himself, than the same broken promise were it made to his son.

No less certainly, though perhaps less obviously (and so, perhaps, even more punitively), there continues to be considerable injustice in when and how the right to make promises is actually recognized. I walked into a restaurant in my neighborhood the other day and, explaining to the proprietor (a total stranger to me) that I had forgotten my wallet at home, I was nevertheless able to order and eat a meal, in exchange for my promise to return later and pay for it. Not everyone’s solemn word purchases as much trust with strangers as mine can, more often than not because of facts about what they look or sound like, or what side of town they live on.

To even hope for an explanation of why this is so, one must be prepared to confront systemic issues about social power and privilege. I am not so prepared. Suffice it to say, our actual practice of promising undeniably contributes to these systemic issues, and there is an onus on us as philosophers to understand how it does, and a real concern that in the way that our practice enables some but not others to be recognized as able to make claims on the trust of others when they promise, it may be making an otherwise bad situation worse. Implicit in my discussion throughout has been the hope that these aspects of the right to promise as we know it need not be essential to it in all its possible forms. But such optimism may turn out to be unfounded.

A different (though related) point is that if trust is a form of capital, we have strong reasons to be vigilant about the way it intermingles with capital’s other, more familiar forms. For instance, we need to make sure that our trust is not for sale, and so the right to promise should not be the sort of thing one should be able to buy, for any price. This includes, notably, buying it back after it has been lost through previous breaches of trust by, for example, launching PR campaigns like those we often see from politicians, banks, or corporations, which have the thinly veiled aim of washing away the memory of earlier broken promises, and other failures to live up to the trust once put in them. Lost trust can be re-earned, and the right to promise can sometimes be forfeited and then won back again. But when this happens, it should not be merely because those who have broken faith manage to distract from their earlier failings. A flourishing right to promise requires vigilance, in order that the undeserving cannot claim it.

Finally, the importance of the right to promise and its dependence on our shared ideals suggests that, insofar as we do wish to remain committed to these ideals, we should do our best to ensure that worthy promisors are given their due. Principally, this means being prepared and willing to take others at their word when they deserve it. This may be easier said than done. Trusting others generally makes us vulnerable, puts us at risk. Thus, when others offer us their word, we often find ourselves with strong countervailing impulses, even when we regard them as deserving. In some instances, this may take the form of seeking to shore up our trust through other mechanisms, e.g. to purchase insurance, to make a backup plan, or even to “get it in writing.” In other words, we often find ourselves strongly tempted to hedge our bets. The more strategies for hedging are widely available and normal, the more tempted we may be.

Perhaps in some cases certain forms of hedging may be more consistent with the spirit of taking someone at her word — not every way of seeking additional security necessarily involves an affront to the character of a word-giver, a denial of her status as someone with the right to make a promise. “Trust, but verify” may, on some occasions
neglected challenge for philosophy. We must determine the reasons we have to promote, support, abide by, take comfort in, nourish, reform, or revolt against the systems of ideals and norms upon which promising as we know it depends, even as we find that those ideals and norms are deeply ingrained in who we think we are.

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