



Karen S. Feldman. *Binding Words: Conscience and Rhetoric in Hobbes, Hegel, and Heidegger*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006. x + 158 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8101-2281-9; \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8101-2280-2.

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A Textual Performance in Three Acts

In this challenging and thought provoking work, Karen S. Feldman investigates the agency of figures and metaphors in the rhetoric of conscience contained in three landmark texts: Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), Georg Wilhelm Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), and Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927). Feldman questions the performative agency of rhetoric, particularly how language not only represents conscience and the modes in which the will becomes determinately bound, but also how language actively unfolds conscience in an act inseparable from the reading experience itself. The book also analyzes how examples and figures, due to a lack of appropriate words, locate these authors in a space of rhetorical tension between representing and exemplifying conscience. The effect on the reader of *Binding Words* itself is intense and engaging.

Feldman writes that in *Leviathan*, Hobbes condemns metaphor for corrupting truth, understood as the correct ordering of names. This correct ordering is necessary, according to Hobbes, for the binding power of the declared transfer of rights towards a sovereign needed to establish stable political authority. Figurative language, conversely, has an eloquence that appeals to the passions in a manipulative way, as well as facilitates public deception by distorting the proper significance of words, according to the ideal of nominal clarity. Feldman focuses on Hobbes's particular treatment of the metaphor of "conscience," a metaphor for ethical subjectivity, which Hobbes argues has shifted from representing a publicly shared knowledge to a private, interior form. Feldman

argues that Hobbes sees this metaphoric shift as performatively positing private knowledge, representing it into being, in a way that threatens the binding guarantee of witnesses for publicly shared knowledge (p. 27). The authority of the commonwealth becomes threatened by figurative language, both by the performative positing of opinion as valid privatized knowledge, and by destabilizing the governable connectivity of names. Feldman sees in Hobbes a discussion of conscience that serves as a "turning point of suspicion in the history of early modern philosophy regarding both metaphor and the rule of conscience as a foundation for ethics" (p. 16).

In Feldman's analysis of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, we see that, according to Hegel, conscience is certain of its pure universal duty, but must actualize this conviction, prove that it is bound to duty, and make itself objective (p. 50). It does this by declaring its conviction through language, so that it can be recognized by others. In this way Hegel shows the problems facing private conscience as a binding principle for shared morality. He reveals how successfully performed moments of conscience's own certainty, once acted out in words, rhetorically fail due to the labile nature of language, which causes the declaration to be more universal, particular, objective, or subjective than what conscience meant to perform (p. 62). Language draws conscience into moments of contradiction. Feldman explores these moments that propel the unfolding of conscience and that Hegel describes in terms of exemplary figures, including the "voice of conscience," "the community of

conscience,” “the beautiful soul,” “the hypocritical conscience,” “the judging conscience,” and “the confessing conscience.” Feldman reminds the reader that the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as a text, claims a binding force on the very conscience whose story of unfolding it tells. She asks whether the text in fact succeeds, whether the reader’s conscience becomes bound by Hegel’s narrative, despite the difficulty conscience has in establishing itself in words. Feldman finally doubts whether this text can succeed in overcoming the rhetorical failures that it itself professes to be unavoidable when moments of conscience are declared in particular words (p. 79).

Feldman presents Heidegger’s *Being and Time* as a text that reveals the question concerning the meaning of being as a rhetorical one, insofar as it cannot in proper words ask what it should. The text itself, Feldman claims, performatively shows the impossibility of an appropriate language by which to question being and Dasein, or by which to call an authentic experience of conscience into being in a binding way. The overall effect is a performative calling for another kind of hearing and thinking, not dominated by everyday understandings and expectations (p. 102). Feldman identifies an oscillation in the text, a rhetorical tension, between figuration and performance. On one hand, Heidegger’s phenomenological-ontological questioning of Dasein and conscience must borrow entitative words from a theoretical, investigative stance. On the other hand, Heidegger holds that it is impossible to tell a determining narrative “about” Being and conscience because they are not objective entities; all words that attempt such an account necessarily come up short. Feldman shows how Heidegger reveals these constraints of language by referring to certain words as “unhandy tools” that frustrate clear explication. Heidegger performs what he describes by using these “unhandy tools,” such as conspicuous and defamiliarized figures and negative statements, often unhelpful for under-

standing, in order to dislodge everyday thinking about being and conscience (p. 86). Feldman argues that *Being and Time* acts as an exemplary performative call or attestation to conscience that shows that no entity outside of Dasein calls Dasein into being, but rather that the potential call comes from within Dasein itself. The call to conscience is not a call to an ontic object, but rather a way of existing, one that necessarily withdraws itself from hypostatizing terms that are meant to theoretically describe it (p. 100).

Feldman suggests that we can never be certain where the agency or power of performative bindingness rests in the reading experience. Is it in the text itself, in the author, or in the reader? Is the agency of a text literal or merely figurative? Feldman holds that because we both engage our agency in reading a text, but are also subject to the effects of that text, we are always vulnerable to a mingling of the literalness and figurativeness of textual binding, with no independent guarantee of where this performance takes place (p. 110). Feldman concludes by suggesting that it is impossible to prove that a text can performatively bind conscience, but that this can only be exemplified. The question arises as to whether we can read Feldman’s *Binding Words* as such an exemplary performance. On one hand, the book is constative in its account of texts by Hobbes, Hegel, and Heidegger, texts from which Feldman must take a certain distance in order to critically assess their potentially binding character. Her account here is made even richer with the help of a very complete set of explanatory endnotes and wide-ranging selected bibliography. Feldman’s own engaged investigation, however, carries the reader through these passages in a manner that indeed opens up new ways of thinking, displaces assumptions about language, and finally can be said to perform an impressive binding act itself.

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