

**A Reply to Carol Voeller and Rachel Cohon:
“The Moral Law as the Source of Normativity” by Carol Voeller
“The Roots of Reason” by Rachel Cohon
by Christine M. Korsgaard***

I am going to begin today by bringing together one of the themes of Carol Voeller’s remarks with one of the criticisms raised by Rachel Cohon, because I see them as related, and want to address them together.

Voeller argues that the moral law is constitutive of our nature as rational agents. To put it in her own words, “to be the kind of object it is, is for a thing to be under, or constituted by, the laws which are its nature. For Kant, laws are constitutive principles ... in something very close to an Aristotelian sense: for Kant, laws are proper to objects¹ much as form is to object, for Aristotle.” Voeller believes that the moral law defines the kind of cause that we are, and we are under the moral law because we are that kind of cause. Since the defining quality of a rational agent is that a rational agent acts on its representation - I prefer to say conception - of a law, Voeller thinks the question for Kant is whether we can find a law which *just is* the law for causes that act on their representations of laws. As she puts it, “The problem, for Kant, is whether there is a law of a cause that acts on norms - on reflection, on its representation of a law. If there is, then the constitutive principle of that cause will be the law normative for it in reflection.”

Now Voeller appears to think that I will disagree with this strategy for grounding the moral law, because she sees me as giving an anti-metaphysical or a metaphysical account of Kant’s ethics, in contrast to Kant’s own. But so far, I don’t

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¹ Voeller reads: laws proper are to objects, but I assume that’s a mistake.

disagree with it at all - in fact I think it's exactly right. I see myself as anti-metaphysical in the sense that I believe Kant saw himself as anti-metaphysical: I deny that we have metaphysical *knowledge*, and in particular I would deny the kind of dogmatic rationalism that asserts that we have knowledge of objects in the world that correspond to the concepts of pure reason.² But like Kant, I am no enemy of metaphysical *thinking*, and in particular of Aristotelian teleological thinking.

In fact I take it to be Kant's view, perhaps closest to the surface in the third *Critique*, that the very idea of an object involves something like teleological form. In chapter four of *The Sources of Normativity* I evoked a comparison between animals as conceived by Aristotle, that is, as having self-maintaining forms, and human beings as I conceive them, as being engaged in the maintenance of our identities. Since I think the moral law is the law by which we maintain our identity or, to put the point another way, the law by which we maintain the integrity that makes it possible to have identity, I concluded from that discussion that there was a sense in which morality is the human form, or, as I put it there "the form that *human life* takes." (4.3.9 p. 152) This seems to me to mark out common ground between Voeller's views and my own.

But when Voeller turns to the question why the law for beings whose causality takes the form of acting on their representations of laws should be the categorical imperative, I think we part company. Because if I understand her correctly, she thinks that the answer has to appeal somehow to a metaphysically grounded idea of what really is unconditionally good, and I don't think that.³ I will come back to the question how I

² Including, in a sense, the concept of the good. But I am going to argue that in effect we make the good, and that is better than knowing it - in the same way that intellectual intuition is better than discursive knowledge.

³ The fact that the argument of G1 starts from the unconditional value of the good will doesn't seem to me to be relevant here because G1 is presented analytically - it starts

think the argument does go, but first I want to turn to the point in Cohon's criticisms that I take to be related.

Cohon has challenged me on two points: first whether my theory is, as I claim, a voluntaristic theory in which reasons are created through human legislation, and second, whether the argument I used to show that if we are to have reasons then we must value our own identities as human beings succeeds. It is the first of these challenges that I will primarily be addressing today. Cohon - for today, anyway - goes along with me in accepting the idea that at least some of our reasons spring from, and depend on, our conceptions of our practical identities. But she wants to argue that we don't make the reasons - rather, in so far as we actually have the identities, the reasons are there, and what we do is at best *discover* or *acknowledge* them. She emphasizes that the fact that many of our practical identities are contingent does not show that they are optional or not a deep part of ourselves. Let me quote Cohon:

"If I think that to be a good mother I must teach my child not to steal, I will take the desire to do that as a reason. Now on Korsgaard's account a certain procedure is necessary ... if I am actually to have a reason to teach my child not to steal: I must reflect on the impulse and identify with it in such a way that I give myself a law. ... But [now speaking in her own voice, Cohon continues] in endorsing the consideration and commanding myself to act on it I don't make it a reason. The reason was there all along. If teaching my child not to steal is necessary if I am to be a good mother as I conceive of it, and I care about being a good mother, then I have reason to do it before I give myself a law to that effect. The reason is rooted in my practical self-conception, and that was present, and in part made me what I was and am, before I reflected or willed. I may

from the assumption that morality as we conceive it is no chimera - and we want the synthetic argument here.

do something by endorsing the impulse ... Perhaps reflective endorsement is necessary for acting on this reason. But I don't make the reason by reflective endorsement."

Now I hope it will be reasonably clear what Voeller and Cohon's objections have in common at this point. Both of them want to argue that in a certain way we have an identity that is already there, and it gives us reasons, and that has nothing to do with our legislating these reasons into existence; both, therefore, are in effect opposed to the voluntarism or constructivism of my view - that is, to the claim that our reasons are in a certain way created through our own legislation. For Voeller, the precedent identity is given by the law constitutive of our nature as rational agents, and so is deeply rooted in the nature of things. For Cohon, on the other hand, the identities can be contingent and cultural and all that, but her point is that insofar as these identities give reasons, those reasons are already there. Cohon points out that there are ways to square my view with the voluntarism it claims, but she thinks those ways are unacceptable. In an earlier version of her comments than the one you heard today, she wrote:

"Perhaps the view is that until we endorse an impulse by way of a practical conception of our identity, we have no practical identity. This version of the view would say: it is not the case that I walk around with a variety of practical identities already set, and these determine what reasons I already have. Rather, at every juncture where I am confronted with an impulse, I must elect whether or not to take on, or to sustain, the practical identity associated with it. And until I do, that practical identity is not fixed for me, or perhaps is not really mine insofar as this impulse is concerned. To make the impulse a reason, I must choose or reaffirm the practical identity that sanctions action on it. This would indeed make autonomy crucial to the creation of reasons."

And today she said:

“A third view which might be Korsgaard’s is that before I give myself a law, the impulse now confronting me is not yet a reason for me to act even though it is compatible with my practical identity, because there is no I, no acting self, whose reason it can be. By making an active self at this time, I make the impulse a reason, and I make an active self by giving myself a law. An agent is something that can act through time, so to make a reason I must make myself an agent whose existence extends forward into possible future times by giving myself a universal law, a principle that pertains to all relevantly similar situations and not just to the one at hand.”

Cohon thinks the first of those views, the view that we are constantly deciding whether to sustain our practical identities is - I’m quoting - “unacceptable” - because of the ways in which conceptions of our identity are deep and so can seem to us to be non-optional. And she thinks that the second and more extravagant view, the view that we in a sense create ourselves as agents through our own legislation is “metaphysically very mysterious and perhaps incoherent.” She asks “How can I give a law to a self that does not yet exist? How can making a law for someone bring that someone into existence?”⁴ Actually, however, these views, which Rachel thinks are unacceptable, mysterious, and possibly incoherent, are pretty much exactly the views that I hold. So

⁴ Voeller, on the other hand, takes me to task for presupposing the existence of rational agents. Admittedly, however, that is not because she thinks we make ourselves into such agents but because she thinks Kant is asking a question about whether we really are such agents. To the extent that this means Kant is asking whether there is a law for rational agency (there are no rational agents unless there is one), I agree with her, as will emerge from the argument I am about to make. If it means that there is room for reflective beings to doubt whether that law applies to them: I do not think we can doubt that there are rational agents if there is such a thing as rational agency, and that is settled by the first question.

I'm going to try to defend them this afternoon.

Let me start from the question why the categorical imperative is the law for agents who act on their representations of laws - or, as I think of it, the law of self-conscious causality. The argument I will present here was sketched in the first section of the "Reply" in *The Sources of Normativity*, but I think the way I put it there was somewhat obscure. I've recently come up with what I hope is a clearer version, so what I am going to do now is quote a section from a recent paper of my own, "Self-Constitution in the Ethics of Plato and Kant," with apologies to those of you who have heard it before.

In the third section of the *Groundwork*, Kant argues that insofar as you are a rational being, you must act under the idea of freedom - and this means that you do not think of yourself, or experience yourself, as being impelled into action, but rather as deciding what to do. You take *yourself*, rather than the incentive on which you choose to act, to be the *cause* of your action. As I said a moment ago, I take this point to be essentially the same as the one Voeller emphasizes - that you act on your conception or representation of the law. In my view, both the fact that we take ourselves to be the causes of our actions, and the fact that we act on our representations of laws, amount to this: that agency is *self-conscious* causality, causality that is aware of itself as the acting cause.⁵ That's what makes doing something different from being the location of an event - you are aware of *yourself* as being the determinant of what happens. The question is why Kant thinks that in order to operate as a self-conscious cause, you must act on a universal law.

To see why, let us consider what happens if we try to deny it. If our reasons did

⁵ If Voeller thinks that this is not what Kant has in mind when he says we act on our representations of laws, then my argument will not bring us together as much as I am supposing.

not have to be universal then they could be completely particular - it would be possible to have a reason which applies only to the case before you, and has no implications for any other case. Willing to act on a reason of this kind would be what I will call “particularistic willing.” If particularistic willing is impossible, then it follows that willing must be universal - that is, a maxim, in order to be willed at all, must be willed as a universal law.

It’s important to see that the question here is not whether we can will a new maxim for each new occasion. We may very well do that, for every occasion may have relevant differences from the one we last encountered. Any difference in the situation that is actually relevant to the decision properly belongs in your maxim, and this means that your maxim may be quite specific to the situation at hand. The argument here is not supposed to show that reasons are *general*. It is supposed to show that reasons are *universal*, and universality is quite compatible with - or rather requires - a high degree of specificity. So particularistic willing is not just a matter of willing a different maxim for each different occasion. Instead, particularistic willing is a matter of willing a maxim for exactly this occasion without taking it to have *any* implications of *any* kind for any other occasions, whether they are like this one or not. You will a maxim thinking that you can use it just this once and then so to speak discard it; you don’t even need a reason to change your mind.

Now I’m going to argue that particularistic willing is impossible. The first step is this: To conceive yourself as the cause of your actions is to identify with the principle of choice on which you act. A rational will is a self-conscious causality, and a self-conscious causality is aware of itself as a cause. To be aware of yourself as a cause is to identify yourself with something in the scenario that gives rise to the action, and this must be the principle of choice. For instance: suppose you experience a conflict of desire: you have a desire to do both A and B, and they are incompatible. You have some principle

which favors doing A over doing B, so you exercise this principle, and you choose to do A. In this kind of case, you do not regard yourself as a mere passive spectator to the battle between A and B. You regard the choice as yours, as the product of your own activity, because you regard the principle of choice as expressive, or representative, of yourself. You must do so, for the only alternative to identifying with the principle of choice is regarding the principle of choice as some third thing in you, another force on a par with the incentive to do A and the incentive to do B, which happened to throw in its weight in favor of doing A, all in a battle at which you were, after all, a mere passive spectator. But then you are not the cause of the action. On my view, this is why practical identity and volition are so intimately linked. Self-conscious or rational agency requires identification with the principle of choice on which you act.

The second step is to see that particularistic willing makes it impossible for you to distinguish yourself, your principle of choice, from the various incentives on which you act. According to Kant you must always act on some incentive or other, for every action, even action from duty, involves a decision on a proposal: something must suggest the action to you, before you endorse or reject it. And that's the incentive. In order to will particularistically, you must in each case wholly identify with the incentive of your action, with what suggested it to you. That incentive would be, for the moment, your law, the law that defined your agency or your will. It would in effect be you.

It's important to see that if you had a particularistic will you would not identify with the incentive as representative of any sort of type, since if you took it as a representative of a type you would be taking it as universal. For instance, you couldn't say that you decided to act on the inclination of the moment, *because you were so inclined*. Someone who takes "I shall do the things I am inclined to do, whatever they might be" as his maxim has adopted a universal principle, not a fully particular one: he

has the principle of treating his inclinations *as such* as reasons. A truly particularistic will must embrace the incentive in its full particularity: it, in no way that is further describable, is the law of such a will. This means that the person who wills is at each moment identified entirely with the ultimately particular incentive which he endorses.

But that in turn means that particularistic willing eradicates the distinction between a person and the incentives on which he acts. And I think that means that there is nothing left here that is the *person*, the agent, that is his will as distinct from the play of incentives within him. He is not one person, but a series, a mere conglomeration, of unrelated causally effective impulses. There is no difference between someone who has a particularistic will and someone who has no will at all: no causality for the self-conscious cause to be conscious *of*. Particularistic willing therefore lacks an agent, a person who is the cause of her actions, as distinct from the incentives that suggest them. And action that lacks an agent isn't action at all. So particularistic willing isn't willing at all.

If a particularistic will is impossible, then when you will a maxim you must take it to be universal. Taking your maxim to be a universal law is therefore constitutive of an exercise of the will, in fact constitutive of the will itself. Since willing is self-conscious causality, it also follows that the categorical imperative is the constitutive law of self-conscious causality. This is the conclusion that Voeller and I both want, but notice that my argument for it has made no appeal to the unconditionally good. Voeller may object that all I get from this argument is "the empty notion of a mere universal generalization." I think it can be shown at least that the argument yields a law that universalizes over all rational agents, and that is a point I shall come back to.

Now as I think of this argument, it doesn't just show that the categorical imperative is constitutive of self-conscious causality. It also shows that self-conscious causality, or, to put it more simply, *action*, is a form of *self-constitution*. If particularistic

willing breaks us apart into pieces, it is universal willing that holds us together into one piece, and so that constructs us into the sorts of unified subjects who can *be* rational agents. So I want to affirm this view in what appears to be its most extravagant form: with every act of the will, we make ourselves into rational agents, as well as into the particular rational agents who we are.

Now to make this view seem a little less extravagant, I want to return for a moment to the Aristotelian ideas which both Carol Voeller and I referred to earlier, and draw a comparison that I hope will help. I said earlier that I believed Kant held the view that the very idea of an object involves something like teleological form. In conceiving something as an object, we attribute a kind of unity to it that I think in Kant's view can only spring from purposiveness or teleological form. This sort of view has its roots in Aristotelian metaphysics. According to Aristotle, what makes an object the kind of object that it is - what gives it its identity - is what it does, its *ergon*: its purpose, function, or characteristic activity. This is clearest in the case of artifacts, which are obviously functionally defined. An artifact has both a form and a matter. The matter is the material, the stuff or the parts, from which the object is made. The form of the artifact is its functional arrangement; its teleological organization. That is, it is the arrangement of the matter or of the parts which enables the object to serve its essential purpose, to do whatever it does that makes it the kind of thing that it is. Say for instance that the purpose of a house is to serve as a habitable shelter, and that its parts are walls, roof, chimney, insulation, and so on. Then the form of the house is that arrangement of those parts that enables it to serve as a habitable shelter - or rather, to be more precise - it is the *way* the arrangement of those parts enables it to serve as a habitable shelter. The walls are joined at the corners, the insulation goes into the walls, the roof is placed on the top, and so on, so that the weather is kept out, and a comfortable environment created within. That is the form of the house.

On this view, to be an object, and to be teleologically organized, are one and the same thing. Teleological organization is what unifies what would otherwise be a *mere heap* of matter into a particular object of a particular kind. At the same time, the teleological organization sets certain standards or norms for the object, which I like to call “internal standards,” because they are standards that apply to the object simply in virtue of being the kind of thing that it is. A house whose form or organization does not successfully foster sheltering - say a poorly insulated house with a leaky roof - is therefore a bad house. So the idea of a good house is set by the same norms that define the very idea of a house.

Now Aristotle extended this account of artifactual identity to living things with the aid of the view that a living thing is a thing with a special kind of form. A living thing is a thing so designed as to maintain and reproduce *itself*: that is, to maintain and reproduce its own form. It has what we might call a self-maintaining form. So it is its own end; its *ergon* or function is just to be - and to continue being - what it is. And its organs, instincts, and natural activities are all arranged to that end. The function of a giraffe, for instance, is to be a giraffe, and to continue being a giraffe, and to produce other giraffes. It's organized to that end. We might therefore say that a giraffe is simply an entity so organized as to keep a particular instance, a spacio-temporally continuous stream, of giraffeness going - primarily through nutrition - and also to generate other instances of giraffeness, through reproduction.

Now it is important to notice the complex role that teleological organization plays with respect to the giraffe's activities and actions. The giraffe's actions are both dictated by, and preservative of, its giraffeness. A good giraffe action, such as nibbling the tender leaves at the tops of trees, keeps the giraffe going, for it provides the specific nutrients needed to constantly restore and refurbish its giraffeness through the digestive processes. Yet the giraffe's action is one to which it is prompted by instincts resulting

from its giraffe nature. In Aristotle's own terminology, the giraffe's form is both the efficient and the final cause of its actions.

And this fact - the fact that the giraffe is organized to keep itself going - is related to another important difference between living things and artifacts, which is that living things are made of parts that strictly speaking cannot exist independently of the living things themselves. You can't build a giraffe out of tender green leaves, but a giraffe's digestive processes turn tender green leaves into the kinds of matter out of which a giraffe *is* built - giraffe tissues and giraffe organs and so on.⁶

Now it follows from this that if a giraffe ceases its activities - if it stops nibbling leaves, or stops digesting them when it does - it will fall apart. So, strictly speaking, being a giraffe is not a state, but rather an activity. And now we have finally reached the point that I want from this excursus. Being a giraffe is *doing* something: a giraffe is, quite essentially, an entity that is always *making* itself into a giraffe. In fact, the *entity* that I just mentioned is in a way derivative, arrived at only by an artificial freezing of the observer's mental frame, for nothing that stops working at being a giraffe, that stops making itself into a giraffe, will remain a giraffe for long. So to be a giraffe is simply to engage in the activity of constantly making yourself into a giraffe: this is what a giraffe's life consists in.

Now I think this feature of animal identity holds for practical identity too. Being a person is not a state, but rather an activity. A person's practical identity needs constant construction and reconstruction, because it is constantly, as we might put it, threatened

⁶ Actually speaking very *very* strictly this is true of artifacts too - large plaster slabs can exist apart from houses, but *walls* cannot, for walls too are functionally defined, and a large plaster slab that isn't part of a house can't divide one room from another, or hold up a roof. But the only reason to bother making this point is to support the parallel with organisms.

and at issue - in the same ordinary way an animal's physical identity is constantly threatened and at issue. So just as to be an animal is essentially to be constantly engaged in the activity of making oneself into that kind of animal, so to be a person is to be constantly engaged in the activity of making yourself into that particular person.⁷

Now let me try to articulate more clearly what I am saying. On the one hand, I am agreeing the Voeller that we have a kind of precedent identity, and it has its own law, and that law is precisely the categorical imperative, and it is given to us by our nature as the kinds of creatures that we are, self-conscious causes. But I think that law is a law of self-constitution: our precedent identity *just is* that of beings whose fate it is to create our own identities. The moral law, by demanding that our reasons be universalizable and so that we constitute our wills into unified objects, is the law of self-constitution - it is the law we follow when we create our practical identities.

Now it is often objected, as it is by Cohon, that this leads to an overly voluntaristic conception of identity. We do not make our own identities, the objection runs; for instance, I did not choose to be, say, an American citizen, or my parents' daughter. Even many of my personal friendships, the older ones especially, are as much the outcome of circumstance as of choice. So I am these things - this country's citizen, these people's daughter, this person's old friend - *perforce*, and not because I chose to be them. And yet these identities give rise to reasons and obligations, as much as the ones that I do more plainly choose, like a profession or an office or a friendship quite deliberately sought out.

And my view is that while that is true in one way, in another way it is not. For

⁷You'll have noticed that in running this last comparison I shifted from an animal's making itself into a *kind* of animal to a person's making herself into a *particular* person. That disanalogy wasn't an accident or a slip. It's an effect of the special freedom inherent in self-conscious causality that we human beings create for ourselves more individual identities than animals have.

whenever I act in accordance with these roles and identities, whenever I allow them to govern my will, I endorse them, I embrace them, I affirm once again that I am them. In choosing in accordance with these forms of identity, I constantly make them my own.

To see the force of this point, consider one of the standard dilemmas of contemporary moral philosophy. Some people have complained that the Kantian self is “empty.” If you conceive yourself simply as a pure rational agent, and are not committed to any more specific conception of your identity, you are as it were too distant from yourself to make choices. There are two problems here. The more formal problem is that it looks as if you can have no reason to do one thing rather than another. But even if you can find some particular reasons, there is also a problem about wholeness, about commitment. How can you be a true friend, a true citizen, a true Christian, if the relevant commitments are always up for question and open to choice? The self, it is argued, must be not empty but rather determinate and full: it must take certain identities and relationships as unquestionable law.

And then of course the other side replies that there are also two problems with the determinate self. In the first place, the determinate self is not free, for its conduct is governed by a principle or a law which is not reason’s own. In the second place the determinate self must in the end be unjust. For tolerance requires exactly that distance from our roles and relationships that the defenders of the determinate self deplore. “Christianity is my religion, but just in the same way, Islam is his” says the tolerant person. Tolerance demands that you see your religion not as *you* but as *yours*, yourself not as essentially a Christian but as essentially a person who has a religion - and only one of many you might have had. So you cannot identify with your religion all out and still be a tolerant person. Or so says the defender of the empty self.

But I think that this is a false dilemma, arrived at by an artificial freezing of the

observer's mental frame, just as the view that being a giraffe is a state rather than an activity is produced by an artificial freezing of the observer's mental frame. The view that we must choose between the empty self and the determinate self assumes that the endorsement of our identities, our self-constitution, is a state rather than an activity. If having an identity - if being a person - were a state, we *would be* stuck on the horns of this dilemma. For in that case we must either already have constituted ourselves - in which case the self would be full and determinate, - or we must not have done so yet - in which case the self would be empty. But on my view, we don't have to choose between these two options, because self-constitution is not a state that we achieve and from which action then issues. It is action itself; it is the ongoing work of self-conscious action. We are always endorsing, reendorsing, and so making ourselves.

And this gives me the resources for addressing one more point. I said earlier that Voeller might object that the argument against particularistic willing shows only that "the empty notion of a mere universal generalization" is internal to the idea of willing. The argument doesn't yield Kant's more substantive moral law as the law of our nature, the constitutive law of self-conscious causality.

There are actually two parts to this worry, as I pointed out in *The Sources of Normativity*. One question is whether the law that you act on has to be a law that universalizes over rational agents, a law for all rational agents as such. The other question is whether such a law, a law for all rational agents as such, yields reasons that are, in Nagel's *Possibility of Altruism* terms, only subjectively universal, or in Parfit's terms, only agent-relative, or in my own terms from chapter four of *The Sources of Normativity*, only private; or whether on the other hand it yields reasons which are in Nagel's terms, objective, or in Parfit's, agent-neutral, or in mine public. The first kind of reasons, the private ones, are like toothbrushes - all pretty much alike, but we must each have our own. The second kind, the public ones, are essentially shareable, in

roughly this sense: if I have a reason to have X, you have a reason to see to it that I have X. From such reasons we can construct a common good. Now to get us to morality, in Kant's sense, the argument must get us to laws that universalize over all rational beings *and* that yield such essentially shareable reasons. I think that the argument does both of these things, but it's only the first point I'm going to argue for right now - that the law universalizes over rational beings as such. I don't have anything to add to the second point beyond what I already said in chapter IV of *The Sources of Normativity*. So the question I am addressing now is: Does the argument against particularistic willing give us a law that universalizes over all rational beings, over rational agents as such?

I think that the answer is yes, because the universal law which is established by that argument is a law which describes the activity by which a rational being constitutes himself - by which he makes himself into a particular person. And I think that this means that the law is addressed to rational agents as such. To put it another way, it means that we can't assume, so to speak, *prior* to action - that is, prior to the application of the universalizability principle to the case - that the agent who applies the universalizability principle is anything other than - especially anything more particular than - a rational agent.

So what I am suggesting is that the you who constitutes yourself is a rational agent, while the you who is thus constituted is a mother or a teacher or a citizen or a friend. The categorical imperative tells you how to achieve these particular identities, to the extent that it tells you how to achieve the integrity needed to sustain them. So the categorical imperative is addressed to rational agents as such.

But I don't think that this means that you are distant from and not fully identified with the particular identities you achieve in action, as the fans of the determinate self claim. The truth is the opposite - constant, active reconstitution and reendorsement of the self is a *deeper* form of identification than that produced by mere

inertia, lack of reflection, and taking for granted. But if self-constitution is an activity in this way, the structure must be that the activity of being a *particular person* is something carried on by a *person*, by a rational agent, just as the activity of being a particular giraffe is something carried out by a giraffe as such.

That brings us back to the Aristotelian analogy, and to put it a little fancifully, in terms of that identity, you might think of your possible practical identities as being like an animal's food. First they are mere matter, not you yet but the kind of stuff from which people are made. In acting on them, in taking them up, you transform them into particular form, into yourself. Possible practical identities are the things you make yourself out of. What do people make themselves out of? You are born into a culture, into a particular time and place, you are born into a family and a community, you have certain talents, you are assigned certain roles, you become attached to certain people whom you happen to meet - a range of identities, actual and possible, happens to be available to you. So what do you make yourself out of? Like any other animal: whatever is palatable and handy.

Now Cohon objects specifically to this, saying that practical identities do not need support of the form "I've got to have something, and this is something, so it will do." But odd as it may sound I think that at some level they do. A human being needs somebody to be in much the same way that she needs somebody to love. And I think we love people, and find our love normative, as much because we need somebody to love as because the people are wonderful. I don't think it follows, however, that I'm committed to the view that any identity or any beloved is as good as anything other, as Cohon's formulation here suggests.

The point I want to make about this is a little hard to articulate clearly, and I think this fact leads to a lot of confusion about what voluntarism implies. It's this: Human beings are social and cultural animals, and both as a species, and within a

particular culture, we have built up a network of reasons within which we live. Most of the time, we operate comfortably within that network of reasons, and make judgments of better and worse within it, and don't ask much about where the normativity of the reasons comes from. When we operate within this network of reasons, the difference between a realist and a voluntarist account of normativity isn't apparent to us. It is only when we come, so to speak, to ask about the grounding of the whole network that questions about realism vs. voluntarism arise. The voluntarist can grant all of this, and still believe that ultimately the whole system of reasons is the product of human legislation, a product of the human will. A voluntarist like myself, who thinks that legislating involves setting a value on humanity, can even argue that respect for humanity involves a *prima facie* commitment to respect the already legislated network of reasons. It's a way of sharing the reasons of others. But on a voluntarist view, that commitment springs from respect for your fellow value-legislators, rather than from a belief that the extant network of reasons represents something like knowledge of what, independently of human legislation, is actually good.

Let me sum up. Earlier I said that a common theme of Voeller and Cohon's remarks was the claim that our reasons spring from an identity that is already given to us, and therefore are not the products of our own legislation. In Voeller's view this is our necessary and *a priori* identity as causes of a certain kind, beings who act on their representations of laws. Cohon had in mind more the sorts of things that I call contingent practical identities, and her criticism was that we get our reasons from these rather than legislating them. I have agreed with Voeller that we have an identity that is already given to us, but in my view it is precisely the identity of creatures whose fate it is to create their own identities - or, to put it more strictly - to constitute their own wills. And my answer to Cohon is to affirm the two hypotheses which she says would make my views consistent, but which she herself finds implausible and incoherent - namely

the view that our contingent identities are always being ratified anew and the view that we in a sense *create* ourselves as agents with every action we perform.

With that as background, let me address two other points my commentators have made. Carol Voeller has organized her remarks around the idea that my view is naturalistic. I don't know whether anyone will still be tempted to call the amalgam of Kantian ethics, Aristotelian metaphysics, and existentialism which I have just tried to articulate "naturalistic"; but my own view on that question is still the same as the view which I articulated in *The Sources of Normativity*. As I said there, if a naturalistic view is one that reduces normativity to some natural fact, then my view is not naturalistic. Norms are something we are confronted with in the first person standpoint provided by self-consciousness, and they are not reducible to any natural fact. If, however, a naturalistic view is one that *explains the presence* of normativity in the world without appealing to any non-natural facts, then my view is naturalistic. I take the fact that we are confronted with the norm set by the categorical imperative and the task it describes - the task of self-constitution - to be explicable by appeal to the fact that we are self-conscious agents, and that is not a non-natural fact.

I have not left myself space for dealing in a satisfactory way with Rachel Cohon's second set of objections, concerning the foundational argument, but I would just like to make a couple of points about what she says. First, while I find her "reflective persistence" version of my argument more congenial than her "implication" version, I also think that these two readings are less different than she thinks. The difference, according to Cohon, is this: In the reflective persistence version, I am claiming that in order to sustain the normativity of my practical identities in the face of continuous reflection, I must ultimately come to place a value on my own humanity. According to the implication version, we are "already committed" to valuing our humanity, whether this occurs to us or not. I don't think the two versions are so

different, because it seems to me that the sense in which we are already committed to *any* implication is simply that we would find ourselves committed to it if we kept reflecting along the same lines.⁸ The conclusion that I wanted from my foundational argument is actually a bit more complex than this - it is that if we kept reflecting we'd be confronted with the choice between valuing ourselves and complete practical normative skepticism. And while certainly someone might fail to reflect, I don't agree with Cohon that it is open to us simply to dismiss reflection when it comes upon us - once the question has been raised, it's been raised.

That said, one version of the reflective persistence argument which Cohon presents captures what I have in mind quite exactly. Let me quote it - or rather the parts of it I find congenial - Cohon says⁹:

“In answer to the question, “Why be a musician?” I could say, “I know, it's only rock 'n roll, but I like it.”¹⁰ It isn't sublime or the Lord's work;

⁸ If there were some further sense in which we were already committed to all the implications of any of our beliefs or commitments, exploratory thinking would be impossible, because it would entangle us in immediate contradictions.

⁹ This again is her wording from an earlier version of the comments.

¹⁰ “It's Only Rock 'N Roll (But I Like It),” The Rolling Stones, EMD/Virgin, 1974.

it isn't of transcendent value. I do it because *I* like it. On further reflection I ask myself, "Why should I do what I like? Does what I like really matter?" And here I think the answer will be "it does, because I'm worth it." Only a person overwhelmed by feelings of her own unworthiness will not think she has reason (at least some reason) to do what she likes. This does locate the roots of my reason firmly in myself...."

Cohon think this does not represent my view, because she thinks my view is not that we must value ourselves, but that we must value our reflective nature. She's wrong about that - this is just the sort of reflection I have in mind. We need practical identity and we express a value we set on ourselves by giving ourselves what we need. So the difference between us is that she thinks only some cases of valuing are like this, while I think every case is. On my view, it's all rock and roll - none of it transcendent or the Lord's work, but plenty of it sublime. The things that matter to people matter because people matter, and not because those things meet independent standards of the objectively good. And people in turn and in the same way matter because we matter to ourselves. By taking ourselves and our admittedly contingent tastes and interests to be of value, we create all the value there is in the world.