

## COMMITMENT AND ACTION

According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, commitment is an 'engagement which restricts freedom of action'. This means that if I have committed myself to do something, say X, my freedom to do something other than X is restricted. If the action X is of a small duration — if, for example, I have told my friend that I would meet him at 3 p.m. — it would mean that my freedom to do anything else at 3 p.m. than meeting him is restricted. If, on the other hand, the action involved is of longer duration, my freedom is proportionately restricted. For example, if I have committed to my friend that I would go for a walk with him every morning, then my freedom to do anything other than going for a walk with him is restricted.

From the foregoing, it is clear that commitment has two aspects or implications. Every commitment implies something to be done and something not to be done during the same space-time situation. These may be called the positive and negative aspects of commitment respectively. If my commitment to meet my friend at 3 p.m. implies that I have not to do anything other than meeting him, it also implies, more clearly and directly, that I have to meet him. For, it is quite probable that I don't do anything else, but I don't meet him either—I may just sit idle. If this happens, then, though I don't do anything else, I still fail in my commitment. Thus what is significant is that the commitment is carried out. In other words, the positive aspect of commitment is more important than its negative aspect. So long as the positive aspect is carried out, the negative aspect has very little practical significance. The meaning of commitment viz., that it is an 'engagement that restricts freedom of action', quoted in the beginning, emphasises the negative aspect.

This is an important point. In the context of a commitment, we have to see whether the commitment has been carried out or not. In other words, it is the positive aspect of commitment which is more important. If, as in the illustration given above, I don't meet my friend at the appointed time, I fail in carrying out my

commitment. That is a sufficient ground for passing a judgement about my conduct in the context of my commitment. It is comparatively insignificant what I do instead of meeting my friend, which I was committed to do. Thus it is clear that the positive and the negative aspects of commitment are not at par. In order to have a clear understanding of the nature of commitment, it is necessary to emphasise that it is the positive aspect which is more important. We have to judge the conduct of the committed person from this positive point of view. That every commitment has a negative aspect also is not a special feature of commitment; that is a common feature of all human actions. This point will become more clear as we proceed.

One can be committed in a variety of ways. One can be committed to a person for a specific purpose. My commitment to my friend to meet him at 3 p.m. is a commitment of this type. In a general manner, commitment in this context means promise to do or not to do something. One can also be committed to a particular political ideology. Commitment in this sense means that the person will work for the propagation of the political ideology to which he is committed. But two persons committed to the same political ideology may do different things to propagate it. Thus, out of two committed communists, one may study and write whereas the other may do field work. This difference is at the level of means only and such that it does not make any difference in the original or basic commitment of the person concerned. However, in some cases, the differences in the means employed is so significant that, notwithstanding the similarity in commitment, it cannot be ignored. During our struggle for freedom, for example, although almost all the persons involved aimed at the same thing, Gandhiji's insistence on the use of non-violent means only was so significant and basic that to miss or ignore it is to misjudge the entire situation. But the difference may not be about means only, it can be on other points also in the sense that two committed communists may be propagating different shades of communism. However, the difference in approach does not in any way absolve or reduce the responsibility of the committed communists from working for its propagation. So long as one is committed, one has to do something to prove the commitment. A question that can

be asked in this connection is : if a person, after he has committed himself to a particular political ideology, discovers that, in fact, it is not what he had thought it to be, can he withdraw his commitment? In other words, are commitments revocable? We shall attempt to answer this question in the sequel.

In addition to commitment to an individual or to a political ideology, there can be religious and other commitments also. There can also be commitments in which one is primarily answerable to oneself only. My commitment to tell the truth is such a one. If I am committed to tell the truth, I am answerable to myself only. If I tell the truth, I have the satisfaction that I am acting according to my commitment; if I don't tell the truth, I should have the feeling that I am not doing what I ought to do. It would appear that once a commitment is made, whether to oneself or to someone else, it ought to be carried out. Conversely, in general, whenever a commitment is not carried out, it ought to be condemned as undesirable. If making a commitment implies restrictions on one's freedom, it also makes one's choices clear and known. If a person has to act, in whatever way, his freedom is naturally restricted. This means that it is not the special feature of commitment that it restricts freedom; it is a feature of action as such. Whenever I act, my freedom to do something else is restricted for the simple reason that in any given space-time situation, I cannot do two things. If, for example, at a given time I am eating vegetarian food, whether by chance or as a result of my being committed to vegetarianism, my freedom to eat non-vegetarian food at the same time is duly restricted.

The various ways of being committed may be divided into two categories. The commitment to a person is usually for a particular purpose or action. My commitment to my friend to meet him at 3 p.m. is such a commitment. But the commitment to a person can also be for a purpose or action involving a much longer time. For example, I may be committed to help a widow till her eldest child gets a reasonably good job. But both these commitments are of a specific type in as much as they do not involve or touch my entire being. These may be called specific commitments. On the other hand, commitments to a political ideology or religion are not so specific; they are general and cover or involve the

entire being of the person committed. These may be called non-specific commitments. Further, among the specific commitments themselves, there may be degrees of specificity for the obvious reason that, out of two specific commitments, one may be more specific than the other. This point is clearly brought out in the two illustrations of specific commitments given above.

In the context of commitments considered so far, the difference is about the object of commitment, i. e., to what one is committed. But commitments can differ from one another on other points too. In some cases, the commitment is such that the means employed to carry it out have no bearing on its character. If, for example, I am committed to reaching a particular place by a particular time, it is immaterial how I cover the distance. In this case, I am committed to the end only. But in some cases the role of means employed is significant and as such cannot be ignored. Gandhiji's insistence on non-violent means during our freedom struggle is such a case. In this case the means have great moral significance because freedom achieved through non-violent means is basically different from the one achieved through violent means. The means have moral significance not only by themselves but also because they have a bearing on the character of commitment in question. There can also be cases in which the means employed have all the moral significance and the relative commitment is almost insignificant. If, for example, I am committed to being rich, it would appear that the commitment by itself is morally natural. However, the means that I employ for becoming rich have moral significance in the sense that they can be desirable or undesirable.

From the foregoing, an important point emerges — can a commitment, once made, be changed? It is important that we consider this question because the answer we give to this question can be a fundamental point in determining the very character of and our attitude towards commitment. But before we consider this question, we must consider another question — are all commitments of the same type or, in other words, are all commitments equally valuable? In normal circumstances, is my commitment to accompany my friend for a movie as important as my commitment to marry a war-widow? The slightest consideration will

show that, even considered as independent and not alternative commitments, my commitment to marry a war-widow is immensely more important than my commitment to accompany my friend to a movie. But why? Although it may appear obvious as to why it is so, it is necessary to formulate a criterion or basis for saying so. The criterion that appears relevant in this context is — what would be the consequences if I failed to carry out my two commitments? Would the consequences of my failing to accompany my friend to a movie and my failing to marry a war-widow be the same? Obviously not. The consequences of my failure in the second case are far more serious than in the first case. If this is agreed upon, we can say that a significant criterion for judging the relative value of various commitments is: what would be the consequences if we failed to carry out our commitments?

It may be objected that the criterion being suggested here is negative because it draws our attention to the relative significance of two commitments not being carried out. But that is not the case. Basically, commitment is something positive only. However, there may be situations in which *one* is genuinely perplexed or is in a dilemma. In such situations one of the ways of knowing the relative significance of two commitments is to see what would be the consequences if one failed to carry them out. It may be further objected that the criterion is subjective in as much as it leaves to the individual to judge the significance of consequences. But that is not a unique feature of commitments; that would be the case in respect of most of the moral questions.

To know whether or not a person carries out his commitment is not to know something in isolation; it is to know his character as well. It is reasonable to expect that a person of 'good' character would carry out his commitments. On the contrary, if a person usually fails to carry out his commitments, it is definitely a reflection on his character. When we enumerate his good qualities, it may not be one of them.

The preceding consideration regarding the significance of various commitments is applicable in general circumstances, that is, when we consider various commitments as independent of one another. But there are situations in which we are to make a choice

between two alternative commitments. In other words, in a given time-space situation, we have to make a comparative assessment about the value of two commitments and take a decision about what we have to do. A doctor, for example, may have to choose between his commitment to tell the truth and saving his patient's life. Or a person may have to choose between his commitment to his beloved and his father's wishes — if he marries his beloved, he earns the displeasure of his father and if he obeys his father and consequently does not marry his beloved, he breaks his promise and earns her wrath. Situations like these are complicated but not uncommon. How should we resolve such conflicts between alternative commitments? Obviously, the choice cannot be left to the likes and dislikes of the individual.

A general and safe criterion in situations which call for a choice between two alternative commitments can be this—other factors being the same, the choice of which commitment is likely to bring about more happiness or a more agreeable state of affairs? For example, the person who has to choose between keeping his commitment to his beloved and obeying his father may very well ask himself—choosing which alternative is likely to result in over-all better consequences? If, on cool reflection, he finds that his father's objection to his marrying his beloved is superficial and primarily sentimental and that by marrying his beloved he is likely to bring about an over-all better situation, he should go ahead. This criterion can also be applied for examining any other situation, choice or conduct from the moral point of view. Since the situations are human and complicated, involving a variety of factors or circumstances, precise mathematical calculations are not possible (it can only be regretted that such precise results should be expected at all). But if the criterion suggested above is honestly applied it will be found that it gives us fairly reasonable results—both in moral evaluation of what has happened and in helping us to decide what to do in a situation where we have to choose between two alternative commitments.

We can now consider whether commitments once made can be changed. It appears difficult to give an answer which would have universal or even near universal application. But this much can be stated—commitment once made can be changed if,

generally speaking, the change is for the better. In the same way when I fail to carry out my commitment, I should be excused if, by not carrying out the commitment, I have behaved in a better manner. If, in the context of my movie commitment, on my way to the theatre, I find a person bleeding after an accident, help him by taking him to the hospital or to his place and thus fail to reach the theatre, I deserve not only to be excused but even to be patted. My duty to help a bleeding person is obviously more important than my commitment to reach the theatre. Here again, if we see what would be the consequences if I failed to accompany my friend to the movie and to help the bleeding person, it would be obvious that the consequences of failure in the second case are more significant.

A commitment is made in and is relevant to a context. When the context has changed and it is reasonably clear that the commitment has become outmoded or unnecessary, there is no harm in giving it up. In quite a few cases, it will die a natural death. In other cases, the person committed will change, and so on. Our commitment to work for the freedom of our country was relevant till the 15th August, 1947. After that date it has become redundant so that it is natural that this commitment should be considered unnecessary and given up. This, of course, does not mean that we cannot work for the progress of our country. We can; but so far as our commitment to work for the freedom of our country is concerned, that has become clearly unnecessary. When this commitment is not there, naturally the responsibilities it entailed are also not there.

We thus arrive at the position that in quite a few cases, when the context has changed, the relative commitment also changes or becomes unnecessary. But there are other points which have to be considered. Can a person, who has committed himself to a certain pattern of behaviour opt out of it? On what grounds can such a change be justified? In order to understand this point let us consider the following two cases. If a person makes a commitment without knowing the situation thoroughly—either because of ignorance or because he has been intentionally kept in the dark—then it appears reasonable that when he comes to know the situation well, he should have the freedom to review his commitment.

If a girl makes commitment to marry a particular boy and subsequently learns that his family has a history of tuberculosis, she has, I think, a right to opt out of the commitment. This is so because at the time of making the commitment, she was either ignorant, or was not knowingly told, of this vital fact. I feel that it is only reasonable that she has a second look at her commitment. If she now decides not to go in for this marriage, she is morally justified in doing so. On the other hand, if she sticks to her commitment notwithstanding the additional information and subsequently contracts tuberculosis, she alone is to be blamed for this. However, there are cases where a person thinks of a change in his commitment without there being reasonable ground for doing so. If a boy has second thoughts about his matrimonial engagement because he now has a proposal with a larger dowry, his action cannot be justified. This is so because there is no material change in the particulars of the first proposal. If he insists on a change in his commitment he is taking only his own advantage into consideration. His insistence on a change also proves another point. Even if the amount of dowry in the first proposal were not a significant consideration, his insistence upon a change in favour of the proposal with a larger amount of dowry shows that he approves of the dowry system. This in itself is undesirable. But to make the amount of dowry the deciding factor in matrimonial alliances is all the more undesirable. A change in commitment in a case like this cannot therefore be approved of.

The problem of changing or opting out of commitment is important. It is, therefore, necessary to find out or establish some objective criterion for determining whether a change can be approved of. In the case of the boy's marriage, given above, it may be maintained that if he has a better proposal now, he has a right to opt out of the previous engagement (commitment). However, as already pointed out, this is a narrow view of the situation. Further, if a larger dowry is considered to be a valid criterion for changing one's matrimonial commitments, there may be no end to the process. Even in business, where the primary, if not the only, motive is profit in terms of money, one is supposed to stick to commitments once made irrespective of the subsequent fluctuations in price. A change in commitment can be considered to be



valid or authentic if, and only if, the party which suffers loss after the change also finds, on cool consideration, the circumstances warranting changing, valid. In the case of the girl's marriage to the boy suffering from tuberculosis, discovered subsequently by the girl, even the boy, on cool consideration, should find the change justified. At least disinterested persons will find the change in this case justified because in normal circumstances, commitment or no commitment, a girl cannot be expected to marry a boy having a family history of tuberculosis. However, it may appear that we are asking for too much. It may be argued that whatever be the grounds for the girl's opting out of commitment, it may be quite difficult for the boy to appreciate them. But there does not appear to be any way out. Constituted and used as we are, it may be difficult for most of us to agree with a decision or judgment (in the case under consideration, the girl's decision to opt out of her matrimonial commitment) which goes against us. In such a situation one can only hope that we are so educated and trained that we can appreciate and judge situations, in which we are ourselves involved, in an objective and unbiased manner. Moreover, I think it is not just a case which involves a boy and a girl. If the girl marries the boy she is not only exposing herself to the danger of contracting tuberculosis, but also the children that she may give birth to. Even if, for the sake of argument, we say that she has a right to decide the future course of her own life the way she likes, she has no moral right to expose her expected children to such a serious and distinct danger as contracting tuberculosis.

We thus come to the position that a change in commitment can be approved of only if a disinterested person also approves of it. This may appear to be a vague and inapplicable criterion. It may be asked, expectedly, who is a disinterested person? But in fact, the criterion is neither vague nor inapplicable. Hidden in this is the element of universality to which Kant drew our attention, or the Christian principle—do unto others as you wish them to do unto you. If, in a given situation, a person changes his commitment and I want to know whether it can be approved of or not, then I can very easily ask myself the question— if I were in his situation, would I change the commitment? In normal circumstances, an exercise like this should give us a fairly

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reasonable assessment. Of course, it may be said that this criterion will not work because no two human situations are absolutely identical. But that much can be said about all ethics. However, if there is an element of objectivity in ethics, if we can learn from the experience of other persons in the moral field, if we have to pass moral judgement at all, this is a fairly reasonable criterion for determining whether a change in commitment in a given situation can be approved of or not.

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