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COMMITMENT AND ACTION

Introduction

Commitment and action are very powerful and much discussed concepts, and their discussion involves many complicated and sophisticated problems in the context of the philosophy of politics, of sociology and of the person. My purpose in this paper is not to make a contribution to this discussion. It is something different. It is simply to articulate some problems and initiate their discussion. My justification for this is two-fold : one, I find that these simple problems are present in some contexts of considerable importance and they are in need of a discussion; and two, I think that this will enable me to find my bearings in the more sophisticated discussions instead of my losing my way in them.

What is the problem or the group of problems with which I am concerned in this paper? My concern is to identify the factors involved in commitment or committed action and to understand the interrelationship between these factors. I might say that I want to consider or discover the necessary conditions of the possibility of commitment or committed action.

I have tried to identify these factors by considering some examples. By considering the example of Dasharatha's commitment to his promise, I have discussed the view that in the absence of appropriate action, commitment will cease to be commitment. Developing the example further, I have tried to show that commitment is much more than fragmentary firmness. It is a matter of the whole personality of the individual concerned. The importance of this point is brought out by considering the example of Arjuna – who is not ready to fight and is later persuaded to fight. It brings out the point that action if it is to be committed action must have both an individual and a social meaning. This means that action must be related both to individual and social reality. This factor in committed action poses the problem of the possibility of radical departure from both the individual and the social reality. I have tried to show that instead of posing a problem, it reinforces the point to which it is supposed to be an objection. The factors that we have identified in committed action

are all interrelated and are the necessary conditions of the possibility of committed action. It is not possible for one or the other to be absent — action, commitment, individual point and social point must all be present in committed action. The absence of any one alters the nature of the rest.

With the help of two examples, I have tried to show how our understanding of committed action helps in the understanding of some problems of authenticity and commitment. The two areas chosen are those of modern art and of political activity. However, these are only illustrations. If I am right, such illustrations are lying all around us in all areas of life for these what we have, when we have it, is not commitment but an illusion of commitment. Commitment in order to be commitment has to be commitment to life, commitment at least to be possibility of life — individual and social. Without the possibility of commitment to the possibility of life, the possibility of human life also ceases. What passes as human life is an illusion. If I am right, I think it has important consequences for all areas of our life and activity.

I

Commitment Involves Action

I shall begin by considering the example of Dasharatha from Ramayana and his commitment to Kaikeyi. In this case, Kaikeyi had once saved Dasharatha's life when he was wounded in the battlefield. In gratefulness and love (Kaikeyi was the youngest and the most beautiful of Dasharatha's three wives) he granted two boons to her. Kaikeyi had kept them for a rainy day or an opportune moment. And at the opportune moment, Kaikeyi demanded of Dasharatha that Bharata, her son, should be crowned the king, and not Rama, the son of Kausalya; and that Rama be sent to exile for a period of fourteen years. Dasharatha tried to dissuade Kaikeyi but failed, and then accepted to do and did what was demanded of him by Kaikeyi. In this example we can broadly distinguish three elements : one, there is the promise to grant two wishes; two, there is the occasion to fulfil the promise — Kaikeyi's demands; and three, there is the fulfilment of the two demands — at least one of the demands, though the other was not fulfilled through no fault of Dasharatha. There would be many variations in detail. The boon may not be so non-specific; they

may be specific. There may not be an explicit demand for the fulfilment of the commitment, but the circumstances may demand its fulfilment. However, such variations and refinements would not affect our discussion.

That all the three are factors in the situation can be seen from the following : Suppose there was no appropriate action when the demand and the need for action arose, there would have been no commitment. Whether the commitment was deceit, thoughtless generosity, desire, wish, etc. will be matter of the circumstances of the case. (But this is not my concern at present). However, until the need or demand for action arose, there would have been no clarity as to whether there was commitment or there was no commitment.

In this case we do not speak of only intention and action but of commitment and action because there is a firmness in the intention such that the intention is carried out inspite of considerable loss — loss of desirable things and gain of undesirable things. This is also an important feature of committed action. This does not mean that these difficulties are always present where there is commitment; but it does mean that there is the possibility of the fulfilment of the commitment even when there are impediments.

But is it necessary that for there to be commitment, commitment must issue into appropriate action at the appropriate times; or could one accept the possibility of commitment without action? In the context of this question, I should like to have brief look at the controversy regarding 'virtue is knowledge' or that 'no man voluntarily does what he knows to be evil'. Or 'to know good is also to do good when the circumstances are right'. But it is a common occurrence familiar to us all that one very often knows what is good and yet does not do it, and one very often knows what is evil and yet does not avoid it. So, in one sense of the term it must be clearly false that no one voluntarily does evil. But is there any sense in which one might say that 'no man voluntarily does what is evil' is right? One might make the following suggestions:

(a) If a person claims to know what is good and yet does what is evil, and does so consistently, then certainly one would be inclined to challenge the claim that he knows what is good. For example, if a person said that it was bad to trust people pointlessly, and yet

he consistently hurt people pointlessly, then one would not be sure whether he knew that it was bad to hurt people. Only lapses of behaviour can be explained in terms of weakness of will : this in the context of frequent conformity to the conduct required by what is known to be good. If so, knowing that x is good is explainable only in the context of doing x; and the net doing will have to be explained if the claim to knowing good is to be maintained.

(b) But even this concession to the claim that one may know good and yet one may voluntarily do evil (as a lapse) may be questioned. It might be said that the weakness of will is weakness of knowledge of what it is good for man to be; and therefore Socrates is more fundamentally right when he claims that it is impossible for a man to know good and yet to voluntarily do evil.

I think that what holds in the case of moral commitment, and it is not possible to give up the view that the relationship between commitment and action is a necessary one.

II

Commitment and Personality

Having taken a brief look at the controversy regarding the relationship between commitment and action, we shall consider another feature of the nature of commitment.

Is Dasharatha's commitment something fragmentarily restricted to the keeping of his promise to Kaikeyi, or is it a part of a larger context? If it were fragmentary firmness, it is not quite intelligible except as an aberration. This is not to deny that there could, apparently at least, be such an aberration. But commitment has a larger context, and what that larger context is could be found out with reference to the life of the person. The larger context could be any one of several possibilities. The larger context of Dasharatha's commitment could be, for example, an extreme love for Kaikeyi, or it could be a deep and severe dislike for Rama, or it could be a general commitment to promise-keeping. In order to decide which if these actually provided the larger context in the case of Dasharatha, one will have to find out about Dasharatha's attitude to other promises and so on.

As in the case of the commitment to the promise, one could think of one or more possible larger contexts, so also in the case

of commitment to keeping promises in general one could think of one or more possible larger contexts. It could be a desire for power or for money or it could be a desire to live a virtuous life in general.

My purpose in referring to the possibility of a larger context is merely to point out that commitment is a matter of personality; it is a matter of the character of the persons concerned. The larger context could be one of power, or pleasure or virtue or salvation. Each one of these could be made to serve the purpose of the remaining three.

But does this not make commitment a matter of all or none—that either there is commitment or there is no commitment; and there is no question of a limited commitment? But what is a limited commitment, let us say to duty? It is either a commitment to something else, or it is a commitment to non-commitment. This is not to say that there can be no lapse from commitment or no deviation from commitment. But one speaks here of a lapse only in the context of the commitment.

III

Commitment and the Context

If commitment is a matter not of fragmentary firmness, but is a feature of the personality as a whole, then this imposes a certain limitation on the possibility of commitment. This I want to discuss with the help of the example of Arjuna.

Both Krishna and Arjuna are agreed that the good to be achieved is moksha, but there is a disagreement about how it is to be achieved. But it is important to note that this is a misleading way of describing the situation. The disagreement is not a general one about how moksha is to be achieved; it is about how moksha is to be achieved by Arjuna. Arjuna says that since one can achieve moksha through the path of knowledge, he too could do the same. Krishna says that he cannot because this is not according to his dharma, this is not according to his personality as it is (for our present purpose, it is unimportant that the dharma was defined in terms of caste). Arjuna's past and present preclude him from adopting the path to moksha that he wanted to adopt.

But this raises an important issue : is one condemned by one's past or is it possible to overcome and transcend it? Let us for the

present accept that it is possible to overcome the past — many people have done so. But it is important also to see what is involved in overcoming the past.

It means a change in the personality as a whole. It is not a question merely of deciding to do what one chooses to do at the moment. If it is to be change of commitment, it has to become a meaningful part of one's life — future as also past. If this does not happen then it is not a change in commitment, but an escape from commitment. From whatever one knows of Arjuna, there does not appear to be any such total change. In so far as that is so, this was an attempt to escape commitment and not to change it.

However, this is not all. One's attempt to change oneself has social implications. The others have to accept one's desire to change one's commitment. It might be said that acceptance by others is unimportant, change of commitment is a matter of one's conscience. This is perfectly all right, and one will have to pay the price that one has to pay for acting on one's conscience. But here there are many problems, of which I want to mention one. In so far as the change in commitment implies a rejection of a method of solving problems, unless an alternative method is suggested of solving those problems, or a method is suggested of altogether avoiding these problems, acting on conscience becomes a way of escaping problems, it becomes a way of escaping commitment. I am saying it very badly but what I do want to say is that commitment has to have the context not only of the personality of the individual, but also of the life of the society. If there is no such context, then also commitment ceases to be commitment. In so far as Arjuna was not providing any such alternative, from the social point of view also, he was evading commitment and not changing commitment. And his action of not fighting would have been no committed action, nor the beginning of a committed action.

But is it not possible that an individual is so much ahead of his times that his commitment does not appear to be socially adequate? It is not always easy to decide what is ahead of times and what is fancy; but it is not always difficult also, especially when other explanations are available for the change sought and advocated.

If I am right then, both these factors, the personal contex-

and the social context are essential to commitment and to authenticity. When these contexts are not present commitment and authenticity cease to be commitment and authenticity and they do not play the role that these play in the life of an individual and the society; I want to point to two examples very briefly and tentatively.

IV

Commitment and Authenticity or Illusion

In the light of the discussion so far I want to consider two controversies : one in the field of art, two in the field of politics.

Let me take the controversy in the field of art first. Of the sincerity and dedication of many of our artists, painters, playwrights etc. (as of many others in other fields) there can be no doubt. But if I am right this is not enough to make their sincerity a commitment. The sensibility of the artists must be a part not only of their personality, but it must be a part of the social milieu. It must articulate and educate the sensibility of the people and thereby enrich their life and the life of the artist. I do not know if we can confidently say this of our artists etc. (and also of all of us). But is this failure not due to the fact that they are ahead of the times? Surely, this is to look for a flattering and conscience-silencing understanding, when more plausible and more disquieting explanations could be available. If this is so, then, in spite of the sincerity commitment is an illusion. Alienation from one's society is an illusion. Alienation plays a definite role in the life of an individual, and the society; but superficial assimilation to another society does not.

Let me now turn to the controversy in politics. It is often said that Gandhi is a revivalist, at best a liberal. Marxism is revolutionary. One very important reason for this seems to be that radicalism and class-conflict are identified. But what is radical is also a matter of that in relation to which it is radical; and there could be situations where class-conflict is not the most radical approach, it may be removal of untouchability or establishment of Hindu-Muslim understanding. It might be said that this is not the real understanding of society; the real understanding is in terms of class-conflict. But a real understanding should lead

us to effective action, and Gandhi has been most successful in that direction. It will not do to explain this away by saying that he was exploiting the weakness of the masses. Once again I want to suggest that the sincerity of the Marxist friends does not make their commitment commitment, because they lack something else which is also required. The commitment of Marxists is an illusion and of so many others. To the millions (850, not 80) there is no difference between the present forms of Marxism and of Gandhism.

Conclusion

What I have said in respect of these few areas of our life is true generally. If so, the conditions for the possibility of commitment are not realised. If they are not realised, how can there be commitment, and how can there be life ?

If I have succeeded in focussing these issues and giving some form to them, I hope the many shortcomings of the paper will be forgiven.

Karnataka University,
Dharwar.

K. J. Shah