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Philosophical Commitment as Artistic Expression

Robert K. McMaster

In this paper I will deal with and try to give acceptable answers to three basic questions that deal with the topic of philosophical commitment. The questions and the order in which they will be dealt with are as follows:

What is philosophical commitment?

How does philosophical commitment develop?

What is the best way to describe, talk about, or understand this commitment?

Let's begin with the first question. Just what is philosophical commitment? In the most simple and general terms, I think we can describe philosophical commitment as a certain way of looking at the world, or of looking at a philosophical problem or question. If you like, it is a certain style that one uses in approaching philosophy. Alfred North Whitehead is one of the few philosophers who has taken the idea of style seriously and what he says about it I think will help us in understanding philosophical commitment. In his book *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*, Whitehead makes the following remarks on style:

Finally, there should grow the most austere of all mental qualities; I mean the sense for style. It is an aesthetic sense, based on admiration for the direct attainment of a foreseen end, simply and without waste.

Style, in its finest sense, is the last acquirement of the educated mind; it is also the most useful. It pervades the whole being.¹

There are four points that I would like you to remember from the above quotation because I will focus on three of them later and one of them very shortly. Those points are Whitehead's belief that style pervades our whole being, that it is the last acquirement of an educated mind, that it has an aesthetic quality about it, and that it is seen as the smoothest or most efficient way of achieving one's goal.

The last characteristic is the one that sheds the most light on the question before us now, that is, what is philosophical commitment? With that last characteristic in mind I think that it is accurate to say that philosophical commitment is a certain style one develops in response to a philosophical question because one believes that that style will be the smoothest and most efficient way for us to reach a satisfactory answer to the question. In other words we think that approaching the question with another style would be a waste of time.

This brings us to our second question, that of determining how one develops this

style. This is a difficult question. Most philosophers will agree that one does not suddenly wake up in the morning and realize that you are an existentialist or a linguistic analyst or a logical positivist or whatever. Once you have developed your style of philosophy you realize that it grew slowly and as a result of certain influences. Perhaps it was a certain professor, or book, or a certain experience, or a combination of things. The problem is, those things happened to you, and we realize that other philosophers have had different experiences and consequently have developed different styles. To speak about the development of philosophical style then, is almost necessarily restricted to speaking about the style of a specific philosopher. I say almost because I think that there are two factors that are nearly universal as far as developing philosophical style goes.

The first is the educational training that philosophers receive. This training is marked by two important characteristics that I believe inhibits the development of philosophical style. The first is the very lack of attention given to the topic of philosophical style and the second is the eclectic nature of the training.

I am not against exposing students to a large number of philosophers, but I think that we should be aware of the effect this has on the development of philosophical commitment. Eclecticism coupled with a lack of serious attention being given to the topic of commitment can easily lead a student to the conclusion that to be a philosopher means not committing yourself. I think that you will agree that to be a philosopher entails precisely the opposite. One can keep an open mind without necessarily having an empty one. I think that it is time that we started to give this area serious consideration in the teaching of philosophy on both the graduate and undergraduate level because its importance for the development of philosophical commitment has been vastly underrated. Whitehead said that style was the last acquirement of an educated mind. I think this is true, but just because style is the last thing acquired does not mean it should be the last thing considered, or worse, not considered at all.

The second characteristic of philosophical commitment that I think is almost universal is that it takes time to develop it. I think that it is important to note that most of the great philosophers produced their important works after the age of thirty. I do not mean to say that there is something magical that happens to a philosopher when he reaches that age, I just think that it illustrates the point that it takes time to work out your own philosophical style. I think that Aristotle expressed this in the *Nicomachean Ethics* when he said the following:

What has been said is confirmed by the fact that while young men become geometricians and mathematicians and wise in matters like these, it is thought that a young man of practical wisdom cannot be found. The cause is that such wisdom, is concerned not only with universals but with particulars, which become familiar from experience, but a young man has no experience; indeed one might ask this question too; why a boy may become

a mathematician, but not a philosopher or a physicist. It is because the objects of mathematics exist by abstraction, while the first principles of these other subjects come from experience, and because young men have no conviction (*italics mine*) about the latter but merely use the proper language . . .²

The fact that it takes time to develop style does not mean it should be ignored. I think the issue should be dealt with, but not forced. To use a rough analogy it seems to me that the development of philosophical commitment is similar to the onset of puberty. There's no way of speeding up the process, yet it helps a great deal to know something about it before it arrives.

We come now to the last question. How are we to understand this thing called philosophical commitment? Why does one choose one style rather than another? Why is there, as Professor Lange puts it in his book *The Cognitivity Paradox* "continuing philosophical disagreement"?³

In answering let me remind you once again of one of the characteristics that Whitehead ascribed to our sense of style. He said that it is an aesthetic sense. Once again I think that Whitehead is right. I think that the best way to view philosophic commitment is as a type of artistic or aesthetic expression that is, in Susanne K. Langer's terms "symbolic of human feeling."⁴ For Langer, all art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling. In this respect, I think that philosophical commitment and the products that flow from it; teaching, writing, and even life itself can be understood as symbolic of the way a particular philosopher feels about philosophy, life, and the world. It would seem that Professor Lange also accepts this view of philosophy when he says, "One is tempted to say that, disguise matters howsoever we will, philosophy remains an art, the product of a creative, disciplined imagination."⁵ I say, it would seem that he does because later in *The Cognitivity Paradox* he tries, by virtue of his "ideally rational and informed community of philosophers" to put philosophy on a footing similar to that of science. That is, if there are some things that Lange's ideal community can come to agreement on then we will have a basis for eliminating many of the disputes that reign in philosophy. But this is precisely the way that science has been able to achieve uniformity. There is nothing sacrosanct or absolute about the empirical method of investigation. It derives its efficacy from the fact that most scientists agree that it is the best method of scientific inquiry.

If one thinks that philosophy should also be a science then Lange's idea sounds appealing. But if you think that philosophy is more of an art than a science then it becomes clear that the diversity of philosophy is its strength, not its weakness. We would no more want uniformity in philosophical thinking than we would in the world of painting, or fashion, or sculpture.

There is another important implication that follows from viewing philosophical commitment as a form of artistic expression. Put simply it is that every philosopher

must honestly ask himself if the commitment or style of philosophy he has chosen is really symbolic of the way he feels about philosophy. Does your style, as Whitehead puts it, pervade your whole being? Is it really symbolic of the way you feel? Or are you just playing at intellectual games and/or word games?

I would also like to point out that one is not necessarily restricted by natural talent when making a philosophical commitment. That is, it is not a question of being a positivist because you don't understand existentialism. I'm sure that some of you can attest that one style may be as reasonable, relevant, and meaningful as another. But you can't have both, that is why a commitment is needed.

One last question. In view of the diversity which exists in the philosophical world, is there any commitment that philosophers as a whole can make without sacrificing this diversity? I think there is. I think philosophy as a discipline should commit itself to becoming once again an interesting and relevant discipline for the intelligent layman. It had this quality at one time, and I think that it could have it again. But at the present time, I think that it has strayed far from this mission. Lionel Trilling in his book *Mind in the Modern World* laments the state of all intellectual disciplines today and about philosophy in particular remarks ". . . it would appear to have become a technical subject for specialists and no longer consents to accommodate the interest and effort of any reasonably strong general intelligence."⁶

I think that it would be both a sad and dangerous thing for philosophy to succumb any further to this fate. Sad because it is capable of doing more and dangerous because the questioning attitude which philosophy engenders is essential to a healthy democratic society.

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NOTES

¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*. Free Press Paperback. (Toronto: Collier-Macmillan Canada, Ltd., 1967), p. 12.

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Vol. IX of *Great Books of the Western World*. Edited by Robert Maynard Hutchins (54 vols. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952) p. 391.

³ John Lange, *The Cognition Paradox*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 6.

⁴ Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 40.

⁵ Lange, *The Cognition Paradox*. p. 62.

⁶ Lionel Trilling, *Mind in the Modern World*. (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), p. 16.