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Robert N. Beck
Clark University

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Philosophy, Commitment, and Their Institutional Setting

Robert N. Beck

The question before this colloquium, whether the philosopher is neutral or committed, arises in a variety of contexts and takes on multiple meanings. It can be asked more broadly so as to refer to the humanities generally, to scholarship, even to the university itself; and it can be asked with precise reference to philosophy. Having at least these two contexts, the question calls for separate, though I think interrelated, considerations. I shall begin with some broader issues, and turn to the question of philosophical commitment later.

I

But first, it may be helpful to ask how the question of commitment versus neutrality has come to the foreground in recent if not contemporary thought and experience at all. I do not imply that the question is just a modern one—indeed the opposite is really the case. Plato's *Republic* speaks of a variety of commitments which the philosopher should have; and religious educational institutions have long had, often with supporting spokesmen, developed doctrinal commitments.[1] Still, the question of commitment has arisen for us in an especially forceful way. At least two of its major sources can be easily identified.

The first of these—and I separate them only for analysis, well recognizing that they are or can be interrelated—arises from a misunderstanding or misplacement of an old but, I think, still valid notion, namely the neutrality of the university. In fact, since this source of our question ascribes to universities what ought properly to be attributed to individuals, namely commitment, and also (perhaps only at times, to be sure, and then mostly by implication) ascribes to individuals the neutrality which belongs to universities, it may be said to involve something of a category mistake. I will not guess whether the misplacement is intentional or not, and I have already indicated that I take the denial of institutional neutrality to be an error. It has nevertheless been a position assumed in recent times by activist students and faculty, though I do not believe it is limited solely to these groups.

Three strands of argument, not all of equal weight, make up the challenge to the ideal of institutional neutrality. The first I have already alluded to: since individuals, it is said, are always motivated by their commitments (or biases or unconscious interests, etc.) and therefore never really are "objective," so too institutions must have their commitments and biases. The impossibility of the former implies the impossibility of the latter. I think you are all aware of some of the practical consequences of such a judgment. One illustration is the investigation of university stock

portfolios to determine whether investment patterns show a commitment to racism. A second strand is crudely historical, and is another of the now tiresome inferences based on Hitler's Germany. Was it not the neutrality, the lack of political concern and commitment on the part of German academia, the position argues, that made Hitler's takeover of education, if not the nation, so easy and so successful? Without commitment on the part of universities, without political involvement, it is said, the dire consequences that affected Germany may also affect us. Now I hope I have not put this point unfairly, for it is stated briefly, and I confess that I am weary of inferences of this kind. But I must also say that I am unmoved by it too, partly because of the looseness of inferences from history, especially recent history, partly also because in fact the evidence for the neutrality of German universities and professors is unclear. One recalls Heidegger's temporary commitment to Nazism, and I have heard personal testimony from men who studied in Germany in those days that their classrooms, at least, were sheer indoctrination sessions in Nazism. That the neutrality of the university has dire social consequences is, I think, a doubtful proposition at least. The third strand of argumentation against the notion of neutrality rests on an ideal of relevance, and charges that neutrality entails irrelevance. The meaning of this assertion is, I think, clear enough, and it needs no documentation because of its familiarity. My own belief about this charge is that it really rests on a confusion of institutional neutrality with value nihilism. But to show this, I need to speak positively about the meaning of neutrality itself.

Now it must first be observed that when someone such as myself defends the notion of the neutrality of the university, the phrase he uses is shorthand for a rather complicated position. It refers on the one hand to institutional neutrality with respect to the outcome or *conclusions* of inquiry. On the other hand, however, it does not refer to some kind of neutrality in general, whatever that may mean. Indeed, the idea of the neutrality of the university presupposes a number of commitments and value judgments. Three of these can be easily singled out: the value of such neutrality itself, the values presupposed by inquiry, and the values or standards covering the *methods* of inquiry. I shall consider these briefly in order.

(1) First, the value of neutrality. Commitment to the ideal of university neutrality with respect to conclusions carries with it a commitment to the value of that commitment. And this commitment is in turn supportable by two well-known arguments elaborated by John Stuart Mill—arguments, to be sure, which he directed toward supporting political freedom, but which are really as, if not more, appropriate to academia, for they commend neutrality for the necessary institutional frameworks of human thought and action. Recall that Mill developed two arguments, the second of which, I might note in passing, has often been overlooked. In the first of them, Mill urged that freedom is important as a *means* of inquiry. Not all knowledge, truth, and artistic expression is in, so to speak, and freedom of inquiry is an indispensable condition for the furtherance of truth and knowledge. This can be called an argument from skepticism, for it rests on the premise that human beings have not attained complete knowledge; and I think it has merit for someone whose episte-

mology is not absolutistic. But Mill has a second argument which he would propound even to one who believes that, at least in some sense, all truth is at hand. This may be called the personalistic argument, for in it Mill suggests that an environment which fosters the individual's opportunity to come to his own ideas, to live his life, to conduct his inquiries, all according to his own convictions, is morally more mature, is more respectful of personality, than is its opposite.

These arguments will, I am sure, have varying degrees of persuasiveness for different persons. To me they are quite persuasive. More important, though, is that, while Mill addressed them to an ideal of freedom, I am suggesting that they support and give meaning to the ideal of institutional neutrality. Indeed, my suggestion is that neutrality is but a name for the institutionalization of the principles of freedom and respect for personality within an institution devoted to the intellectual life.

(2) The second commitment implied by the ideal of neutrality is to certain values presupposed by inquiry itself. I shall not attempt a complete list or an exhaustive analysis of them, but clearly, I think, inquiry does presuppose such values as intellectual integrity, truthful communication, perhaps an ideal of truth itself, or at least of verification, reliability, or warrant. I think, too, that inquiry presupposes an ideal of freedom of inquiry, and as well—since inquiry has an outreach to if not basis in community—the ideal of respect for personality.

(3) Third, and finally, is the commitment to professional standards regarding methods of inquiry. Here again I shall not attempt to state or justify them—and actually, such standards are nearly as diverse as the disciplines themselves. The commitment to standards arises—and institutional neutrality supports it—because the claims made by inquirers need to be responsible claims. This notion should not be read conservatively, for there is the important matter of inquiry into the standards of inquiry, and therewith the need to change them in the light of advancing insight. If the word professional had not come across bad times recently, and I confess that for me it is still a good word, I would make this point by saying that the ideal of institutional neutrality presupposes or carries with it a commitment to professionalism of method.

Thus, the idea of the neutral university does indeed mean that the university is committed, and the commitment is to a range of values and ideals, and the concomitant institutional actions, appropriate to the intellectual life. But, it must also be noted, this neutrality in turn means that the university must not take stands on substantive issues other than its own specific values. And just here arises the charge made against universities when they were challenged to—and in many cases have—"taken a stand" on such issues as Vietnam, racism, sexism, poverty, prisons, and so on. Since many faculties and student bodies did in fact make their commitments on these matters, one must infer that the ideal of neutrality, and with it ideals of freedom and personality, have in the recent past constituted a minority view.

Now I turn to the second major source from which our question, neutrality or commitment, seems to have arisen. This source is certain conclusions believed estab-

lished especially by the sociology of knowledge. I am quite consciously using this expression in a loose, even popular, sense, and there may also be elements of a popularized Marxism in the movement I am referring to. But whatever name is used, this source makes its challenge not by questioning the value of institutional neutrality but by asserting that it is nonexistent. That is, it is said, the university, its life and commitments, reflect only bourgeois or middle class Waspish values. Not only is the university therefore narrow—perhaps hypocritically so because of its claims—but it is taken to be one of many cultural institutions which reflect and promote, not truth, but dominant class interests and powers. The outcome of these assumptions is well-known. It is the attempt to "radicalize" universities so that they would reflect "our" interests rather than someone else's, and would serve as "our" power and instrument rather than "theirs." Consequently, speakers and classrooms which did not serve "our" interests were booed down, and interruptions were directed toward denying the right to teach or speak about ideas contrary to the new interests the university was to serve. The general point is that universities always reflect *some* interest, social or political as it may be, and therefore it is necessary, not to interpret or justify the university differently, but to change it.

This source of our question, like the first, is not at all persuasive to me. To be sure, I speak loosely of the sociology of knowledge: the specialist in the field might say I misrepresent him. But I want to dodge his criticism, for I am identifying a popularized view. The basic reason for my rejection of the account of the university given by this position is that I believe that if all forms of human consciousness spring from the class interests which purportively sustain our personalities, then the entire sphere of intellectual and creative activity becomes incomprehensible. I would also argue, though I shall not here, that in fact thought and knowledge transcend class interests. But, a little more technically, I find that the fundamental premise of the sociology of knowledge, namely Marx's sub- and superstructure dichotomy—or some analogous assumption—confuses the validity of what we know with how we come to know it; and in doing so, it makes nonsense of all knowledge and art, and indeed even of itself as knowledge. In sum, the sociology of knowledge, at least in the simplistic form I have given it, is destructive of the university as we have known it—and as well, if the connections suggested above between inquiry, neutrality, freedom, and personality hold, of our very humanity.

In addition to this inference from the sociology of knowledge, two other observations can be made about these efforts to radicalize the university. The first is that there is a distinction, though it is often overlooked, between reflecting an interest and being committed to one. The difference is crucial, for the former does not rule out neutrality for inquiry (it may produce some tensions, to be sure), the latter in principle does. Thus, for example, that a private educational institution may reflect capitalist economic values does not in principle rule out individual commitment to alternatives; to be institutionally committed to an economic ideology does.

The second observation is about the university as a social institution, and thus as having social power, that is, power to effect social change or to maintain tradition.

Now in the above discussion, I have meant by university primarily scholarly-educational activities, but universities are, of course, social institutions as well. My own judgment is that the power of universities has been greatly exaggerated in recent times, largely for purposes of radicalization; and further, that it is important that universities not generate social power even if they can. Furthermore, whatever power stance, conservative, liberal, Marxist, radical, universities may in fact have —and the institutionalization of higher learning may take many forms—the proper concern of the scholarly-learning activity is simply whether the institutionalization is supportive of that activity and maintains the commitments outlined above which constitute the meaning of institutional neutrality. Beyond this concern, the university as scholarly activity should not go, for then it is subject to ideological manipulation and distortion. And this because it would be seeking to effect social (institutional) changes on grounds other than the needs of the university itself. The place to effect social change is the political process; politicizing the university can only mean losing it.

I want to add a qualifier to these sharp observations, though, and that is, that it does not follow from what I have said that the university is immune from criticism. Far from it. But the important consideration is what ideals suggest and guide criticism. As human institutions universities do, one might almost say must, fall short of the ideals appropriate to them, and they are therefore always subject to critique. What I have suggested is that, rightly understood, institutional neutrality with its implications for freedom, inquiry, programmatic coherence, and respect for personality, is precisely the basis of such criticism and development.

In sum, then, my discussion has supported an ideal of neutrality for the university. This is an old idea, expressed in one of its forms by the young John Dewey when he long ago wrote that parents, nations, ideologies may have goals for education, but education itself has no goal except more education. It is an ideal, not of eliminating hostile alternatives like peace movements and ROTC programs, but of positive support for diverse positions, if only they are conceptually based and professional in method. The "space" for scholarship created by the neutral university is not there to serve special alien interests such as rights movements, peace or war activities, or political ends, however much within that space individuals have their commitments to such ends. It is there for critique, for protecting scholarship and learning, however popular or unpopular, however strong or weak, the conclusions taken by individuals may be. Finally, I also believe that in thus serving really itself, the university ultimately serves society in the ways most appropriate to its nature. Maintaining the ideal of neutrality, with its accompanying commitments, is the university's way of serving individuals pursuing the intellectual life; and it is through their contributions to society that the justification of the university is ultimately to be found.

II

What I have urged thus far has some analogies with the second major topic of

this paper—though I stress the comparison as only analogous. Our colloquium topic, the philosopher as neutral or committed, suggests again a twofold treatment, one part of which raises the question of neutrality on the basis of unconscious drives or motives, the other raises the question of commitment in relation to philosophical ideas or conclusions. Again, I shall discuss these two issues separately, though for some thinkers they are interrelated.

Since the first basis upon which our topic is usually discussed is a psychological one, I shall refer to it simply as the psychology of knowledge. Again, I am popularizing somewhat, but the general import of the position is that neutrality is an impossibility because of the influence of psychological mechanisms of one sort or another; and also, usually, the position therefore denies any cognitivity or objectivity to philosophical statements. Indeed, the major difference between these two sources I shall discuss is just here: the psychology of knowledge usually denies the validity of the philosophical enterprise, the second need not deny it, but does suggest an interrelatedness of philosophical statements such that conclusions in one area of philosophy imply or presuppose other philosophical conclusions. But more of this difference later.

Consider a set of examples based on the psychology of knowledge: behaviorism is a repressive rule resulting from a decision to repress emotions; solipsism is narcissism; Ayer's positivism is a repression of the death fear; Russell's atomism is a repression of suicidal tendencies; Moore's world of good grammar is the result of the cultural super ego. Such a list could be expanded indefinitely, and it need not be made up in psychoanalytic terms alone. Also, observations such as these can be done with more subtlety, so that philosophical statements are viewed as anxiety statements, or perplexity statements, or even proposal statements.

Now I am not going to be able to catch everything about the complex—and in some quarters powerful—position within the net cast by a short paper. Indeed, I can hardly offer more than the beginning of a refutation of it—and I do think this general position is an erroneous one. Still, I want to make one or two observations about it. The first is that, to make such judgments, a philosopher needs to have some coping stone of objectivity. Like the drunk staggering down the street who grabs the nearest light pole, so the psychology of knowledge, casting doubt on the cognitive life generally, must have its own cognitive base from which it can make what it takes to be true statements about the philosopher and his activity. Such bases have been various: psychology, psychoanalysis, science, language, society, and so on. Even Lange's view that philosophy is proposal is not simply a proposal about proposals, but rests on the judgment (which I take it he would hold to be true) that knowledge and truth are related and definable in terms of notions of evidence and falsifiability.[2] Of course I am not doing justice to the full complexity of his position, but I do think it rests, like the others, on an external base of presumed objectivity. Now for another subtlety: is the justification of the base—let us say science, for example—a scientific or a philosophical one? It is hard to take the

justification as science, for it would not follow scientific canons; and it is hard to take as philosophical, for most detractors of philosophy would rule out the validity of philosophical activity. In sum, while a base is needed to show the non-objectivity of philosophy because of bias, anxiety, etc., the objectivity of the base cannot be established.

A second observation is this: It is only on the basis of an ideal of intelligibility that error and bias can be identified at all. That is, if we charge one of our colleagues with one or the other, it must be on the presupposition that some objective knowledge is possible—minimally, knowledge of that error or bias. To be sure, I do believe that we finite human beings make errors—perhaps even part of the meaning of finitude is error—but this fact implies for me, not the impossibility of philosophical objectivity, but rather the reality of the ideal of rationality. *Ratio est capabilis,* though the circumstances and conditions in which we attain a grain of philosophic truth may be extremely limited.

I turn now to the other half of my topic, namely whether the philosopher, in making any statement, implies thereby additional philosophical or other commitments. Does an ethical analysis imply a world view, or does a judgment on the ontological argument imply a view of feminism? Now this question would be an easy one for a rationalist who believed in internal relations: his answer would be yes. But I am not sure that this is a clarifying answer, and it would undoubtedly not be satisfactory to anyone who denied a strict doctrine of internal relations.

What this reference to rationalism suggests, though, is that philosophy is a unified activity, however much we break it up into specialties like logic, ethics, and metaphysics. Such is the view of philosophy which I accept, though I think it has a differentiated unity. To state my view briefly and somewhat dogmatically: I find that the root, the *Urgrund,* of philosophical activity to be ethics, that is, in value judgments, chief of which are judgments about cognitive values. Logic and epistemology follow in my sequence, and then the other philosophical disciplines are built upon these. Thus a value judgment, or many of them, would for me underlie a world view, but I do not think the reverse is the case.

However this suggestion is criticized, the additional point I want to stress is that such interdependence of philosophical activities does not imply subjectivity of philosophical judgment. It rather implies, I think, that philosophical positions must be judged holistically, and this because philosophical statements do indeed have degrees of interdependence. I would add as an empirical generalization, though, that such interdependence affects all cognitive statements, scientific and theological as well as philosophical; and also, that a philosopher is the least likely of scholars to hold these implications and commitments unconsciously. In fact, one of the marks of philosophical excellence, I think, is just this ability to make commitments and presuppositions explicit.

Does this imply that a philosopher is politically committed, or that he should be? If what I have just suggested is true, then, while not strictly an entailment, a social

philosophy, or at least some social options, is related to other philosophical judgments. And should the philosopher be socially or politically committed in the sense of political action? This question is a little more complex, and is itself a philosophical judgment about which we cannot easily generalize. I suspect it reflects conclusions about the interrelations of *theoria* and *praxis*. My own position, for what it is worth, is that political commitment and judgment are part of the philosophical commitment, but with the provisio that they are subject to revision in the light of further philosophical considerations. That is, the philosopher is committed to political action but is not tied to it—which is another reason why he needs to work in an institutional environment which does not demand his commitments, nor make them for him.

III

May I now briefly sum up these observations. I have argued that, for all the pressures against it, the ideal of university neutrality is still a valid and important one. I have suggested, though, that this neutrality itself involves commitments to the context which supports, even makes possible, the intellectual life. I have also suggested that the notion of commitment does not destroy the philosophic life by making objectivity impossible, but in fact it is the ground on which we seek objectivity. Of course in all these observations about neutrality, cognitivity, and objectivity, I have been speaking of ideals—ideals which I take with other idealists to be distant yet attainable, and therefore real. But also with Spinoza I conclude by noting that all good things are as difficult as they are rare.

Clark University

NOTES

[1] I shall not treat separately the issue of specific religious commitments by universities, for the general position I outline will be seen to imply, I think, the conclusion that such commitments are inconsistent with the idea of a university—though not, to be sure, with other institutions of higher learning. To make this out fully, though, and with reference to the standard literature, would require a paper of inappropriate length.

[2] See John Lange, *The Cognitivity Paradox* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), esp. pp. 67ff.