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Engagement + (Joint) Commitment

On the Obligation to Act Together

What is the difference, or compatibility, between two words or two protocols – the French-English engagement (*engager*) and the English-French commitment (*commettre*)? Could a few acts (activity, agency, work, effort), potentially named by these two terms, imply very specific kinds of obligation? Our intention is to show that complementarity and correlation of the concepts of commitment (joint commitment) and engagement in the English language (although not exclusively) could be an introduction into the existence of a new kind of obligation (which is neither a perfect, nor simply an imperfect obligation). We would like to elaborate in a few steps, or by way of a few operations, the process of constituting group agency (an engaged group, such as the Group for Social Engagement Studies). Our assumption is that individuals who simultaneously research and thematize engagement or group agency together, who write and study together (discipline means studying something together and in a group) are indeed engaged individuals and are a group or make (up) a group. (In Serbian and Croatian, the verb *činiti* means to act or to do, but also to be a part of an entity, constitute it, make it up, be part of its content.)

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Preliminarily, we insist on there being an entirely inexact or uncertain number of different unclassified activities (which is why we are speaking of processes and steps) that have the capacity to:

- a) not only encourage or obligate another (or others) to identical or similar action or reciprocal reaction, but also to produce an obligation that implies a joint, group action ('to do something as a body'), and
- b) not only obligate members of a group to do something together, but to exceed the borders of joint commitment of the group, *a priori* obligating non-members or all potential and future participants to joint and coordinated action.

What are these actions like, then, the ones that engage others (all others) or that have the capacity to commit (to bring together, collect and bind even those who are not present in one place simultaneously)? Let us describe and list, that is, assume a few meanings of the verbs 'commit' and 'engage'. These three verbs in the first person plural imperative (let us 'describe',

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'list', 'assume'), which could be uttered sufficiently loudly by any individual at the same time suspending their own speech in the first person singular (only 'we' can replace 'I'; and only 'I' can utter the pronoun 'we'), could together represent a kind of obligation for all those who are potentially within earshot and understand the utterances. The way these verbs were used potentially connects, mobilizes and invites others to individual agreement or action, but at the same time (also) summons them to (the same, common) answer. Their joint answer or joint action¹ is confirmed not only when each of us conducts a given activity (e.g. describing, assuming or listing meanings of the words 'commit' and 'engage') or else when simultaneously and with total commitment, abandon and concentrated activity performs a collective performance of 'assuming', 'describing' and 'listing'. It is also confirmed when these three imperatives are repeated or simply uttered: 'let us describe and assume and list'. The first person plural imperative is one of the initial, but conditionless, conditions of institutionalizing the work of a group or of joint commitment. Yet certainly not the only one. Verbs such as ask, suggest, entreat, supplicate, appeal, demand, order, as well as prove, argument, justify or defend (not even necessarily used in the imperative) could encourage to engagement and potentially to joint commitment.

The first book of the *Torah* (Chapter 11) describes the first constituting of joint commitment, joint work and first great architectural and institutional adventure. In addition to the imperative that sets collective intentionality in motion (several times, too: 'come, let us [*havah*] make bricks...'; 'come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make ourselves a name, lest we be scattered upon the face of the entire Earth'), and in addition to the grandiose project and majestic goal, singleness of the space and time for all members of the group, the introduction of new technology, the discovery of incorporation and the invention of the entity of the company (name), and in addition to the ability of the group to produce a nearly unbelievably powerful instance that disrupts and ultimately destroys the very project – in addition to all that, the group, also, possesses *ad hoc* the same language, thus ensuring the clear and complete communication of all its members.

Engaged action would then be the one that is above all public or announced (for it cannot be a kind of negative social act or a secret, an undisclosed

1 Would it be too irrelevant a digression to stop for a moment in order to let our ear listen to the subtle difference between common and joint? Where common implies a simple commonality, that something is *happens* to be happening in two or more places, or an opinion *happens* to be held by more than one person, joint implies a more complicated unity, one not only with more intentionality (than simple commonality) but also comprising two steps: the first step of agreement and the second of expression. A common feeling or opinion is one that simply recurs; a joint feeling or opinion calls to mind a feeling or opinion *arrived* at, with a prior state of potential disagreement.

action performed in silence). Further, it is provocative in nature, really a call or message to all, to others (*com-mittere* can mean to send), a prompting of all to come closer, to join (not only members of a group, but also those absent), because ‘to commit’ precisely means an action that encourages or obligates others to do something together by doing so as members of a future committee (“joint commitment obligates the parties one to the other to act in accordance with the commitments”; M. Gilbert). However, engaged action is specific in that it supposes this type of great or grand work, adherence (‘giving one’s all’, ‘committed to the end’) and abandon (a kind of sacrifice for others or with other or towards others, or in their stead, sacrifice as bringing closer, but also as work that calls others to join, repeat our action and thus construct future joint work) – all with the goal of bringing us closer to others. (The word *engager* comes from the verb *vado*, with the German word *wadi*, Latin *vas*, *vadis* meaning ‘*je m’avance vers quelqu’un*’, ‘I am advancing towards another’; P Kemp.) We advance towards or are brought closer to others either when we become bound to them or bind them to us, when we ‘invest’ or ‘place something’ into or before others, when we ‘*mettre en gage*’ / ‘pledge’ or ‘*donner en gage*’ / ‘give a pledge’.

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What does this mean? What does it mean to place a pledge or burden (guarantee, bail, *hypothèque*; ‘*engager, c’est hypothéquer*’) before an other or before all (the whole community), and to what extent is that a form of modest violence and forcing others (or all) to choose whether they would join this specific action or not? What kind of action does not principally have to be in strictly direct relation with another (‘if I am doing something, then you or she must do likewise’), but that certainly binds me to another (and the other to me) such that it jointly obligates us to conduct it (‘if I act, then we all act’, ‘if you act, then all act’)? If my public activities involve collecting money for caring for gravely ill children, organizing temporary shelter for war refugees from a neighboring state, or if I often visit slaughterhouses to protest against (the way of) killing animals, would not all these activities be called engaged (and ‘activist’)? Each could represent ‘personal commitment’ (*engagement personnel*), and at the same time, none could be performed individually, but would always require smaller or larger groups of people (‘joint commitment’). However, this transformation of individual into group agency need not necessarily be the most significant characteristic of these actions. The beginning of the explanation of this transformation was long ago constructed by Kant, where he speaks of duties to oneself as such (*Pflicht gegen sich selbst*), of debt or obligation to oneself that always precedes and underpins/conditions any possible obligation to others (which he will call external duty).

Far more complicated, but also perhaps more crucial, is the set of actions that could be located in that place in English where two complementary words or strategies overlap and at the same time diverge: engagement and

commitment. Personal engaged action (crucially perhaps in contradistinction to the French *engagement*) remains personal, such as me being engaged in my career or caring for the ill. Only a handful of people, in my more or less immediate circle, will recognize this engagement, and in recognizing the engagement might feel that it is 'a thing of public importance', and thus an obligation to join in. Commitment or joint commitment, for it is always in the plural, calls for a different kind of obligation. Namely, when I call a lunch meeting of our Group for Social Engagement Studies at a nearby restaurant, and promise to attend the beginning of the meeting, then I am truly engaged and all those who answer the meeting call will confirm my action, thus also becoming engaged. But the joint commitment of our group ('to act in accordance with commitments') occurs only when the actions of the group produce sufficient reason or obligation for those who do not initially belong to our group, or those who are still not at the scheduled meetings, to necessarily join. If our group truly acts together, if it is jointly engaged (such action always referring to the vital connections and relationships that hold the community or the group together), then I am obligated to join it, to become engaged ('if all act, then I act'). Such an obligation is different from a non-perfect obligation, because the person that gives charity or uses polite protocols or helps the poor in no way produces the identical obligation in me. By contrast, joint commitment of a group could never leave me or us indifferent.