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Keywords

Commitment

The origins of **commitment** are complex; the term is derived from the early fifteenth century verb 'commit', a double borrowing from the Latin *committere* and the French (via Anglo-Norman) *comitter*. The Latin root is the prefix 'com' ('together, in combination or union') + the verb 'mittere' ('to send'). In Latin the wide range of meanings included 'to bring together', 'to engage in battle', 'to begin', 'to involve', 'to consign', 'to entrust', 'to impart', 'to perpetrate', 'to break the law', and 'to incur a penalty', with the later, post-classical meanings of 'to send someone to trial or prison', and 'to send on a mission' or 'to appoint'. In French the range was broadly similar, though with some extensions: 'to perpetrate a crime, sin, or error', 'to hand over', 'to accomplish', 'to punish', 'to send', 'to empower', 'to appoint', and 'to command'.

Commitment enters English in the mid to late sixteenth century and carries over many of the etymological root senses of 'commit'. There are four main semantic trajectories in the early uses which are related, though the connections are not obvious: detention; to send (for consideration); to entrust; to perpetrate. The dominant link is the use of **commitment** in relation to the law. Thus the earliest use pertains to detention before a trial (or imprisonment afterwards), and is retained in legal use (though the more usual general term is now 'committal'). An extension of this sense is recorded from the nineteenth century and refers to detention in an institution for care or treatment (specifically in what we now call a psychiatric hospital). Concurrent with the first sense is the technical meaning (now rare but still used in parliamentary jargon) of sending legislation for the consideration of a committee for the purposes of scrutiny. This is clearly related to another sense that also appears in the early seventeenth century: entrusting something to the care of another, specifically the transfer of responsibility or control. The final sense amongst these early uses of **commitment** is a departure, though rooted in the etymological origins of 'commit': perpetrating a crime, sin or similar offence (in contemporary usage the term would now more usually be 'commission').

Interestingly, although all of the early senses are retained in the language one way and another, it is not until the end of the eighteenth century that the first use of **commitment** in the modern sense appears. That is, the general meaning of the act of making a binding obligation to a particular course of action or policy, or the act of giving an undertaking (implicitly or explicitly). The narrowing from the reference to the action to the meaning of an obligation or responsibility per se, occurs slightly later in the early to mid nineteenth century. Significantly, although the late-eighteenth century sense is non-specific in its connotation, the earliest recorded examples are political (George Washington in 1789 and Thomas Jefferson in 1793). Given that politics involves the conscious espousal of causes, involving belief and practice, it is unsurprising therefore to note the late nineteenth century development of **commitment** in the sense of being dedicated to a political cause, ideology, or particular form of activity. There are two further semantic extensions to the term. The first is its specific use in Sartrean Existentialism in the mid twentieth century, to mean engagement with the world by committing oneself to a political cause. The second is the broadening of the term to its use to mean the

act of committing oneself to a person in a specific relationship (formally or simply by practice). Two other meanings also occur in the twentieth century: the act of assigning resources for a particular purpose, and by extension, in a specialised military use, the deployment of troops. In contemporary use, **commitment** is often deployed in a considerably weakened sense to mean engagement or effort, though the stronger sense persists even in general usage.

It is in the context of questions of aesthetics that the meaning of **commitment** has been most problematic in the twentieth century. Debates around politics and aesthetics within the socialist tradition have often revolved around competing definitions of this complex term, specifically in relation to the political alignment of a work of art or its author. Marx and Engels, for example, dismissed what they called 'tendency literature', while praising the work of Balzac and Dickens. And Brecht rejected what he took to be Lukacs's narrow demand for a specific form of writing, with the contention that artistic production is unpredictable and therefore not politically controllable. Summarising these debates, Raymond Williams argued that the meaning of **commitment** is as yet unresolved and remains unhelpfully positioned between a type of formalism (the imposition of a particular style) and a late version of Romanticism (in which the individual artist commits to a cause). In the political sense, of course, **commitment** must mean a conscious and active choice of position. In relation to the aesthetic, however, the term remains contested, open, and subject to specific understanding.