

Commitments in a Post-Foundationalist World

With the publication of our first special issue, some words of explanation are in order. Departing from our regular format, this issue presents an important conversation currently taking place within political theory.

Why publish a set of essays on political theory in a deliberately interdisciplinary journal like *The Hedgehog Review*? The answer, in short, is that we think this conversation has relevance far beyond the boundaries of political science to discussions taking place in moral philosophy, social theory, aesthetics, psychology, and religious studies. Our desire, then, is to introduce this significant discussion to a broader audience.

It may be of some help to begin by explaining the genesis of this issue. Five years ago, political theorist Stephen White published *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory*, a ground-breaking and provocative book in which he suggested that there may be a middle ground between fundamentalism and relativism, between dogmatism and skepticism, between foundationalism and anti-foundationalism. How one holds one's beliefs, he argued, might be more important than the content of those beliefs for finding a middle ground between each of these extremes.

White coined the term “weak ontology” to suggest a way of holding deep commitments about the nature of human beings that acknowledges both the historical, cultural, and contestable character of those commitments and their fundamental role in shaping our political and moral claims. Our deepest commitments, he argued, can be both fundamentally important *and* contestable. In *Sustaining Affirmation*, White discussed the writings of four leading political theorists (political philosopher William Connolly, postmodern theorist Judith Butler, moral philosopher Charles Taylor, and political theorist George Kateb) with special attention to the implicit ontologies—or deepest commitments about what it means to be human—that shape their political claims.

In response to the publication of White's book, political theorists Keith Topper and Dilip Gaonkar organized a conference at Northwestern University, inviting White and the theorists he discusses, as well as a number of respondents and other conversation partners to participate. This was an incredibly fruitful exchange that advanced the conversation considerably, by bringing to light not only the strengths, weaknesses, possibilities, and worries about White's original argument, but also a range of further avenues for reflection and research. It was clear that such a rich and provocative discussion needed to be brought to a larger audience.

The heart of this issue of *The Hedgehog Review* concerns the ways in which we acquire, hold, express, and live out our deepest commitments and the ways in which these commitments shape our moral and political affirmations. This is neither an easy nor a straightforward exercise. One reason, of course, is that we live in a culture of relentless critique—not only in academia but also in our larger public culture. How might we move beyond pure critique towards the possibility of affirmation? To know where things have gone wrong implies an idea of how things might be right, however unarticulated that idea might be. By examining the ways specific critiques come to be formed, is it possible to bring into relief the affirmations implicit in those critiques?

Another reason why commitment and affirmation are deeply problematized in our day has to do with the ways in which belief and commitment have been grounded and justified in the past. “Foundationalism” has become a troublesome word, and much energy has gone into deconstructing the various foundations to knowledge, belief, and commitment that have shaped culture historically. Does a suspicion toward foundations leave us with a groundless relativism in which nothing but critique is possible? Even in the face of the most radical skepticism, is it not naïve to imagine that there are no obligations, however tentatively held, that inform that skepticism or that shape the skeptic’s particular address to the world? How, then, in a post-foundationalist world can we recognize, articulate, and engage the commitments that implicitly inform our moral and political claims and actions?

The essays published here provide us with new ways of thinking about how we hold our deepest commitments; how those commitments are constituted, shaped, and challenged; and how those commitments shape our larger claims about how the world should be, even when those commitments are only implied. In publishing this special issue of *The Hedgehog Review*, we will not mislead you: the essays here will be challenging to follow at times. But we are convinced that the subject matter is so important that it well merits all the effort and sustained attention you can give it.

—T.H.R.