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Institutions in Action

The Nature and the Role of Institutions
in the Real World

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The Importance of Institutions in Social Reality

We often consider language as a significant indicator of what is happening in the world – and rightly so. Indeed, language generally reveals the degree of respect that people have for institutions. And when this degree is low – that is, when someone does not grant the right respect to a given institution – we say that this lack of institutional respect must be underlined or even punished.

In fact, institutions are considered – sometimes with a hint of rhetoric – something that must be protected, defended, and removed from the sphere of power and conflict, not because they are extraneous to conflict but because they are interpreted as arbitrators that have the task, essential to any democracy, to represent the third party between the ones involved. To be or to represent an institution means precisely to be at a higher level, taking a neutral stance with regard to the parties involved, in order to formulate a judgment that is a guarantee of impartiality. In this sense, because it is impartial, an institution should also have the power and moral authority to represent all those who belong to it.

Therefore, one of the main characteristics of institutions, as well as of their representatives, consists in acting from a place that is neutral, not because it does not belong to anyone but because it belongs to all those who are represented by that institution. In this sense, we must also consider the institution as a common good. Institutions (entities such as states and governments but also universities, courts of justice, or parliaments) are therefore common goods – universals, in a way – that belong to all citizens of a State, to all the members of a community. Therefore, they must be treated with the same care and attention that we have, or should have, for the natural resources of the Earth, the common lands that belong to a nation, the seas or anything else does not belong to anyone, since, ultimately, it belongs to the sum of generations that have lived or will live on Earth.

That said, it is evident that the ontological question about the identity of an institution is crucial from a philosophical perspective. In order to answer the question of the nature of the power managed by institutions, one has to answer another question concerning the nature and identity of the things we call institutions. In other words, what are institutions? How can we define them, provided that it is possible to agree on a definition?

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Can they be considered as collective subjects, as claimed by some theorists, or do we have to understand them differently, as a class of specific objects with particular properties? And if we choose this second option, what kind of entity would they be, and what properties would define them? What kind of relationship is there between the institutions and the singular subjects? What and how many types of relationships can there be between institutions? The ontological inquiry therefore takes precedence to that of other areas of philosophy, especially political and moral philosophy, which deal with or refer to institutions. Many institutions are in fact political subjects – think of the States – and, at the same time, they are also the political instruments needed for the implementation of justice. In other words, institutions, whatever they may be, are inspired by justice and have the task of promoting it.

Whatever the metaphysical option we decide to adopt to describe the nature of institutions, another decisive question is that of their relationship with individuals. This is true whether we decide to interpret institutions as subjects that are other than individuals, that is, not coinciding with the sum of the individuals that compose them, or whether we decide to interpret them as collective subjects. Since existence over a considerable time span seems to be one of the properties that define the essence of what we call an institution, it is evident that, above all in the political and ethical debate, the question of trust between institutions and citizens is crucial. A relationship of trust seems to be a necessary condition for the institutions to be able to last over time and to carry out their task: namely, the protection of individuals also through the application of justice.

Finally, a last aspect to consider concerns the question of the relationship between institutions and those elements – such as norms, laws, and contracts – that have a normative basis. Can we reasonably understand normativity as the foundation of institutions? If so, should we think of normativity as external to the institutions or internal to them?

This volume collects contributions from various theoretical and methodological orientations, aimed at investigating the theoretical cores related to the nature of institutions, their identity, and the normativity which inspires and grounds them, with the goal of bringing the debate on institutions back to the center of social ontology.

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Contents