

## What is an Institutional Role *For*?

### Abstract

I seek a general formal set of criteria which can tell us how and why some particular type of role-defining institution is doing what it should, doing what it is there *for*, such that we can determine whether or not it is doing well or badly as a thing of its kind. I first cite the need for such a conception of 'characteristic activity' for institutions that define social roles, then show how an initial 'functional' formulation (e.g. just as pens write and engines drive, Universities educate; hospitals treat people's health) is useful but, in the case of typically complex social institutions, inadequate. The remainder of the paper is then concerned with advancing a more satisfactory conception by illustrating further aspects of institutions which are indispensable to their characteristic activities. I consider a historical account of original intentions (such as may or may not be found in mission statements) and then an actual and a hypothetical contract model. Drawing on both the insights and shortfalls of these candidate models, I outline an alternative account which for a particular kind of institution incorporates: a) the reasons humans have had or would have for establishing some particular institution and b) some human good or set of goods which is served in institutionally distinctive ways.

### Introduction: Roles and Institutions

Many if not all of the demands and obligations of professional and social roles are defined by institutions: <sup>1</sup> what someone is expected to do and not do *qua* academic or parent is determined by the formal requirements and obligations defined and monitored by Higher Educational Institutions or by the social norms attached to the institution of the parental family. Thus, institutions, via the roles individuals bear, place different kinds of particular and significant demands on individuals regarding what they should or should not do. This normative aspect of institutions via roles, together with the number of different roles we commonly occupy in advanced modern societies, is reflected in the development of the similarly diverse and wide field of professional ethics, in which Christine Swanton has recognized that:

[a]ny work on professional ethics needs to supply a view about the point or function of the institutions in which roles are embedded. For [...] the point or function of those institutions

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'social institution' can refer to many things at different levels of organization, from the workings of an entire political state to the socially instantiated practice of 'the family Sunday dinner'. Geoffrey Hodgson offers a distinction which will be useful here: '*Institutions* are systems of established and embedded social rules that structure social interactions. *Organizations* are special institutions that involve (a) criteria to establish their boundaries and to distinguish their members from non-members, (b) principles of sovereignty concerning who is in charge and (c) chains of command delineating responsibilities within the organization'. Geoffrey M. Hodgson, 'Institutions and Individuals: Interaction and Evolution', *Organization Studies* 28 (2007), pp. 97-116. I talk here of 'institutions' only as those which determine the demands of social roles. Certain organizations (on Hodgson's definition) may provide the clearest and familiar examples, but different kinds of less formal or organized institution may be apt for the functional analysis I will offer.

determines the nature of the roles which individuals in those roles occupy, and the nature of those roles determines what counts as ethical behaviour of individuals occupying those roles.<sup>2</sup>

Notice, firstly, that Swanton's insight here applies not only to the institutions that create and sustain professional roles, but to all sorts of institutions which determine the demands and obligations of social roles. The question of how one should behave *qua* juror is virtually incomprehensible without reference to the workings and aims of the legal institution in which the juror's (temporary and non-professional) role figures. And the purposes of parenthood embodied by the institution of the parental family provide a set of putative expectations of the ('in it for the long-haul' and vocational) parental role. Insofar as Swanton is right about professional ethics needing to supply a view on the functions of the institutions that determine professions, there is a corresponding need for just the same understanding of any social institution which determines roles. The task of this paper is to explore some possibilities for such a view.

Secondly, before looking into a functional understanding of institutions of the kind which Swanton urges, it is important to see just what is, and what is not, under investigation. Clearly the target is a model for critical scrutiny of what an institution – and thus the roles it shapes – should be like in terms of its function, where this should be distinguished from a standpoint from which any rational agent can assess or justify a refusal to carry out some particular action(s) that a role might demand. Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, has defended the need for such a standpoint, claiming that moral agents require the virtues of constancy and integrity in order to be able to judge an action as impermissible even if clearly determined by the obligations of some role, and even from within a social environment where all our duties were discharged by fulfilling our social role-obligations.<sup>3</sup> Separately, and unaffected by the success of MacIntyre's argument, is the question of function that is internal to institutions and the roles they define.

To illustrate, consider the recent example of the UK inquiry into the conduct of the press (Leveson). The Leveson investigation raised the general – and perhaps all too vague – question of how press journalists should and should not act. But at least one specific version of that general question cannot be answered by reference only on one hand to the strictures of existing laws or professional codes of conduct or what we would expect of any decent moral person on the other. That is, whether the role of press-journalist – its set of norms, demands, culture and expectations – has in its *own terms* become *something other than it should be*. Press institutions' activities, like all institutions and activities, may rightly be circumscribed by demands made on all moral agents, such that there may for example be some actions that no moral agent – hacks and editors included – is ever obliged to carry out. But a justificatory explanation of what should or should not be the purposes and activities of the press – and thus which obligations it should or should not ascribe to its roles – will not be supplied entirely by such a theory.

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<sup>2</sup> Swanton, Christine, 'Virtue Ethics, Role Ethics, and Business Ethics', in Rebecca L. Walker and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds., *Working Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p210.

<sup>3</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair, 'Social Structures and Their Threat to Moral Agency', in *Ethics and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

### **Institutions and Functional Explanations**

As to the question of what a certain role-defining institution should be like, then, we might begin with the thought that social institutions characteristically fulfil certain purposes and not others. Accordingly we might rest content with the view that an institution is just like anything else the function or purpose of which provides criteria for ascertaining its operation as a good or bad instance of its kind.<sup>4</sup> For example a heart that fails to pump blood strongly enough to sustain the life of its host's body is not a good heart, a good pen writes well, can be held easily, and a good hammer has a handle firmly attached to a head solid and heavy enough to drive nails into wood. Institutions are similar to these natural objects (such as bodily organs) or human artifacts (like tools), insofar as they are functional entities: to know what they *are* is just to know what they do. Universities educate; hospitals treat people's health. Whatever *else* they might do, newspapers publish the news and sell their papers, parental families care for and raise children, sports clubs compete in whichever sport they pursue, and charities raise money or procure resources for those in need of them, and so on. Thus as a starting point, it might seem obvious what the primary purpose and therefore the function of any institution is: parental families are *for* nurturing children; legal institutions are *for* maintaining law and order and enacting justice; and sports clubs are *for* playing sports and recreation, and so on.

So far so good, but the analogy between functional objects – such as hearts or engines – and institutions – such as Universities or clubs – starts to break down on closer examination. For unlike less complex functional entities, the broadly conceived nominal or primary function of an institution – the putative ‘what it is there for’ – may well be necessary to establish the ‘characteristic activity’- the activity or set of activities which makes it a better or worse social institution of its kind – but it appears not to be sufficient. It is by no means clear that functions of social institutions can be separated instructively into a scheme of, for example, primary and extraneous functions; or defining purposes and necessary but auxiliary functions. In the context of business ethics Elaine Sternberg has appealed to the primary and distinguishing function of business, claiming that ‘[t]he defining purpose of business is maximizing owner value over the long term by selling goods or services’, and then arguing that this purpose maps the territory of what businesses should and shouldn't be doing *qua* businesses.<sup>5</sup> A manufacturing business is not a hospital or care institution, nor should it take itself to share the same purpose(s), even if these institutions may at times actually do some similar things that bring social benefits which we value. ‘To incorporate extraneous elements into the definition of business simply because they are perceived to be good, or important, is to distort the truth. It is to confuse the desirable with the essential’.<sup>6</sup>

Sternberg is concerned with identifying the defining characteristics of business activity *per se*, and so she focuses on the shared activity of many types of business. Yet from the claim that maximizing owner value is business's defining purpose, it does not obviously follow

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<sup>4</sup> See for example Foot, Phillipa, *Virtues and Vices* (London: Blackwell, 1978), p.135 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Sternberg, Elaine, *Just Business: Business Ethics in Action* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), p.32.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p.33

that this is the function or purpose by which we can judge *a* particular business to be properly functioning *qua* that business, whilst taking all its other factors as business-valuable only to the extent that they serve that function. ‘The (or *a*) local’ pub is undoubtedly first and foremost a business, and as such its purpose is to maximize owner value for whichever company or persons own it. Accordingly ‘business’ would be rightly said to be ‘looking good’ when its trade and profits were on the up. Yet far from identifying and specifying what it might mean for the local pub to be doing well *qua* local pub business, this consideration only goes as far as showing its success *qua* the goals of *any* business. For, how plausible is it to afford definitional or distinguishing rights to ‘business’ – in the ‘ongoing financial concern’ sense – over the intrinsic social function of this particular kind of business – in the ‘pub-business’ sense? Suppose that the pub is the ‘hub’ of the community, a place for a particular kind of social activity, in which people identify themselves as ‘regulars’ and in which many pub-specific activities take place. These social aspects are things the absence of which wouldn’t just make the local pub different. Arguably the absence of these features would make it, at the very least, some other kind of business. Thus these social features are far from extraneous to this business. True, the pub is a business and not a social support scheme; or a community centre run, say, by local government or by a charity for non-business reasons. Nevertheless to deem these of its social aspects extraneous to the function of that business would seem to ‘distort the truth’ about what it is there to do; of what it is there *for*.

For our purposes there are two general points to draw here. Firstly, the characteristic activity – i.e. the activity or set of activities the instantiation of which makes something a worse or better instance of its kind – of some social institution can comprise far more than some primary or nominal purpose or function it has, even when that purpose or function is essential to the institution existing (‘essential’ in the sense of being the *sine qua non* and in the sense of generating the institution in the first place). Secondly, functional purpose or purposes, of different social institutions can be both manifold and modified or replaced to the extent that institutions are socially constructed and sustained through time. The characteristic activity of an institution may at one time just be its essential purpose (in either or both senses of ‘essential’) as it could be when the pub was first opened for purely business reasons, for example. Yet this does not stop the function of a social institution, as a living social entity, developing to include the host of social features mentioned above. Sternberg is right that the primary functions of a charity, hospital or savings bank will of course each delimit the characteristic activities of each of these institutions, so that to fail to serve them will be to fail in some respect *as* that kind of institution. But this does not entail that the exercise of an institution’s sole or primary function is identical with its characteristic activity – the ‘point’ of that institution.

### **Institutions, Reasons and Human Goods**

So how might we grasp an institution’s characteristic activity? Next, I aim to get closer to an answer by assessing the strengths and weaknesses of some other candidate models.

#### *Origins and Original Intentions*

Clearly, social institutions originate from and comprise various collective *purposive* activities of persons, and thus a normative notion of what some social institution does and

should do in order to do well as a thing of its kind, must ultimately relate to the justifying reasons and purposes that persons have in forming, participating in and sustaining these institutions. To ask ‘what is the characteristic activity of an institution’ will be at some point to ask not only about what it happens to be like at any given time, but about the reasons that people have for creating and sustaining that institution.

One basis for an alternative account, then, might be the intentions of those who originally founded the institution in question. In some cases, these intentions are explicit and preserved, such as when we have available a ‘founding fathers’ or mission statement, or a constitution – which may be written or unwritten. The absence of such a statement or constitution would not, in principle, prevent actual original intentions and reasons for the formation of a given institution being germane to its characteristic activity. For example, common knowledge about or historical research into why and how a co-operative wholesale organization came into existence – as a way of facilitating fair and affordable trade for people in abject poverty when ruthless profiteers were monopolizing trade – might tell us something about its mission and its characteristic activity. This can be the case even if those particular, original, historical conditions may have significantly improved.

Yet as we have already noted from the discussion of Sternberg’s account, institutions can change and evolve, as can some of their characteristics which we take to be defining or essential ones. And the problem here is that the question of whether or not they have changed or evolved *for better or for worse* doesn’t seem to be answered by considering how an institution was or why it came about in the first place. Suppose, following feminists following Engels, that the origin of the monogamous heterosexual family as we know it was due to people’s responses to a certain set of determinate socio-economic conditions, and that these conditions facilitated the subjugation of women through their role within the family:

With the advent of civilization and class society, the twin changes [the rise of private property and the unleashing of new social forces] were consummated: the private property system was victorious, and women plummeted from their former high status to become the oppressed sex of patriarchal society.<sup>7</sup>

If, at least, the modern nuclear family originated for *some* reasons that are grounded in property acquisition and patriarchy, there still seems no reason to suggest that *these* reasons should play any part in determining normative criteria for families now or since. Many would agree that whatever else they may be, good families function as centres of social support, friendship, love and nurturing, and the characteristic activity of the family has evolved such that it can now be seen as a well-functioning institution *without* ancestral traces of patriarchy and inequality. (And a good thing too, most would say.) Of course, other institutions may have stayed true to their original form or some founding principles or intentions, and they may have done so for some good reasons – as in the case of the wholesale co-operative whose particular characteristic activity seems inextricable from its original concern for socio-economic justice. But this appears to be a contingent matter, and

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<sup>7</sup> Evelyn Reed ‘Introduction’ in Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972).

the historical facts about the original intention behind construction of an institution are not in every case necessary, and may not be sufficient in any case, for determining its characteristic activity.

### *Actual Contracts and Agreements*

A different kind of strategy appeals to contracts or agreements, where the characteristic activity of an institution could be construed from the agreements that persons in institutions sign up or agree to in taking their place within an institution. Consider the contract one might sign when joining an association or taking up a job, or the rules or guidelines one (explicitly or tacitly) assents to in joining a club, for example. These kinds of explicit or tacit contracts or agreements may embody or reflect a mission statement or a constitution, but they need not. And because these features and activities of institutions are those that people actually agree to, and in some cases literally ‘sign up’ for, actual contracts and agreements appear to provide criteria that track the *reasons* we have for forming and sustaining those institutions.

Yet it is quite possible for actual contracts and agreements within institutions to track the actual activity, but fail to comprise or track the *characteristic* activity, of an institution. An institution that is succeeding or failing in all sorts of different ways might have available for scrutiny a whole series of highly detailed individual contracts and agreements. Nothing about these many contracts or their level of specificity, whether considered singly or collectively, necessarily tells us why, or how, it is succeeding or failing *qua* that institution. Institutionalized agreements and contracts, explicit or tacit, can in fact be agreements to do all sorts of things, including *fail*.

### *Hypothetical Contracts*

What, then, of determining an institution’s characteristic activity through the idea of the ‘hypothetical contract’? As a candidate explanation the hypothetical contract model looks promising for, as it has been employed in political philosophy, we might say that it does good work towards determining the characteristic activity of the state.<sup>8</sup> One way of understanding a key feature of the hypothetical contract model is that its justificatory force rests on a claim about what people would strive for in the *absence* of a political state or civil society (regardless of whether anyone actually did so in a pre-societal state of nature).<sup>9</sup> The point here, as I see it, is that in claiming that individuals, if rational and under certain conditions, would come to select certain political constraints were they deprived of them, the hypothetical contract model advances some claim about what requirement(s) the state would be fulfilling: in other words, a claim about what the state is *there for*. Thus a conception of the state’s characteristic activity can be characterized, on this model, as the provision of protection from the arbitrary power of other individuals or other states: of peace, justice and security for its individual constituents. This is why a state that radically fails to fulfil some or all of these criteria is seen as a most perspicuous example of a ‘failed’

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<sup>8</sup> See Michael Huemer, ‘The State’ in John Shand, ed., *Central Issues of Philosophy* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 275.

<sup>9</sup> See Andrew Levine’s essay: ‘Rawls’, in *Engaging Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 191. For this observation on the hypothetical model more generally see Jonathan Wolff, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Chapter 2.

or ‘failing’ state. The philosophical bite of the hypothetical contract model, then, is that it offers a normative and functional account of better or worse states via the extent to which it meets or fails to meet criteria that suitably well-informed rational people *would* choose. Accordingly we could identify the characteristic activity of an institution by the functions and activities that rational agents would want, agree upon and strive for were they not there.

An advantage of the hypothetical contract model is that it is not vulnerable to the problem of social evolution. The typical nuclear family may have changed, and may now have little to do with the original actual reasons for the nuclear family’s emergence, but the reasons why we would want to bring about families have not. However, the main shortcoming of the hypothetical model, as it stands, is that it accounts for why rational human beings make, and should make, certain institutions but not quite *how* particular institutions are, or should be, made. Consider the range of reasons agents would have for creating and participating and furthering various other social institutions. These include reasons to promote health, learning and education, knowledge, justice, communication, availability of information, truth and political participation – among many others. In identifying reasons to further these things – health, learning, etc. – in the form of institutions, we have not yet distinguished *which* kind of institution should further *which* of those concerns. Learning, and arguably education, widely construed, takes place within a number of institutions and social practices including the family and the workplace, whilst some of the practices associated with journalists and media outlets – such as communication of information and debate – overlap with the putative practices of other political and legal institutions. A moment’s reflection on ‘campaigning journalism’ tells us that even justice, apparently essentially connected as it is with institutions of law, is not obviously debarred from figuring as an explanatory reason as to why and how we should maintain some media institutions. So we don’t yet know, for example, whether the characteristic activity of a particular news media outlet is to do solely or primarily with communicating historical and political events, or campaigning against injustices, or entertainment, or something else in conjunction with some or all of these, or whatever. All we know so far from the hypothetical contract strategy is that these are desirable ends that some institution(s) or other should pursue. We don’t yet know which, in what ways, or why.

### **Towards an Alternative Account**

Let us recap the insights and shortfalls of the accounts considered so far. Sternberg’s functional account shows that the defining purpose of an institution must be distinguished from those of other institutions if we are to understand how it is to operate as that institution. But this also shows that such individuation of an institution’s purpose can easily leave too much out (it may define ‘business’ but not ‘*this*’ or ‘*that*’ business’). In attempting to incorporate the salient social and purposive elements, we considered then the reasons humans have actually had for creating institutions (why was this or that institution formed in the first place) and then, in the hypothetical contract model, the justifying reasons we would have were these institutions not in existence.

What next? In individuating business purposes, Sternberg is careful to observe that a business might bring wider social benefits which all sorts of institutions might also bring, but that *because* of this generality – because all sorts of institutions can be seen to serve human goods – the furthering of those goods cannot serve as the distinguishing feature of business. A key point to draw from this discussion is that any institution is in some way supposed to be directed at some or other social benefit(s) in the form of some human good(s). The hypothetical contract model also helped reveal that health and law etc. are *goods* that rational people would have reason to promote by forming and sustaining institutions. We need to see the reasons people have had or would have for creating and sustaining institutions and we need to see that these reasons concern the furtherance of certain goods. So, both the individuating aspect of Sternberg's picture, and the purposive reasons revealed as important by the original intentions and the hypothetical contract model, point to a necessary feature of institutional characteristic activity being the connection between any social institution and some human good or goods. When and where a social institution is created and sustained through time, it is in some sense for the sake of some human good(s). Aristotle opens the *Politics* with, it seems, similar thoughts:

[a]ll associations come into being for the sake of some good - for all men do all their acts with a view to achieving something which, in their view, a good. It is clear therefore that all associations aim at some good <sup>10</sup>

Just what is it about some socially created and sustained institution that is good for us, and how does the (properly functioning) instantiate these goods? In light of the insights and shortfalls of the original intentions and contract models, the conception I briefly propose here can be characterized as follows.

A particular institution fulfils its characteristic activity when and only when it: a) serves its putative nominal primary purpose or goal, where such purpose must be understood in terms of the reasons humans have had or would have for establishing this particular institution; and in doing so b) substantiates some human good or set of goods in (an) institutionally distinctive way(s).

The 'institutionally distinctive' part of the second condition (b) needs some explanation. Consider the relation between human goods and the functions and goals of institutions. It is such goods which, as part of its goals or ends, the relevant institutions should serve. Hospitals are there to promote the good of health, for example, and we have good reasons to promote the human good of health. Yet, as to the need for specificity, note that all sorts of institutions promote health: gymnasiums and health clubs, for example. What particularizes an institution connected to the good of health, such as a hospital or even more particularly a certain *type* of hospital, is that it realizes the goal of health in certain ways, and not others. This view, then, maintains the importance of individuation urged by Sternberg. It sees the characteristic activity of an institution as the furthering of some

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<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* 1252a1-a7



human goods or set of goods which only *that* kind of institution carries out and realizes in a certain way. Health as a human good is a shared goal but only hospitals promote it by palliative care, emergency surgery, out patient therapy, and so on.

## Conclusion

The question we began with was how to supply a view of the function or purpose of an institution in relation to the roles that institution defines. What may best further illustrate the account just suggested, and return its focus to the question of individuals acting in roles, are cases of complex professional roles such as that of the social worker. The social worker typically fulfils her role as a public employee of and within an institution of the state, usually via local government, whilst at the same time making interventions at the more private level in the lives of individuals and social groups such as households and families. In seeking to act well *qua* social worker, she will need to consider a) how best, in a particular scenario, to interpret and act on her actual obligations which may or may not be defined in codes of professional practice; b) whether such a code of practice and the actual practices and culture of her profession now are the right or wrong ones, and why. Thus it may be that c) she could, *qua* social worker, have grounds to resist or seek to change some of the actual practices or demands of her role according to what these should be instead *qua* effective well-functioning social work. Following Swanton, and probably Aristotle, satisfactory answers to such questions can only be intelligibly addressed in light of some conception of what social work is there for. As for a more substantive account of that conception, I have suggested that at least indispensable to such a conception are the reasons we have for instituting social work, related as these reasons are to the goods with which social work is concerned (the well being and security of vulnerable people and the prevention or removal of certain social conditions inimical to that level of well being), and an understanding that social work characteristically works towards these goods in specific ways that are not realized in the same way by other institutions – even (or especially) when other institutions may overlap in serving some or all of the same goods. It is crucial for both social work practitioners and society in general to see that social workers are not police officers, for example.

None of this is to suggest that the view of institutional characteristic activity offered here will once and for all or in every case determine institutional functions, and thus role demands. ('Are *those* goods cited in the previous paragraph really the goods of social work, and if so why? – it might be asked.) But I hope to have shown that the functions of institutions – such that they will tell us about how these institutions' roles should be defined – are often far from conspicuous and, in response, offered a way of thinking about such functions which I hope will be apt for further discussion.

Sean Cordell  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Sheffield  
UK

sean.cordell@sheffield.ac.uk