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Tradition and innovation: The dual nature of institutional thinking and its implications for modern governance

Kwangseon Hwang

Public Administration & Policy, Gachon University, Seongnam 13120, South Korea; kwangseonhwang@gmail.com

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Abstract: Institutional thinking, a concept that underscores the importance of internal perspectives and the enduring purposes of institutions, plays a critical role in maintaining societal stability and ethical governance. This paper explores the dual nature of institutional thinking, highlighting its positive aspects and inherent dangers. Through an examination of economic, political, and philosophical forces, the paper identifies modern challenges that undermine long-term commitments and ethical values within institutions. By drawing on historical and contemporary examples, including slavery, Nazism, and discriminatory practices, the discussion provides a comprehensive understanding of how institutional thinking can both promote human well-being and perpetuate systemic issues. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need to reaffirm institutional values, promote long-term thinking, and balance individual rights with collective responsibilities to harness the positive aspects of institutional thinking while mitigating its risks.

Keywords: institutional thinking; challenges; societal values; ethical governance; long-term commitment

1. Introduction

Institutional thinking, a concept that emphasizes the importance of understanding and valuing the internal perspectives and purposes of institutions, plays a critical role in maintaining the integrity and functionality of social structures. Institutions, whether they are educational, governmental, or economic, are seen as the bedrock of societal stability and continuity. They embody the collective values, ethics, and long-term goals that shape human interactions and societal development (Hecl, 2008). This framework underscores the importance of institutions in fostering justice, education, and stewardship, thereby ensuring that individual actions align with broader societal objectives.

However, institutional thinking is not without its challenges and risks. When institutions lose sight of their purpose to serve humanity, they can become harmful, perpetuating injustices and systemic issues. This dichotomy is evident in historical examples such as slavery and Nazism, where institutional frameworks were manipulated to justify gross human rights violations and moral failings (Hecl, 2008; Taylor, 1989). These examples highlight the potential dangers when institutional values are distorted or misaligned with ethical standards.

Institutional thinking requires a delicate balance between upholding long-standing traditions and adapting to contemporary societal needs. This balance is crucial for ensuring that institutions do not become stagnant or oppressive but remain dynamic entities that promote human well-being. The benefits of institutional thinking include fostering ethical behavior, accountability, and a sense of stewardship among

professionals. It encourages individuals to consider the long-term implications of their actions, aligning immediate tasks with enduring institutional values (Levin, 2020).

Conversely, the dangers of institutional thinking arise when institutions become ends in themselves rather than means to serve humanity. This phenomenon, where the preservation of the institution takes precedence over its foundational purposes, can lead to harmful consequences. For instance, the institutionalization of discriminatory practices, such as the exclusionary admission policies at Harvard in the 1920s, demonstrates how institutional thinking can be manipulated to serve unjust ends (Hecló, 2008).

This article explores the dual nature of institutional thinking, examining its benefits and dangers, and provides a critical analysis of its application in contemporary society. By drawing on previously published works, including those by Hecló (2008), Levin (2020), and Taylor (1989), this discussion aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of how institutional thinking can be both a stabilizing force and a potential source of systemic issues. It will delve into the practical applications of institutional thinking in modern professions, the ethical dilemmas it presents, and the various challenges posed by economic, political, and philosophical forces.

2. Positive aspects of institutional thinking

2.1. Positive aspects of institutional thinking

Institutional thinking is rooted in the belief that institutions are more than mere organizations; they are repositories of societal values and ethics. As highlighted by Hecló (2008), institutional thinking involves a commitment to the enduring purposes and values that institutions embody, such as justice, education, and stewardship. This commitment is reflected in three key concepts: faithful reception, infusion of value, and stretching of time horizons.

Faithful Reception refers to the acceptance and continuation of established institutional values and practices. It emphasizes the importance of tradition and the wisdom embedded in long-standing institutions. For instance, in the legal profession, this concept is evident in the adherence to legal precedents and the maintenance of the rule of law, which ensures stability and predictability in legal judgments (Kronman, 1993). Similarly, in education, faithful reception is seen in the adherence to academic standards and the transmission of knowledge and values across generations (Shulman, 2005).

Infusion of Value involves ensuring that everyday actions are aligned with the broader values and long-term goals of the institution. This concept underscores the importance of integrating ethical standards into daily practices. In the corporate world, this is reflected in corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives where companies strive to align their operations with societal values such as environmental sustainability, fair labor practices, and community engagement (Porter and Kramer, 2011). Healthcare professionals also embody this principle by adhering to ethical codes that emphasize patient care, compassion, and respect for patient autonomy, ensuring that their immediate actions contribute to the long-term goal of public health (Beauchamp and Childress, 2013).

Stretching of Time Horizons requires individuals to consider the long-term

implications of their actions, fostering a sense of stewardship and responsibility for future generations. This concept is crucial in professions such as environmental science and urban planning, where decisions made today have significant impacts on future generations. Institutions like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) work towards long-term environmental sustainability by providing scientific assessments on climate change and advocating for policies that mitigate its adverse effects (IPCC, 2014). In the financial sector, the principle of stretching time horizons is reflected in the practice of sustainable investing, where investors consider the environmental, social, and governance (ESG) impacts of their investments (Eccles and Klimenko, 2019).

2.2. Practical applications in modern professions

In modern professions, institutional thinking encourages ethical behavior and accountability. Professionals are seen as stewards of their fields, responsible not only for their own actions but also for upholding the integrity of their profession. This approach promotes a culture of ethical conduct, peer accountability, and a commitment to the public good (Hecl, 2008; Levin, 2020).

In healthcare, institutional thinking manifests in a commitment to patient care that goes beyond immediate treatment. Healthcare professionals adhere to ethical codes that emphasize compassion, integrity, and respect for patient autonomy. This ethical framework ensures that the actions of healthcare providers are aligned with the long-term goal of improving public health and fostering trust in medical institutions (Beauchamp and Childress, 2013).

In education, institutional thinking drives educators to foster critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and civic responsibility among students. Educators uphold academic integrity and model values of curiosity and diligence, ensuring that their teaching practices contribute to the long-term development of informed and responsible citizens (Shulman, 2005). This commitment to institutional values helps maintain the credibility and effectiveness of educational institutions.

Legal professionals uphold justice and the rule of law, guided by ethical codes that demand honesty, confidentiality, and public service. Lawyers and judges are tasked with interpreting and applying the law in ways that uphold these values, ensuring fairness and equality before the law (Kronman, 1993). This adherence to institutional values is crucial for maintaining public trust in the legal system.

In the corporate world, institutional thinking is reflected in CSR practices, where companies engage in sustainable practices and ethical conduct, aligning their operations with broader societal values (Porter and Kramer, 2011). Companies that embrace CSR demonstrate a commitment to ethical business practices, transparency, and accountability, which can enhance their reputation and long-term success.

2.3. Broader implications for societal well-being

Institutional thinking extends beyond individual professions and has broader implications for societal well-being. Institutions that effectively embody and promote core values contribute to social cohesion, trust, and stability (Fukuyama, 1995). For example, institutions that maintain high ethical standards and transparency can foster

public trust and support. This trust is essential for the effective functioning of democratic institutions and the rule of law.

Moreover, institutions that adapt and evolve while maintaining their core values are more likely to succeed in the long term (North, 1990). This adaptability is crucial in a rapidly changing world, where institutions must navigate complex challenges such as globalization, technological advancements, and environmental sustainability. Institutions that demonstrate resilience by learning from past experiences and incorporating lessons into their future practices are better positioned to address these challenges and remain relevant (Senge, 1990).

In conclusion, institutional thinking is fundamental to the sustainability and ethical functioning of modern professions and societal structures. By committing to the enduring purposes and values of institutions, professionals can ensure that their actions are aligned with long-term goals and ethical standards, fostering a culture of ethical conduct, accountability, and public service. As we navigate the complexities of contemporary life, institutional thinking provides a valuable framework for maintaining the integrity and purpose of our institutions. This framework not only enhances professional practice but also contributes to the broader goal of societal well-being.

3. Dangers of institutional thinking

Institutional thinking, while promoting stability and continuity, carries significant risks when institutions become ends in themselves rather than means to serve humanity. This transformation often leads to the institution's original purpose being forgotten, causing harmful consequences.

3.1. When institutions become ends in themselves

One of the primary dangers of institutional thinking is the potential for institutions to lose sight of their original purpose and become self-serving entities. This shift can result in the perpetuation of injustices and the creation of harmful practices.

Slavery: Historically, slavery was an institution sustained by institutional thinking that accepted established norms of racial superiority and mutual obligation for "the Southern way of life." As highlighted by Hecló (2008), institutional thinking in this context led to the normalization of grave injustices. The institution of slavery was rationalized through the lens of economic necessity and social stability, ignoring the profound human rights abuses it entailed. This example demonstrates how institutional thinking can perpetuate severe injustices when the institution's purpose is distorted.

Nazism: Adolf Hitler epitomized the perversion of institutional thinking by merging his identity with the myth of Aryan purity and German nationhood. His actions, driven by a false sense of value and purpose, resulted in catastrophic consequences for humanity. According to Hecló (2008), Hitler's manipulation of institutional values for genocidal and totalitarian ends highlights the extreme dangers when institutional thinking is divorced from ethical considerations and human welfare.

Discriminatory Practices: In the 1920s, Harvard officials created admission rules

to limit Jewish enrollment, aiming to maintain a certain demographic composition. This example, detailed in Karabel's (2005) "The Chosen," illustrates how institutional thinking can be manipulated to justify exclusionary practices under the guise of protecting institutional integrity. Such actions reflect the misuse of institutional values to maintain social hierarchies and discriminate against minority groups.

3.2. The ethical dilemma: Good vs. bad institutions

Determining whether institutional thinking is inherently good or bad depends on the moral purposes served by the institution. Good institutions promote human well-being, while bad institutions can cause significant harm. The challenge lies in discerning and upholding the moral quality of institutions.

Objective Analysis in Social Sciences: Some social scientists argue that making moral judgments about institutions is scientifically inappropriate. However, ignoring the moral implications of institutions undermines the ultimate purpose of social science, which is to enhance human well-being (Hecllo, 2008). As Selznick (1957) emphasizes in "Leadership in Administration," the values embedded in institutions are crucial for their effectiveness and legitimacy. Without considering these values, social science fails to address the full impact of institutions on society.

Human Well-being as the Ultimate Goal: Institutions should be judged based on their contributions to human flourishing. Good institutions promote justice, freedom, equality, and community, while bad institutions should be reformed or dismantled. Taylor (1989) argues in "Sources of the Self" that the moral quality of institutions is fundamental to their legitimacy and effectiveness. Institutions that fail to promote human well-being become impediments to progress and justice.

3.3. Practical obstacles and misunderstandings

Institutional thinking faces numerous practical obstacles and misunderstandings in modern society. These challenges can undermine the effectiveness of institutional values and the efforts of those who adhere to them.

Perception of Naivety: Those who think institutionally are often seen as naive or gullible, failing to appear as sophisticated thinkers who can see through institutional manipulations. This perception is particularly prevalent in environments that prioritize individualism and short-term gains over long-term institutional goals (Klein, 2015). Institutional thinkers may be dismissed as idealists, unable to navigate the complexities of modern organizational life.

Obscurity and Lack of Recognition: Institutional thinkers often work behind the scenes, receiving little recognition for their efforts. Their commitment to institutional values is not considered newsworthy or glamorous. As a result, their contributions to maintaining and enhancing institutional integrity are frequently overlooked (Scott, 2001). This lack of recognition can discourage individuals from committing to institutional values, reducing the overall effectiveness of institutional thinking.

Misunderstanding and Misrepresentation: Commitment to institutional values is frequently misunderstood as obstructionism or idealism. This can lead to being perceived as judgmental or elitist, particularly in ideologically charged environments. For instance, in academic settings, defending traditional educational values may be

seen as resistance to innovation (Brennan and Naidoo, 2008). Such misunderstandings can marginalize institutional thinkers and undermine their efforts to promote long-term institutional goals.

Exploitation: Those who adhere to institutional values can be taken advantage of by individuals who disregard institutional rules for personal gain. This exploitation is evident in various sectors, including business and politics, where ethical considerations are often sidelined in favor of expediency (Jackall, 2010). Institutional thinkers, committed to ethical standards, may find themselves outmaneuvered by those who prioritize short-term success over long-term integrity.

Isolation: Institutional thinkers may find themselves isolated, struggling to find kindred spirits who share their commitment to long-term institutional goals. This isolation can be particularly challenging in environments that prioritize individual achievements over collective efforts (Putnam, 2000). The lack of support networks can make it difficult for institutional thinkers to sustain their commitment to institutional values, leading to burnout and disengagement.

While institutional thinking offers significant benefits in terms of stability and ethical governance, it also poses considerable dangers when institutions become self-serving entities. The historical examples of slavery, Nazism, and discriminatory practices underscore the potential for institutional thinking to perpetuate injustices when divorced from ethical considerations. The challenge lies in maintaining a balance where institutions serve their intended purpose of promoting human well-being. Overcoming practical obstacles and misunderstandings requires a concerted effort to recognize and support the contributions of institutional thinkers. By fostering environments that value long-term goals and ethical standards, we can harness the positive aspects of institutional thinking while mitigating its risks.

4. Modern challenges to institutional thinking

Institutional thinking faces significant challenges from various modern forces that undermine long-term commitments and ethical values embedded in institutions. These challenges arise primarily from economic, political, and philosophical shifts that prioritize short-term gains, individual autonomy, and skepticism towards traditional authorities.

4.1. Economic forces

The modern economic system, characterized by industrial capitalism and the market revolution, poses substantial obstacles to institutional thinking. This system's focus on short-term operational effectiveness and personal gratification often undermines long-term institutional commitments (Scott, 2014).

Creative Destruction: The concept of creative destruction, popularized by economist Joseph Schumpeter, describes the incessant process of innovation that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one (Schumpeter, 1942). This dynamic disrupts traditional institutions by replacing them with bureaucratic structures focused primarily on efficiency and profit maximization, rather than ethical values and social responsibilities. The displacement of long-standing institutions by more efficient, yet

ethically void, entities erode the moral foundation and societal trust in institutions.

Consumer Culture: The relentless pursuit of consumer satisfaction devalues non-monetized institutional values, fostering a culture of immediate gratification. As Bauman (2007) notes, consumer culture shifts focus from long-term societal goals to short-term personal desires, undermining the collective ethos that institutions rely on. This shift makes it challenging to sustain institutional commitments that require patience, sacrifice, and a vision beyond immediate personal benefits.

4.2. Political forces

Democratic societies, while promoting equality and individual rights, often unintentionally undermine institutional thinking by emphasizing present needs over long-term commitments and reducing values to material categories (Tocqueville, 1835).

Short-Termism: Democratic societies tend to prioritize immediate desires, weakening long-term institutional commitments. Politicians, driven by electoral cycles, often focus on policies that yield quick results rather than those that sustain institutional integrity over the long term (Lindblom, 1977). This short-termism creates a governance environment where strategic planning and adherence to enduring values are overshadowed by the need to satisfy the electorate's immediate demands.

Materialism: The focus on material wealth in democratic societies diminishes the importance of non-material institutional values. Tocqueville (1835) observed that in democratic societies, the pursuit of material comfort becomes paramount, reducing the societal emphasis on civic virtues and communal responsibilities. This materialism can erode the foundation of institutions that depend on collective ethical standards and long-term vision.

Individual Autonomy: The emphasis on individual rights and self-expression can conflict with the collective purposes of institutions. As Dworkin (1977) highlights, the liberal emphasis on individual autonomy often leads to a neglect of the collective responsibilities that institutions promote. This tension can result in weakened institutional cohesion and a decline in the shared values necessary for institutions to function effectively.

Majoritarianism: The dominance of majority opinion in democratic societies can suppress minority views, undermining the diversity of institutional perspectives. This majoritarianism can lead to the marginalization of minority groups and the exclusion of alternative viewpoints essential for the robust functioning of institutions (Young, 2000). It challenges the inclusivity and adaptability of institutions in addressing diverse societal needs.

4.3. Philosophical forces

Intellectual currents from the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Modernism have contributed to an anti-institutional mindset, challenging the very foundations of institutional thinking (Taylor, 1989).

Enlightenment Rationalism: The Enlightenment's emphasis on individual reason and skepticism towards traditional authorities has weakened institutional wisdom and continuity. As Kant (1784) asserted, the Enlightenment encouraged individuals to

think for themselves, often at the expense of established institutions and traditions. This rationalistic approach has led to a devaluation of the accumulated wisdom and ethical frameworks that institutions embody.

Romantic Individualism: The Romantic movement's emphasis on self-expression and creativity has further eroded the collective purpose of institutions. Romanticism valorizes personal freedom and emotional authenticity, often viewing institutions as constraints on individual creativity (Berlin, 1999). This perspective undermines the collective ethos that institutions require to maintain their legitimacy and effectiveness.

Modernist Rebellion: Modernism's rejection of traditional forms and fascination with the new has diminished respect for established institutions. Modernist thinkers and artists, in their quest for innovation and originality, often dismissed the value of traditional institutional structures (Berman, 1982). This rebellion against tradition has contributed to a cultural climate that is skeptical of institutions and less inclined to uphold their enduring values.

The challenges to institutional thinking in modern times are profound and multifaceted, stemming from economic, political, and philosophical shifts that prioritize short-term gains, individual autonomy, and skepticism towards traditional authorities. The forces of creative destruction, consumer culture, democratic short-termism, materialism, individual autonomy, majoritarianism, Enlightenment rationalism, Romantic individualism, and Modernist rebellion collectively undermine the long-term commitments and ethical values essential for the robust functioning of institutions. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to reaffirm the importance of institutional values, promote long-term thinking, and balance individual rights with collective responsibilities. By doing so, society can harness the positive aspects of institutional thinking while mitigating its risks and ensuring that institutions continue to serve their fundamental purpose of promoting human well-being.

5. Discussion

The concept of institutional thinking underscores the significance of maintaining and valuing the internal perspectives and purposes of institutions. It promotes stability and continuity within society by fostering long-term goals and ethical standards. However, the practical application and sustainability of institutional thinking face several contemporary challenges. This discussion delves into these challenges by examining the underlying economic, political, and philosophical forces, while integrating relevant literature to provide a comprehensive analysis.

5.1. Economic forces

The modern economic system, characterized by industrial capitalism and market dynamics, poses substantial obstacles to institutional thinking. The emphasis on short-term operational effectiveness and personal gratification often undermines long-term institutional commitments. Schumpeter's (1942) concept of "creative destruction" aptly describes the relentless process of innovation that disrupts traditional institutions, replacing them with bureaucratic structures focused primarily on efficiency and profit maximization. This transformation can erode the ethical

foundations and societal trust in institutions.

Moreover, consumer culture fosters immediate gratification, devaluing non-monetized institutional values. Bauman (2007) highlights how consumerism shifts focus from long-term societal goals to short-term personal desires, undermining the collective ethos that institutions rely on. This shift presents a significant challenge in sustaining institutional commitments that require patience, sacrifice, and a vision beyond immediate personal benefits.

5.2. Political forces

In democratic societies, the emphasis on equality and individual rights often unintentionally undermines institutional thinking by prioritizing present needs over long-term commitments and reducing values to material categories. Tocqueville (1835) observed that democratic societies tend to prioritize immediate desires, which weakens long-term institutional commitments. Politicians, driven by electoral cycles, frequently focus on policies that yield quick results rather than those that sustain institutional integrity over the long term (Lindblom, 1977).

Additionally, the focus on material wealth in democratic societies diminishes the importance of non-material institutional values. Tocqueville (1835) noted that the pursuit of material comfort becomes paramount, reducing the societal emphasis on civic virtues and communal responsibilities. This materialism can erode the foundation of institutions that depend on collective ethical standards and long-term vision.

The emphasis on individual rights and self-expression can also conflict with the collective purposes of institutions. Dworkin (1977) highlights that the liberal emphasis on individual autonomy often leads to neglect of the collective responsibilities that institutions promote. This tension can weaken institutional cohesion and decline the shared values necessary for institutions to function effectively.

5.3. Philosophical forces

Intellectual currents from the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Modernism have contributed to an anti-institutional mindset, challenging the very foundations of institutional thinking. The Enlightenment's emphasis on individual reason and skepticism towards traditional authorities has weakened institutional wisdom and continuity. Kant (1784) asserted that the Enlightenment encouraged individuals to think for themselves, often at the expense of established institutions and traditions.

The Romantic movement's emphasis on self-expression and creativity has further eroded the collective purpose of institutions. Romanticism valorizes personal freedom and emotional authenticity, often viewing institutions as constraints on individual creativity (Berlin, 1999). This perspective undermines the collective ethos that institutions require to maintain their legitimacy and effectiveness.

Modernism's rejection of traditional forms and fascination with the new has diminished respect for established institutions. Modernist thinkers and artists, in their quest for innovation and originality, often dismissed the value of traditional institutional structures (Berman, 1982). This rebellion against tradition has contributed to a cultural climate that is skeptical of institutions and less inclined to uphold their enduring values.

5.4. Addressing the challenges

Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to reaffirm the importance of institutional values, promote long-term thinking, and balance individual rights with collective responsibilities. Selznick (1957) emphasizes that the values embedded in institutions are crucial for their effectiveness and legitimacy. Without considering these values, social science fails to address the full impact of institutions on society.

Promoting institutional thinking in contemporary society involves integrating ethical standards into daily practices, as seen in corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and sustainable investing (Eccles and Klimenko, 2019; Porter and Kramer, 2011). These practices align immediate actions with long-term goals, demonstrating a commitment to ethical conduct and accountability.

Furthermore, fostering environments that value long-term goals and ethical standards can mitigate the risks associated with institutional thinking. This approach can enhance professional practice and contribute to the broader goal of societal well-being. Institutions that effectively embody and promote core values contribute to social cohesion, trust, and stability (Fukuyama, 1995). They can adapt and evolve while maintaining their core values, ensuring resilience in a rapidly changing world (North, 1990).

While institutional thinking offers significant benefits in terms of stability and ethical governance, it faces substantial challenges from economic, political, and philosophical forces. These challenges prioritize short-term gains, individual autonomy, and skepticism towards traditional authorities. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to reaffirm the importance of institutional values, promote long-term thinking, and balance individual rights with collective responsibilities. By doing so, society can harness the positive aspects of institutional thinking while mitigating its risks, ensuring that institutions continue to serve their fundamental purpose of promoting human well-being.

6. Conclusion

Institutional thinking serves as a cornerstone for maintaining the integrity and functionality of social structures. It emphasizes the importance of aligning individual actions with broader societal objectives, fostering ethical behavior, accountability, and a sense of stewardship. However, this paper has demonstrated that institutional thinking is not without its challenges and dangers. When institutions become self-serving entities, divorced from their foundational purposes, they can perpetuate significant injustices and systemic issues. Historical examples such as slavery, Nazism, and exclusionary practices at prestigious universities underscore the potential for institutional thinking to justify harmful actions when ethical considerations are sidelined.

The modern challenges to institutional thinking are profound, arising from economic forces that prioritize short-term gains, political dynamics that emphasize immediate desires and individual autonomy, and philosophical shifts that undermine the authority and continuity of institutions. These forces collectively erode the long-term commitments and ethical values essential for the robust functioning of

institutions.

Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to reaffirm the importance of institutional values, promote long-term thinking, and balance individual rights with collective responsibilities. By fostering environments that value ethical standards and long-term goals, society can enhance the positive aspects of institutional thinking while mitigating its risks. This approach will not only improve professional practices but also contribute to the broader goal of societal well-being, ensuring that institutions continue to serve their fundamental purpose of promoting human flourishing.

In conclusion, while the journey of institutional thinking may be uphill and fraught with challenges, it remains an essential endeavor for sustaining the ethical and functional fabric of society. By recognizing and addressing the contemporary challenges that undermine institutional thinking, we can work towards a future where institutions effectively uphold their core values and contribute to the long-term well-being of humanity.

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