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ON THINKING
INSTITUTIONALLY

Chapters

4 + 6



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CHAPTER FOUR BEING INSTITUTIONALLY MINDED

In this chapter we consider a particular way of thinking. It is not so comprehensive as to deserve designation as a "world-view." And it is not systematic enough to be called a philosophy. It is tempting to call this way of thinking an "ethos." Anthropologists use that term to designate the evaluative character—the moral and aesthetic tone—of a given culture. However, that seems overly grand. As Clifford Geertz has said, a people's ethos is their underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects.¹ To be sure, the way of thinking I wish to talk about is evaluative in character, but it is more like a particular sensitivity than a comprehensive way of life. It is a sensitivity that coexists, competes with, and is often overwhelmed by other sensitivities carried around in our heads.

Probably the best we can do in modern English is to call this way of thinking a "stance" or "appreciative viewpoint."² As used here, appreciation does not mean simply an attitude of gratitude or admiration. An appreciative viewpoint is a way of being aware, a particular kind of sensitivity in forming judgments. The particular sensitivity to be discussed has to do with an appreciation that is institutional in its commitments. Venturing beyond the English language, the old medieval term *habitus* would serve well. It means a bent in one's disposition, something

more socially conditioned than a personal preference but not so tightly structured as to render the individual a mere carrier of predetermined social norms.

As we noted at the outset of this book, the difficulty is that in these times we are trying to talk about a way of thinking that is sensed mainly as an absence. Institutional thinking seems to be one of the main things missing when all sorts of events repeatedly beset American public life, involving both individuals and organizations. Its absence is a much felt presence, but we do not seem to have a way of discussing it. In this chapter I will try to describe the internal monologue that comes with being inside an institutional frame of mind and looking out. To visit this mental interiority is not a romantic adventure that is likely to produce box office hits or popular best-sellers. It is more like revisiting the rooms of a comfortable and forgotten old home. Institutional thinking is undramatic, unassuming, and unfashionable. That helps explain why we see so little of it.

The Internal Point of View

The last chapter ended by leaving an idea hanging: thinking about institutions is not the same thing as thinking institutionally. The latter involves shifting one's perspective to understand institutions from the inside out. This perspective is immensely important, and, to the great loss of all concerned, it is rarely discussed in our schools. That includes schools from the elementary level through college. Not being discussed, the whole subject of institutions shrivels toward an insignificance that is wholly at odds with human realities.

The conventional approach of the social sciences fails us at this point. To understand human affairs as they truly are, it is not enough to be a detached observer looking in. This gaze from the outside should not be disparaged, but it can never be sufficient to grasp the subject we are dealing with in this book. Moral agents thinking and acting within a framework of institutional

values do not disclose their full character to the detached outside gaze. There is a gap to be crossed between the life of moral commitment entailed in thinking institutionally and the life of detachment characterizing the academic social scientist. Denying any inclination to pass judgment on the facts, the external observer parts company with the reality of people's lives. He fails to see that the object of his study differs in kind from that of the natural scientist.

What is missing is not simply a piece of academic curriculum. What is missing is something in the human curriculum that needs to be passed on to help young people get their bearings in the world. If our teaching considers institutions from only an outside, external viewpoint, we reinforce the prevailing tendency to dismiss the meaningfulness of institutional values. Understanding from the inside lets us see how people use such value commitments to appraise their own and others' behavior, to give reasoned meaning to the decisions and actions that they take in life.³ By omitting the internal point of view, we indirectly teach and reinforce the idea that our social existence is merely a succession of fluid, revocable associations of convenience and arbitrary personal tastes.

While thinking "about" institutions is an intellectual project conducted by professional academics, thinking institutionally is something both broader and deeper. It is about a way of carrying on in the real world, and we all do it to a greater or lesser extent—at the office, in family relations, in the public square. Whatever academics might have to say about institutions, an institutional way of thinking concerns value-laden attachments that we all accept, refuse, or negotiate in one way or the other in our lives. That is why the issue of thinking institutionally is bound up in not only an academic curriculum but a human one: it carries great consequence for grounding our self-understanding as moral agents. Thinking about institutions may make you a social scientist, but thinking institutionally can actually help make you a more fulfilled human being. That is a large and rather arrogant claim, and my hope is that by the time you come

to the end of this book you will be in a good position to weigh its merits.

Let me put the point another way. To think about art is not the same thing as having an artistic view of the world, just as thinking about science is not identical to thinking like a scientist. To think about religion is clearly not the same thing as being religious in your approach to daily life. Likewise, as I have learned over the years, to think about marriage is certainly not the same thing as thinking like a married person. Indeed, the more you think in the abstract about marriage (prenuptial contracts, child custody issues, joint property arrangements, and so on) the less likely you may be able to embrace the full human commitment of being a married person.

The sorry fact is that "thinking about" may actually diminish capacities for "thinking in" institutional terms. The academic approach of the schools has the effect of rendering everything into a subject/object relationship. It tends to drain away the capacity truly to appreciate what it means to mentally inhabit a world endowed with institutional values. Thinking about institutions is not the same thing as thinking institutionally because "thinking about" does not tell us what it is like for a person to go around with presuppositions of the relevant institutional values and purposes in his or her head. Accepting and participating in those values and purposes as a moral agent is what makes you a part of the institution. And, reciprocally, it makes the institution an important part of who you are, even though it need never fully define you.

It might be objected that scientists, artists, and, yes, even married persons think in many different ways. And in a behavioral-descriptive sense, that is of course true. Inside institutions we can find people driven by considerations of personal self-interest, disinterested concern for others, conformity to peer pressure, unthinking habit, and much more. But to stop there leaves us on the descriptive periphery of the subject. It says nothing about the institutional point of view itself and simply misdirects our attention to incidental variations in personal behavior.

An internal perspective shows something different. It is a stance/appreciative viewpoint asserting that by virtue of participating in an institutional form of life, there are more and less appropriate ways of doing things. These obligations are a kind of internal morality that flows from the purposive point of the institution itself. An institution brings expected conduct within a normative order that has its own history, irrespective of the fact that the actual behavior of various human beings may not conform to those expectations. And I suspect that if, rather than trying to score intellectual points, we are seriously reflecting on our own life experiences, we all know that the "internal point of view" can be quite real. When the house is on fire, a person who rushes to save the family photo album rather than the television set or latest game player is expressing a form of institutional thinking. That person has thought with a familial appropriateness.

If all of this seems too vague, we might return to the "hard" sciences and consider the contrast between thinking *about* physics, chemistry, biology, and the like and thinking *like* a scientist engaged in investigating those matters. By invoking the term "thinking like a scientist" I do not mean that there is some unique scientific mind or psychological makeup possessed by people called scientists. It is true that some champions of science like to hold on high the model scientist who exhibits a psychological state of disinterested objectivity, rigorously discarding preconceptions and personal preferences as he or she proceeds down the path of neutral scientific inquiry. But that kind of psychologism is not how science works.⁴

It is closer to the mark to say that thinking like a scientist means accepting a method of inquiry, the scientific method. However, that too is often said quite glibly, providing a recipe for science fair projects but little idea of what acceptance of the method implies. What the method really means is that science is a social institution. As a practical matter, the social group composed over the generations of those agreeing with the purpose of the scientific enterprise and submitting to its rules in pursuit of that purpose constitutes the institution that is science.

The scientific method is a set of rules of procedure, a methodology. But the rules are not the institution. The rules are choices made by people engaged in the scientific enterprise. The community of people lays down requirements to act in certain ways in order to pursue the purpose that the people in this enterprise hold in common. That purpose, labeled the "advancement of science," is to search for universal laws and causal explanations regarding how the physical world truly works. Such knowledge is acquired by observations, hypothetical statements, predictions, and experiments interrogating the physical world. These supply the materials, not the method, for doing science and thinking like a scientist.

The scientific method stipulates the manner in which science permits one to learn from these materials. This method for acquiring reliable knowledge requires that all statements about how the physical world works must be capable of repeatable tests that could falsify the claims of any observation, experiment, hypothesis, or prediction. In other words, any claim of scientific knowledge must be made in a public—social—way that is capable of being examined by others committed to testing the claim against evidence from the same physical world. These others may want to do so out of personal spite, self-centered ambition, idealistic causes, or any number of other reasons. The issue is not one of motivation but the method of intersubjective testability. Any general statement that is not capable of being tested for refutation is not considered a valid scientific statement.

The possibility of falsification is central because no number of confirming observations can establish a generalization beyond doubt, and we all wish to confirm what we believe is true. So there is that ever-present human temptation to resort to confirming evidence and avoid anything to the contrary. But only one contradictory piece of evidence can be sufficient to disprove a generalization. The scientific method, for the sake of seeking truth, fully embraces that need to work against the easy grain of human gullibility and self-validation. In this sense, while the aim

of science is to discover empirical truth, it can be approached only indirectly by eliminating what is false.

This means that moral obligation lies at the heart of science as a social institution. The scientific method depends on something more than the mere possibility of falsification. It requires human beings—the scientists who make up this community—who are positively committed to seeking contrary evidence and who reject any effort to protect scientific statements from falsification (for example, by changing definitions, bringing in ad hoc hypotheses, using authority to dismiss evidence, personally attacking critics, or suppressing inconvenient facts). The subsidiary rules of science can be debated and changed, but to reject this moral obligation to seek the truth through falsification is to abandon science itself and launch into a different game.

We know that in practice, scientists often do not work in the way I have just indicated. Scientific organizations and research programs (which are not the same thing as the institution of science) can be authoritarian, elitist, and closed-minded. Theories become established and "normal science" often proceeds in a rather uncritical way, as if the prevailing model had been verified by experience and needed no further scrutiny. However, the point is that in the scientific community as a whole, this intellectual lassitude and dogmatic acceptance remains continuously vulnerable to public challenge in light of new evidence. Within the self-corrective process of science itself, it remains possible for observations to accumulate and deepen doubt about the scope of the old model's applicability. The stage is then set for a revolutionary upheaval that can replace the old models with new ones. Such scientific revolutions can and do happen because the core purposes and obligations to truth in the scientific enterprise have remained intact.⁵

To a nonscientist, all this might seem rather austere, impersonal, and, well, "scientific." But please consider more carefully the "purposed" nature of this group of people who submit to the scientific method. Across the generations, theirs is a magnificent expression of the human spirit. To think scientifically is to

launch on a quest that values, above all things, truth. It is to trust that the scientific search for truth will be granted success by powers beyond our command. In confident faith, beyond any possibility of evidence, such thinking presupposes that there is intelligible meaning in the natural world itself, an underlying order to things that is universal and eternal. This quest does not begin in rational calculation or critical analysis. It begins with human wonderment at the world and a prerational appreciation for the beauty of intellectual order.⁶

But there is something going on in science that is still more astonishing than that. To think scientifically is to trust wholeheartedly that the presumed order of the natural world is accessible to man's scientific investigation—that any truths about the nature of things expressed in empirical data can actually be grasped by the powers of the human mind. The social institution of science, with its framework of moral agency and purpose, shows that among the most incomprehensible things about the universe is the fact that there is a creature in it that should imagine it is comprehensible. Unknowingly, because they have never been taught this way, students in tens of thousands of annual science fairs are being asked to participate in a community of moral agency and purpose that endorses certain emotions and values as correct. To think within the institutional framework of science is to endorse a wonder, passion, and faith that do in fact glorify the human spirit.

I hope that this example from the "hard" sciences will help to clarify the shift to an internal perspective that I am trying to present. Here, as in other areas, we are struggling with a certain deficiency in language. If the text you are reading were written in another language (say, Greek or German) we could use different verbs to distinguish the various meanings of the term "to know" with regard to institutions. There could be a verb for "know" as in an external observer seeing and noticing something. There could be another word for "know" in the sense of recognizing and comprehending the features of what you have

seen in the first sense. Both of these stances of "knowing about" were the subject of the last chapter. However, there could also be a word "know" that means to understand something from the inside, to know by partaking in the known. That knowing-as-participating-in is what we are trying to deal with in this chapter. To think in an inside way means to "know something" as in fully experiencing it and not just thinking about it, to have an intimate engagement rather than an intellectual encounter with something. The internal point of view gives us access to what it means to think institutionally, or as expressed at the beginning of this book, to have "respect in depth."

These distinctions may make sense to you, but in trying to use them we immediately run into a problem. To be sure, thinking institutionally is not the same thing as thinking about this or that institution. However, institutional thinking usually occurs in the context of some particular institution, and without this particularity, there is only so much that reasonably can be said on the subject. But this still leaves some things that can be said, and my task here is to try to distill common features of institutional thinking. The institution in question may be an organized social structure (such as the court system, university, or church) or a social practice (such as a given profession, rules of legal procedure, or religious ritual). Here we are trying to work above these particularities and sketch some important general features of mental life inside things institutional.

Some Family Features

We will begin by way of negation and then move on to three more positive elements of thinking institutionally. The various features to be discussed are obviously overlapping, and they probably have to be in order to constitute what is a single appreciative viewpoint. It would be a mistake to try to turn these distinctions into sealed compartments.

What It Is Not

There are two major issues to observe concerning what institutional thinking is not. In the first place, thinking institutionally is not the same thing as thinking in organizational or bureaucratic terms. Our modern society has developed through immense organizations for production, consumption, communication, entertainment, warfare, and the like. This has tempted many people into equating bureaucratic power structures with institutions. That makes it easy for critics to see the notion of institutional loyalty as just another expression of the blighted life of William Whyte's "organization man," the soulless modern who has "left home, spiritually as well as physically, to take the vows of organization life."⁷

However, institutional thinking has to do with living committed to the ends for which organization occurs rather than to an organization as such. To the institutionalist inside it, the organization has a surplus of meaning insofar as it is seen to serve a valued cause in some important way. Bureaucratic organizations in particular are tools that need to be held to their right use in light of their larger purpose. Thus institutional loyalty is not necessarily the same thing as organizational loyalty, and in practice the two can be in profound conflict. For example, it is clear that J. Edgar Hoover became very adept at thinking organizationally to protect his bureaucratic empire, and in doing so did long-term damage to the institutional qualities of the FBI as a law-enforcement agency. By contrast, FBI agent Coleen Rowley brought forward to her superiors information on the agency's pre-9/11 failures because "the issues are fundamentally ones of integrity and go to the heart of the FBI's law enforcement mission and mandate."⁸ It was a career-ending choice to put thinking institutionally morally ahead of thinking organizationally.

Institutions usually are associated with particular organizations that are at least formally charged with pursuing certain ends. In the next chapter we will have more to say about the dis-

inction between "good" and "bad" institutions. Here we need to recognize that however good the institution and its organizational manifestation might be, there is no morally simple way of deciding the limits of loyalty. Group loyalty can too easily become the highest form of morality. Leaders can have a knack for exploiting the feeling that everyone ought to be a "team player." When does the whistleblower blow too quickly or too often? What line will tell us that a police force, military unit, or teachers' union has gone too far in protecting their own? Is nepotism an authentic form of family loyalty? Answers to such questions have to be sought by consulting the larger purposes of any institution for genuine human well-being.

To be sure, wondering about one's duty in a particular case is often nothing more than an attempt to explain it away. But there are also difficult situations where there is no obvious answer. Thinking institutionally means being mindful of one's duty. And that means accepting that there can be anguishing choices to be made in matters of personal duty and organizational loyalty. To deny the tragic quality of such situations will simply throw us into worse errors. Like Virgil's Aeneas, the dutiful institutionalist may well have to pass through the sad vale of soul-making.⁹

In the second place, thinking institutionally is not the same thing as "critical thinking," a term that has now come into much fashion in academia. In other words, the central impulse among institutionalists is not to rigorously question and challenge everything presented. There is no agenda of "critical" analysis to unmask, demystify, and expose with a "hermeneutics of suspicion."¹⁰ On the contrary, institutional thinking offers some good reasons to be rather suspicious of unremitting suspicion. It considers any call to question everything and challenge all claims based on authority to be errant, self-destructive nonsense. We should consider more closely why this is so, although I realize that at this point I may be burning a good many bridges with any academic audience.

Since the 1980s the "critical thinking movement" has been an important influence on curriculum reform and teaching assessment throughout K-12 public schools, as well as in our colleges and universities. Of course, if critical thinking is taken to mean using one's mind in a clear, careful, inquiring, and logical way, then there cannot be much room for objection. It is really not saying much more than that a critical thinker is a good thinker. For several millennia teachers have been trying to help students acquire the skills and attitudes needed to move in that laudable direction. It is equivalent to teaching competence in reading or writing and obviously useful in any subject.¹¹

However, educational malpractice begins to emerge when this commonsense view becomes a device for teaching that the only really intelligent thinker is the critical thinker. When critical thinking is equated with the one right way of being intelligent, we are left with a major problem. Most of the experts in the forefront of the critical thinking movement in our schools realize that there is no conception of moral agency or purpose necessarily associated with this skill.¹² The whole business of teaching critical thinking really has nothing to say about what one should do with this ability. It may just as easily make a person a better scoundrel as a better citizen. It is comparable to teaching the scientific method as a technique and remaining oblivious to the moral obligations and purposes of science as a social institution. Devoid of institutional appreciations, the vaunted intelligence associated with critical thinking is really a way of not knowing.

Consider the recipe that advocates of the critical thinking movement present as the essential steps in effective thinking and problem solving. Curriculum guides and teachers' workbooks relish acronyms, and in this case the widely marketed recipe is called IDEALS (an irony I could not have invented). The IDEALS model advocates the following six steps for critical thinking:

- Identify the problem
- Define the context
- Enumerate choices
- Analyze options
- List reasons, and
- Self-correct

If you are thinking critically about critical thinking, you will notice that something important is missing. The schema identifies everything surrounding the moment of decision, but says nothing about making the decision itself. With the lists of choices, analyzed options, and reasons spread out in front of me, what should guide my decision? Is there an ethic requiring something of me? Is there a tradition of learning and wisdom outside myself to draw on? Is there some community to which I owe allegiance? Are there institutional values deserving my assent for the sake of sustaining some common way of life? From my IDEALS recipe I might reasonably infer that the answer to all such questions is no. There are no substantive criteria that should be consulted or followed in making the decision. There is only the disembodied act of choosing. By his own reasoning and observations of the world, the critical thinker possesses within himself all he needs for problem solving.

To this vacuousness the institutionalist wholeheartedly objects. If for no other reason, he objects because the inevitable implication of such teaching is to destroy the integrity—the tied-togetherness—of what it means to be human. The implication is that we should teach youth that to be intelligent—that is, to be a critical thinker—is something that happens in one compartment of your life. In another compartment, presumptively not based on intelligence, is the ethical dimension that might tell you what critical thinking should be used for. It follows that if moral agency is not a matter of intelligent judgment, it must be a residual compartment dominated by irrational emotion, arbitrary traditions, or personal tastes needing no intelligent justifi-

cation. Perhaps the academic champions of critical thinking do not mean to do so, but they are teaching young people to think of themselves not as persons but as disassembled, hermetically sealed compartments of critical intelligence, personal moral preference, and basic instinct.

As a curriculum reform initiative, the "critical thinking movement" is a reflection of larger intellectual fashions in leading academic circles. There the "critical" perspective is invoked to make it the main goal of education to reveal the reality-creating social, historical, and psychological forces that shape our lives. These forces are unveiled and shown to be mechanisms for exercising power and gaining submission to the disguised will of cultural authorities. Generally speaking, the resulting cultural inheritances are shown to be narrow, oppressive, and patriarchal. Unless one is deconstructing them, reading the canonical text is a form of indoctrination. But above all, the critical insight is that all cultural inheritances are something to see through, go behind, and get over. Only after escaping the grip of authority can you create an authentic, independent life for yourself.

Thus the critical thinking movement presents itself as going to "the heart of education . . . where traditional advocates of a liberal education always said it was."¹³ What the leading lights of modern liberal education set as their objective is essentially the opposite of thinking institutionally. For example, the Harvard faculty's most recent formulation of its hopes for the new general education curriculum and the broader Harvard College experience goes as follows:

The aim of a liberal education is to unsettle presumptions, to defamiliarize the familiar, to reveal what is going on beneath and behind appearances, to disorient young people and to help them to find ways to reorient themselves. A liberal education aims to accomplish these things by questioning assumptions, by inducing self-reflection, by teaching students to think critically and analytically, by exposing them to the sense of alienation produced by encounters with radically different historical moments and cultural formations and with phenomena that exceed them, and even our own, capacity fully to understand.¹⁴

Amidst all this unsettling, defamiliarizing, disorienting, assumption-questioning, and induced alienation, we are left with a troublesome question. How and where are students going to get the promised help "to find ways to reorient themselves"? Where are the compass bearings for this reorientation to come from? It surely will not come from the "alienation" produced by encountering what we lack the capacity to understand. It would appear that the great task of liberal education is to leave students with no solid sense of reality. And then let them figure out things for themselves.

The truth, critically understood, is that "traditional advocates of liberal education" have clearly not "always" had this view. Their view has been more like what the Renaissance humanist Pier Paolo Vergerio pictured:

We call those studies liberal, then, which are worthy of a free [liber] man: they are those through which virtue and wisdom are either practiced or sought, and by which the body or mind is disposed towards all the best things. From this source people customarily seek honor and glory, which for the wise man are the principle rewards of virtue. Just as profit and pleasure are laid down as ends for illiberal intellects, so virtue and glory are goals for the noble.¹⁵

Hence it is not surprising that institutional thinking is at odds with the critical thinking movement in whatever its modern guises. The movement's advocates say that at its core, critical thinking is "judgment that is purposeful and self-regulatory." But it is judgment that does not endorse, or even recognize, any purpose beyond itself. The "self-regulatory" quality of its judgments is better described as self-referential, for it presumes that no external correctives from the surrounding material of history, religion, or culture are necessary. It is an educational agenda that teaches students how to fit into a larger culture that is telling you to believe whatever you like, but trust nothing. At often very high tuition rates, our children are being taught to take their places in the upper ranks of a culture that essentially distrusts itself.

Young people on the receiving end of this treatment in our high schools and colleges are never encouraged to be critical about the critical thinking movement itself. Students are to trust in the authority of the self-proclaimed "experts" urging critical thinking on them. Let us return to a founding document of the critical thinking movement cited earlier, *Critical Thinking: A Statement of Expert Consensus for Purposes of Educational Assessment and Instruction*. Who are these experts? Should it worry us that only two are from the natural sciences? That none are from outside the United States? That there is no empirical evidence offered to support their claims about the benefits to students of teaching the proposed critical thinking curriculum? And yet, if you think critically about such critical thinking, you must ask, What is the warrant for these people teaching me that this critical view is the one right way of thinking?

Likewise, a Harvard freshman could legitimately wonder about what wellsprings of knowingness justify such a determined and well-paid effort by the professorate to unsettle, defamiliarize, and disorient young minds. Why should we accept the belief that all beliefs are personal and culturally subjective—all beliefs, that is, except this one that our academic seers are feeding us? In late 2007 our imaginary freshman was told by Harvard's new president that "truth is an aspiration, not a possession. Yet in this we—and all universities defused by the spirit of debate and free inquiry—challenge and even threaten those who would embrace unquestioned certainties. We must commit ourselves to the uncomfortable position of doubt, to the humility of always believing there is more to know, more to teach, more to understand."¹⁶

But wait, our young novice thinker might say. Why does the spirit of debate and free inquiry in a university mean we must commit ourselves to doubt as an unquestioned certainty? To be sure, truth is our right aspiration, but whence the dogma that it can never be our possession? And why assume that because we believe certain things are true we cannot also believe there is always more to know, teach, and understand?

Although a person's constantly questioning, skeptical awareness is taken by the critical thinking movement to be the very hallmark of intelligence, the truth is that our leading modern intellectuals, who are the sort of people who write about institutions, are a peculiar social type with a particular outlook that is itself rarely critically examined. While they champion the idea of self-consciously thinking about and questioning everything we are doing, they do not live the game they are preaching. They—just like the rest of us—spend their lives uncritically doing most things from habit. We have in fact already surveyed that ground in the earlier comments in Chapter 2 regarding the burden and impracticality of such a hypercritical intellectual agenda.

Since there is much about thinking institutionally that is not focused on thinking critically about what you are doing, today's "advanced" academic perspective subtly but consistently devalues institutional commitments. It does so by dismissing or holding in low esteem one of the central operations of such commitments—namely, the internalization of norms of social usage to the point of habitual practice. As one of Britain's more exceptional intellectuals put it almost a century ago: "It is a profoundly erroneous truism, repeated by all copybooks and by eminent people when they are making speeches, that we should cultivate the habit of thinking of what we are doing. The precise opposite is the case. Civilization advances by extending the number of important operations which we can perform without thinking about them."¹⁷

However, if we leave it at this, institutional thinking risks being misunderstood as simple conformity, either to what some tradition tells you to do or to what everyone else is doing. The truth is that it is precisely against such a loss of "will to meaning" that institutions stand guard. Modern prejudices to the contrary, thinking institutionally is still thinking. Rather than being mindless, it means being mindful in certain ways, exercising a particular form of attentiveness to meaning in the world. A certain kind of intelligence is required to appreciate such meaning. The real choice is not between critical thinking and mindless,

habitual behavior. It is deciding which habits are worthy to be embraced.

Institutional Thinking as Faithful Reception

As a basic orientation toward life, institutional thinking understands itself to be in a position primarily of receiving rather than of inventing or creating. The emphasis is not on thinking up things for yourself, but on thoughtfully taking delivery of and using what has been handed down to you. In taking delivery, institutionalists see themselves as debtors who owe something, not as creditors to whom something is owed. As debtors they have been freely given a world charged with meaning and calls to commitment. What is on offer is an invitation to engagement that goes well beyond self-engagement. Faithful reception gives life meaning by establishing a connection with exterior referents from the past that have, in a sense, already gone beyond and outlived you, and done so to your benefit. This view of indebtedness was expressed by a young Abraham Lincoln as he spoke about the political institutions he saw around him in 1838:

We find ourselves under the government of a system of political institutions, conducing more essentially to the ends of civil and religious liberty, than any of which the history of former times tells us. We, when mounting the stage of existence, found ourselves the legal inheritors of these fundamental blessings. We toiled not in the acquirement or establishment of them—they are a legacy bequeathed to us by a once hardy, brave, and patriotic, but now lamented and departed race of ancestors.¹⁹

So it is that in receiving a benefit with gratitude and faithfulness, a person repays the first installment on his debt.

Because the known ways are valued, thinking institutionally gives no special premium to newness and originality for its own sake. There is no esteem to be gained by thinking up things for yourself. Instead, a person who is thinking institutionally has entered into a preexisting normative field meant to guide the

choices of agents within the given institution, regardless of their private preferences. Not the only job, but the job most at hand in all respects and times is learning how to play the game well, with an excellence that goes beyond rote obedience to the rules of the game. A player respecting the game of basketball may not know who Dr. Naismith was or the original rules about peach baskets, or that the game once had nothing to do with slam dunks and jump shots. Innovation is not meant to change the game. Legitimate innovation is meant to realize, with greater skill and fidelity, the larger potential of what the game is. In a line from Goethe that the late Jaroslav Pelikan liked to quote, "What you have received as heritage, take now as task and thus you will make it your own."

Here too, modern minds can find this emphasis on receiving to be quite strange, to say the least. When some issue arises, we expect to consult different opinions, consider alternatives, and come up with a working solution, preferably something new and innovative. From the institutionalist perspective, things are different. What has been received from those who preceded us carries a presumed weightiness. It is precisely this weighty, rooted quality of what has been given to us that makes it rest heavily in the working of our minds. The inheritance does not present itself as something to be regarded as a passing intellectual fancy, mood swing, or convenient opportunity for personal development (although it surely is the latter). Having a realistic, sober view of our human condition, the institutionalist understands that people usually have a greater need to be reminded than to be liberated.

To repeat, this does not mean closing off thought to any form of innovation. Quite the contrary. In Giuseppe Di Lamputusa's novel *The Leopard*, the young nephew puts the point well to his complacent, aristocratic uncle (I paraphrase): "If we want things to stay the same, there are going to have to be some changes." Precisely because it regards itself as a legatee of something of great value, institutional thinking eagerly seeks to understand what has been received in light of new circumstances that

are always intruding. Without appropriate adaptations, the legacy cannot be preserved.

To be willing to submit to what has been received is a distinctly unfashionable idea in contemporary society. That is why the canon of Western literary classics has aroused such controversy in modern academia. It is why in all the arts, modern critics have had a field day cutting the masters down to size and declaring "genius" to be merely a socially constructed category.¹⁹ Scratch below the surface and you will see that the difficulty is not really that the allegedly "great" works were created by European white males. If Shakespeare were someday discovered to be a black woman, the problem with honoring the excellence of the classics would still be the same. It would be the problem of submitting to the authority of Shakespeare and his, or her, brilliance.

The institutionalist values and is willing to submit to authority, and to admire the excellences of what has been delivered to him. However, submitting and admiring does not mean being servile and retrograde. It does mean having quite modest expectations of what is to be gained by historically careless innovation or by valuing newness for its own sake. More than that, because the internal perspective of thinking institutionally regards some things as givens that have been handed down to us (such as the essential mission of a business, an artistic style, the meaning embedded in a tradition, ritual, or, in a politician like Lincoln's case, the idea of the Union), there is something against which to be adaptable. Indeed, an otherwise unavailable space for adaptability and even playfulness is opened up precisely because one is working within a known context of rules and values. Whether playing at sports, music, mathematics, creative writing, architecture, or any other creative activity of the human spirit, improvisation is intelligible and possible because there is an inherited background against which to improvise and be playful.

The contrast between thinking institutionally and thinking in line with current intellectual fashions is stark. The postmodern stance of anti-institutional thinking rejects all such inherited

values as cultural oppressions. Meaning is to be found only in self-creation, not faithful reception of something beyond oneself. As a result, the anti-institutionalist outlook has no capacity for either playful improvisation or genuine admiration. Instead, it has only the drab promise of disoriented, anarchic, and ultimately meaningless self-expression. Perhaps that is why so many of the sophisticated thinkers embracing the postmodern movement exhibit, not a sense of joyful exhilaration at their liberation, but a deep, unrequited sadness.²⁰ And even if the professors put a brave face on the idea of living without roots, the sadness is likely to creep into their students.

Institutional Thinking as Infusions of Value

It has been famously observed that to institutionalize is to "infuse with value beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand."²¹ This is a helpful view because it points toward the distinction between strictly instrumental attachments needed to get a particular job done and the deeper commitments that express one's enduring loyalty to the purpose or purposes that lie behind doing the job in the first place. Such a commitment may entail ongoing loyalty to some organized group or process, but the sense of attachment that marks institutional thinking requires us to go a good deal farther down this path.

The shape of that longer journey becomes clear if we ask where the infusion of value is coming from. If it is simply a matter of the individual actor's injection of meaning, then we are implicitly relegating institutions to objects of psychological purchase that people choose to make based on some sort of pleasure/pain calculation. For example, the devout sports fan may in this sense infuse the game with value, his payoff being to "get a kick out of it." Yet, it is clear that such a fan may also have little interest in—and may easily behave in ways harmful to—this given sport as an institution. His self-centered enthusiasm as a fan is such that he behaves like a lout in the stands, potentially discrediting the game in the eyes of all who see him. Likewise,

the most talented player of a game may achieve glorious records and still be an utter failure as an upholder of the game as an institution. I think that is what Ryne Sandberg meant in the passage quoted at the outset of this book. As he saw it, the honor of being elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame was not a reward. It was a validation for doing what you are supposed to do out of respect for the game.

In other words, institutional thinking is about value diffusion as well as infusion. Institutions diffuse values by connecting a person to something that goes beyond the self-life. They make claims on one's thinking to acknowledge, and then through choices and conduct, to help realize some normative order reflected in the task of upholding the institution and what it stands for. Institutions embody principles that guide and are necessary for institutional existence. It is not enough that an institutional purpose speaks to you. It must speak into you. It is the work of moral agency to try to live out what that larger purpose is saying.

Institutions embody what the philosopher Charles Taylor has termed "strong evaluations." As he puts it, these "involve discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which *they* can be judged" (my emphasis).²² These intrinsic values imply relations of obligation, not calculations of convenience or personal preference. They demand that primary attention be given to what is appropriate rather than to what is personally expedient. From inside an institutional worldview, one is moved by a central fact—that there is something estimable and decisive beyond me and my immediate personal inclinations. In approaching a major choice, the question is not, How can I get what I want? It is the duty-laden question that asks, What expectations and conduct are appropriate to my position and the choices I might make? What is it, larger than myself, into which I am drawn? And attracted by the light of its value, what *should* I want? The particulars will vary with the

institution, but generally speaking, all institutions offer answers to such questions, questions that modern societies have often forgotten how to ask.

If merely thinking "about" institutions, we would now have reached the doorway into a very complicated discussion. Behind this door lie distinctions between values and norms, the moral and the ethical. Here, in analyzing the normative status of institutions, we would find ourselves weighing arguments about the primacy of the right or the good. Are individuals lashed from behind by norms, duties, the right? Or are they pulled from ahead by the attraction of values, aspirations, the good? In an age of skeptical self-awareness, how shall we justify choosing how to choose? On what basis should we prefer the claims of Kantian deontology or the claims of pragmatic consequentialism? Difficult questions to be sure, and if one is working from the framework of the critical thinking or cultural deconstruction movements, it seems that there are no rational, intersubjectively verifiable standards for choosing how to choose. This is why the only conclusion postmodern thinkers can seem to come to is the advice that, through acts of will, a person should create his or her life as a work of art.

To our great good fortune, given the internal point of view we are pursuing here, there is no need to tie ourselves up in such intellectual knots. These intricacies of justification, however intellectually interesting they might be in their unending mental scrollwork, are more of a distraction than an aid to understanding.²³ In the action-based life world that gives rise to institutional thinking, we are not working off premises of skepticism and introverted self-awareness. We are institutionally minded and looking outward to the world. And from this perspective it is easy to appreciate the continuous interplay between, on the one hand, the attractions and aspirations by which institutional purposes draw us and, on the other, the norms and duties that consequentially make themselves felt in our daily lives. Obeying the rules of grammar and respecting forms of syntax are one thing. Pursuing the vaguer and more morally charged goal of good

writing or even literary excellence is another. However, these are not two opposing things, just different and related things. Properly appreciated, the two activities are complementary and capable of enriching each other.

The law as an institution is a good example of such complementary interplay. Seen up close in its daily operations, the legal system occupies itself in what appear as procedural routines virtually devoid of moral content. Day in and day out the attempt goes on to govern human behavior by the application of coercive rules. Even here, however, a certain "inner morality" is demanded for the law to actually be law. This morality is thin, to be sure, but it is what is required by the concept of law, especially if that concept includes the idea that law is something meant to be obeyed. Thus, if there is to be law—an application of coercive rules to govern people's behavior—among the requirements are that the rules are (1) publicly known, (2) not contradictory or retroactive, (3) capable of being obeyed as a practical matter, (4) stable enough to guide action, and (5) administered in a consistent way with what the rules say.²⁴ Those are internal "ought" requirements implied by even the most amoral understanding of what law "is."

However, to stop there would be like confining our understanding of writing to the rules of grammar, or of science as an institution to the routines of the scientific method. Looking from the outside we can see a conceptual separation of law and morals. The law is not a device to enforce anyone's moral blueprint for life. However, from the internal point of view, the law as an institution means that one is participating in something that was brought into being and continues to exist precisely for moral purposes. It is not a matter of law imposing morality; law is the expression of a moral viewpoint. It expresses an aspiration for justice applying to all persons through the rule of law. In ordering human affairs, this is what the institution of law is seeking to "see to."²⁵ It is at the heart of why human beings struggled to create, and continue struggling to uphold, a *legal* order as distinct from a discretionary order (law is whatever the ruler

decides) or a customary order (law is whatever rules have always existed). Legal rules—not arbitrary princely whims or vague ancestral traditions—are to function as the governing reasons for decisions and action. The institution of law is infused with and diffuses value because of this faith that the rule of law will do best at pursuing the moral goal of equal justice.

If the law seems too abstract, we might return to a more emotionally risky example: the institution of marriage. As suggested earlier, thinking about marriage is a different thing—from personal experience I would say a vastly different thing—from thinking like a married person. Perhaps by now that is obvious. But when it comes to thinking like a married person there exists within this perspective different levels of what might be called thinking institutionally. You and I both might work on our particular marriage relationships quite faithfully, really trying to do what it takes to sustain and develop the relationships with our respective spouses. But it is in addressing the question of "why" we are ultimately making this effort that the different levels of institutional thinking start coming into view.

I work on the relationship with my spouse (communication, respect, task-sharing, and the whole litany of being a good partner) because I know that if this relationship is working, things will go better for me. I am at the Doctor Phil level of things, the calculative level of knowing that "if Mamma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy." And at one level this view makes obvious sense. But it also bespeaks a wholly contingent loyalty to the relationship and behind that, to the institution of marriage. If trying to make Mamma happy doesn't eventually make things go better for me in this relationship, then, well, it is time to head for the exit. In effect, I have deconstructed the notion of fidelity to the point where it simply means my faithfulness to me.

You, on the other hand, are working on the relationship with your spouse as I am, but with a deeper commitment to honoring the marriage institution itself. Because you do not believe that an unrewarding marriage should simply be jettisoned, you are more willing to invest time and effort in your

marriage than I am in mine. You will make many more attempts than I do to resolve marital disagreements. You will find your own dissatisfaction an insufficient cause simply to give up on the marriage. While I am "working on the relationship," you on the other hand are laboring over it in a much more self-sacrificing way. The differing results should come as no surprise, although it does seem to come as a surprise to social scientists. In the long run, my greater sense of freedom to leave an unsatisfying marriage increases the likelihood that my marriage will become unsatisfying and something to be left behind.²⁶

Obviously, everything depends on whether the partners entered into a marriage have compatible expectations. If both see their relationship as a conditional contract of mutual convenience, the longevity of their arrangement may be relatively short, but the psychological costs of abandoning the marriage should be small (that is in theory; in practice, the costs in various categories are rarely small). By the same token, if both partners see marriage as a covenantal, rather than contractual, commitment of life together until death strikes, the psychological burden of abandoning this shared identity will be huge and the marriage likely to be long-lasting. (The practical implication is, if you are thinking institutionally about marriage, avoid someone who is not; and if you are not thinking in that way, avoid someone who is. Life will proceed much more smoothly, though perhaps not more meaningfully.) If marriage or any other institution is to be sustained through the vicissitudes of time and circumstance, the support has to be based more on what people are willing to put into it than on what they are currently getting out of it. Such willingness to invest is a hallmark of thinking institutionally.

In all of this there is an important message. It is especially important for those who have been lured into thinking that the true value of something consists simply in the fact that I, the creator of my life as a work of art, have chosen it. This message is saying something to the contrary and well worth considering. The infusion of value means that thinking institutionally is not

a matter of personal whim, as if you get out of bed and decide that today I will think this way. And it is certainly not a question of following a six-step IDEALS program for critical thinking. To be institutionally minded is to enter and participate in a world of larger, self-transcendent meanings. On a grand scale, the self-transcendent reference may involve some profound cultural ideal, or sense of historic purpose, or religious understanding of what God expects of human beings. Or the self-transcendent meaning may be something in the middle distance, such as a professional calling, family business, artistic tradition, or community identity.

Whatever the case, because institutions are an inheritance of valued purpose and moral obligation, they constitute socially ordered groundings for human life. Such grounding in a normative field implicates the lives of individuals and collectivities in a lived-out social reality. That is a far different thing from pursuit of the socially disembodied ideal. Those pursuing the undefined, institutionally ungrounded ideal seek to bring down to earth the abstractions of social justice, nationhood, holy truth, and the like. It is the lure of utopianism. Because they are respectful of what has been delivered and attentive to the strong evaluations that serve as guides in a disoriented world, persons thinking institutionally are in a good position to perceive the horror that lies behind utopianism's alluring smile. They can see the dangers posed to both collectivities and individuals. Dreams of the institutionless, abstract ideal have left human beings vulnerable to the yearning for total revolution, from the French Revolution onward through communism, fascism, and Maoism. The cost of pursuing the collective dream is well over a hundred million lives cut short in the century just past.

The dream of a life without institutions in pursuit of the undefined ideal also occurs at the individual level. Here the total revolution promises that each person can be the artistic creator of his or her own meaning of life. At this level too the institutionalist is well positioned to recognize the danger. This danger is the tendency for institutionally ungrounded commitments to

self-expression to slide over into self-indulgence and, from there, to ultimate self-destruction. In intellectual circles and popular culture alike, celebrity stars glamorize a life without institutions, and many fans seem to enjoy living vicariously through the personal anarchy of a Michel Foucault, Timothy Leary, Janice Joplin, or Kurt Cobain. What others see as a heroic turning of one's life into an autonomous work of art, the institutionalist sees as misguided foolishness and likely to turn into a work of self-immolation.

Thus, with its socially and historically grounded infusions of value, the natural effect of institutional thinking is to pull down the utopian. But its natural effect is also to lift up the mundane work of ordinary life to something more in keeping with the human spirit. In Chapter 2 we reviewed a litany of misdeeds in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, and such scandals involving prominent people and organizations naturally attract our attention. But in going about our daily lives we are often scandalized in another kind of way. For example, we encounter the store attendant who is not attending to much of anything, especially the customer. Or it is a coworker who is working at everything except the task at hand. Or it might be the slacker student or the slacker teacher who is merely going through the motions of the day's lesson plan. What these big and little scandals all have in common amounts to this: people not doing the job that is supposed to be done.

Being institutionally minded will certainly not eliminate such common annoyances. But it does put us in a position to honor the mundane activities of daily life more than we might otherwise do. It helps us to appreciate the importance of taking responsibility for doing the job right in some larger institutional scheme of things. It helps us to realize that people who fail us institutionally are not just making miscalculations or errors in doing something. They are failing at being something they are supposed to be. Whether a doctor, teacher, plumber, computer programmer, checkout clerk, janitor, or preacher—we all make mistakes in our jobs under a variety of circumstances. It is

another thing to willfully violate the very point of being a doctor, teacher, plumber, computer programmer, janitor, or preacher. The former is a conditional miscalculation or misunderstanding. The latter is a betrayal of position and ultimately of being.

Institutional Thinking as a Stretching of Time Horizons

It follows from earlier points that institutional thinking also involves being mindful about time in a particular way. To think institutionally is to stretch your time horizon backward and forward so that the shadows from both past and future lengthen into the present. Earlier, we saw how this takes the form of receiving and handling carefully what has been delivered from the past. In this section we want to look more broadly at the time horizons of institutional thinking in linking past and future. As we will see, just because a person is thinking about the future does not mean he or she is thinking institutionally.

To think institutionally is to be attentive to precedent. Unfortunately, to modern ears that evokes an image of being controlled by the "dead hand of the past." A more adequate view of institutional thinking understands precedent as a form of solidarity. Choices made in the present serve to strengthen or erode solidarity among an "us" that is peopled by the living, the dead, and the yet unborn. Because there are attachments through time, institutional thinking means living an implicated life, always both inheriting and bequeathing. As the poet John Donne put it, it is to see yourself as "at once receiver and the legacy."²⁷

A sense of this perspective might be gained if you imagine having a time portal in your room. Through this portal step people of your society from times past and times future. Meeting those coming from the past, you hear questions like this: What have you done with what we have freely given to you? Are you mindful of it? What is the evidence that you are taking good care of it in your times? Is there gratitude in your work? And

then there come people from the future stepping through the portal to have a word with you. From them you hear questions like this: Why didn't you pass on to us in better order the things you received? What lack of care for us caused you to saddle us with your debts rather than provide us the advantage of your investments? Have you cherished yourself over us? Is there respect for us in your work?

Granted, my poor takeoff on Dickens's *Christmas Carol* may be too fanciful, but it is trying to make an important point. When thinking institutionally, current decisions are made with a continuing awareness that you are enjoying the fruits of something belonging to predecessors and successors. Therefore, while change is inevitable, the recognition of its implications is embedded in a strong appreciation for what has gone on before you were here and what will go on after you are gone. That is the broad understanding of precedent, and it is something far different from being under remote control by the cold, dead hand of the past. On the contrary. A sense of inheritance backward and forward in time can always keep finding fresh work for such stewardship. To put it another way, institutional thinking shapes conduct by making it beholden to its own past history and to the history it is creating. The present is never only the present. It is one moment in a going concern. And that going concern makes a strong claim on not only one's decisions and actions but also one's affections. It is like receiving and passing on a kiss through a veil.

To be constrained in the present by partaking of the fruits of what belongs to predecessors and successors has a venerable legal name, so venerable that it is traceable back to pre-Christian Roman law. The term is "usufruct." It refers to the right to make full use of something while also being under the obligation to pass on intact, without injury, the substance of the thing itself. It is the tenant's right to enjoy as well as the tenant's responsibility to protect an asset belonging to others. Pick and profit from the fruit of the orchard, but make sure the orchard's trees are there for the next tenants to enjoy.

Usufruct is a fruitful concept for considering the stretching of time horizons that is entailed in thinking institutionally. At first glance, it might seem that we need to do no more than invoke this idea and we have neatly defined one of the characteristics of being institutionally minded. But we need to think again. To be thinking about the future and the right of usufruct is by no means necessarily the same thing as to be thinking institutionally. To see why, we can turn to an exchange of letters on the issue of usufruct. The letters were sent between two friends who also happened to possess two of the best minds that have ever graced American public life. The differing viewpoints expressed in these letters between Thomas Jefferson and James Madison take us to the heart of the matter and will repay careful consideration.

A Tale of Two Letters

Thomas Jefferson had left Monticello for France to be the ambassador to America's indispensable ally in the recent war against Britain. On September 9, 1789, he wrote to his friend and Virginia neighbor James Madison about a novel idea he had. The intellectual and political context for this idea is crucially important. It had been prompted by the intellectual conversations swirling in France about the elemental, self-evident principles of political society.

During the four months before Jefferson put pen to paper, King Louis XVI had convened the Estates-General for the first time in 175 years; the Third Estate, claiming to represent the nation, had broken with the Estates of the clergy and nobility to form the National Assembly and man top government positions; Paris mobs had stormed the Bastille and rural mobs had threatened landlords; the National Assembly had issued decrees nullifying peasants' ancient feudal obligations, and then followed that up at the end of August by issuing "The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen." At least on paper, a nation of equal citizens under the law would now be the sovereign power

in France. In a mere one summer, centuries-old institutions of France's ancien régime had crumbled. Jefferson was writing toward the end of what we now know was only the first stage of the horrific French Revolution. A whole institutional infrastructure was being destroyed, and in its place—the undefined ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. They were the anti-institutional and socially disembodied claims for power that anyone could and did use for personal purposes in the years ahead.

For his part, James Madison in 1789 had left his home at Montpelier for Philadelphia to take a leading role in the First Congress created by America's new Constitution. In those same four months before Jefferson wrote his letter on usufruct, Madison had been active in the first session of this First Congress, enacting laws that created the administrative institutions for the new national government—departments of State, War, Treasury, the Office of Attorney General, and a system of national courts. More than that, in this four-month period Madison almost single-handedly won congressional passage of the amendments to the Constitution that we now call the Bill of Rights.²⁴ And yet a little over a year earlier Madison had consistently opposed adding amendments for a Bill of Rights to the proposed Constitution. Knowing a little more about this context will help us to understand the letter Madison eventually sent back to Jefferson.²⁵

Madison's inconsistency is only on the surface, and it was something much more than political expediency. His opposition to and then championing of a Bill of Rights actually expressed an underlying consistency—a consistency in thinking institutionally—about the new Constitution. Here is why.

For Madison and those of his generation supporting the American Revolution, the underlying aspiration was for a system of self-government by free men. With a military revolution won in 1781, the question for practical reasoning was how to make that ultimate goal possible. After six years of disillusionment and disorder, the eventual institutional answer proposed to the people in 1787 was a Constitution as best the Founders (heavily influenced by Madison) could design it. That answer

proposed to create a truly national government with powers that were limited but necessary for being a single nation. The issue would then be how to begin institutionalizing the Constitution's answer so as to make such a design keep going through time. Thinking constitutionally is raising thinking institutionally to the nth power. And in the transition between the drafting of the Constitution in 1787 and its first months of operation in 1789, that is what James Madison was doing.

Madison originally opposed adding a Bill of Rights on several grounds. He and others argued that it was unnecessary. Since the national government would have only specifically enumerated powers, there was no need for amendments saying that it could not do what it had no power to do. Moreover, listing rights could be taken to mean that unlisted rights did not exist and could create an illusion of security behind mere "parchment barriers." Not least of all, allowing state ratification on condition that certain amendments be added was equivalent to allowing the opponents of a strong national government to destroy the Constitution's design. Thus Madison and his allies stood firm on the principle required if the design itself were not to be strangled at birth. State ratifying conventions had to vote the proposed Constitution up or down, without amendment.

However, at the ratifying conventions in crucial states, it became clear to Madison that without assurances that amendments would be forthcoming in the future, there might well be no birth for the Constitution in the first place. Thus ratification finally and narrowly occurred in Massachusetts, and above all Virginia, on the understanding that once the new government was in place, amendments suggested by the state conventions would be appropriately considered. By making that bargain, Madison accomplished something important. Since proposed changes would now occur within the Constitution's own design for amending itself, any such changes would be a step helping to institutionalize that very design.

So it was that on the day in May when Louis XVI reluctantly convened the Estates-General, Madison stood up in the

House of Representatives to make an announcement. He would shortly introduce a package of proposed amendments to the Constitution. Pouring over the nearly two hundred amendments that had been suggested in the state ratification debates, Madison eventually distilled a list of nine that he laid before Congress in June. Excluded were all those amendments that would have changed the Constitution's institutional structures and powers. Retained and summarized were mainly those proposed amendments pertaining to personal liberties.

Protected from amendments that sought to change and likely destroy the Constitution's institutional design (that is, a truly national government of limited but strong powers), amending the Constitution to add a Bill of Rights could now plausibly be seen in a new light. Madison's proposed amendments would not only be keeping faith with the understandings given at state ratifying conventions. They would also strengthen the Constitution by deepening and broadening its public support. The state ratifying conventions had made the popular concern about protecting rights very clear. In Madison's words, the new Bill of Rights would help "extinguish from the bosom of every member of the community any apprehensions, that there are those among his countrymen who wish to deprive them of the liberty for which they valiantly fought and honorably bled." In other words, the Constitution would be further institutionalized by a Bill of Rights tying the document to the nation's Revolutionary history and founding goal of liberty.

The demands of political expediency would have been met by mere proposals. However, Madison kept faith with the unwritten constitutional process that had brought things to this point. He not only proposed but also worked tirelessly and almost single-handedly to gain congressional approval, even when legislative bargaining eliminated the amendment he most favored (one that would have prohibited the states, and not only the federal government, from violating individual rights). At the end of September, Congress finally passed twelve amendments to the Constitution and sent them to the states for ratification.

The Argument

With this background we are better prepared to hear what Jefferson and Madison are saying, not just to each other but also to us. Their contrasting voices can help us understand the difference between institutional thinking and its opposite when it comes to looking toward the future in light of the past. So now at last we come to the letters.

Jefferson's idea, which he thought had "never to have been started either on this or our side of the water" was as follows. The essential question is whether one generation has a right to bind another generation. Jefferson's answer is that no such obligation can rightfully be transmitted through time. "I set out on this ground which I suppose to be self-evident, 'that the earth belongs in usufruct to the living'; that the dead have neither powers nor rights over it." Jefferson begins by considering the natural right of the individual. Of course, under the laws of a society there can be rules for the transfer of property to descendants, but the question here is not about social conventions. It is about the abstract natural right of individuals, and here, Jefferson argues, the situation is clear.

The portion [of the earth] occupied by any individual ceases to be his when himself ceases to be, and reverts to the society...no man can by *natural right* oblige the lands he occupied, or the persons who succeed him in that occupation to the payment of debts contracted by him. For if he could, he might during his own life eat up the usufruct of the lands for several generations to come, and then the lands would belong to the dead, and not to the living, which would be reverse of our principle.

Jefferson then goes on to extend the same principle to the societal level. "What is true of every member of the society individually is true of the all collectively, since the rights of the whole can be no more than the sum of the rights of individuals." He makes this extension of principle possible by conceptualizing society in terms of individual generations. He first imagines a

society of succeeding generations where each generation is born on the same day, reaches maturity at age twenty-one, and dies at age fifty-five (then the current life expectancy at age twenty-one). In effect, when a generation leaves the stage at a fixed moment "as individuals do now," the whole society dies and is replaced by the next generation.

The point of Jefferson's thought experiment is to show that, as with individuals, "the earth belongs to each of these generations during its course, fully, and in their own right." If the first generation could charge the second with its debt, the second charge the third with its debt, and so on, "then the earth would not belong to the living." Thus no generation can rightfully contract obligatory arrangements beyond the course of its own existence. At age twenty-one the generation may bind itself for thirty-four years; at age fifty-four for only one year.

Of course, Jefferson acknowledges that the timing is not as neat as this, with a generation undergoing "a constant course of decay and renewal." But in Jefferson's way of thinking the problem is a purely mechanical one of timing and easily overcome by consulting the mortality tables. Doing so shows that "generations changing daily, by daily deaths and births, have one constant term beginning at the date of their contract and ending when a majority of those of full age at that date [of contract] shall be dead." It turns out that those of an age (that is, twenty-one or older) to form a majority will be dead in roughly nineteen years. It follows that since the will of the majority binds the whole, "19 years is the term beyond which neither the representatives of a nation, nor even the whole nation itself assembled, can validly extend a debt."

However, debt is only one example of obligation that a generation may transmit to the future. Jefferson pursues the logic to its end, such that the validity of every act of society is limited to nineteen years.

On similar ground it may be proved that no society can make a perpetual constitution, or even a perpetual law. The earth belongs

always to the living generation. They may manage it then, and what proceeds from it, as they please, during their usufruct. They are masters too of their own persons, and, consequently, may govern them as they please. But persons and property make the sum of the objects of government. The constitution and the laws of their predecessors extinguished then, in their natural course, with those whose will gave them being. This could preserve that being till it ceased to be itself, and no longer. Every constitution, then, and every law naturally expires at the end of 19 years. If it be enforced longer, it is an act of force and not of right.

For Jefferson, the fact that the next generation could obviously repeal any constitution or law if it chose to do so was insufficient. The practical difficulties in organizing any such repeal meant implicitly that the arrangements carried forward from the past would remain in force. Only an explicit, fixed term of one generation for all acts of society would satisfy the requirement for an express declaration of the public will, so that no generation will be binding another.

These were not idle speculations on Jefferson's part. He closed his letter by urging Madison to raise this idea in the new government and to include it in the preamble to the first national law for raising revenue. Even thirty-five years later, Jefferson was still writing to his correspondents on this theme. "We may consider each generation as a distinct nation, with a right, by the will of its majority, to bind themselves, but none to bind the succeeding generation, more than the inhabitants of another country."³¹

What is Madison to say? If you have overseen the creation and protection of the Constitution's design, helped erect the first national administrative structure of government, and made the Bill of Rights a legislative reality binding the Constitution to America's revolutionary cause, what do you say about the idea that all of this should have a nineteen-year expiration date and then, if everyone in the next generation would prefer, simply start all over again?

What Madison says is respectful, intellectually penetrating, and a fine expositive example of thinking institutionally. He

does not begin with the abstract individual, a concept so attractive to Jefferson and the leading minds of the French Revolution, as well as to Rousseau earlier. Indeed, that is why Rousseau could look at swaddling clothes and collars and miss the whole point. By contrast, Madison begins with the concept of law. He suggests to Jefferson that the acts of a political society can be divided into three types of law: the fundamental law of the constitution, the laws stipulating that they cannot be revoked at the will of the legislature, and all other laws lacking that irrevocable quality. And so, from his institutional way of thinking, Madison begins the work of demolishing Jefferson's idea.

As for the fundamental law of the constitution, Madison argues that the problem lies in applying Jefferson's theoretical scheme to the real world. First, a constitutional order ceasing at the end of a given term would "be too subject to the casualty and consequences of an interregnum." In other words, disorderly dead zones would be created in the life of the nation. These would be periods devoid of any institutional connections as our political society transitioned from the prior regime to the next expressly chosen regime. Second, a constitutional government subject to expiration dates would "become too mutable and novel to retain that share of prejudice in its favor which is a salutary aid to the most rational government." In other words, Jefferson's idea would not allow for the development through time of the patriotic emotional attachments that even the most well-thought-out constitutional design needs in order to be sustained. Third, the anticipation of a periodic open season for total revision of the constitutional order would generate confusion in the public's mind and incentives for powerful, self-seeking groups to exploit such confusions to their own selfish purposes.

In short, from his institutionalist perspective, Madison is politely saying that Jefferson's idea of a constitutional order is no constitutional order at all. It is a repeated throw of the historical dice, offering each generation the chance to bet the house on something new.

Madison then turns to the second type of laws, those involving "stipulations" that prevent their revocation by the mere will of the majority in a legislature. Here he undermines Jefferson's idea by going to its roots and examining what I have called the institutional notion of "taking delivery." Madison asks, "If the earth be the gift of nature to the living, their title can extend to the earth in its *natural* state only. The *improvements* made by the dead form a debt against the living who take the benefit of them. This debt cannot be otherwise discharged than by a proportionate obedience to the will of the authors of the improvements." Again, in a very polite way, Madison is saying that Jefferson has misunderstood the way in which human beings exist. They are not a succession of lone figures occupying a piece of physical nature in space-time. They are social creatures inheriting everything that their fellow social creatures have made of the physical world and passed on to them.

Madison next shifts the focus forward in time and again undercuts Jefferson's narrow, abstractly individualistic view of obligation. "Debts may be incurred with a direct view to the interests of the unborn as well as the living." For example, the debts involved in protecting our nation from foreign aggressors will benefit untold future generations. Madison's implied question is: Should we stop defending the nation when the war debt exceeds what can be repaid in the next nineteen years? Likewise, debts may be incurred primarily for the benefit of the next and later generations. Here Madison's implied question is: Should we not invest in any future beyond the nineteen-year end of our own generation's nose? For this second kind of law, Madison concludes, "There seems, then, to be some foundation in the nature of things, in the relation which one generation bears to another, for the *descent* of obligations from one [generation] to another. Equity may require it. Mutual good may be promoted by it. And all that seems indispensable in stating the account between the dead and the living is to see that the debts against the latter do not exceed the advances made by the former."

Thus in place of Jefferson's mechanical and abstract logic, Madison leaves it as a matter of making an inherently historical, socially attentive judgment. We the living must decide if we are violating an intergenerational trust by burdening others with more than we received from the past. That, of course, is an impossible calculation, but Madison is not calling for an accountant's calculation. He is asking that a self-governing people stretch their time horizons and in that light of intergenerational responsibility, seriously think about what they are doing.

Madison then turns to the third category of law, the mass of ordinary laws that are freely made and unmade at the will of the legislature. Here the problems with Jefferson's idea are "merely practical" but no less devastating. Such ordinary laws establish a web of rights and obligations between parties, especially regarding property. Operation of these laws would now sink into a morass of violent struggles as parties jockeyed for advantage amid the uncertainty generated by periodic expiration of the larger constitutional and legal order. But it would not be an equal struggle. Now the burden of difficulty in organizing a successful repeal would shift to those wanting to renew the status quo after nineteen years. It is "anarchy" that would now be advantaged, and Madison spells out how. By weakening people's sense of "all the obligations dependent on antecedent laws and usages," the frequent return of periods superseding such obligations would inevitably:

- undermine the value of property rights, especially as expiration periods approached;
- encourage selfish attitudes of licentiousness that are already too powerful in people;
- discourage all efforts at steady industry pursued under the sanction of existing laws; and
- give immediate advantage to the clever and shrewd over other parts of society.

Madison concludes by showing that the problems with Jefferson's idea stem from thinking that only express consent to a regime of government and laws can render them legitimate. Seeing institutions embodied in relationships ongoing through time, Madison insists that "a tacit assent may be given to established governments and laws, and that this assent is to be inferred from the omission of an express revocation." That has to be so if the political society is to be able to function.

To show this Madison asks, "On what principle is it that the voice of the majority binds the minority?" It is a seemingly innocent question, but it cuts to the heart of Jefferson's endorsement of a social-political order based solely on the natural right of each generation. It asks, What is the principle of natural right by which a majority binds a minority of any given generation? The answer is that there is no such principle in the law of nature. The rule for deciding by the majority voice has been one principle among others that has been found useful in political society, just as on some issues, such as creating and changing a constitution, a rule requiring decision by something much greater than a mere majority may be useful. Here we should let Madison finish the argument in his own words. Prior to the instituting of such useful majority-decision rules:

unanimity was necessary; and rigid theory accordingly presupposes the assent of every individual to the rule which subjects the minority to the will of the majority. If this assent cannot be given tacitly, or be not implied where no positive evidence forbids, no person born in society could, on attaining ripe age [that is, twenty-one], be bound by any acts of the majority; and either a unanimous renewal of every law would be necessary as often as a new member should be added to the society; or the express consent of every new member be obtained to the rule by which the majority decides for the whole.

In his letter to Jefferson, Madison respectfully leaves it as a question, but the answer to the question is clear. Jefferson's idea would subvert "the very foundation of civil society."¹¹

Raising Our Sights

Clearly, Thomas Jefferson had a vivid sense of usufruct, to the point of claiming the sovereignty of each living generation and the nonexistent rights of any other. People who do not exist, he said, cannot have rights. He saw the situation, not in terms of obligations one generation might owe to another, but in terms of what any living generation must not do to the next. It must not impose any law, constitution, or other binding obligation. Like today's professors of postmodern cultural criticism, Jefferson viewed the influence of the past as solely an oppressive force. His thinking was tuned to what I described earlier as "the undefined ideal" abstracted from the institutions and historical ligatures of society.

Jefferson never gave any sign of seriously engaging Madison's powerful and institutionally informed arguments against his idea. For decades he was content simply to keep repeating his abstract notion of the natural right of each generation to be a "different nation" from the others. By contrast, James Madison understood political society as a going concern. Its generations were not by right different nations. As a social and historical fact, the generations were participants in a great chain letter that was being handled, amended, and passed down through time. The constitutional order and system of laws were instruments making possible the generations—a people's—joint venture together, and these instruments were carried forward through tacit assent. The ties of moral obligation between past, present, and future were inescapable if a political society were to succeed as a going concern.³²

In 1790, Madison seemed to catch only a glimpse of the idea of the Union. It lay like a sprouting seed in the year-old Constitution. Even so, he had a glimpse and objected to Jefferson's idea of stopping and restarting a constitutional regime every nineteen years. As he asked rhetorically, would not such a government "become too mutable and novel to retain that share of prejudice in its favor which is a salutary aid to the most rational government?" By the early 1830s, as the last survivor

among the Constitution's drafters, Madison had more than a glimpse of what was at stake. He struggled to oppose the growing doctrine of state nullification of national law, a doctrine that would destroy the American Union as defined by the Constitution. Before dying in 1836 his last message to the current generation gave advice that was "nearest to my heart and deepest in my convictions, . . . that the union of the states be cherished and perpetuated." The substantive identity of a people had been institutionalized in the Constitution. For this people, the Union expressed in the Constitution was the indispensable instrument for their republican ideals of self-government.³³

Another generation more and, faced with the ultimate crisis, Abraham Lincoln could articulate the vision as none had before. It was a vision of solidarity across all generations of Americans, with the Constitution as their institution of Union, aspiring to the republican ideals of liberty and equality. In his first inaugural address he called it the people's "mystic chord of memory." America was not a contractual union of individuals in the present generation, any more than it was a mere group of states contracting to create a friendship league for safety and convenience. Entering or leaving a contract changes nothing of substance. Entering a covenant changes your identity, and leaving a covenant is of devastating consequence for that identity. Lincoln's way of thinking, like Madison's, was everything that Jefferson's was not. Lincoln and Madison thought institutionally about the life of the nation. For Jefferson, there was no such thing—only the life of each passing individual and generation. Lincoln gave elegant expression to what was implicit in Madison's tightly reasoned letter and explicit in his fight to pass the Bill of Rights. Lincoln fused the ideals of the Declaration of Independence, the institution of the Constitution, and the shared history of the nation, invoking each generation's covenantal solidarity with ancestors and posterity, a union organic and even sacramental.³⁴

Now, in a roundabout but, I hope, better informed way, we can at last return to the third of our "rational choice" cases. It is

the one left unaddressed in Chapter 3 after we considered the Law Merchant and king's power cases in relation to George Washington's performance in thinking institutionally. You may recall that the specific subject matter of this third and most difficult case concerns economic transaction costs and the inescapable need for some authority empowered to enforce rules of the game. These are the rules that are necessary if any mutually beneficial exchanges are to be a realistic possibility. The general problem is that any ruler with sufficient power to enforce the needed rules for the common good will also be powerful enough to enforce rules serving only his own good. And why, rationally speaking, would a ruler not do so?

To have their work accepted, the Framers of the U.S. Constitution essentially had to satisfy the challenge posed by that question. Amid widespread perceptions of domestic turmoil threatening property rights, commerce, and the rule of law itself, they were proposing to empower a new national government that would create and enforce the needed rules. But why should the people agree to bind themselves under such an authority when it could just as well rule in its own interest and against their liberties?

Obviously, there is no room here to follow all the intricate arguments and developments that led to acceptance of the U.S. Constitution as the supreme law of the land. The advocates gave assurances that the new government was not a ruler but a reflection of the people's self-rule. They promised that republican liberties would be safeguarded by the Constitution's very design (that is, a government limited to the powers enumerated, with internal checks and balances among three branches, with external checks and balances of federalism in relation to the states, and with the promise of a bill of rights). But why take a leap of faith into such assurances and promises? What accounts for not only ratification but also the ongoing tacit assent to the constitutional order that was crucial during those first troubled decades of national life? Read through the history of this remarkable period—say, the thirty years from 1772 to 1802—

and you are left repeatedly asking yourself, How in the world did these people pull off such a thing?

Of course, there can be many explanations, but it is no help simply to say that enough people decided to act rationally in their long-term self-interest. You are not likely to act in your long-term interests unless you are first thinking about your interests in a long-term way. I believe the evidence shows that behind the myriad arguments, there was constant recourse to a particular outlook, an appreciative stance, that had been shaped during the events of that generation. It was a triad of thoughts amounting to one grand theme, and it recurs throughout all the disputes and potential turning points. In fact, it is repeated so many times in so many quarters and varying ways that after a while one almost stops noticing it.

First, there is the notion that mankind's ancient hopes for freedom have been handed down to this generation of the American Revolution. The Greek and Roman classics, Bible stories, the rise and fall of the Dutch Republic, and above all, the centuries of struggles for the rights of Englishmen all spoke to this notion.

Second, a great many Americans were convinced that there was a larger meaning to their actions and the events of their time. What was happening was a momentous experiment testing whether or not republican self-government could work.

Third, Americans were convinced that, one way or the other, the results of their experiment would reverberate into the distant future—to all "posterity," as they often called it.

Because this tripartite formulation became such a familiar way of interpreting events does not mean that it should be dismissed as rhetorical window dressing. On the contrary, it means that we should take it very seriously as a force in those times. There is good evidence that many Americans of different social stations considered themselves engaged in a portentous joint venture and shared a genuine, continuing fear that it would fail.³⁵ Preserving the republican experiment meant saving not only Congress from the states or the states from each other but

especially the people from themselves. Supporters of the Constitutional order were having to convince the ruler—the people—to constrain himself with a Constitution that greatly restricted the majoritarian premises of popular government itself. To accept and continue supporting that arrangement, people needed some larger way of thinking about specific goals and actions of the day.

The thought triad just sketched did that. It spurred some critical mass of people in this generation to be involved in the three features of what I have called thinking institutionally. Such people realized that they had taken delivery of something of immense importance, the hope of the ages for human freedom and equal rights. They saw their political work infused with value going well beyond the controversies of the moment; the aspiration for self-government itself was on trial. And they saw the stakes of their work stretching forward to untold future generations all around the world—or, as the aged Madison put it, “the last hope of true liberty on the face of the Earth.” Their work in thinking institutionally was not beyond partisanship, but it was well beyond ordinary, shortsighted pursuit of partisan payoffs.³⁶ What they had received as heritage, they did indeed take as task and thus made it their own.

There was nothing inevitable about the acceptance of the Constitution or its initial survival. It was touch and go all the way. And the fault lines did not run so much between different people as between different parts of people’s minds. They ran between thinking in an institutional way and thinking in a narrower, short-term, self-indulgent way. They also ran between thinking in an institutional way and thinking in the abstract, socially disembodied way of the undefined ideal.

* * *

Of course, all this was a long time ago. Today we are caught up in talk about institutions failing us. But look closely and I think you will see that when institutions fail, it is mainly a matter of people failing institutions. People fail institutions by failing to think and act with due regard to the valued purposes

embodied in institutions. To repeat an earlier point, the failure does not consist in simply making mistakes, errors, and miscalculations. It consists in failures of being.

Consider again the lists in Chapter 2’s cavalcade of misconduct that occurred throughout the public, private, and nonprofit realms in the last half-century. Ask yourself, what is it that really failed?

Just suppose that the leading figures involved in any of these events had resisted temptations to the contrary and had actually held fast to the idea of behaving in an institutionally appropriate way. Suppose that these people from yesterday’s headlines had been of a mind to think that their private, personal agendas were something to be subordinated to their institutional responsibilities. Suppose they had been of a mind to weigh the moral claims of the past and their obligations to the future and had viewed their choices about how to act in that light. Perhaps not all, but certainly the vast majority of items on those lists would be blotted out. And how much better off would everyone have been as a result.

As I suggested in Chapter 2, there is more to thinking institutionally than just being extra careful to avoid breaking the rules, much less being clever enough to avoid criminal indictment. It entails entering into the spirit of things, and by the end of this chapter I hope you have a better sense of what that might mean. Amid the perpetual perishing that marks our individual existences, institutions are weathered presences. It is intellectually interesting and important to think about them. But it is more humanly valuable to enter into the way of thinking that they embody—in other words, to seek and place value on their interior point of view.

It may sound like I am saying that thinking institutionally is all about being unselfish, rationally uncalculating, and altruistic—indeed bordering on the saintly. That is not so. But since institutional thinking is always pointing to something beyond the self-life, it naturally can appear to onlookers as a matter of self-denial rather than self-assertion. But thinking institutionally

is, in its own way, a kind of self-assertion. It asserts not a negation of self but a giving of self.

To borrow language from another context, thinking institutionally is a sign or a witness: it alone does not say everything, but rather grows by saying what it is not and revealing what it points to.³⁷

Institutional thinking resists utopianism in projects of both social construction and self-construction. But it also insists that mundane life is far more than a banal submission to expediency. It views the present as thoroughly enriched by inheritance and legacy. Again, to borrow a thought from a religious context, thinking institutionally tends to humble without humiliating us, to raise us up without flattering us.



CHAPTER SIX WAYS OF THINKING, WAYS OF BEING

The preceding chapter took as its point of departure an obvious fact: it is possible to think without acting. You and I may treat "thinking institutionally" as an interesting intellectual exercise and still never do anything about it. Yet while it is possible to think without acting, it is not possible to act without thinking.

To that statement, the natural first response might be, "What nonsense." We see people acting without thinking all the time. It is the sort of behavior that makes up the bulk of the daily news 365 days a year. Only an academic in some tower of ivory could claim it is impossible to act without thinking. So let me try to clarify what I mean.

By saying it is not possible to act without thinking I am not referring to responses of a person's autonomic nervous system, like jumping at the sound of an unexpected loud noise or unconsciously breathing in and out. By "act" I mean making a conscious move in the world. That includes acting on impulse, or as we often say, "without time to think." Such situations are especially revealing of our deeper thought patterns. When we do not have "time to think" and can only respond based on what is

already in the character of our mental outlook—that is when our thinking, our foundational thinking, is most clearly exposed.

I am not trying to say something obscure or academically clever. Anyone who has ever been romantically involved with another person knows that what I am saying is true. If you want to know what the person you are dating is really about, do not study what is going on during the dating ritual. Pay attention to what happens when the person thinks no one else is watching. And pay special attention as this person responds to the unexpected. To put the point crudely, watch a person's "gut" response in order to get a reading on what is going on in his or her head. The ancient wisdom literature expresses it more elegantly: As a person "thinks in his heart, so is he" and "out of it [your heart] are the issues of life" (Proverbs 23:7; 4:23). We act in the way we think deep down at the heart level. You and I may not be what we think we are, but what we think, we are.

In Chapter 4 I tried to describe what it is like to inhabit and move around in a particular frame of mind called "institutional." And throughout this book I have pressed the case for reviving and living out this normative point of view. As I said at the outset, thinking institutionally is nothing dramatic, new, or flashy. It is more like revisiting a forgotten old home place and experiencing a re-cognition—a bringing to mind again—of valuable things that only appear to have been forgotten. The discussion has tried to focus on background presumptions about right relationships. As best I can, I have tried to describe a "respect-in-depth" way of thinking about our lives and surroundings.

By contrast, thanks to modern communication technology, virtually everything we are now lured to pay attention to focuses on fleeting foreground features and short-lived personal encounters. The Internet and its related technologies have given almost everyone something that is unique in human history—the means for indiscriminate self-expression, and this in a "virtual" world where nothing really endures or has substance. The allure of the ephemeral is now enveloping us, and it seems destined to do nothing but grow.¹

In such times it makes excellent sense both to distrust and to value institutions—to distrust because institutional purposes are pursued through the actions of flawed human beings, and to value because institutions have enduring purposes worthy of our efforts and loyalties. Thinking institutionally is about using our reason. However, it pushes a person to go beyond being instrumentally rational—that is, simply making intelligent choices regarding means to some arbitrary and self-validating goals we happen to have chosen simply to please ourselves. It calls on a substantive rationality regarding intelligent choices about the ends of action worth choosing.

The rational basis for evaluating institutions is not a matter of personal whim. The basis is the good any given institution produces for human well-being. The deep-seated purposes of institutions are aspirations in that upward direction. Those are aspirations to which we can appropriately hold ourselves accountable. In a perplexing world, they can orient the modern search for "authenticity" in our individual life commitments. They can help us discern the limits of loyalty to any particular organization or process, though they can never shield us from the agony of having to make hard choices.

Is it really so difficult to cut through the fluff and blather of our popular culture to see the things that need to be taught and learned? The chronicle of misdeeds discussed at the beginning of this book points toward the immense gains to be had from thinking institutionally. Those gains are both societal and personal in nature.

At the most basic level, there is the matter of sustainability and survival. We noted an elemental form of institutional thinking that consists of not critically questioning everything you are doing and simply carrying on with your job as it is supposed to be done. If nothing else, the steady habits in such thinking (not the same thing as addictive behavior) have immense survival value for society at large. They give implicit testimony to and support for the value of the going concern of the social order. The multitude of nameless people who are—in Ryne Sandberg's

phrase—"just doing what I'm supposed to do" amounts to an immense sheet anchor sustaining civilized life, something we never are likely to notice until disaster strikes.

History offers compelling examples of societies surviving through devastating cataclysms by virtue of ordinary people simply carrying on with their appointed duties. A historian has described the similar grounds of social survival in the atomic bombing of Japan and the Black Death in fourteenth-century Europe:

In the worst years of the mortality, Europeans witnessed horrors comparable to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but even when death was everywhere and only a fool would dare to hope, the thin fabric of civilization held....Enough notaries, municipal and church authorities, physicians and merchants stepped forward to keep governments and courts and churches and financial houses running—albeit at a much reduced level.²

In ordinary times as well, institutional thinking holds great value on a variety of fronts. It injects a concern for something more than the claims of personal power and temporary advantage. With at least some people around you who are thinking institutionally, there is a greater chance of being told what you need to hear rather than simply what you want to hear. Institutional thinking also helps protect against the willful ignorance called presentism—the arrogant privileging of one's own little moment in time. Institutional thinking transforms the past into memory, which is a way of keeping alive what is meaningful in the qualitative significance of our experiences. Because it is attentive to rule-following rather than personal strategies to achieve personal ends, thinking institutionally enhances predictability in conduct. Predictability in turn can enhance trust, which can enhance reciprocating loyalty, which can facilitate bargaining, compromise, and fiduciary relationships. All this is a chain of relationships that amounts to a civilized way for people to live together.

In the end, the advantages of institutional thinking come down to what is distinctly human. Humans flourish through attachments to authoritative communities, not as totally unencumbered selves. Because institutional thinking goes beyond merely contingent, instrumental attachments, it takes daily life down to a deeper level than some passing parade of personal moods and feelings. By its nature, institutional thinking tends to cultivate belonging and a common life.

To be sure, works of modern fiction routinely portray rebellion against all institutions as courageous adventures of liberation. The promise is perfect freedom. But that promise is an illusion. The truth—to be found in any reliable work of nonfiction (whether history, biography, or current events)—is that a life devoid of institutional attachments becomes a perfect hell of self-destructive excesses. At the center of such real-life accounts is the ultimate excess, the overweening self-life. Without authority for freedom to play against, the liberation adventure extinguishes itself in existential meaninglessness. When you really look at the facts of everyday life, the "adventure" of total self-liberation turns out to be a self-destructive trajectory. That is the real story line about the egoists in our modern celebrity culture. Throughout our tabloids and Internet blogs, the sub-texts are usually appealing to an inward, unarticulated moral outlook. Our popular culture loves its celebrity heroes, but it loves even more the sight of their crumbling self-made pedestals. That is a backhanded way of affirming that there really are pedestals of merit on which to stand, even though the humans atop may be rather wobbly.

There are good, commonsense reasons why an anti-institutionalist perspective does not work in real life (which is a world quite different from the thought-palaces of many tenured intellectuals). However much we might pretend otherwise, we humans are not complete enough to complete ourselves. We are not rich enough that we can do without institutional attachments and intergenerational kisses. We simply do not have the

fullness of resources that would be required. If nothing is important but self-fulfillment, there is nothing of substance available to help us do the filling.

Thinking institutionally offers us a more excellent way of being in the world. It demarcates a middle zone of liberating constraints. To the one side is the lone cultural wanderer facing a bewildering array of choices. Because they are self-validating, they are choices without any larger substantial meaning. Whatever peace and meaning is to be found must come from internally generated expressions of the Self and resistance to all external threats to one's autonomous self-determination. To the other side of the institutionalist's zone is the yearning for unity and a pooling of particularities into something whole. It is the totalizing vision that answers to the cultural wanderer's lostness. The promise is an "I" capable of knowing itself only because it is absorbed into a monistic "we."

The institutionalist middle zone yields a more realistic view of life. Human beings find meaning as they live in the tension between the universal and the particular, between what has been given and what is not yet fulfilled. This middle zone does not claim to provide ultimate meaning, because thinking institutionally is not a religion or comprehensive secular ideology. It is a place for finding proximate, human-scale meanings. Such meaning emerges through engagement in the historical tasks and obligations that lie at hand for each one of us. These are the mundane but rewarding tasks and obligations embodied in institutions that involve family, work, education, local community, religious congregation, citizenship, and—to return to where we started—sports.

And increasingly we are realizing that the same institutional way of thinking should apply to whatever piece of geography we happen to occupy. Our piece of earth and proximate surroundings are another kind of middle zone, a localization that participates in a larger world environment. Through force of physical circumstance, we moderns are having to learn what it means to faithfully receive, to infuse with value and thoughtfully pass on

to others our earth home. Again, events rather than philosophical arguments are mainly teaching us the lesson. The material world is not simply an ensemble of objects for our use; it is something that makes a claim on us and our sense of stewardship. We lead implicated lives. "The environment" is only the most visible object in a larger world of human relationships that is suffering and quite possibly decomposing for want of institutional thinking.

So what should you and I do? Perhaps one day someone will produce a self-help book or twelve-step program for those who want to improve their lives by thinking institutionally. That is not on offer here. It makes no sense to exhort people to be good or think institutionally until they have a better understanding of what that good thing is. Many people do have a sense of the matter even if they cannot verbalize it very well. That is why from time to time I have appealed to a common-sense understanding that we seem to share about such things as sportsmanship, marriage, law, and the first day of school. We should take this as a sign of hope for the future. The "appreciative viewpoint" I have called thinking institutionally forms a deep stratum in our human makeup. It does not need to be invented by some social philosopher or political leader. It needs to be recovered and articulated. Hence this book's rationale.

Thinking institutionally is really not that difficult to understand. We more or less know it when we see it. It is simply very difficult to live out. This way of thinking and being in the world is hard work. The reasons for this have been discussed in the last chapter. So, awaiting publication of the next self-help book and twelve-step program, what is a person to do? Like all the advice we have heard regarding a healthful diet and exercise program, the practical answer is as straightforward to state as it is difficult to carry out.

Moral realism understands that the grand movements of history, from life to death and everything in between, are played out in the particular acts of individuals. Those acts, influenced as they must be by all sorts of larger contextual factors, remain

choices that we as moral agents have the freedom to make or not make. They are not the automatic result of blind, deterministic necessity. Institutionalists have an essentially hopeful view, believing in a better future. That is why they try to use the materials of the past to invest in that future.

At the same time, thinking and acting institutionally does not come easily for us, especially in light of the modern dangers and obstacles it faces. Institutional thinking is learned. And it is learned, or not learned, in the home, the schools, the marketplace, and the political forum. It cannot be learned if it is not taught, and most teaching occurs through example. Doesn't that tell us something we should do?

A recent multiyear study has tried to understand how people in various domains of employment come to do "good work." What the researchers mean by this term is not only a high "job" performance rating but work that reflects a humane, responsible, and consistent quality of moral behavior. Good work is what our earlier discussion subdivided into the concepts of profession, office, and stewardship. Anyone who has read this far will not be surprised by the researchers' findings. What fosters such good work is, first, a strong sense of moral commitment to larger purposes that one brings to the job; second, the professional ethic exemplified by those individuals providing a person with his or her early job training; and finally, the "lineages" of worthy models from the past with whom one identifies in working toward the future.³ In short, a person learns to think institutionally by being around and identifying with people who model and reinforce one's appreciation for institutional values. This produces a gradual, perhaps only half-conscious shaping of character.

For anyone left wondering what to do, the most practical advice on this matter is also the most ancient. A person learns to think and act institutionally by doing it. In that sense it is like an "art." It is not a matter of learning philosophical arguments. It is a matter of doing it in order to learn more deeply about what one is doing. Aristotle put it this way: "The virtues we get by

first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, for example, men become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre. So too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts."⁴

This sounds rather abstract, but it is actually quite practical. In fact, to acquire a way of thinking, institutional or otherwise, is probably the most practical thing a person ever does. So, for example, in today's atmosphere of cynical distrust, there is at least one thing you and I can realistically do to raise the level of healthy trust in society. It may be the only thing we can do. That is to strive to be trustworthy. The same advice applies to all the other aspects of being institutionally minded that we have discussed. By carrying out the actions that follow from thinking institutionally, we enhance a culture of institutional values. Therefore, while our modern culture does shape us, we also shape our culture by the ways of thinking and being that we choose to embrace. The *habitus* that makes up our daily lives marks the point of contact where other people are touched by and may be brought to consider institutional values. Our example is much more important than any theoretical model or book on the subject.

There is no golden age of institutional values to return to, but neither need we remain stuck where we are in our modern impasse. To repeat, living in a world of nothing but institutional thinking would be a monstrosity. But to live in a world in which institutional thinking is absent, or so heavily discounted as to fade into insignificance, would be an even greater monstrosity. The evidence lying all around us is hardly ambiguous. Our current danger is not too much but too little institutional thinking. The modern mind has lost its equilibrium with regard to institutions. The Enlightenment taught us to think for ourselves, and the Romantic countermovement taught us to express ourselves. The rise of bureaucratized mass industrial society showed that we had to protect the Self, and the development of our

consumer society has assured all of these Selves that we have a right to have things our way, and quickly so. The cultural upheaval of the 1960s insisted on having it both ways: on the one hand to be dismissive of institutions as mere formalities that we could remake at will and on the other to thoroughly condemn institutions as oppressive power structures of the Establishment.

It is surely ironic that as long-term commitments, institutional and otherwise, are fading from the modern consciousness, we humans are now on the verge of living longer than our kind has ever dared hope to live. But buried in that statement is something more important than the possibility of long life. We are the creature that hopes. We are not just an animal that "wants" for the next meal or mating or escape from a predator. In our nature we pass beyond the bounds of wanting to a realm of things greater than we have experienced and yet have the capacity to yearn for. Of course, we can tell ourselves that it might be wishful thinking. But even in telling ourselves that, we are affirming some minimal faith in the possibility of a larger, hopeful truth of things. We have at least enough faith to doubt and ask questions. And the answers we yearn for are not a sweet brew of lies.

Thanks to medical technology we, our children, and grandchildren are now being promised a vast expansion in the human life span (unless we willfully eat, drink and/or smoke ourselves to an early death). The old 70 and 80 may become the new 150 or 200. Is that good or bad news? I think we will discover that long life is not what we really hoped for. Mere longevity will not take away the sadness of a self-life that offers no larger meaning and yet cannot help yearning for such meaning. Our longer time span will then appear as simply the lengthening of autumnal shadows felt by the aging medievalist:

Time of mourning and of temptation,
Age of tears, of envy and of torment,
Time of languor and of damnation,
Age that brings us to the end,

Time full of horror which does all things foolishly,
Lying age, full of pride and envy,
Time without honor and without true judgment,
Age of sadness which shortens life.⁵

Should it occur, humankind will probably survive any eventual triumph of anti-institutionalism, whatever our life span. Our species has a very clever, small-mammal quality to it—a quickness, adaptability, and subtlety of maneuver that will probably help us avoid extinction.

The larger question, of course, is whether we will survive as something more than mere survivors, that is, as something in the image of what it is to be fully human. As individuals and as a society, we need not lose our bearings on that subject. There is available to us a valid, though incomplete, vision of that fuller image. It is the reflection caught in our deep-seated human capacity to think and act institutionally. We would do well to take that capacity more seriously—to learn about it, appreciate it, teach it, and act on it.

"Does the road wind uphill all the way?" Yes, to the very end. But that is no reason to lose heart. The way up can also be the way out, toward something better.