20 What is an institution?[1]

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What is an institution? One thing is clear is that it is a category that figures throughout social theory including economics. Equally clearly, though, it is a term that is rarely elaborated in detail. In some ways this is surprising, at least in economics, particularly in regard to the heterodox traditions. This is just because one of the central alternatives to the hugely dominant mainstream approach in economics, namely the (old) institutionalist tradition, makes the institution a central category.

A close examination of modern usages of the category within this institutionalist tradition, however, reveals that there is significant variation in the way the category is interpreted, not least because even here the category is rarely elaborated. It is easy to be persuaded of the idea that one reason this tradition is not more successful, and has to a significant extent lost its way since the heady days of its inter-war popularity, is that it no longer has a coherent account of its central category.

Other heterodox economic groups, especially post-Keynesians, equally make frequent reference to institutions without indicating clearly what they mean. Like old institutionalists, post-Keynesians view their heavy reliance on this category as a feature that differentiates them from the mainstream (see Davidson, 1980). But without their elaborating how they understand the category we have no automatic reason to suppose the mainstream should not also make use of it. Indeed, in recent years one branch of mainstream economics has actually identified itself explicitly as 'new *institutional* economics'. For various reasons, then, the explicit investigation of the category institution seems overdue.

This paper aims to make a start with this. There is, though, an immediate problem in deciding how to proceed, and I think it is important that I delineate the criteria I shall draw upon in defending the conception of an institution given below.

The central problem here is the unreliable and contested nature of much social theorising, particularly in economics. If there were modern theories widely accepted as sufficiently reliable that employed the category of an institution it would make sense to tease out and elaborate the conception implied along with its presuppositions, etc. But such is not the case.

In the absence of such resources we have to fall back on others that are available. With this in mind I am proposing that the criteria developed below are appropriate to fashioning a sustainable conception of an institution.

The first suggested criterion is that our conception of an institution (or indeed of any other social entity) be coherent with our best account of social (philosophical) ontology.

By social (philosophical) ontology I mean study into the basic nature and structure of social being, the theorisation of those constitutive features of social reality (if any) that underpin all other aspects. By social reality I mean that domain of phenomena whose existence depends (non-contingently) at least in part on us.

Of course, it could be that we are just as badly off in terms of ontological theories of the noted sort as we are with social–substantive theories. Actually, though, I believe recent years have witnessed substantial advances in social ontology. Clearly if we possess a sustainable ontological theory of the relevant sort, i.e. an explanatorily powerful conception of the fundamental constituents of social reality, it would be unreasonable to advance a conception of institutions that was *in*consistent with it. To the contrary it makes sense to use any such ontological theory to direct our endeavour to elaborate a conception of any important social category, such as the institution.

My second suggested criterion is that there should be a degree of continuity or conformity with past usages of the term institution. It would be unhelpful, not to mention confusing, to seek to interpret the term otherwise, say to define it as a central category of nuclear physics or ornithology.

The specific strategy I adopt here will be to examine the way the term has been used in the project of old institutionalism. Of course I have already noted that the term is variously interpreted in that tradition, at least in modern contributions. If we could read the meaning of the term straight off from these there would be little need for the current paper. What I do contend is that the project of (old) institutionalism has had a historical mission, and that it would be surprising if a project so named did not make the category of institution central to that mission. Thus my strategy here will involve a degree of historical reconstruction.

It may be the case too that a (dialectical) synthesis is required of any historical interpretation uncovered with the insights of recent ontological theorising.

Notice that in seeking conformity with the most significant historical precedent, my strategy departs from that of others, like John Searle, who is not much interested in the etymology of the term. Although Searle's conception of social ontology and my own may not actually be that different,[2] Searle is explicit that he is not much interested in how others have used the category. Rather, he is primarily concerned to set out an account of how social reality fits together, and the category institution (or of an institutional fact) is one he has happened to seize upon to express certain features of his conception (see below) regardless of how the term is, or has been, used by others.

A third criterion that I think is essential is that the conception has utility in its context of usage. Here the relevant context is social theorising. Of course, operational usefulness will be achieved just if the category picks out a definite feature of reality, if it has a definite reference. This is also a criterion that will need to be met.

But there will be gains, too, to avoiding unnecessary repetition. Of course, all progressive projects transform understandings, and it is often necessary that meanings of categories be adapted in line with new understandings. But there seems to be little point in transforming the meaning of a category if it ends up signifying what other terms already signify. Thus in the case of institution, specifically, there seems little point arguing for conceptions that, say, use the term as an additional way to name little more than a rule, or set of rules, a social system, or a patterning of behaviour, and so on. Something more distinctive seems required.

I do not pretend that these criteria will always, or perhaps even normally, be sufficient to tie down the meaning of a social category, or even convince that a proposed interpretation is sufficiently coherent or complete. But they do seem necessary. To formally complete the picture I can add, as a yet further criterion, that the conception defended be shown to fit with, or be coherent in the face of, context- (including analysis-) dependent features of the situation. In particular, any tensions or loose ends generated by the analysis ought reasonably to be at least highlighted, and, to an extent, addressed, if not actually fully resolved (all analyses remain partial at some level). And where there remain competing conceptions, the version to accept is perhaps that which fits best with any other relevant context-dependent features of the situation, where terms like 'relevant' and 'best' must also be determined from context.

These criteria, if rarely spelt out, seem, for the reasons given, sufficiently compelling that I will not discuss them further. Rather, I will now develop a conception of institutions that is coherent with them.

A conception of social ontology

So what theory of social (philosophical) ontology can inform our conception of an institution? I have elsewhere (Lawson, 1997, 2003a) elaborated at length the theory of the fundamental categories of the social realm that I find to be the most sustainable, so here I merely elaborate its main features.

According to it, social reality is, amongst other things, *structured*, that is, it is irreducible to any one ontological realm, such as that of actualised practices.

In particular it is constituted in part by *social rules.* By a social rule I understand a generalised procedure of action or way of doing things that, under a suitable transformation at least, can (whether or not it ever is) be expressed as an injunction of the form: 'if x do y under conditions z'. For example, 'if driving, keep to the left-hand side of the road, when in twentieth-century Britain'. The stipulation 'under conditions z' will

often be dropped in any explicit formulation but will always be implicated, albeit unacknowledged. All action, for example, takes place over limited regions of time and space and in some community or other.

This formulation is quite general and intended to apply equally to semantic, moral, constitutive, regulative, etc., forms, or aspects, of rules alike. The 'do y' in other words is to be interpreted widely and to include such injunctions as 'interpret … as', 'count … as' 'take … to mean', and so on.

It is just because social rules can be out of phase with the practices they govern (workers, in the UK at least, can meaningfully threaten to work to rule, meaning that the latter is contravened by current practices; motorists break the speed limits on motorways) that we can recognise them as ontologically irreducible to those practices.

A second widespread feature of society is that it is highly *interconnected*, with aspects constituted through their relations to other aspects, resulting in totalities.

Significant here is the prevalence of *internal social relations* in addition to *external* ones. Two objects or aspects are said to be *externally related* if neither is constituted by the relationship in which it stands to the other. If there are externally related features in reality, promising examples include bread and butter, coffee and milk, barking dog and post-person, or two passing strangers. In contrast, two objects are said to be *internally related* if they are what they are by virtue of the relationship in which they stand to one another. Landlord and tenant, employer and employee, and teacher and student are examples that spring easily to mind. In each case it is not possible to have the one without the other; each, in part, is what it is, and does what it does, by virtue of the relation in which it stands to the other.

A form of social structure, forming a significant component of the interconnectivity of society, is the category of *positions* into which people slot. It is the positions in particular, via community-accepted rules delineating sets of associated specific rights and obligations, that are internally related to each other, say those of teachers to students. This position–rules–relations conception allows us to understand how different people can (and often must) follow different rules, governing practices that are often oriented to others, and how practices can persist even as the practitioners change. Thus the practices of teaching and studying are regularly reproduced in my university even though the people occupying the positions of students regularly change, as often do those that adopt the roles of teachers.

In short, if the ontological picture I am setting out includes the category of interconnectivity, this takes the form of a structured social network. Specifically it is manifest as a network of positions characterised by the rules (and thereby tasks, rights, obligations, perks and prerogatives) and so practices associated with them, where each set of positions, rules and practices is determined in relation to other positions and their associated rules and practices, and wherein these positions are immediately occupied by individuals.

With the features of social ontological conception so far laid out the more complex categories of *social systems* or *collectivities* can also be elaborated quite straightforwardly. For the conception of social systems and collectivities that is supported in this framework is precisely of an ensemble of networked, internally related, positions with their associated rules and practices.

All the familiar social systems and collectivities – the economy, the state, international and national companies, trade unions, households, schools and hospitals – can be recognised as depending upon, presupposing or consisting in internally related position-rule systems of this form.

Sub-distinctions can be drawn. While a *social system* is best conceived of as a structured process of interaction, a *social group* or *collectivity* can be understood as consisting in, or depending upon, or as a set of people distinguishable by, their current occupancy of a specific set of social positions (see Lawson, 1997).

Notice that at any one time a particular individual will occupy any number of positions. That is, the same person may be a parent, child, worker/boss, teacher/student, immigrant/native, male/female, old/young, member of religious or political or community organisations and so on. The resulting conception then is one that: (1) renders intelligible the often noted, but reputedly difficult to sustain, sense of a group or collective interest and thus the basis for a theory of collective action, and yet (2) allows the possibility of a conflict of interest at the level of the individual.

Put differently, on this relational conception any specific collectivity can be understood in terms both of its relations to other groups, especially those against which it is defined and/or is opposed, as well as of the complex of internal relationships within the collectivity itself. Amongst the many advantages of this conception is the feature that, in stark contrast to mainstream economics, it allows a meaningful focus not only upon production and exchange activities but also upon a range of distributional issues, such as the allocation of resources to groups as well as of people to positions.

A further fundamental feature of this theory of social ontology that I have yet to emphasise is that all of social life is *intrinsically dynamic*. Social life is inherently processual.

These social dynamics take the form of processes of transformation, with all social structures being reproduced or transformed through human agency. The upshot is a *transformational conception of social being*. Let me briefly elaborate.

Consider a social structure such as a system of language. Clearly we are all born into language systems. None of us create them. At the same time, being social phenomena, language systems depend on us and specifically on transformative human agency. So they do not determine what we do, and they do not create our speech acts; they merely facilitate them. Thus the categories of creation and determinism are out of place here. Rather, we must view matters in terms of the categories of transformation and reproduction.

For any given language system, its structure of rules, and so on, is given to the individual when he or she comes to speak, and it is reproduced and/or transformed through the sum total of individuals engaging in speech acts. The social structure in question is the (typically unacknowledged) condition of a set of practices, just as its reproduction and/or transformation is the (typically unintended) result of these practices.

In short, social structures exist as processes of reproduction and transformation. This is their mode of being. A market or a university or a language system does not exist in a primarily static form subject at most to moments of change (due to new technology or whatever). Rather, change is essential to their modes of being; they exist as continuous processes of transformation and/or reproduction. Even where aspects of certain social structures appear a posteriori to remain intact, this is only and always because they have been actively (if mostly unintentionally) reproduced. On this conception, no aspects are fixed and out of time; all are subject to processes of transformation. So there is no ontological prioritisation of continuity over change (or vice versa); continuity and change are ontologically equivalent. And each, when it occurs, is open to, and for understanding necessitates, (a causal) explanation (see, e.g., Lawson, 1994, 1997, 2003a).

A final fundamental category of the ontological conception I am laying out is that of *emergence*. A stratum of reality can be said to be emergent, or as possessing emergent powers, if there is a sense in which it:

1 has arisen out of a lower stratum, being formed by principles operative at the lower level; and
2 remains dependent on the lower strata for its existence; but
3 contains causal powers of its own which are both irreducible to those operating at the lower level and (perhaps) capable of acting back on the lower level.

Thus, organic material emerged from inorganic material. And, according to the conception I am defending, the social realm is emergent from human (inter-) action, though with properties irreducible to, yet capable of causally affecting, the latter.

On this conception, institutions, whatever else they are, will be an emergent social phenomenon. Indeed, I think we can conclude from ontological considerations laid out that if institutions are more than social practices, they will take the form of specific emergent, dynamic, holistic social structures. The question is: of what sort?

Notice that if all that is being suggested is that institutions signify social systems (including systems of rules) or collectivities, etc., we can easily do without the category, and perhaps we should. If, in contrast, and as seems plausible, the institution is a form of social structure, possibly a social system, *viewed under but just one (set) of its aspects*, the task is to determine which one.

Historical lineage

As already indicated, in seeking an interpretation of an institution consistent with some prominent historical usage of the term, I intend to focus on the tradition of old institutionalism. And I also repeat that my strategy is to unearth the nature of the project of old institutionalism. For, as I say, once this is discerned it ought to be easy to see how the central concept of institution fits into (and presumably serves to underpin) that paradigm; it ought to be possible to determine the traditional meaning of the term by examining the nature and purpose of the tradition that has grown up around it.

So how should we distinguish the project of old institutionalism? Because there is often thought to be a good deal of overlap between the various heterodox traditions, I need to distinguish institutionalism both from other heterodox traditions as well as from the dominant modern mainstream project. So let me first indicate how I think all the heterodox traditions part company with the mainstream, and then indicate how I believe the various heterodox groupings are to be differentiated from each other. These are matters I have sought to address elsewhere (Lawson, 2003a). My assessment, in brief, is that:

1 A distinction between the modern heterodox traditions in economics and the mainstream approach can be coherently sustained only on ontological, rather than substantive or policy, grounds.
2 The various heterodox traditions can be coherently distinguished from each other not on ontological, substantive or policy grounds, but according to their individual concerns or questions of interest.

Let me briefly elaborate. The modern mainstream tradition, as I have elsewhere demonstrated (Lawson, 1997, 2003a), must be characterised itself not in terms of substantive theories or policy stances but in terms of its method: the one enduring and distinguishing feature of the project is its insistence that all economic explanation be couched in terms of mathematical–deductivist methods.

These methods can be shown to presuppose an implicit ontology of closed systems, resting on atomism and isolationism. And in opposing the mainstream orientation, as I have elsewhere argued, heterodox economists have (implicitly at least) recognised that social reality is not closed and atomistic, but rather is open, structured, intrinsically dynamic or processual, and highly internally related, or mutually constitutive, amongst other things. In other words the heterodox traditions implicitly presuppose the ontological framework elaborated above. This has led to their alternative approaches.

However, ontological criteria do not divide the heterodox projects from each other, just because each seems implicitly to presuppose the same ontological conception (of openness, structure, process, internal-relationality,

and so forth). Rather, as I have also argued elsewhere, each heterodox position is best conceived as a division of labour within a relatively coherent overall economics project (Lawson, 2003a, chapter 7).

Notice that in advancing this contention, I am suggesting that the heterodox traditions within economics relate to each other in much the way that economics relates to other social-scientific sub-disciplines. Because all the branches of social science deal with similar material, specifically with processes of social transformation, rules, relations and positions, etc., then (as with natural sciences dealing with their own common material) it is reasonable to interpret each sub-discipline (including economics) as a division of labour within one overall social-scientific endeavour.[3] I am adding to this that the separate heterodox traditions are best conceived as divisions of labour within economics.

The reason I reject the view that any heterodox tradition be identified according to substantive theories, methodological principles, policy stances and so forth is just because there is much disagreement on such matters within any given heterodox tradition as well as development of them over time. Rather, as I have shown elsewhere (Lawson, 2003a), the feature that has continually united each heterodox tradition is a continuing interest with a particular set of questions or interests.[4] My task here, then, is to indicate the set of questions and concerns that most characterise the history of the institutionalist tradition.

In my view the concern that has traditionally and uniquely most taxed (and continues to tax) the old institutionalist tradition is how to deal with continuity and change, or reproduction and transformation, in social life. In particular, that tradition has pursued an interest in this as it relates to open systems (albeit not using this terminology) where continuity and change are ontologically on par, with each in need of explanation (albeit perhaps with some contributors seeing the explanation of continuity/stability the more challenging and others the explanation of change).

It is in the context of this concern that the institution has been focused upon. Specifically, in a world of flux and uncertainty, the institution has been regularly identified as a relied-upon source of endurability, of continuity and stability, and indeed as the most significant such source.

If this interpretation is correct then formulating it in a manner consistent with the conception of ontology outlined gives rise to a conception of institutions that I have briefly given elsewhere, namely as *particular social phenomena, mostly social systems, or structured processes of interaction, that are relatively enduring and recognised as such* (see Lawson, 1997, pp. 317–18; Lawson, 2003a, pp. 43, 332).

Actually I need to modify this conception to capture the insight that some structures are actually set up as institutions, that is are formally *instituted*, but turn out to be short lived. Such occurrences need to be acknowledged alongside the typically (though not necessarily) non-planned 'spontaneously'

emergent forms that with time are *found* to be relatively enduring. So my modified conception of an institution runs as follows:

> *Institutions are particular forms of emergent social phenomena, mostly social systems, or structured processes of interaction, that are either intended to be (whether or not they are), or are discovered a posteriori to be and are recognised as, relatively enduring.*

The contribution of Veblen

To defend my conception of old institutionalism and the category of institution that best fits with this tradition, let me briefly consider both the central contribution of Veblen, surely the figurehead of the old institutionalist tradition, and also the way Veblen's message was taken up by post-Veblenian institutionalists, specifically through their wielding of the 'Veblenian dichotomy' as a major tool of the institutionalist tradition.

Veblen's central concern is summed up in his formulating one of the most famous questions of economics: 'Why is economics not an evolutionary science?' As I have argued elsewhere (Lawson, 2002, 2003a) Veblen clearly thought economics should become an evolutionary science (even though he believed, wrongly, that it was evolving into one anyway, and not necessarily for laudable reasons, i.e. without his providing a teleological account). By an evolutionary science, Veblen understood the concern with, and study of, (non-teleological) processes of cumulative change and causation. In the context of economics specifically, Veblen opens his discussion, writing:

> There is the economic life process still in great measure awaiting formulation. The active material in which the economic process goes on is the human material of the industrial community. For the purpose of [an evolutionary] economic science the process of cumulative change that is to be accounted for is the sequence of change in the methods of doing things – the methods of dealing with the material means of life.
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> (Veblen, 1898, pp. 70–1)

And he closes it, writing:

> … an evolutionary economics must be the theory of a process of cultural growth as determined by the economic interest, a theory of a cumulative sequence of economic institutions stated in terms of the process itself … It is necessarily the aim of such an economics to trace the cumulative working out of the economic interest in the cultural sequence. It must be a theory of the economic life process of the race or the community.
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> (Veblen, 1898, pp. 77–8)

Various aspects of these passages are worth emphasising. Observe, first of all, that Veblen makes reference from the outset to the economic *life process*. By this expression I take Veblen to be concerned with the way human society and culture, and human beings in society and in culture, develop or change over time. Just as Darwin was interested in the history of all life regulated by 'descent with modification', so I think Veblen takes the goal of evolutionary social theory to be human socio-cultural history regulated through descent with modification. The second passage seems to confirm this interpretation.

Of course, Veblen is focusing on economics. So his primary concern is with one aspect of this life process, namely the economic aspect. By *economic* Veblen means methods for dealing with (or actions concerned with, or interests in) the 'material means of life'. So Veblen is concerned with socio-cultural evolution primarily as it connects to changes in the methods of dealing with the material means of life, basically technology.

The point I really want to draw out, though, is that Veblen is dealing with process, with change over time. And as the second passage reveals, an evolutionary theory must be 'a theory of a cumulative sequence of economic institutions stated in terms of the process itself'. I want to suggest that institutions are mentioned here just because they are being interpreted as a relatively enduring feature of social life, albeit a feature that is subject to evolutionary change and development. Unfortunately, before I can establish this contention, I must first deal with a prominent misreading within (old) institutionalism concerning Veblen's notion of an institution.

There is a passage in *The Limitations of Marginal Utility*, much quoted by (old) institutionalists, and widely interpreted as in effect Veblen's definition of an institution. According to this interpretation Veblen conceives institutions to be 'settled habits of thought common to the generality of men'.

But now consider a rather more extended version of the passage from which the above 'definition' is extracted. The context is Veblen's discussion of the 'premises of marginal-utility economics'. At the relevant point of the discussion, in a passage that includes the suggested definition of an institution, Veblen is arguing that

> [these premises of marginal-utility economics] … are principles of action which underlie the current, business-like scheme of economic life, and as such, as practical grounds of conduct, they are not to be called in question without questioning the existence of law and order. As a matter of course, men order their lives by these principles and, practically, entertain no question of their stability and finality. That is what is meant by calling them institutions; they are settled habits of thought common to the generality of men.
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> (Veblen, 1909, p. 239)

Veblen immediately continues, however:

> But it would be mere absentmindedness in any student of civilisation therefore to admit that these or any other human institutions have this stability which is currently imputed to them or that they are in this way intrinsic to the nature of things. The acceptance by the economists of these or other institutional elements as given and immutable limits their inquiry in a particular and decisive way. It shuts off the inquiry at a point where the modern scientific interest sets in.
>
> (Veblen, 1909, pp. 239–40)

It is clear from the wider passage that Veblen is not here offering a definition of an institution in terms of habits of thought at all. Rather, in the often-quoted passage, the subject of the sentence is not even institutions but (certain) principles of action. By calling them institutions Veblen is drawing attention to their perceived 'stability and finality', on their being 'settled' and 'common to the generality of men'. Veblen is not offering a strict definition here, but implying they share the characteristics of institutions, that in effect they are relatively enduring and widely recognised as such.

Consider, too, that part of the extract that immediately follows the familiar short excerpt. From Veblen's suggesting it would be absentmindedness to 'admit that these or any other human institutions have [the noted] stability', it is apparent that he has been referring not to institutions *per se*, but rather to particular examples of social phenomena that might be called institutions.

What is more significant here is that Veblen is noting the degree to which stability is imputed to institutions. Veblen is acknowledging that their stability is but relative (to most other social phenomena); indeed he is explicitly emphasising that no social phenomenon can be treated as given or fixed. His more specific contention though is that if institutions are relatively enduring compared to other social phenomena, it is precisely in the nature of institutions to be subject to processes of evolutionary change or adaptation over time.

The Veblenian dichotomy

Unfortunately, those institutionalists who took up this theme of theorising change and continuity did not always follow Veblen in insisting that institutions are, whilst relatively stable, also continually subject to change. Rather the analysis of continuity and change became somewhat dichotomised, even being referred to as the Veblenian dichotomy. This, however, does not matter for my immediate concern, which is to establish the traditional institutionalist focus on questions of process, of reproduction and transformation. But let me go through some of it anyway, to indicate that the dichotomy in question is indeed as I have portrayed it.

Precisely put, the Veblenian dichotomy is the idea that social life, or more specifically culture, is essentially decomposable into two components: technology and institutions. Or rather that it is the idea that culture is decomposable into technology and the ceremonial features of life, where prominent amongst the latter are institutions. And these two components are interpreted as very different. The former serves as a continuous internal impulse to change; the latter acts merely to constrain, to render everything static: without technology there would be no change.

Consider, for example, the writings of David Hamilton, in a book whose publication 50 years ago was recently marked by a special symposium in the institutionalist *Journal of Economic Issues*. Hamilton raises the 'enigma' that social life, including especially culture, reveals both continuity and change, and wonders how this is possible. His explanation is simply that technology provides the latter while institutions impose the former, that once the distinction between technology and institutions is recognised the enigma to which he refers is clear:

> Once this distinction is clearly seen, the seeming enigma of the dynamic and static aspects of culture becomes clear. Culture is made up of dynamic and static elements that appear 'in some sort of symbiosis'. Veblen and other institutional economists call the static element institutions; the dynamic element is called technology.
>
> (Hamilton, 1991, p. 84)

As is well known, institutionalists who take the view described draw significantly on the (early) writings of Clarence Ayres in particular, for whom the following summary statement is perhaps characteristic:

> The history of the human race is that of a perpetual opposition between … the dynamic force of technology continually making for change, and the static force of ceremony – status, mores, and legendary belief – opposing change.
>
> (Ayres, 1944, p. 176)

Now, whatever we may think of the 'dichotomy' as portrayed by Hamilton, Ayres and others, I think it is clear that the notion of an institution embedded in their analyses conforms to the conception of it I am defending: as expressing those features of social life that are relatively enduring and recognised as such. It is clear that Hamilton and Ayres, etc., go overboard with this notion and regard institutions not merely as relatively enduring, but as more or less fixed over a significant period of time, after which they still do not change but wither away (see Lawson, 2003b, p. 179). As Veblen recognised, in reality institutions undergo continuous processes of change, and are essential components of an impetus to change elsewhere. But this discussion should be sufficient to drive home my central claim

that, for the institutionalist tradition, the concern has long been to develop an understanding of the social process, in terms of relative continuity as well as change. And the notion of the institution has figured in this just because it has been thought to provide a major element of continuity or durability that arises in social life.

The usefulness of the category

If within the context of economics as social theorising the conception of an institution I defend has been found to be coherent with our best account of social ontology and receives historical support, does it remain useful as a modern analytical category? I think the answer is yes. This is so just because:

1 there indeed exist *relatively enduring* emergent structures of social interaction (satisfying the condition of realism);
2 there is no other term that captures the *relatively enduring* (and recognised as enduring) structures of society;
3 these sorts of structure are sufficiently analytically important to warrant identifying in social theory.

In reference to (1), we need only think of language systems, money, property, organisations including Cambridge University, or even the (British) tea break.

In reference to (2), we might notice that whilst the interpretation advanced here identifies a feature of social reality expressed by no other category (in English), other interpretations are not so indispensable. Indeed, and as I have already stressed, if the category of institution is reinterpreted as yet another term for (sets of) social rules (customs, norms, conventions), or patterns of behaviour, or a social system or collectivity, it is difficult to see the point.

In reference to (3), it warrants emphasis that the issue I really need to address is whether relatively enduring emergent social structures, including social systems, are analytically important *in lieu of the characteristic of their being relatively enduring and being recognised as being so*.

The generalised structuring of society is a feature that is everywhere enabling (as well as, or better through being, constraining). This is so not least through the production and reproduction of forms of deontic powers attached to particular positions and taking the forms of rights, obligations, duties, perks, authorisations, legitimisations and so on.[5] Society, in short, can be recognised as a system of (enabling and constraining) power relations.

But although deontic powers and other enabling features of social structures may be found to be components of, or even on occasion to constitute, institutions, certain instances may not be institutional at all; a one-off seminar, for example, can be so structured that specific deontic powers can be momentarily brought into being, and then abolished. So

the analytical value of the category of an institution cannot reside in the constitution of such powers *per se* or indeed in any enabling features that are common to all social structures.

This, then, is where my conception differs from that of John Searle, who does suggest that the creation of deontic powers is defining of institutions. In fact, as I have already noted, Searle is not really interested in the meaning of the category *per se*, but with social ontology more broadly conceived, and in particular with identifying 'the glue that holds society together' (2004, p. 11). An institution is just the term he adopts to label important features of human society.[6]

My own orientation here is somewhat different. Not only am I interested in understanding society's glue, but I also seek to delineate one of society's basic, if integrated or stuck-in, components. Here it matters that I do not just assimilate more or less everything socially significant under the head of institution, but distinguish the latter category according to historical understanding and particular analytical insight.

Thus, to recall, on the basis of historical analysis and other considerations, the particular conception of institutions I have elaborated is as particular forms of emergent social phenomena, mostly social systems, or structured processes of interaction, that are either intended to be (whether or not they are), or are discovered a posteriori to be and are recognised as, relatively enduring. Clearly I now need to consider what it is that renders these specific social forms analytically important, that is as important under their aspect of being relatively enduring.

My contention is that the reason the institution, so conceived, is analytically important is just because in an uncertain and often perilous, largely open, social (and natural) reality it alone facilitates opportunities for planning that would otherwise not be possible.[7] Let me examine this claim in detail.

As I have argued elsewhere (Lawson, 2003a), human beings are forward looking; we are not just passive reactors, but fundamentally initiators of action. However, this realisation has also to be balanced with the recognition that (*pace* many formulations of mainstream economists, for example) human beings have somewhat limited cognitive and computational capacities.

In addition, social reality is found to be fundamentally open. Social event regularities of the causal sequence sort (such as pursued by modern economic modellers) are neither universal nor ubiquitous. Indeed they are rather rare in the social realm, and those that are found are very often not only severely restricted but highly partial.

There are thus limits to anticipating future outcomes. Yet despite this I think it can be accepted that human beings not only make plans but also, and in many ways, are often rather successful in their forward-looking undertakings. This can be so even with regard to objectives that individuals set themselves knowing that their realisation may take a matter of days, months or even years.

The reason this is possible is that some (knowable) features of social life – namely institutions – do possess a significant degree of endurability.

It seems to follow then, given that successful forward-oriented behaviour is in evidence, that individuals must form their longer-term goals mostly in terms of those mostly highly abstract features of society that are found to be the more enduring, i.e. in terms of institutions. However, these aspects, being mostly highly abstract, rarely facilitate knowledge of concrete details. So it seems that to make sense of the behaviour in question it must be the case that individuals: (i) form broad, somewhat abstract, *plans* (Lachmann, 1971, 1991), *projects* or *schemes* on the basis of a knowledge of such structures, (ii) with the intention of filling in details, or adapting these plans to specific conditions and contexts, as the individuals move through life. People likely form long-term plans in terms of broad goals or purposes which (from the individual's [always situated] perspective) are currently viewed as possible and desirable, leaving the details open to determination at a later date.

At a very high level of abstraction, individuals may, for example, decide to seek positions of power whatever the form of society in which they find themselves may take. Or, somewhat less abstractly, they may suppose (with reason) that the society in which they are situated will continue and seek goals compatible with its most fundamental or otherwise enduring aspects.

Thus, an individual situated in early twenty-first-century western society may form plans to pursue a certain type of career, to become a political or religious activist, to get married and/or have a family, to travel, to go to university, to teach, to care for others, to help preserve the environment, and so forth.

It seems entirely possible that our only feasible option, if we are to succeed in future-oriented behaviour in an open world, is to formulate abstract plans such as these. The task is then, as I say, to fill in the concrete details as we go along, depending on the nature of the contexts of action; to adapt plans formed to other plans (of one's own and/or of others) or to changed understandings or situations, etc.

In any case, it is surely clear that institutions so understood are a very fundamental feature of human societies.[8]

Remaining issues of relevance

Finally, there is the question as to whether there remain any tensions or loose ends, etc., thrown up by the analysis, that warrant addressing. I think there is at least one. I suggested earlier that social reality is inherently open and processual. I have also defended a conception of an institution that turns on its (actual or intended) relatively enduring nature. It is the latter feature (endurability) in the former conditions (openness and change), indeed, that, I have suggested, renders the institution such an important analytical category.

But it can fairly be asked how it is that, in an open and dynamic social world, such endurability as we find in institutions is possible. Alternatively put, if we do have before us an acceptable and sustainable conception of an institution (as an actually acknowledged, or intended to be, *relatively enduring* emergent social structure), a task that remains is to elucidate something of an institution's causal conditions. In virtue of what are institutions possible?

Like all social structures, institutions are reproduced (or not) through human practice. More specifically, the mode of being of the institution (again as with any social structure) will be in conformity with the transformational model of social activity described earlier. According to this formulation, structure is given to human beings who draw on it in their practices. And it is through being drawn on in human practices that all social structure in turn is reproduced and/or transformed. This is the transformational conception. Specific social structures, including institutions, are the conditions, as well as reproduced outcomes, of human practices.

The endurability of institutions, then, will be related to the sorts of practices through which they are reproduced. And the practices that presumably contribute most to the reproduction of social structures are those of a routinised sort, including any that have become habitual. This seems to be what Veblen was getting at:

> The growth and mutations of the institutional fabric are an outcome of the conduct of the individual members of the group, since it is out of the experience of the individuals, through the habituation of individuals, that institutions arise; and it is in this same experience that these institutions act to direct and define the aims and end of conduct. It is, of course, on individuals that the system of institutions imposes those conventional standards, ideals, and canons of conduct that make up the community's scheme of life.
>
> (Veblen, 1909, p. 243)

The task before us, then, is to determine how routinised forms of behaviour arise. And an obvious first issue to take up, given this discussion, is to determine whether the explanation must be completely circular. Specifically, do we have a (possibly, but not necessarily, fragile) 'equilibrium' type situation, a spontaneous, quite arbitrary, form of order, in which, perhaps as a result of (Darwinian) evolutionary forces, institutions are there solely because of the routines through which they are reproduced, *and* routines are there solely because this is the sort of practice that institutional structures encourage; or is there more to the story? I suspect the latter is the case.

First of all, of course, many institutions are in fact instituted; they are designed to be enduring structures. This is especially true of that subcategory of institutions that have 'constitutions' laying down rules governing

issues of responsibility, sovereignty, boundaries and indeed continuity. These types of institutions (whether planned or not) can be delineated under the head of *organisations* (though taking care always to distinguish the organisation *qua* totality from the latter's organising structure).

Other institutions, though not planned as such, will confer sufficient advantages to some that their continued reproduction will be accepted as a specific goal of the advantaged group, and sometimes by many others as well.

Of course, all social structures are facilitative of (some) increased human capability; they confer power in allowing practices to be possible that would likely not have been in their absence. But organisations, whether planned or spontaneous, typically have hierarchically structured positions of power built into them, providing incentives to their occupiers to generate rules and routines that increase the likelihood that these organisations will indeed endure.

Nor are such incentives to reproduce hierarchical structures confined to those holding formal positions in organisations. Wherever authority or power over others or over significant resources exists, whether this is the authority of patronage, magic, religion, spiritual leadership, myth or whatever, there is an incentive for some practitioners to see the supporting practices and structural framework reproduced.

Of course, these are hardly novel insights. In particular, the picture conveyed was always the emphasis of the old institutionalist tradition. If we ignore his contention (already criticised above) that institutions are static (as opposed to being merely relatively enduring), we find that Hamilton expresses this understanding very well:

> What makes institutions static is the fact that the ultimate test of authenticity for any institutional pattern rests on authority – the authority of magic, religion, habit, and custom reinforced by a mythical efficacy. The institutional pattern is tied closely to the system of status of the community to which is attributed great significance. All groups have been graded into positions of higher and lower status in accordance with an imputed efficacy to perform feats of prowess, whether religious, military, pecuniary, or scientific.
>
> (Hamilton, 1991, p. 84)

> Thus, it comes about that there are various roles in society which give to those fulfilling them a particular status within the institutional framework. These status positions are defined by mores which prescribe what is construed to be appropriate behaviour within any given role. Such mores define status-relationships within the institutional fabric. The whole process is justified by myth and has the authentication of the ancestors. As such it is not subject to empirical verification and is believed to be true beyond the necessity of further inquiry. In fact inquiry would be impertinent. This supposition gives

> to the ceremonial behaviour pattern its peculiar rigidity. Hence it is the rigid aspect of culture.
>
> (Hamilton, 1991, p. 85)

Routinised practice

So far I have emphasised the incentives for particular structures to be instituted and for existing institutions to be further reproduced. These will in turn encourage the take-up of routinised forms of behaviour, often via the instigation of formal rules. But I think that relatively autonomous forces work the other way too; that we have direct incentives, and indeed exhibit tendencies, to engage in routinised, including habitual, practices *per se*, i.e. for reasons apart from any desire to contribute to the continued reproduction of structures as institutions that this may facilitate.

In particular, the more that we do habitually the more that can be carried out tacitly, that is without conscious reflection, so that, in short, the more we can each achieve. This applies to ways of talking, working, making music and so on. So it is not surprising that we frequently enter into routinised forms of conduct, allowing forms of behaviour to become habitual.

Equally clearly, we could not act in such ways, i.e. follow habits, without possessing the capacity so to do. In other words, a condition of possibility of any habit is a *disposition* to act in the said manner, where a disposition just is a capacity so structured, that it is perpetually oriented or directed to generating some form of behaviour (habit) in the appropriate conditions.

Now it seems to be the case that we regularly act in many habitual ways simultaneously. It thus seems to follow that an individual, in part, comprises a complex structure of (durable if also transformable) dispositions. This structure is one which, following Bourdieu (e.g., 1990, chapter 3), we might refer to as the *habitus*. It is a structure that enables us to negotiate a number of obstacles in a manner that would be impossible if we had to reflect upon them all. Thus the habitus seems to be an essential ingredient in an understanding of routinised behaviour.

But the point of these few remarks is just that human beings seem to have the (highly useful) capacity to act on many levels simultaneously if they allow the performance of such activities to become tacit, particularly habitual, and this is most easily facilitated if practices become repeated or routine. This will tend to mean that where structures are chosen (for whatever reason) as the grounds of forms of practice they will tend to be reproduced to the extent that the practices they ground become routinised. In short, the ability to engage in routine actions, and the advantages of so doing, will tend to facilitate institutions, as the structures drawn upon are in their turn reproduced.

Unconscious motivations

However, there seems to be more still to the following of routines and the forming of habits. For individuals are observed to engage in such practices even when there is no straightforwardly apparent benefit. And it is often observed that when most individuals find themselves, even temporarily, constrained from engaging in routine patterns, stress and tension sets in (Lawson, 1997).

Human beings, in short, appear to engage in routinised forms of behaviour whether or not there is any *direct* motivation rooted in the pragmatic, historically specific, goals of daily life, and seem to need to do so.

To account for this situation it is necessary to acknowledge a role for something like unconscious motives that indirectly dispose human agents to engage in institutionalised or routinised forms of conduct.

The most obvious explanation of the noted phenomenon is a human need for, or one that is (or appears to be) satisfied by, a significant degree of continuity, stability and sameness in daily affairs, the avoidance of radical disruption. At the level of the unconscious is a basic need for inner security grounding a generalised disposition towards the maintenance of trust in the world and the avoidance of anxiety, a disposition that is in practice fulfilled (or anyway met) through, if amongst other things, the doing of familiar things routinely.

It can be argued (Lawson, 1997) that the psychological origins of ontological security (to adopt, but modify the meaning of, Laing's expression[9]) are to be found in basic anxiety-controlling mechanisms, hierarchically ordered as components of personality. The generation of feelings of trust in others, as the deepest element of the basic security system, depends substantially upon predictable and caring routines established by parental figures. The infant is very early on both a giver as well as a receiver of trust. As he or she becomes more autonomous, however, the child learns the importance of protective devices, which sustain the mutuality implied via tact and other formulae that preserve the face of others. Ontological security is protected by such devices but maintained in a more fundamental way by the very predictability of routine, something that is disrupted in circumstances of radical disjuncture (Lawson, 1997).

According to this interpretation, because an orientation to the avoidance of anxiety occurs early on between the infant, through her or his interaction with the closest guardian, typically the mother, and because it occurs before any significant acquisition of language, the mechanisms developed to counteract the development of anxiety are, in part at least, unconscious ones.

As the infant grows into an adult, the controlling of anxiety remains a basic need or disposition, one that is largely unconscious. But whereas in infancy the experience of trust, stability, sameness and continuity is achieved through the parental maintenance of predictable caring routines, in adult life it is obtained in the routine modes of conduct that

facilitate going on generally. The performance of routines, in other words, is not only essential to the reproduction of social structure but is equally fundamental to the production and reproduction of each individual personality.[10] Here though I focus on the endurability of social structures and in particular of those that are repeatedly reproduced, namely institutions.

Notice that in this brief outline I have allowed (in parentheses) for the *possibility* that the need for inner security, for control of anxiety, only 'appears to be' satisfied by a significant degree of continuity, stability and sameness in daily affairs, by the avoidance of radical disruption. That is, I have not excluded the possibility that (over)reliance on routines in an open world is ultimately as much a cause as a consequence of anxiety.

We need look only to modern economics to recognise that many do choose to treat the open world as closed in conditions where it is quite inappropriate to do so. Yet most of us can easily refuse to rely on practices that (mis)treat open systems as closed. Indeed, acknowledging the openness of our world can be not only conducive to gaining awareness but also liberating and somewhat invigorating. For those modern economists for whom this is not so, it seems that a previous immersion in closed systems thinking has been so prolonged that the thought of letting go is met mostly by overwhelming anxiety.

In a similar fashion, it is quite conceivable that in the social world more widely the (relatively) ontologically secure person will often participate in the following of routines without becoming anxious when routines are disrupted. It is equally conceivable that those who most experience the disruption of routines as a direct threat to the self tend to be those that have previously immersed themselves most (and overly so) in routinised forms of conduct.

Fundamental here are questions concerning the nature of human development. It is widely accepted in modern psychology that the infant starts out in life with a form of non-dualistic being and awareness, and that this comes to be replaced by a more dualistic mode of being and awareness following subject–object differentiation. More specifically it is accepted that:

1 non-dualistic awareness is in a sense primary, and dualistic awareness is an alienated expression of non-dualistic awareness, serving to displace and partly to conceal it; and
2 the 'normal' progression from non-dualistic to dualistic awareness is not irreversible; and
3 threats to dualistic awareness are continually posed by the fact of the openness of human existence.

If these propositions hold, then it can be argued (against Freud and other dualistic thinkers) that the reliance upon routine and other features that serve to maintain a sense of solidity and security of (unified) self apart from others is ultimately illusory and 'dehumanising'.

From this latter perspective, adopted notably by Willmott (1986), 'the primacy of non-dualistic awareness is always present in the gaps between the screen of solidifying thought and feelings' (Willmott, 1986, p. 116). However, the situation tends to be misdiagnosed as one in which the problem is not the pursuit of solidity but of challenges to it, so that 'paradoxically, it is this ever-present challenge to solidity and security that stimulates, and seems to justify, efforts to gain reassurance about the security of being – for example, through immersion in routine' (Willmott, 1986, p. 116).

It follows, according to this perspective, that immersion in routine is ultimately a condition of anxiety rather than of its control, so that 'seeking to contain anxiety through immersion in routine can offer only a fitful and ultimately illusory resolution of the existential contradictions of human life' (Willmott, 1986, p. 115).

This is not the place to develop or assess contending positions. I only note that there are competing conceptions of why unconscious motivations dispose us to engage in institutionalised or routinised forms of conduct. All I need note here is that they do. And to the extent that these routines become shared and overlap, they can lead to the instigation, and certainly serve the reproduction, of social structures as institutions.

Of course, if theorists like Willmott are correct it is interesting to question the sorts of institutionalised structures that are most conducive to human flourishing on this particular conception. Clearly, institutions, i.e. recognisably enduring structured processes of interaction, allow possibilities for human action that would otherwise not occur. But to the extent they serve to regiment and atomise rather than to facilitate and connect with others, then presumably there is a case for transforming them into something more in line with our needs. Still, these, too, are issues that are largely tangential to the topic of the current paper.

The point, here, is that there are various reasons why certain practices, once enacted, will be followed routinely. And where specific structures, or sets of structures, are drawn upon in the undertaking of these practices, they can, with the production of routinisation, clearly become institutionalised, i.e. are transformed into institutions.

Conclusion

I have suggested an interpretation of an institution consistent with both our best account of social ontology and the mission of the old institutionalist tradition, and which has clear analytic usefulness. Modern economics is unfortunately replete with ill-defined terms, even including those such as markets, money, choice, institutions, wealth and firms that many regard as central categories of the economics discipline. It has been the aim of this paper to contribute to a sustainable interpretation of at least one of these categories, one that is intended to be of particular value to those interested in modern heterodox thinking.

Notes

1 A talk based on this paper was originally presented at the 6th international workshop on institutional economics held at the University of Hertfordshire from 30 June to 2 July, 2004. I am grateful to the participants for helpful comments. I am also grateful to Stephen Pratten for reminding me of the paper's existence and providing an outlet for it in the current volume.

2 Though we do have different terms for our fundamental categories, with Searle's consisting in collective intentionality, assignment of function, status function, and the background. See, e.g., Searle (1995, 1999, 2004).

3 And I have argued in particular that economics is best conceived as the identification and study of the factors, and in particular social relations, governing those aspects of human action most closely connected to the production, distribution and use of the material conditions of well-being, along with the assessment of alternative really possible scenarios (see Lawson, 2003a, chapter 6).

4 Thus, for example, Post Keynesians can be identified according to their concern with the fact of fundamental uncertainty stemming from the openness of social reality. Such a focus could take in the implications of uncertainty or openness for the development of certain sorts of institutions including money, for processes of decision-making, and so forth. At the level of policy the concern may well include the analysis of contingencies that recognise the fact of pervasive uncertainty, given the openness of the social reality in the present and to the future, etc. For those influenced by Keynes especially, a likely focus is how these matters give rise to collective or macro outcomes, and how the latter in turn impact back on individual acts and pressures for structural transformation, etc.

   By similar reasoning Austrians may perhaps be best identified according to their emphasis on studying the market process and entrepreneurship in particular, or perhaps in line with the attention given by this project to the role of intersubjective meaning in social life, and so on.

   Feminist economists already tend to identify their own project, namely as one that (in addition to proceeding very differently to the mainstream) concerns itself with women as subjects (which may include, for example, giving attention to differences amongst women, as well as between genders), and takes a particular orientation or focus, namely on the position of women (and other marginalised groups) within society and economy. The latter focus includes an attention to the social causes at work in the oppression of, or in discrimination against, women (and others), the opportunities for progressive transformation or emancipation, questions of power and strategy, and so forth. This orientation has inevitably meant a significant attention, within feminist economics, to issues which historically have been gender-related, such as caring, especially for children, and indeed the nature of family structures in specific locations. But in principle there is no area of social life that is excluded. It is the sorts of questions pursued that seems most to distinguish an approach *within* the heterodox traditions as feminist, not specific substantive claims or methodological principles.

5 Notice that the power relations involved provide system-specific reasons for acting, reasons that would not exist in the absence of the system. Thus we seek certification (perhaps through higher education) in order to gain access to employment just because the systems of certification exist and are widely recognised.

6 Indeed, when suggesting that it is the creation of these power relations that 'distinguishes human from other animal societies' (2004, p. 12), Searle recently acknowledges that by his definition even a relationship between two friends qualifies as an institution to the extent it carries obligations, rights and responsibilities (whereas the practices of religion, education and science are considered

not to just because they are considered not to involve the creation of deontic powers – 2004, p. 24). In fact, Searle eventually admits:

> I do not much care whether or not we want to use the word 'institution' for both those practices whose names specify a deontology and those that do not, but it is crucial to emphasise the important underlying idea: we need to mark those facts that carry a deontology because they are the glue that holds society.
>
> (Searle, 2004, p. 23)

7 The uncertainty and precariousness of social life was recognised by early institutionalists, of course, albeit perhaps best expressed by John Dewey. John Dewey was never an institutionalist. But he was an influence and fellow traveller. Certainly, many seem to share Ayres' assessment that 'an institutionalist has quite as much to learn from John Dewey … as from Veblen and his interpreters' (Ayres, 1951, p. 47).

Dewey's emphasis is on the precariousness, uncertainty and instability of all, especially social, existence. He describes his starting point as the recognition that

> the things of ordinary experience contain within themselves a mixture of the perilous and uncertain with the settled and uniform. The need for security compels men to fasten upon the regular in order to minimise and to control the precarious and fluctuating.
>
> (Dewey, 1925, p. xi)

He eventually writes:

> A feature of experience which is emphasised by cultural phenomena is the precarious and the perilous … Man finds himself living in a perilous world; his existence involves, to put it baldly, a gamble. The world is a scene of risk; it is uncertain unstable, uncannily unstable. Its dangers are irregular, inconstant, not to be counted upon as to their times and seasons. Although persistent, they are sporadic, episodic. It is darkest just before dawn; pride goes before a fall; the movement of the greatest prosperity is the moment most charged with ill-omen, most opportune for the evil eye.
>
> (Dewey, 1925, p. 41)

Adding:

> If unknown forces that decide future destiny can be placated, the man who will not study the methods of securing their favour is incredibly flippant. In enjoyment of present food and companionship, nature, tradition and social organisation have co-operated, thereby supplementing their own endeavours so petty and so feeble without this extraneous reinforcement. Goods are by grace not of ourselves. He is a dangerous churl who will not gratefully acknowledge by means of free-will offerings the help that sustains him.
>
> These things are as true today as they were in the days of early culture. It is not the facts which have changed, but the methods of insurance, regulation and acknowledgement.
>
> (Dewey, 1925, p. 43)

Dewey is critical of philosophy for treating the stable as more real and focusing more on the former. But he is not critical of the human disposition to seek or hope for stability, only of the presumption of its ubiquity. For Dewey,

> the significant problems and issues of life and philosophy concern the rate and mode of the conjunction of the precarious and the assured, the incomplete and the finished, the repetitious and the varying, the safe and sane and the hazardous … Structure and process, substance and accident, matter and energy, permanence and flux, one and the many, continuity and discreteness, order and progress, law and liberty, uniformity and growth, tradition

> and innovation, rational will and impelling desires, proof and discovery, the actual and the possible, are names given to various phases of this conjunction, and the issue of living depends on the art with which these things are adjusted to each other.
>
> (Dewey, 1925, pp. 75–6)

It is these oppositional couples connected with endurability/reproduction and change/transformation that, I am suggesting, provide the abiding concerns of institutionalists.

8 This is surely Common's understanding when he suggests that an 'institution is defined as collective action in control, liberation and expansion of individual action' (Commons, 1931, p. 648).

9 Laing advanced the notion of ontological security originally as a contrast to a very insecure state in which the person is preoccupied with 'contriving ways of trying to be real … of preserving his identity, in efforts, as he will often put it, to prevent himself from losing himself' (Laing, 1965, p. 39).

10 Supportive evidence for such a conception of a system of inner security, one grounding various needs and motivations originating at the level of the unconscious, is provided through examining human responses to situations in which continuity, sameness and trust are undermined, through observing human responses to situations wherein habitual modes of activity are swamped by anxiety which cannot be adequately contained by the basic security system. For example, Bettleheim (see Lawson, 1997) provides a first-hand account of the profound effects of enforced de-routinisation on the experiences of inmates in a Nazi concentration camp. As individuals lose any certitude from the reproduction of rules and predictable routines, they lose any sense of autonomy in action. At the limit they lose their most basic sense of control over their own physical doings.

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