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Institutional Operability: Outward Rule-Following, Inward Role-Playing

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Abstract: Institutional operability refers to the normative conditions governing the exercise of power of office that makes an institution work. Because institutional action occurs by the interrelated actions of the officeholders, a focus on institutional operability requires the analysis and assessment of the officeholders' conduct in their institutional capacity. This article distinguishes two perspectives on operability: 'outward' and 'inward.' The outward view emphasizes predefined instructions for efficient execution, focusing on rule-following to achieve institutional purposes. The inward perspective highlights role-playing and reflective engagement among officeholders to uphold an institution's *raison d'être*. The inward perspective brings to the fore the relational aspect of institutional life and officeholders' interrelated responsibility for guiding institutional action.

Keywords: institutions, institutional action, ethics of office, rule-following approach, role-playing approach

1 Introduction

Institutional operability refers to the normative conditions governing the exercise of power of office that makes an institution work. Institutions are not only made of mechanisms and procedures for the exercise of power of office. Institutions are significantly made of people, the officeholders, who exercise their power of office thereby giving body to institutional action (e.g., Applbaum 1999; Ceva and Ferretti 2021a; Emmett 1966; Ludwig 2017). In this sense, the examination of institutional operability requires the analysis and assessment of the officeholders' conduct in their institutional capacity. So, the analysis and assessment of the operability of a hospital cannot be based entirely on analyzing and assessing its statutory regulations and internal protocols, whether for example they comply with legal

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provisions of safety and transparency. It is crucial to look also at how and why doctors, nurses, management, support, and administrative staff concretely use the power that comes with their role within the hospital, whether it upholds or hinders institutional action.

The examination of institutional operability introduces a distinctive perspective in institutional theory, focused on institutional *action* and not just on institutional *structures*. It thus places the officeholders' conduct and the principles that regulate it at the center of the discussion. The aim of this article is to show how such a focus matters for the philosophy (not only the ethnography or the psychology) of institutions, from an analytical and normative point of view.

Our philosophical examination of institutional operability builds on an analytical distinction between an 'outward' and an 'inward' perspective. The outward perspective conceives institutional operability as rule-following (Sections 2.1 and 2.2). It sees the principles regulating the officeholders' conduct as preset instructions for achieving a predefined institutional purpose which is also defining of institutional action. In this view, the purpose of an institution is conceived as the *telos* the pursuit of which gives meaning and direction to institutional action. So, an institution is operational when the officeholders effectively and efficiently execute those instructions.

The inward perspective conceives institutional operability as role-playing (Section 3.1). It sees the principles regulating the officeholders' conduct as a canvass for enacting the institution's *raison d'être*. In this view, the *raison d'être* of an institution is the open-textured set of normative ideals and values that motivate the establishment of an institution and regulates its functioning. From this perspective, an institution is operational when the officeholders reflectively engage with—interrogate and respond to—each other as they carry out the open project of giving meaning and direction to institutional action.

The inward perspective is important because it brings under the spotlight the relationality of institutional life by giving prominence to the point of view of the officeholders responsible for making the institution work (Section 3.2). Unless this perspective is made central to the analysis and assessment of institutional action, there is a concrete risk of overlooking the interactive aspects of institutional functioning in favor of a kind of institutional determinism. The risk is that, by reducing the complexity of human interactions to quantifiable variables, the examination of institutional operability overlooks the essentially relational nature of institutional responsibilities. One of our main claims in the article is that focus on the inward perspective on institutional operability allows for appreciating the officeholders' interrelated retrospective and prospective responsibility for giving direction to institutional action and responding to its dysfunctions.

The capacity to distinguish between the outward and inward perspectives on institutional operability is important to resist reducing institutions to faceless rule-following entities (Section 4). To be sure, institutional rules and their effective and efficient execution is a part of what it means to make an institution operational. But the mutable circumstances of institutional action also require an important degree of reflectivity in the exercise of institutional functions. In this sense, by calling on the officeholders' direct engagement in the articulation and revision of institutional action, the operability of institutions is also and importantly a matter of ethics of office. By exploring this last claim and its implications, the article responds to the increasing philosophical demand for a more comprehensive understanding of the working of institutions, one that encompasses not only the efficiency and effectiveness of institutional action but also its ethical underpinnings.¹

A lexical note before we start our exploration. When we discuss institutions, we draw on examples of 'public institutions,' referring to various kinds of organizations wielding public power. These include, among others, political assemblies, governmental and nongovernmental organizations, public administrations, social service providers, as well as schools and hospitals. Nothing we say in this article either excludes or supports the idea that the same kind of examination matters also for the discussion of the operability of semi-public and private organizations. This extension is for a later project.

2 The Outward Perspective: A Rule-Following Approach

2.1 The Outward Perspective Presented

The first perspective on institutional operability we identify conceives the analysis and assessment of officeholders' conduct in their institutional capacity as a matter of rule-following. In this view, for an institution to be operational, officeholders must comply with pre-established instructions for achieving a predefined institutional purpose, which also defines—by giving direction to—institutional action. The terms and conditions of the interaction between officeholders are instrumentally designed to achieve such purpose, which works as a *telos* that defines institutional action by modelling it in accordance with a preset standard of

¹ Such a demand is central in the emerging field of the 'philosophy of governance' (e.g., Kirby 2021a). The field includes discussions of the normative standards for institutional action in terms of integrity (e.g., Kirby 2021b) and accountability (e.g., Ceva and Ferretti 2021a) at various levels of governance (e.g., Herzog 2018; Zacka 2017).

performance.² In this sense, the aspiration is to make the analysis and assessment of institutional action, respectively, as objectively clear and measurable as possible. We have dubbed this perspective ‘outward’ because the standards of operability preexist, define, and orient institutional action; they are external to it and work as constraints on its implementation. In essence, the outward perspective views an institution as operational when officeholders effectively and efficiently execute preset instructions, aligning their actions with the institution’s predefined and defining purpose.

To exemplify the outward perspective on institutional operability, consider the New Public Management (NPM) approach to public administration and organizational theory (e.g., Blanco-Oliver, Veronesi, and Kirkpatrick 2018; Hood 1991: 3–19; Lane 2000; McLaughlin, Osborne, and Ferlie 2002; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011). The NPM is a reform movement that gained prominence in the late twentieth century; it highlights the application of market-oriented principles to public institutions, which are expected to operate with a primary focus on efficiency and effectiveness. The NPM derives the standards of institutional operability from managerial and administrative techniques borrowed from the private sector, such as performance measurement, results-oriented management, and cost-cutting measures. Such standards work as externally derived, preset instructions for achieving predefined goals, such as the efficient delivery of public services. The officeholders, for example, public administrators, are tasked with executing these predefined instructions to streamline public service delivery. Such a delivery is efficient when it optimizes resource allocation and minimizes unnecessary costs in terms of both time and money. It is effective when it successfully achieves its purpose.

The NPM approach imports into the theory of public institutional action ideas widely shared in the domain of private sector organizations. For example, such ideas are central to the Total Quality Management (TQM) approach. The TQM places a strong emphasis on rule-following, where employees are expected to adhere to specific quality standards and processes to ensure the efficient production of goods or services (e.g., Oakland 2003).

We suggest that the philosophical underpinnings of such approaches taken from organizational theory can be usefully modelled through the lenses of the outward perspective on institutional operability. In both the NPM and TQM approaches, the normative conditions governing the exercise of power of office

2 For the purposes of our analytical distinction, we only discuss this steadfast version of purposes-driven institutional action. For a discussion of other nuances of this view, see Miller 2019. For an alternative to (moralized) teleological views of institutional action, see such (non-moralized) etiological theories as, e.g., Hindriks and Guala 2021. For these theories, the analysis and assessment of institutional action depends on institutions’ serving their function, say, of promoting the social coordination of individual actions.

that makes an institution work are conceived instrumentally with respect to the effective and efficient achievement, through a series of rules, of a predefined purpose which defines institutional action (by shaping it). To wit, the perspective is outward because the normative conditions governing the exercise of officeholders' power of office lie outside of their interactions, as they are defined by institutional purposes and the rules leading to them instrumentally, as if they were following a recipe. Officeholders are seen as executors of institutional action, as they follow instructions and comply with rules for their implementation.³

To push the 'recipe' metaphor further, the outward perspective on institutional operability seems to model institutional action on the actions of a brigade in a laboratory of French patisserie. When preparing delicacies like lemon meringue pies, the interaction between the members of the brigade is governed by codified instructions that lead their actions through the preparation. Just as in institutional contexts following NPM or TQM approaches, each member of the pastry brigade is viewed as the executor of predefined set of rules to follow. The head chef, in this analogy, corresponds to the institution's leadership, in charge of detailing the overarching purpose of institutional action. The recipe represents the predefined rules that dictate how each step of the preparation should be executed, mirroring the precise protocols of NPM or TQM.

In both cases, whether in the patisserie or in institutional action, operability depends on the faithful execution of these prescribed steps to achieve the set purpose. The focus remains steadfast on efficiency, effectiveness, and compliance with established rules. To appreciate such a focus, the outward perspective offers a compelling lens through which to understand the dynamics of institutional action guided by rule-following principles.

To see the outward perspective at work, imagine a situation where the management of a hospital is faced with a significant challenge: how to analyze and assess the action of the surgical clinic amidst growing patient complaints and concerns. This challenge is prompted by the clinic's negative track record and the need to gain a comprehensive understanding of its operational dynamics. If the hospital management adopted an outward perspective on institutional operability, they would search for the yardstick to run this diagnostic in the surgical team compliance with hospital's regulations for patient care and surgical services. Such regulations can

³ To be true, the perspective is outward also in the derivative sense that it could be adopted by an external observer, for instance, by an external monitoring authority, cognizant of relevant rules and instructions. This is, e.g., the approach to health care assessment the OECD purports (OECD). For another example of such external measurements, see Behn 2014. Curiously, the modelling of public institutional action by external purpose-driven standards may be taken as far as to specify such details as the exact procedure and proportions that the US military accepts for properly called chocolate covered oatmeal cookies and brownies, see US Department of Defense (2003).

be seen as akin to a precise recipe for maintaining high standards of healthcare. From this perspective, the predefined and defining purpose of the hospital surgical clinic's action is steadfast: to provide safe, efficient, and effective medical services to patients. This purpose serves as the guiding principle that shapes institutional action and against which its operability can be measured.

Evaluating institutional operability in this context involves a thorough examination of whether the clinic successfully meets the predefined benchmarks for patient care, for instance by reference to safety protocols. These latter can be seen as akin to a recipe for ensuring safe medical procedures. The effectiveness and efficiency of healthcare delivery become essential factors in determining the clinic's operability. From this vantage point, assessing compliance with the established health and safety procedures reveals the rationale underpinning the actions taken by the healthcare professionals. It offers insights about what contributes to their success or potential shortcomings in providing quality patient care.

Among its practical implications, the analysis and assessment of this scenario from the outward perspective on institutional operability offers the normative standard for the attribution of officeholders' responsibility for institutional action (and, in this case, its dysfunction). The attribution of responsibility is here first and foremost a backward-looking one, aimed to measure and weigh the individual or collective contributions to the functioning (or dysfunction) of the institution. The attribution of responsibility is thus a causal exercise, which aims to retrace the reasons of the functioning or dysfunction of institutional action in the actual or failed compliance with institutional regulations. Of course, it may also be the case that upon analysis and assessment of institutional operability a critical outlook on those regulations emerges. By the same token, the officeholders' prospective responsibility consists in ensuring compliance with institutional rules or contributing to re-design (and committing to comply with) them if such rules prove to be inefficient or ineffective to achieve the institution's purpose.

From this perspective, in normal circumstances, institutional action can succeed or fail depending on either of two factors. Officeholders (or some of them) may fail to comply with the rules designed to achieve the institution's purpose; or officeholders may be complying with the wrong rules, that is rules that were not designed correctly to make the effective and efficient pursuit of the institution's purpose possible. In the first case, the (causally) responsible officeholders must be identified, possibly punished (e.g., by disciplinary provisions) to restore compliance with institutional rules.⁴ In the latter case, institutional rules should be redesigned to better align them with the institution's purpose. But exceptional circumstances

⁴ The relationships between causal (moral) responsibility, blameworthiness, and their relations with restorative justice are the object of a wide debate (e.g., Copp 1997; Sher 2006; Waller 2011).

may also occur, which require a more radical project of institutional reform. These are cases where the very purpose of the institution is called into question. Because, as seen, on this approach, institutional action is defined by its purpose, a revision of the purpose requires no less than an ‘institutional big bang.’ The very justifying reason for institutional action would cease to exist and a refoundation is needed.

The outward perspective on institutional operability
(1) <i>conceptualization</i> of institutional action as rule-following
(2) <i>analysis</i> of institutional action as a mean to achieve the institution’s predefined and defining purpose
(3) <i>assessment</i> of institutional action as effective and efficient execution of a set of instructions
(4) <i>attribution</i> of causal responsibility for institutional functioning/dysfunction (individual or collective)

Figure 1: Summary of the outward perspective.

On the basis of this presentation of the outward perspective on institutional operability, it is important to recognize that it aspires to achieve ambitious objective standards of clarity and measurement of institutional performance. However, it also risks (more or less inadvertently) to downplay the capacity of institutional action to adapt to mutable circumstances and the officeholders to promote institutional innovation (by the exercise of their discretion beyond rule-following). In the face of evolving challenges and mutable circumstances, reference to predefined rules and purposes may prove inadequate to capture the complexity of institutional action. As frustrating as it may be, there may just not be a clear and measurable recipe to make institutional action work and give direction to the officeholders’ conduct. We discuss such risks in what follows.

2.2 The Outward Perspective Discussed

From an outward perspective on institutional operability, we have seen, the analysis and assessment of institutional action rely upon a prefixed set of benchmarks and performance indicators. To be meaningful, such indicators should be instrumentally linked to the efficient and effective achievement of the institution’s predefined and defining purpose. Sometimes such standards may be realized or approximated in their ideal form, especially in the case of simple purpose-driven institutions, such as a special investigative commission or a specific hiring committee. Also, by referring to the telos of institutional action, this approach may have the advantage of developing a solid knowledge base for measuring institutional progresses over time, engaging in comparative appreciations, setting discrete objectives for enhancing institutional performance, and incentivizing or sanctioning officeholders’ individual contributions to achieving institutional results.

However, at the end of Section 2.1, we have also hinted at some risks related to identifying the examination of institutional operability with such an approach. The risks concern both the conception of institutional operability as rule-following and its practical implications for attributing officeholders' responsibility for institutional action and its possible dysfunctions.

The first risk comes from taking seriously the French *pâtisserie* metaphor. The normative conditions governing the exercise of power of office that makes an institution work are hardly as steadfast as the steps in a recipe of French *pâtisserie*. The identification of institutional purposes as the referent for such conditions is a very difficult undertaking in itself. For instance, there may be a general level of normative consensus about the stipulation that the purpose of a university is to provide good education, and hospitals should provide decent health care. Yet, we should also recognize that different academics and health care professionals may have very different views of what concrete standards of good education or decent health care are. For example, the standards of decent health care may vary by questioning whether they should reflect a purely biological approach to saving lives or include the compassionate assistance of terminally ill patients. The purpose of a university must balance also the commitment to promoting excellent and innovative research and, in the case of public universities, to serving the collectivity.

If the definition of institutional action by reference to its purpose is uncertain in the case of such institutions as universities and hospitals, think of how such a feature heightens in the case of such political institutions as representative assemblies in a parliamentary democracy. Normative standards of justice and legitimacy are constantly challenged and in continuous evolution. This feature is not only a matter-of-factly recognition of how institutional action happens to be. It is also necessary for institutional action to adapt to historical developments, and unforeseeable social, political, and environmental circumstances that mobilize a degree of officeholders' discretion.

For example, public institutions worldwide had to face such unpredictable circumstances at the outbreak and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The unprecedented revision of rules of international mobility, the changes in productivity systems, and the organization of a mass vaccination campaign challenged the normative standards for assessing the performance of national and supranational public institutions. Such challenges included, for instance, the tensions between the commitments to protecting health safety and safeguarding economic development while, *inter alia*, securing citizens' personal freedoms. No established recipe was available or could immediately adapt. While pandemics of that magnitude are not the rule, institutional action essentially is a messy enterprise. Officeholders frequently find themselves in the conditions of relying on little more than their good-sense, thus questioning the margins of their discretion concerning the normative

conditions governing the exercise of their power of office. In such circumstances, were officeholders only to look outward for standards and rules to make their action operational, they would easily be at a loss.

There is more. Think of the earlier example of the hospital management assessment of the action of the surgical clinic amidst growing patient complaints and concerns. This example tells the story of an institutional dysfunction occurring in a context where health and safety standardized regulations are available. So, one may think that there are cases where conceiving institutional operability as rule-following can be sufficient to make all necessary analyses and assessments of institutional action. However, even in this kind of cases, where institutional dysfunctions may derive from the contribution of ‘many hands’ it may be unadvisable even to start an investigation leading to the punishment of those causally responsible for procedural deficiencies (Thompson 2017). For example, in a systemically corrupt environment, it seems unpromising to address the question of the attribution of retrospective responsibilities for institutional dysfunction by looking for which officeholder has broken which institutional rule. Sometimes officeholders join an institution which already works on the bases of corrupt practices, and the newly arrived officeholders may adapt to those practices for peer-pressure, akrasia, or fear of retaliation.

In the complex scenarios of institutional action, to hold officeholders retrospectively responsible for such dysfunctions as systemic corruption proportionally to their direct or indirect causal contribution to the establishment and maintenance of a corrupt institutional practice may be at once simplistic and very difficult to realize. Corruption often results from a web of repeated interactions of multiple agents throughout time. Such a complexity challenges the plausibility of conceiving the attribution of responsibility to officeholders on the basis of their causation of or contribution to the dysfunction in virtue of their failure to comply with some institutional rule.

The problems of conceiving the attribution of responsibility for institutional action and its dysfunction on the causal terms proper of the rule-following approach go beyond individualized interpretations. Even on a collectivist interpretation of responsibility for joint actions (e.g., Miller 2017), the causal nexus between some officeholders’ breaking an institutional rule and the impairment of institutional operability can be hard to ascertain. For example, in cases of systemic corruption the motivations, priorities, and actual contributions of the various officeholders vary greatly. To search for a shared intentionality, which manifests itself as

a form of rule-breaking leading institutional action astray by deviating it from its purpose, might be a non-starter.

Consider also that in some cases an institutional dysfunction may occur even in the absence of any formal rule breaking. For example, some forms of corruption such as bribery or embezzlement do come about because some officeholders act in violation of an institutional rule. But in many instances, such as in cases of nepotism or as concerns the political influence of lobbies, the capacity of an institution to work may be hindered even in the absence of any formal rule violation (e.g., Ceva and Ferretti 2021b, ch. 4; Thompson 2005). Should institutional operability be entirely identified with rule-following, the analysis and assessment of such dysfunctions would face serious challenges.

Last but not least, the conception of officeholders' prospective responsibility for institutional action and its dysfunction through the lenses of rule-following carries its own set of criticalities. The reliance on benchmarks and performance indicators to emphasize the potential for empirical measurement of efficiency and effectiveness in institutional action can suggest that institutional operability is primarily grounded in external directives, resembling a form of institutional determinism. What is more, and relatedly, the notion that acting in an institutional capacity primarily entails compliance with predefined standards of performance can (more or less advertently) lead to a fundamental disengagement of officeholders from claiming responsibility for their actions. The risk is to encourage a passive approach among officeholders, as they might come to view their roles as conduits for executing predetermined instructions.⁵ In such a scenario, officeholders may be less inclined to take initiative or ownership of their roles. Furthermore, the belief that institutional dysfunctions can be rectified solely or mainly through the revision of institutional rules may overlook the deeper complexities at play, including the dynamics of human interactions and the need for some ethical engagement beyond rule-following (more on this in Section 3).

In essence, while the focus on purpose-driven rule-following aspires to offer clarity, it might impair the appreciation of the broader interrelated responsibilities of officeholders in shaping and giving direction to institutional action. To appreciate such responsibilities a further perspective on institutional operability is necessary, which can reckon with the relational aspects of institutional life. This will be the object of the second part of the article.

⁵ For an analysis and discussion of this tendency, see, among others, the works by Gornitzka, Kyvik, and Larsen 1998 and Lock and Lorenz 2007.

3 The Inward Perspective: A Role-Playing Approach

3.1 The Inward Perspective Presented

The discussion of the outward perspective on institutional operability as rule-following has revealed a substantial gap in the understanding of what makes an institution operational. To fill this gap, we present and discuss a second perspective that takes into consideration the quality of interactions among officeholders in their institutional capacity as a key factor in the philosophical examination of institutional operability.

This further perspective on institutional operability conceives the analysis and assessment of officeholders' conduct in their institutional capacity as a matter of role-playing. At the core of this view is the conception of institutional action as an exercise of reflectivity.⁶ For an institution to be operational, officeholders must reflectively engage with—interrogate and respond to—each other as they carry out the open project of giving meaning and direction to institutional action. To wit, the operability of institutions is conceived by looking at the reflectivity of the dynamics of interaction between officeholders as they enact the role they have within the institution. We have dubbed this perspective 'inward' because the normative conditions of exercise of power of office lie inside the officeholders' interactions, as they are specified and revised while the officeholders interrogate and respond to each other about the point of their interrelated actions.

In this view, the officeholders are enactors of institutional action. The inward perspective puts officeholders' interrelated agency at the center of the analysis and assessment of institutional action. We mentioned that one of the criticalities of seeing institutional operability only as a matter of rule-following is the risk of sanctioning a passive view of officeholders, that ultimately might lead to their disengagement from taking responsibility for institutional action. The view of institutional operability as role-playing directly addresses this risk by portraying officeholders as actively engaged in giving direction to institutional action, reflecting on their activity and the performance of their roles, both individually and interrelatedly.

The terms and conditions of interaction between officeholders are a canvass for enacting the institution's *raison d'être*. The *raison d'être* of an institution is the

⁶ We borrow this idea of reflectivity in broad brushes from Korsgaard 1996 without necessarily embracing the substantive Kantian underpinnings of her discussion. What we retain as relevant to the institutional context of our discussion, is that, as reflective beings, officeholders can act on reasons, while they can also step back and look retrospectively at their own actions, decisions, and practical reasons to reconsider them critically.

open-textured set of normative ideals and values that motivates the establishment of the institution and regulates its functioning (Ceva and Ferretti 2021a). To conceive institutional action as sustained by a *raison d'être* is significantly different from seeing it as oriented to achieving a predefined and defining purpose. The set of normative ideals and values that motivates the establishment of an institution and regulates its functioning is open-textured in the sense that it is not a parameter guiding institutional action and measuring institutional performance. The normative ideals and values that compose the *raison d'être* of institutions may vary in different ways, thus making institutional action an open project. For example, such ideals may vary for the same kind of institution (e.g., a legislative assembly) across different contexts (e.g., in federal or centralized states) and eras (e.g., in aristocracies or democracies). Variations may also occur within the same institution across time (e.g., public hospitals evolving from an illness- to a patient-oriented understanding of healthcare).

A public institution's *raison d'être* informs the power mandates regulating the various offices within the institution. Therefore, its realization is also open to the officeholders' possible contestation and discretion (e.g., Ceva and Ferretti 2021b; Philp 2007, 2010; Zacka 2017). Notice that to say that officeholders do and, to a certain extent, should use discretion does not mean that their action in their institutional capacity is or should be idiosyncratic, wildly creative, or inspired by their own personal ethics. While not unconstrained, officeholders' discretion is necessary to adapt institutional action to mutable social and political circumstances such as, for example, some health crises, a war, or a change in the demographic composition of the population.

All these elements motivate the interpretation of institutional action as an open project for the officeholders. To the extent that the *raison d'être* of institutions has an open texture, officeholders are called to partake in the work in progress of interpreting and realizing the *raison d'être* of their institution, as well as reacting to institutional dysfunctions.

Revisit, from this vantage point, the surgical clinic scenario discussed in Section 2.1. The hospital management faces patients' growing concerns, and the clinic's track record shows signs of dysfunction. The hospital management's examination of the operability of the clinic should incorporate a dynamic and collaborative approach within the surgical team and with the clinic's staff. It should not solely or mainly rely on predefined regulations and benchmarks of performance as the yardstick for analyzing and assessing the dysfunction. Those who hold a role in the surgical clinic are not seen as mere rule-followers; instead, they become active participants in a continuous interaction aimed at interpreting and realizing the institution's grounding ideals and values (e.g., a commitment to the humane

treatment of patients; fairness and mutual respect; the enhancement of people's well-being).

From an inward perspective, we can thus consider the ethical and interpersonal dimension of the medical practice. This includes the trust that exists between doctors and nurses and the nuanced judgments that medical professionals make where no rulebook can fully encompass the complexities. When medical doctors and nurses collaborate, they *make* the clinic operational, transforming it from an efficient and effective service provider into an ethical institution.

We can also pinpoint how institutional operability calls on officeholders reflectively to engage with one another, sharing insights and collectively adapting their practices to better align with the evolving needs and circumstances of institutional action. This open-textured understanding of the institution's *raison d'être* gives prominence to flexibility and adaptability, examining how institutional action remains responsive to changing conditions and to the officeholders' evolving views and understandings of the point of the enactment of their roles. So, for example, the surgeon must be ready to explain to the nurse why they decided to use a different sewing method from that the nurse studied in the protocol at medical school; the anesthetist must be committed to explaining why a particular patient required a lighter dose of sedation although that made the surgeon's work more difficult. This scheme of interaction gives practical content to the conceptual claim that institutional operability also mobilizes an institutional ethics of office. Such an ethics concerns the reflective and self-critical action of the officeholders, whose analysis and assessment are sensitive to their own sense of the point of acting together as a group.

Contrary to the evaluation of institutional action solely or mainly based on pre-defined benchmarks of performance, the assessment of institutional action from an inward perspective has a moving target. It requires a complex set of evaluations of the terms of interaction between the officeholders as they uphold—define, revise, and correct—the *raison d'être* of their institution. Certainly, institutional rules matter also in this view and officeholders have professional obligations to comply with them. However, focus on institutional *roles* lets an important feature of institutional *rules* emerge: Institutional rules pertain to interrelated embodied roles. These roles confer a unique normative status upon those who occupy them, granting them specific normative powers (e.g., Applbaum 1999; Ceva and Ferretti 2021a; Emmett 1966; Isaacs 2011). That institutional roles are *embodied* emphasizes that they are characteristically (not just incidentally) occupied by human persons. That institutional roles are *interrelated* underscores that they are linked in such a way that the action of any institutional role occupant in the exercise of their power of office structurally depends on the others' (e.g., Ferretti 2019). This point is important because it

explains how the interrelated action of a group of agents (the officeholders) constitutes, by giving body to and enacting, institutional action when they use their power of office in their institutional capacity.⁷

As officeholders act in their institutional capacity, they are called upon to interpret general rules and apply their normative powers to specific cases. For example, when a person wears a surgical scrub, they acquire a normative status with rights and duties that enable them, say, to sedate another person and cut their chest open. The surgeon's performance of their individual role must follow certain mechanisms designed into the hospital's procedures (e.g., they must use certain tools disinfected in certain ways). But a surgeon's action also necessarily depends on the actions of the other members of the surgical team (nurses and anesthetists), who must reciprocally adjust so that their overall performance may make their surgical team work. Some patients may, for instance, resist sedation; others may show some rare aversive reaction; the surgical team must be ready to adapt and act as an interrelated group, even when such adaptations and actions require departing from the standard protocol and involve a degree of improvisation.

Differently from the recipe-following approach in French *pâtisserie*, from an inward perspective, institutional operability resembles the reflective action in Italian home cooking. Italian home cooking is not as codified as French *pâtisserie*. When the kitchen brigade prepares a *parmigiana*, they standardly use some specific ingredients; if they combine layers of tomato sauce, cheese, but pasta rather than eggplant, they would be baking a *lasagna*, not a *parmigiana*. However, the combination of the ingredients, their proportions, as well as the resulting dish may incorporate some variants; for example, the eggplants may be deep-fried or grilled, and some may use *mozzarella*, others *parmesan* cheese. Most importantly, the members of the brigade must take a reflective stance on their own actions as they taste each preparation and adjust it. To understand the logic of the brigade's action, from this perspective, requires the members of the brigade to give their own account of the terms of their interaction, of what they did and how and why they did it. The conditions governing the enactment of their roles are therefore internal to their interaction.

Shifting the focus from external, measurable criteria, to the interactions among officeholders entails expanding the examination of institutional action to scrutinize the underlying normative justifications for officeholders' conduct. While the

7 By saying that the officeholders' conduct in their *institutional capacity* (i.e., when they use their role-related powers) constitutes institutional action, we go beyond reductionist interpretations of institutional dynamics as resulting from individual actions (vs. institutional contexts, see van Hees 1997). We can explain institutional action not merely as it *derives* from individual action (as, for instance, in game theoretic analyses); in our account, the officeholders' interrelated action *constitutes* institutional action.

outward perspective makes institutional operability dependent on external standards, the inward perspective thus focuses on the relational aspects of institutional life by bringing to the fore the point of view of the officeholders responsible for the institution's operation.⁸ In this sense, this perspective on institutional operability is inward also in the sense that it necessarily engages the point of view of the officeholders in the analysis and assessment of institutional action.

The adoption of an inward perspective on institutional operability as role-playing allows for the appreciation of a form of normatively relevant relationality that is specific to and characteristic of institutional action. Such an appreciation bears significant practical implications for the attribution of responsibility for institutional action and its dysfunctions. In a basic sense, officeholders bear individual responsibility for the exercise of their power of office in keeping with their mandate; in this sense, they are accountable for their conduct with respect to institutional rules. But bearing such a responsibility does not just mean that they should comply with institutional rules and respond for their failures to do so (see the discussion in Section 2.1). They are also and importantly responsible for enacting their role reflectively, as they partake in the open project of upholding institutional action in the sense we have discussed earlier.

The emphasis on the interrelatedness of institutional action pinpoints a further dimension of officeholders' responsibility. Officeholders, as an interrelated group of agents, bears the responsibility for steering the course of institutional action. This form of responsibility is neither purely individual nor collective. It is a unique form of *interrelated* responsibility, wherein individual officeholders can be called upon to assume responsibility, individually but by virtue of their institutional relations, for both the functioning and dysfunctions of institutional action. This responsibility is borne as a group of interrelated agents working together to uphold institutional action. Through the lens of interrelated responsibility, it becomes evident that officeholders are normative agents actively engaged in continuously specifying, enacting, and potentially revising their institution's *raison d'être*.⁹

8 A call to adopt an inward outlook on public institutional action features prominently among the claims of the 'ethnographic turn' in public administration. For the proponents of such a turn, to explore the 'heart of the state' requires looking inside the ordinary functioning of public institutions, to concentrate on the officeholders' work, on the values and affective states that sustain their institutional practices, see Fassin and Brown 2015; for a philosophically grounded contribution to purporting such a turn, see Zacka 2017.

9 Ceva and Ferretti (2021b, ch. 4) discuss this form of responsibility for corruption, as a special case of institutional dysfunction. Notice also that this general account of institutional agency can be put in relation to various substantive theories of joint action, for instance, in the terms of shared intentions (Bratman 2014), we-intentions (Tuomela 2013), or collective intentions (Searle 2018). This possibility does not presuppose, nor does it entail the commitment to or compatibility with either of

Consider the example of a national environmental protection agency. Within this agency, officeholders with distinct roles in research, policy development, and enforcement collectively contribute to the realization of the agency's *raison d'être* concerning environmental conservation. Besides their individual responsibility to fulfil their role-related obligations, officeholders bear the interrelated responsibility to define, revise, and possibly correct the direction of institutional action. So, for instance, should discrepancies arise in policy recommendations and enforcement actions, officeholders bear interrelated responsibility for addressing these inconsistencies in a reflective way, thereby holding each other accountable for the direction they have given to institutional action. Recognizing this form of responsibility is crucial within the framework of the open-textured understanding of an institution's *raison d'être*, as discussed previously. This perspective acknowledges the diversity of human purposes and activities that characterize the institutional domain, allowing for flexibility and adaptation over time and across contexts.

This interrelated responsibility encompasses both a backward-looking and a forward-looking dimension. Officeholders are retrospectively responsible for assessing institutional action and its dysfunctions. As the discussion of the surgical clinic example we offered earlier suggests, when officeholders analyze institutional dysfunctions, it becomes evident that such dysfunctions can only be comprehended interrelatedly, considering the relational structures of interaction among different offices. Officeholders' retrospective interrelated responsibility entails holding each other accountable for their use of power of office in a manner that supports and sustains one another in performing their roles to uphold institutional action.¹⁰

Similarly, in the context of attributing prospective responsibilities to react to institutional dysfunctions, corrective action requires the mobilization of the officeholders as a group (not just their individual commitment to rule compliance). In the context of the environmental agency, this means that policymakers must ensure that their decisions are responsive to data from scientists, with inspectors aligning their efforts to make policy decisions binding beyond a merely punitive intent. This prospective responsibility also encompasses officeholders' commitment to sustaining each other in the enactment of their roles. Officeholders bear the responsibility to recognize that they can only succeed or fail together.

these theories. We trust the readers who have a specific interest in institutional ontology to pursue this line of inquiry.

10 This is the idea of office accountability discussed by Ceva 2019 in the context of the corruption of public institutional action.

The inward perspective on institutional operability
(1) <i>conceptualization</i> of institutional action as role-playing
(2) <i>analysis</i> of institutional action focused on how the interaction among officeholders upholds the institution's <i>raison d'être</i>
(3) <i>assessment</i> of institutional action as reflective enactment of institutional roles
(4) <i>attribution</i> of interrelated responsibility for institutional functioning/dysfunction (multidimensional)

Figure 2: Summary of the inward perspective.

3.2 The Inward Perspective Discussed

As we delve into the inward perspective, we find it to be a valuable lens through which to address the criticalities that the outward view encounters (see Section 2.2), particularly as concerns the risks of rigidity in the conception of institutional operability and the complex attribution of officeholders' responsibility for institutional action and its dysfunctions.

One of the primary concerns with the outward perspective is its tendency to rigidly define institutional operability through officeholders' compliance with institutional rules. This approach, likened to a recipe in French *pâtisserie*, assumes that institutions can work effectively and efficiently by adhering strictly to performance purpose-driven standards. However, as we have previously highlighted, this rigidity can be problematic, especially considering that institutional purposes and ideals are dynamic and context dependent.

By shifting our focus to the dynamic role-playing of officeholders within the institution, the inward perspectives recognizes that institutional operability depends, also and importantly, on the officeholders' ongoing, reflective engagement with the institution's *raison d'être*. This emphasis on dynamic role-playing tracks the capacity of institutions to respond flexibly to changing circumstances, whether it is a global pandemic, shifting social norms, or emerging challenges. In such complex scenarios, the inward perspective gives prominence to the capacity of officeholders to engage actively in interpreting and realizing the institution's open-textured set of normative ideals and values, thus ensuring the institution remains adaptable and relevant.

As this perspective focuses on officeholders' direct engagement in shaping institutional action, it also offers insights for revisiting the question of responsibility attribution. We saw that the outward perspective, with its focus on rule-following, tends to assign responsibility in a causal way, primarily based on the officeholders' compliance with or deviation from the codified instructions of institutional performance. This approach falls short in accounting for the complex, interrelated nature of institutional action. In Section 2.2, we discussed such a limitation with reference

to complex scenarios of institutional dysfunction, such as those of systemic corruption, where many hands are implicated. In such scenarios, we saw that conceiving the attribution of responsibility to the officeholders as a causal exercise of establishing their (individual or collective) contribution to achieving institutional purposes by rule-following is insufficient to capture the intricate web of interactions that corrupts institutional action.

In contrast, the inward perspective offers a multidimensional outlook. It does not just look at officeholders as rule-followers but as active participants in the institutional dynamics. When systemic corruption is pervasive, it becomes evident that multiple officeholders are involved, each with varying motivations, priorities, and contributions. The inward perspective recognizes the need to go beyond pinpointing rule breaking. It emphasizes the importance that officeholders stop, step back, interrogate and respond to each other for their failure to support institutional action. This is the point and main practical implication of conceiving institutional operability as a matter of the officeholders' upholding the work in progress of institutional action *reflectively*.

This reflective approach helps a reappraisal of the attribution of responsibility for institutional action. First and foremost, we have seen, that the retrospective individual responsibility that officeholders bear for their exercise of their power of office is critical and not just a matter of (non)compliance. Moreover, this individual responsibility is intertwined with the interrelated responsibility that officeholders share as a group. Officeholders are interrelatedly responsible for steering the course of institutional action, not just for their discrete contribution to achieving institutional purposes (or lack thereof). The interrelated responsibility that the adoption of the inward perspective brings to the fore reckons with the relational aspects of institutional life and the essentially relational nature of institutional normativity.

The adoption of this perspective may raise some worries too.¹¹ Its flexibility and call on officeholders' reflective engagement might make disagreements emerge about officeholders' interpretations of their mandates and their visions of the institution's *raison d'être*, potentially making it difficult to ascertain what direction institutional action should take in a way to which officeholders could generally commit. Moreover, it may sanction a degree of institutional instability, as it emphasizes the constant questioning of the institution's *raison d'être* and the terms of the mandates that derive from it. Such instability might seem in fact undesirable if one thinks that institutions are there to provide structure to human activities, in a way that involves and requires a degree of predictability.

11 We are grateful to Melina Duarte for pressing the following points.

While we agree that these two aspects are critical in the sense of being potentially problematic, we also think they are critical in the sense of being central features of institutional action that we can appreciate from the inward perspective. Disagreements are part and parcel of any human activity that involves interpersonal interactions, and so is a degree of instability, which is actually a condition of institutional change against any form of institutional fetishism. The adoption of the inward perspective permits to point out these elements and include in the analysis and assessment of institutional action how officeholders can grapple with and respond to them. For instance, within a public health agency, officeholders can have diverse interpretations of the agency's mission in the face of a rapidly evolving healthcare landscape (the COVID-19 pandemic provides also in this case a dramatic but helpful illustration). While these disagreements may seem like a challenge, the inward perspective places at the heart of the evaluations of institutional operability the question of how officeholders can and do engage in open discursive practices to specify and revise the agency's direction considering changing circumstances, fostering adaptability and responsiveness.

The direct engagement of officeholders in steering institutional action is thus key to highlight the ethical dimension of institutional operability. From the inward perspective, we can acknowledge that institutional action is not solely and foremost about meeting standards and achieving purposes; it is also and importantly about upholding the normative ideals and values that motivate the institution's existence. In this sense, the inward perspective mobilizes an institutional ethics of office which exceeds fulfilling professional obligations of rule-compliance.

4 Closing Remarks: Outward versus Inward?

The presentation of the outward and inward perspectives on institutional operability has laid out an analytical distinction between two approaches to analyzing and assessing the normative conditions governing the exercise of power of office within institutions. The breaking point between the two perspectives, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 above, is the distinction between conceiving institutional operability as the officeholders' compliance with institutional rules for achieving the institution's predefined and defining purpose efficiently and effectively, on the one hand, and the officeholders' enactment of their institutional roles to uphold the open-textured *raison d'être* of their institution reflectively.

While these two perspectives differ significantly, they need not be seen as logically incompatible. Consider, for example, a multilayered application of these perspectives. During the establishment phase of an institution, it is crucial for officeholders to actively engage in shaping its rationale and direction. At this stage, using

the inward perspective can shed light on why this reflective exercise is normatively significant. To think that officeholders might set to exercise their power of office following a preset template fixing rules for achieving predetermined ends looks normatively undesirable. Insights from the inward perspective can explain how and why the officeholders' reflective engagement matters normatively. Such insights, as presented in Section 3.1, lay out a philosophically solid ground to make sense, for example, of the perils of institutional transplantations, where predefined institutional models are exported and juxtaposed across contexts, such as the attempt to export democratic models to authoritarian regimes.

In phases of normal institutional action, especially in simple organizations or when performing basic functions in regular circumstances, the outward perspective's rule-following approach can prove practical. Our discussion in Section 2.1 has explained why. However, even in such scenarios, our subsequent discussion (Sections 3.1 and 3.2) has also emphasized that officeholders should never disengage or operate on autopilot. Active, reflective engagement remains necessary, driven by the normative commitment to taking retrospective and prospective responsibility for making the institution work. This commitment translates into a generalized level of alertness, ensuring that officeholders continuously sustain each other as they enact, revise, and possibly correct the direction of institutional action. Therefore, examining institutional operability from an inward perspective appears necessary to analyze and assess officeholders' interactions, even when institutional rules and predefined purposes are firmly in place.

It is also essential to acknowledge that certain areas of institutional action are more conducive to the application of the inward perspective. The relevance of this perspective depends on various factors, including the level of discretion officeholders structurally enjoy. For instance, the examination of institutional operability in contexts like the judiciary might emphasize effective and efficient rule-following. However, in areas such as social welfare institutions, educational systems, or healthcare, the reflective engagement of officeholders is crucial to adapt institutional action to mutable and sensitive circumstances. But even in contexts where predefined rules and mechanisms are paramount, a steadfast outward perspective focused solely on rule-following would oversimplify the complexity of institutional life. Our analysis provides the philosophical resources to challenge any bureaucratic view that reduces institutional agency to rule-following and reinforces the notion that no rule-based system can be operational without the mobilization and engagement of officeholders' reflective agency.

The implication of this latter claim is that most institutional dysfunctions cannot be fully diagnosed only by reference to shortcomings in compliance with or, more fundamentally, in the design of institutional rules. Of course, such a diagnostic exercise is helpful and, sometimes it can be sufficient. That may be the case with

minor institutional failures, like in cases of the proverbial bad apple that corrupts institutional action by accepting a bribe for the provision of a public service. However, our discussion grounds the claim that for a complete analysis and assessment of the complexities of institutional dysfunction one must consider the extent to which the officeholders enact their roles reflectively and take on their interrelated responsibility for institutional action and its dysfunctions.

The two perspectives on institutional operability are analytically distinct and may sometimes lead to conflicting analyses and assessments depending on which is prioritized. However, these differentiated and possibly contrasting exercises can generate a dynamic tension that ultimately enriches rather than hinders the examination of institutional operability. Our discussion is an example of this. It provides a philosophically robust and comprehensive framework for addressing the complexities of institutional operability in diverse institutional contexts. It acknowledges that, for an institution to work, officeholders must surely share a commitment to rule-following. However, they must also recognize and grapple with the insufficiency of institutional rules, the mutability of institutional purposes, and the open texture of the *raison d'être* of their institution.

In conclusion, the discussion presented in this article offers a conceptual and normative framework that can significantly contribute to the research agendas of scholars in the fields of political theory and institutional governance. For example, our emphasis on the necessity to recognize the importance of officeholders' active engagement in making institutions operational challenges the growing trend of delegating institutional functions to AI automated technologies, e.g., in the provision of social welfare benefits. While these technologies excel at rule-based applications, overreliance on them may erode officeholders' capacity to claim responsibility for institutional action and hinder their ability to address potential dysfunctions.

This example underscores the analytical significance of the dual perspective on institutional operability systematically outlined in this article. We believe that this analytical systematization can offer a useful framework for future normative inquiries in the field of institutional theory, by providing the instruments to delve deeper into the complex dynamics of institutional action and the attribution of responsibility for its functioning or dysfunction.

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