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Humanism and History as Ethics of Institutions: A Reflection on Linda Woodhead, Truth, and Institutions

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Abstract: This paper builds on Linda Woodhead's discussion of institutions and truth-telling and suggests how we might make progress towards more ethical institutions. Much of the literature on the ethics of institutions focuses on institutions like banks, churches, hospitals, universities, or even political entities. This is also Woodhead's focus. But another understanding of institutions is something akin to "an established law, practice, or custom"; namely, a tradition. How these two senses of institutions might relate and inform each other regarding justice and facilitating truth-telling is largely ignored. Drawing out this distinction helps reposition ourselves with regard to the starting point of the ethics of institutions and provides a backdoor into our understanding of formal institutions. Taking this as my starting point along with Woodhead's discussion of truth and institutions, in this paper, I explore this backdoor further. I do this by drawing on the work of Edward Said and showing that the ethics of institutions is the realm of the humanist, but more specifically, the historian.

Keywords: ethics of institutions; Linda Woodhead; Edward Said; tradition; truth-telling; humanism; history



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1. A 'Backdoor' into the Ethics of Institutions

In her article "Truth and Deceit in Institutions", Linda Woodhead investigates institutional failure to tell the truth. She writes, "For long-lived institutions, history and tradition can be an ally. Structural and cultural changes are easier to make if they rediscover and build upon historic elements, reinterpret existing roles and reinvent established ones"¹. This has far-reaching implications for intuitional ethics. For instance, how can there be truth-telling for abuses of institutions more than a generation ago? Do unaddressed historical ideologies, assumptions, and abuses appear in an institution's current affairs? For instance, how does Turkey's continued denial of ethnic cleansings and genocides perpetrated against Armenians in 1895, 1909, and 1915 continue to affect a variety of interactions and policies in this part of the world, for example, with regard to Azerbaijan's illegal blockade and eventual armed aggression of Artsakh in 2023 (Akcam 2007), or, in the United States, the continued distrust of police, which has roots in racism and have been handed down from this institution's beginning, thus contributing to the systemic problems that we are continually experiencing today (Blackmon 2009)? Moral repair requires, at the very least, the recognition of these historical injustices and denials of abuse and murder within an institution's narratives. Walter Wink helpfully writes, "Human misery is caused by institutions, but these institutions are maintained by human beings. We are made evil by our institutions, yes; but our institutions are also made evil by us (Wink 1992, p. 75)". Further, Amra Bone notes, in response to Woodhead, "institutions are the product of the individuals within them so producing ethical individuals with personal commitment to truth will also lead to ethical institutions". This is correct, but also only part of the issue. Institutions are made up of individuals, but institutions are also communal entities which exist over time and can include generations of individuals. We cannot, suggests Bone, "lower our standards in the name of pragmatism (Bone 2022, p. 107)".

This paper highlights the distinction between “formal” institutions and “informal” institutions of traditions.² Doing this helps reposition ourselves with regard to the starting point for an ethics of institutions and provides an interesting backdoor into our understanding of formal institutions. Approaching the ethics of institutions with this unconventional starting point forces us to ask alternative questions and provides a way of addressing systemic and structural assumptions and injustice within established institutional bodies. Further, by drawing on the work of Edward Said, I argue that the ethics of institutions is the realm of the humanist, where humanism is conceived as the task of unearthing the history and memories of those exploited, excluded, and often invisible voices. Said’s influential and helpful articulation of humanism reminds us that at its heart, it seeks to hear the histories of small nations or marginalized peoples and resists the temptation to flatten narratives into something easy or palatable. It is the search for knowledge, justice, and liberation.

2. Linda Woodhead: Truth and Deceit in Institutions

Woodhead’s article attempts to highlight positive ways to effect change within our institutions. Her starting place here is to ask, “why institutions find it so hard to reveal difficult truths and how they can do better”. Woodhead observes that institutions “conceal, evade, obfuscate, kick into the long grass, brush under the rug, deflect and spin”, attempts at bringing to light difficult truths about abuses in their past and present. What this does is continue to overlook those who have been hurt by individuals within institutions. From here, she asks, “why do institutions behave like this, and could it be different” (89)? Woodhead suggests that it is the legitimacy of institutions which makes deceit by them so shocking and why people within them are able to behave so poorly (91). She then tests this suggestion by highlighting some temptations of institutional life that make truth-telling difficult. She focuses on the shuffling off of responsibility, money worries, hierarchical knowledge of deceit, reputation management, and institutional dishonesty (91–98).

In Woodhead’s final analysis, she suggests that institutions need to be honest about past wrongdoings (98). Without honesty and memory, the possibility of learning from past deceptions and making the necessary changes is not likely (98). “Acknowledging past wrongs by naming them and remembering them, rather than offering a bland once-for-all apology—or a cover up—is an important step in avoiding further paltering and deception” (99). How does one achieve this? Woodhead suggests that clarity about the values of the institutions can help. According to Woodhead, very few institutions mention truth, or honesty, as a value in their value statements (100). Institutions are patterned relations with cultures, values, rituals, and customs which support either truth-telling or deceit (102). Recognizing the difficulties of changing institutions, Woodhead’s account examines the difficulties institutions face in order to see what needs to change so that people can tell the truth within institutional bodies. There should not be tension between remaining loyal to an institution like the church, a university, or business, and also covering up hard truths.

I will show here how Woodhead’s understanding of institutions fits within the broader literature of ethics of institutions. At the risk of being general, approaches to ethics of institutions draw from one of two sources: on the one hand, a virtue theory tradition which most often looks to Aristotle or Alasdair MacIntyre, or, on the other hand, to liberalism which draws on John Rawls.

Geoff Moore in several works draws on MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* to specifically look at the connection between practices and business institutions contrasting corporate character with familiar concepts of corporate values.³ Moore’s work shows how a virtue ethics approach demonstrates applicability, especially regarding internal and external goods. Javier Aranzadi sets himself apart from Moore and MacIntyre, arguing for a political liberal account of the virtue tradition by focusing on the external actions of individuals within the context of social institutions and culture. He asserts that virtue ethics needs an ethics of institutions which address the individual’s ability to achieve determined ends through

virtues. It is institutions and virtues that define the paradigm by which institutions, norms, and society are set as models for human flourishing.⁴

Some have drawn on the history of virtue ethics to counter ethics practices in certain institutions like in medicine and science. For example, Boniolo and Fiore show that codes of conduct and codes of medical ethics are rarely effective. Drawing on the medieval educational methodology of *disputatio*, Boniolo and Fiore are for an ethics of medical institutions centered around deliberation and discussion. This is related to other claims that *docilitas*, the medieval virtue most closely associated with education, is important for biological science.⁵ Like Boniolo and Fiore, Dauwerse emphasizes the importance of developing cultures of listening and dialogue about the complex situations which emerge daily (Dauwerse et al. 2011). Sean Cordell, however, takes issue with agent-based virtue approaches to institutions. For him, virtue ethics is unable to make ethics normative in a way that would be widely applicable. This would seem to be in response to arguments like Moore's cited above (Cordell 2015).

John Rawls's account of institutions remains influential. Principles of justice, Rawls believes, have been abstracted from workable institutional forms. Starting from an "original position",⁶ which includes his well-known veil of ignorance, Rawls argues that individuals, together with others, agree on just institutional frameworks through designing a constitution which creates procedures to create conditions for political rights, liberty, and freedom of thought.⁷ A theory of justice is concerned with just constitutions and practical decisions. People will have confidence to limit freedoms in the case of intolerance if they know that there is a just constitution in place. A stable and just institution requires that when injustice arises, there are forces that preserve justice. An institution of laws is organized by a just constitution, which has been enacted. What is being emphasized here is not individual responsibility or individual obligation, but the application of these principles to institutions. "What is essential is that the constitution should establish equal rights to engage in public affairs and that measures be taken to maintain the fair value of these liberties (Rawls 1999, p. 200)".

For this reason, and often rooted in Rawlsian accounts of institutions, some have argued for a distinction between ethics and politics.⁸ For example, Liam Murphy's makes a distinction between "dualist" accounts of institutional design (politics) and personal conduct (morality) where these two are separate, and a "monist" account which states that there is a plausible normative principle for legal and institutional justice that is connected to personal conduct (Murphy 1999). Similarly, James DiCenso argues that for Kant, there is a coordination between moral and political principles, when coercive laws develop non-coercive ethics principles which contribute to political harmony and the autonomous will of individuals in a free society (DiCenso 2019). DiCenso argues first that, even in the Kantian literature, there is a need for clarity with regard to the relationship between political institutions and ethics, and secondly, that Kant held a monist (to use Murphy's terms) view of this relationship.

What is representative of the literature above is serious and important engagement with formal institutions. The above covers vital topics like the relationship between moral development within institutions; the connection between ethics and political institutions; the role of constitutions for enacting justice; and highlights the connection between institutions, decent societies, and humiliation.⁹ These thinkers and their works attest to the importance that this topic can have for further discussion in ethics and politics. What is absent, however, is a sense of the informal institutions and their distinctive role in formal institutional life. Even in those cases described above that draw on MacIntyre, this aspect of his thought is not emphasized as a significant part of their ethics of institutions. Also, this is not to say that there is no tradition of political liberalism, only that methodologically, liberalism approaches the creation of just political conditions without fully considering informal institutions as described here.

Woodhead's account of institutions is a refreshing departure from the above literature as she makes space for "informal" understandings of institutions more than those presented

above. On the one hand, in continuity with the above literature, and drawing on Mary Douglas, Woodhead notes that an institution is a “legitimized social group” which performs social functions like education, health, or justice. It is a figure of speech and legal fiction to say that it is institutions, and not individuals within these institutions, which act. Rather, members act in the name of, and within, the structures and constraints of institutions. Social functions are discharged by individuals within institutions, like priests, judges, doctors, and teachers, who will then think along with institutions to accomplish a given social task (90). On the other hand, an institution is made up of “patterned relations between humans; it has cultures, operative and stated values, processes, rituals and customs. Some of these support people in being truthful, but many encourage deceit” (102). These are made up of families, ceremonies, or cultural practices. “The legitimating authority may be a trusted and respected individual, like a parent or a judge, or something more diffuse such as common assent to a founding story or a set of values” (90). In Woodhead’s understanding of institutions, this sense of tradition is present, even if not at the forefront.

3. Tradition as Institution

At this stage, we can begin to get a better sense of what is meant by “informal” institutions of tradition, and how these relate to formal institutions. A Christian theological understanding of institutions is built on these two concurring parts. Informal institutions as tradition are the passing on of a series of common practices or shared narratives that exercise authority within a community and provide the framework on which formal institutions grow and develop. It is within the continuity of shared practices and narratives that formal institutions find their solidity and authority. Eric Hobsbawm writes, “‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values norms and behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past (Hobsbawm 2012, p. 1)”. Formal institutions enliven a network of relations, rituals, and practices that lie latent in loyalties and social structures that connect people (Warne 2021). Outside of informal institutions, there is little to no freedom from market or state manipulation. “For freedom to be possible and an associational to flourish, a plural and ‘complex’ political space, one with myriad institutional configurations, is needed to preserve the space of negotiation and interaction (Bretherton 2019)”. Further, formal institutions provide ways of solving problems and pursuing goods which allow for the sustaining of common life from one generation to another. Willie James Jennings writes, “An institution is a sustained work of building. It is a joining aimed at eternity where people, seeking to create the new, commit themselves to a powerful repetition that they hope will never end (Jennings 2020, p. 84)”. The building that is an essential part of institutions outwardly and inwardly bring into force stability that guides action and communication (Markschies 2015, pp. 22–23).

It is at this stage that we need a deeper understanding of “tradition”. At a very basic level, a tradition is when one person transmits, surrenders, or gives over something to someone else, which is then turned into behavior (Congar and Yves 1964, pp. 10–12, 24, 50, 112; Pieper 2010, p. 9; Pieper 2011, pp. 11–12). Josef Pieper writes, “the act of tradition is only completely realized when the last in line, the current last generation really accepts and receives the *tradendum* (Pieper 2010, p. 14 see also, p. 16)”. The current generation must accept what is being handed down. The receiver of tradition accepts the cultural riches of the community. The one who receives is not an “eyewitness” of the message, beginning, or truth which begins the tradition; it is not something that one has discovered on their own. “This means that we can talk about an act of tradition, in the strict sense, only when the person who is doing the handing on takes what he is sharing not from himself, but from ‘some other place (Pieper 2010, p. 13; also see, Margalit 2004, p. 59)”. Tradition is not experienced by one’s own senses; it is “heard” and not “seen”. In this way, tradition is a matter of faith (Pieper 2010, p. 17; Congar and Yves 1964, p. 13). The reception of tradition is a matter of hearing something from someone and taking it seriously. One must accept a message heard willingly

with the conviction that it is true. Yves Congar emphasizes that tradition, in a technical sense, is not something that is written (Congar and Yves 1964, pp. 14, 22, 27). Its truth cannot be verified by rational argument (Pieper 2010, p. 5; Congar and Yves 1964, p. 22). What is being expressed here is that the message, or the truth, is what is important and not the means of communicating (Pieper 2011, p. 11; Congar and Yves 1964, p. 112). Congar further argues that tradition is not just a repetition of the past. It is both conservation and development; it is a synthesis between the transmission of the past and our current experience. What comes of this synthesis is for the benefit of the future. The dangers that threaten tradition are, on the one hand, remaining static, and on the other, “remaining too independent of the advance of new ideas and of their general acceptance (Congar and Yves 1964, p. 159, also see pp. 2, 121)”. With this in mind, Pieper notes, the language used to communicate a truth is actually not all that important as long as the message stays true to what was revealed. The language cannot be antiquated; tradition is passed down in a living language, “through creative rejuvenation and sloughing off the old skin like a snake, so to speak; through a continual confrontation with the immediate present and above all with the future, which in the human realm is the truly real (Pieper 2010, p. 15)”. Progress may, then, be nothing more than the restating or development of latent ideas already accepted and believed but in a novel way (Congar and Yves 1964, p. 120). These institutions create spaces to develop relationships apart from formal institutional entities. These are spaces where listening can take place and trust can develop (Bretherton 2019, p. 461). These informal institutions take place in a number of social contexts, for example, the common habitation of a place or land, within families, or within communities of the artists or other vocations.

There are those traditions which are held by religion to have their roots in a divine source. This is what is called *sacred tradition*. Though the above understanding of tradition has religious significance and import, this is not at the heart of what I am discussing here. What I am more concerned with is what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger have pointed to in their *The Invention of Tradition*, where tradition is a set of invented practices or beliefs used to create a sense of identity (Said 2000e, p. 584; Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012). “Thus the emphasis on tradition in the last two centuries is a way that institutions claim to have legitimacy, even if that legitimacy has human origins. This provides the framework on which institutional authority can occur and be recognized (O’Donovan 2005, pp. 135, 140). And it is this sharing of institutional practices, this recognition of authority that makes up the primary lens through which a community experiences and engages the world” (Hordern 2013, p. 142).

What we have seen above is, because the language of the content of tradition can change from one generation to the next, it is possible that we can be receivers of some ideology or set of beliefs without necessarily knowing it. Thus, an informal institution of traditions which makes up formal institutions can be accepting and moving forward with antiquated and even harmful assumptions about the way the world works.

4. Humanism as an Ethics of Institutions

Ethics of institutions is the realm of the humanist. Humanism can help reposition ourselves with regard to the starting point of the ethics of institutions through informal institutions, and thus providing a backdoor into our understanding of formal institutions. Humanism illuminates the connections between political science and metaethics, theology and economics, and literature and science, showing how these interact with each other in the real world. Institutional justice cannot be the kind of truth-telling that simply addresses the most recent abuse that has been highlighted by the media. What this kind of “truth telling” does is only address the most recent of egregious actions perpetrated by a given institution, whether that be the church, a bank, the police, health care, or government. It is a half-measure, a Band-Aid on a gaping wound. Woodhead is right at many points in her analysis of the importance of truth-telling for institutional progress and health. Even at the expense of possible embarrassment, past wrongs should be named and remembered. This helps prevent further deceptions (see, 99). But, just as bloodless apologies are only the first

step in avoiding further deception, so is not ignoring a history of abusive assumptions that lie at the very heart of an institution's history.

Truth-telling should include the truth, not only of recent poor behavior, but also the truth upon which an institution was founded and of the presuppositions and assumption on which it is based and does its work. This too is a part of the truth-telling. And this is an interdisciplinary enterprise which draws on philosophy, theology, history, and, in some cases, even the sciences. Historian Tony Judt has written, "All collective undertakings require trust. From the games that children play to complex social institutions, humans cannot work together unless they suspend their suspicion of one another (Judt 2010, p. 63)". Here, Judt highlights why this discussion is so important. Without trust, formal institutions will have a hard time gaining the confidence of those whom they are trying to serve. There is, then, a deep connection between truth-telling and an institution's ability to exist and make progress in its affairs.

4.1. Edward Said's Understanding of Humanism

Here, I will explore how the ethics of both formal and informal institutions falls within the purview of the humanist. In fact, it is the humanist that possesses the tools necessary to articulate this ethic. Here, I will draw on the work of Edward W. Said, and specifically his book *Humanism and Democratic Critique*. For Said, humanism is about active reading, specifically an active reading that allows the readers to get inside the process of language that is revealing what is disclosed, hidden, or even masked and is an "integral formative part of the reality itself (Said 2004, pp. 59, 60, 80)". It is an activity of philology, an act of reading well. To be philological, and to thus perform the active task of reading as Said describes it, is "a detailed, patient scrutiny of and a lifelong attentiveness to the words and rhetorics by which language is used by human beings who exist in history (Said 2004, p. 61)". To be historical, to find oneself in the world, in this way (what Said also calls elsewhere "secular" or "worldliness") is to take account of the changing bases of humanistic practices in relation to human life that are in full force in our contemporary culture. Humanism seeks to unearth the history and memories of those exploited, excluded, and often invisible voices that do not make it to the mainstream media. It seeks to hear the histories of small nations and marginalized peoples and resists the temptation to flatten narratives into something easy or palatable. It is the search for knowledge, and from this knowledge, justice and liberation (Said 2004, pp. 81–83, 2000d, p. 301).

For Said, this kind of humanistic reading includes two crucial motions: reception and resistance. *Reception* is "submitting oneself knowledgeable to texts and treating them provisionally at first as discrete objects (since this is how they are initially encountered); moving then, by dint of expanding and elucidating the often obscure or invisible frameworks in which they exist, to their historical situations and the way in which certain structures of attitude, feeling, and rhetoric get entangled with some current, some historical and social formulations of their context (Said 2004, p. 61)". The act of reading is first attempting to put ourselves in the position of the authors and trying to understand why they made certain decisions throughout the writing process and attempting to find a unity within the author through repeated readings (Said 2004, pp. 62, 64). An example that Said gives for this motion of reception is "*ijtihad*". *Ijtihad* is a close reading, a hermeneutic induction, which entails probing general language further through critical language. This is carried out in recognition that "the world of art in question remains at a necessary final remove, unreconciled and in a state of integral wholeness that one has tried to comprehend or impose (Said 2004, p. 71)". Since the Koran is the Word of God, there is no way for the reader to fully understand and comprehend the fullness of the text. That requires, then, repeated readings where one attempts to understand the literal meaning along with an awareness of those who have attempted to understand the text in the past. It is to read the text along with, or inside, a tradition.

The second motion of Said's understanding of humanism is *resistance*. Resistance differentiates between how we are confined to a limited space by our own circumstances

like our educations, and the sense that only experts in, say, economics, the military, health services, or politics, can speak to issues related to these topics. For the humanist, these are urgent concerns. As a humanist, one should attempt to reject and challenge these confinements and presuppositions (Said 2004, pp. 76–79). The world of the economist is not relegated to CEOs or university economics departments. Economics, along with all other fields of study, are within the purview of humanism. Nothing is off-limits. This is because the humanist does not close themselves off, but rather is open to, what Josef Pieper calls, the “totality of things”, which is at the very heart of what it means to do philosophy. No portion of reality or experience is cut off (Pieper 2015; also see, Warne 2023, pp. 154–82). Said notes that it is at this point that the humanist will be “scolded to get back to their texts and leave the world to those whose job is to run it”. But this ignores that the turbulent world in which we find ourselves is full of people with narratives, people who are exiles, outcasts, and immigrants whose accounts of what they go through are often not heard (Said 2004, p. 81). There is no bifurcation between humanism and participation in society. “Humanism is not about the withdrawal and exclusion. Quite the reverse: its purpose is to make more things available to critical scrutiny as the product of human labor, human energies from emancipation and enlightenment, and just as importantly, human misreadings and misinterpretations of the collective past and present (Said 2004, p. 22)”. It is the role of the humanist to offer alternatives to flattened metanarratives which take the human element out of discussions of social goods, economics, and politics (Said 2004, p. 71).

As the humanist does their work of reception and resistance, it is important that they do not close themselves off to others, but that they write and speak in a way that can be heard and understood by others. Said, throughout his career, argues against discipline-specific jargon. In his opinion, the solution to bad writing is simply to avoid jargon that prevents people from being able to read well (Said 2004, p. 72). The humanist cultivates a sense of multiple worlds and interacting traditions that are a form of disclosure. Their task is to be both insider and outsider, to circulate ideas and values relevant for our society while continually and freely demystifying and questioning our surroundings and reality (Said 2004, pp. 72, 76; also see Said 1994, p. 312; 2000c, p. xxxiii; 2000a, p. 565). Further, discipline-specific terminology of this kind is a matter of justice as it gives people access to truth and education, where education allows the ever-widening of our understanding and perception (See, Warne 2018; Said 2004, p. 75). Jargon prevents justice because it keeps people out of the conversation. It only speaks to those who are “inside”. Similarly, Said writes, “Expertise as a distancing device has gotten out of control, especially in some academic forms of expression, to the extent that they become antidemocratic and even anti-intellectual (Said 2004, p. 73; Rustom and Iskandar 2010, p. 5)”. In sum, the humanist reads widely and speaks to a wide audience by writing in a way where they can be understood, using their tools to tell the truth about the world in which we live. Said’s emphasis on not using jargon is important for the ethics of institutions because academic fields that focus on ethics and particular institutions must be able to engage each other. A sin of disciples like theology and philosophy—both analytic and continental—is that it is difficult for non-specialists to engage and reflect. But this is also a sin of most formal institutions, for example, financial, governmental, medical, or scientific institutions, that write and speak in ways that marginalize people who do not have the education and experience and thus prevents their access. The separation of people through jargon or terminology is a matter of justice.¹⁰

4.2. *History, Not Memory*

The ethics of institutions is the realm of the humanist because the humanist does not compartmentalize or restrict their engagement with the world to a single science or discipline, and shies away from language that prevents others from being able to be part of the conversation. “The study of invention of tradition is interdisciplinary. It is a field of study which brings together historians, social anthropologists and a variety of other workers in the human sciences, and cannot adequately be pursued without such collaboration

(Hobsbawm 2012, p. 14)". It is the humanists' place to continually take seriously the human element that exists in the institutions that we live in and take for granted. We have seen that those who have thought about ethics of institutions draw on philosophy in the use of figures like MacIntyre and Rawls: This is important and admirable. But the backdoor to the ethics of institutions of which I am proposing here requires an openness to the voices of others (individuals, communities, fields of study) that are not currently present in the literature. The most obvious approach from this emphasis of the idea of "tradition" will be that of the historian, where the historian is allowed the space to tell the truth about an institution's beginnings and its progress over time, and its enduring values and motivations. This is a way to build trust, a trust that is dependent on a commitment to truth and transparency concerning the past and the stories that an institution tells about itself. Whether religious or secular, coming back to these informal institutions of traditions brings to light moments of error or abuse. Examining these traditions is how to allow them to better achieve their aims. Telling the truth about traditions is essential for creating decent societies which depend on well-functioning formal institutions. This is the way of progress and how institutions shed off past abuses and move forward. It is often the case that we do not adequately scrutinize and take account of, on the one hand, where we think the authority or origin of these traditions lie, and on the other, the fact that we are the receivers of some set of assumptions that we enact in our daily lives, workplaces, and worship spaces.

For those thinking about ethics of institutions, some of the first questions that should be raised are historical. The passing on of traditions from one generation to the next is something that takes place within history. As we have seen above, tradition is a process of formalized ritualization that is cultivated through repetition and is characterized by reference to the past. This is the connection between tradition and the study of history. The historian can recognize symptoms that indicate past problems that might go unnoticed by us today (Hobsbawm 2012, pp. 4, 12). Humanism, and specifically history, then, is this backdoor approach, which asks us to consider an institution's founding and what it continues to pass on regarding its assumptions and values. And, "coming to terms with historical injustices has received insufficient attention from the accommodationist models." (Bashir 2012, p. 128).

We cannot be exclusive about the narratives we tell and only emphasize the good things while leaving out the bad. This kind of "exclusivism" is the "avoidable narrowing of vision that sees in the past only self-flattering narratives that deliberately filter out not just the achievements of other groups but in a sense even their fructifying presence (Said 2004, p. 51)". It is important, however, that we do not confuse history with memory. A memory of institutions can remain curiously out of focus, where it is easy to allow the myths of memory and mythological narratives, which are memorialized triumphalist statues, shrines, "heritage sites", and narratives that praise famous individuals and victories and recall selective suffering, to remind us of the past (Judt 2015, p. 271; 2009, p. 3; Judt and Snyder 2012, p. 277; Margalit 2004, pp. 54, 60). Said writes, "in my understanding of its relevance today, humanism is not a way of consolidating and affirming what 'we' have always known and felt, but rather a means of questioning, upsetting, and reformulating so much of what is presented to us as commodified, packaged, uncontroversial, and uncritically codified certainties, including those contained in the masterpieces herded under the rubric of 'the classics.'" He continues, "there can be no true humanism whose scope is limited to extolling patriotically the virtues of our culture, our language, our monuments (Said 2004, p. 28, also see p. 42)". Memory in this sense appeals to the public, and it is this place of nostalgia that prevents us from taking a hard look at those institutions that play the most significant role in our lives, and are most prone to abuse or to be abused. Memory makes it feel like what has happened in the past is behind us, like the past no longer has a hold on us today, on our decisions, and on our lives (Judt 2009, p. 4). Memory is not necessarily bad, but if it is separated from, or comes prior to, the hard look at historical realities, then memory is open to manipulation. And this is one of the problems of our modern era that appeals to

commemoration, where sites of memory arouse in us sentiments of respect, sadness, or pride. These feed off the presumption of actual historical knowledge. History allows us no such luxury. It criticizes and corrects official public memory (Judt 2009, p. 215). “The intellectual is perhaps a kind of counter-memory, with its own counter-discourse that will not allow consciousness to look away or fall asleep (Said 2004, p. 142)”.

Thus, an *ethics* of institutions is, then, a *history* of institutions. It is telling the truth about the past, even when that history is hard to hear and hard to bear. An ethics of institutions does not disregard memory, as it is a critical resource that provides perspective and draws upon peoples’ ability to remember. But it is the role of the ethics of institutions to also challenge public memory (Judt 2009, pp. 198–99). It is better to distinguish between traditions as institutions while opposing myths and thus risk disillusion and loss of faith (Judt and Snyder 2012, p. 292). It is from here that we can scrutinize our sacred, civic, living or dead traditions and bring to account the moments of abuse in the history of the life of an institution and its current values. What we might find if we delve deep into our histories is, as Said puts it, that what might be considered in this era as established fact, or tradition is “fabrication for mass consumption (Said 2000e, p. 584)”.

Woodhead notes that clarifying institutional values is important “so long as it is not used as a smokescreen” (99). Genuinely taking a hard look at what is being passed down from generation to generation is a way of avoiding the smokescreen. Telling the truth about those values which have been passed on, when scrutinized, can allow for progress. Woodhead further notes that if there is a greater absence of honesty and what I have called “history” above, there can be no learning, and thus change becomes unlikely (98). This illuminates not only patterns of past abuse, but also the ideologies and assumptions on which these patterns develop.

The British Society of Friends (Quakers) that Woodhead cites as being a good example of incorporating a conception of “truth” into value statements, explicitly points to their traditional values of Quaker roots that go back 150 years and promote social justice, speaking truth, having integrity, and sustainability. The British Society of Friends not only explicitly states their commitment to truth, but puts this in the context of traditions of belief and practice. She writes, “For long-lived institutions, history and tradition can be an ally. Structural and cultural changes are easier to make if they rediscover and build upon historic elements, reinterpret existing roles and reinvent established ones” (101).¹¹ Traditions, as I have expressed here, are not static and strictly about the past. It also leaves room for how an institution might grow and progress. Moving forward, new challenges will arise to which an institution will need to respond. But both informal and formal institutions will only remain viable if they are able to open themselves up to these challenges and give themselves the best tools to address these new trails.¹² An example of the other side of the coin is the way that Catholicism has shaped Brazilian Christo-fascism, which is the hegemonic Christianity used and formulated by theological intellectuals that promote authoritarian political theologies which shape the State. Fabio Py has shown that Fr Paulo Ricardo’s politically biased posts on social media since 2013 have set the trajectory for Jair Bolsonaro’s administration (Py 2021, p. 413). Py, by drawing on Dorothee Sölle, shows that Bolsonaro’s Brazilian Christo-fascism has strong family resemblances with the Nazi government’s use of Christian terminologies for its social cohesion, as well as white extremists in the United States. This is not only an issue of political institutions and the influence that the church has on them, but a misunderstanding of theological tradition, which in part could be remedied through attention to history and tradition, and a philological practice of reading well in Said’s terms. It may be Christian terminology, but not Christian. Humanism could not just accept these words and concepts, but rather challenge their usage, showing their anti-theological nature. Thus, Brazilian Christo-fascism, like Nazism and white supremacy in the US, is closer to constructed memory than history. The humanist would seek to unearth the history and memory and highlight the voices of those who have been exploited and those voices that have been excluded in the search for knowledge of the past, with the intent of creating institutions where justice and liberation can flourish. Py, himself,

recognizes that one of the problems here is a kind of “reading” of a tradition. He writes the following:

The hegemonic Christianity used today by Bolsonarism, formulated by theological intellectuals, is promoted in the context of an “authoritarian political theology that escalates and shapes the State”. This political theology is *guided by the reading* and interpretation of the “Great Christian Missionary Institutions,” solidifying a political of “hatred for democratic plurality.”¹³

For the humanist, as Said has described, these are urgent concerns, and it is the place of the humanist to challenge these narratives, readings, and presuppositions.¹⁴

5. Conclusions

This paper highlighted the distinction between “formal” and “informal” institutions. Doing this repositioning with regard to the starting point of the ethics of institutions can provide a backdoor to an understanding of the function of formal institutions in our world, what values may lay latent in them, and how we relate to them. Approaching the ethics of institutions through being a humanist in Said’s terms creates an alternative starting point and forces us to ask unconventional questions, providing innovative ways of addressing systemic and structural assumptions and injustices within established institutional bodies. A community cannot overlook sins of thought, word, or deed in one of its members, nor in its history. There can be no peace if truth-telling is not present. In this way, Linda Woodhead’s connection between truth-telling and institutions is important, but perhaps only part of the story as more emphasis could be placed on *how* truth-telling can take place within institutional history. What is needed is a real sense that institutions are larger entities than we typically have in our imaginations. They are schools, governments, and churches, but they are also historically bound entities that bring to our everyday engagement many presuppositions about the way that money, education, and faith function in our cultural imagination. Theologian D. Stephen Long reminds us that “For the human action never merely arises as an isolated event; it is always already bound by interpretive conditions—which in turn are bound by social institutions historically embedded—such that facts are intelligible only on the basis of those interpretive conditions (Long 2000, p. 224)”. Further, Bashir Bashir notes, “the historical dimension of long-standing injustices gives rise to a set of distinctive demands, such as remembrance, acknowledgement, responsibility, and apology and reparations (Bashir 2012, p. 128)”. These demands not only go beyond deliberative democracy, but extend to demands to tell the truth in our stories about institutions’ place in our society and beliefs.

We are obligated to confront those who are committing injustice. Radical honesty promotes awareness of our actions and leads to a truthful narrative, a truthful autobiography, which can hold us accountable for our past, present, and our future (Lembke 2023, p. 176). When we tell stories that acknowledge responsibility for our actions, we get better (Lembke 2023, p. 186). Knowledge about the past can lead to recognition, justice, and liberation. We cannot be exclusive about the narratives we tell and only emphasize the good things while leaving out the bad. It is important that we do not confuse history with memory. Freed from the presuppositions that silently shape an institution, we can more easily and effectively contribute to the common good. The first steps of justice are done when there is recognition of a past of abuse, whether that be genocide and displacement, or racist and sexist ideologies. Said writes, “the world we live in is made up of numerous identities interacting, sometimes harmoniously, sometimes antithetically... We cannot make our claim as seekers after justice that we advocate knowledge only of and about ourselves. Our model for academic freedom should therefore be the migrant or traveler (Said 2000b, p. 403)”. To emphasize the interdisciplinary approach of humanism, and specifically history’s place in it, is to take seriously Said’s understanding of “worldliness”, which forces us to recognize that we can never be free from the conditions of material existence, and it is the work of the humanist to bring into conversation one tradition with another, showing how they have interacted in the past and how they can peacefully engage each other in the future. This

admittedly difficult task allows traditions to speak to each other and interrogate each other (Said 2004, p. 49). Institutions may lie to themselves and lie to others about themselves. But it is harder to intentionally ignore if one has done the hard work sifting through the past with open eyes.

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Notes

- ¹ (Woodhead 2022, p. 101) Page numbers for Woodhead will hereafter be in the body of the text.
- ² This language is drawn from (Cook 2011).
- ³ For example, see (Moore 2005, 2012).
- ⁴ Also see (Aranzadi 2013, p. 491).
- ⁵ (Boniolo and Fiore 2010; Bezuidenhout et al. 2018) Concerning codes of conduct, see (Kaptein 2010).
- ⁶ (Rawls 1999, p. 11) Much of Rawls’ discussion of institutions can be found on pages 171–346.
- ⁷ For one instance of this discussion, see (Rawls 1999, p. 177).
- ⁸ For one example, see (Phillips and Margolis 1999).
- ⁹ For more on the relationship between the decent society, humiliation, and theology of institutions, see (Warne 2022).
- ¹⁰ For more of this connection between justice and the use of “terminology” to alienate groups of people, see (Warne 2018).
- ¹¹ For more on how the above approach to institutions can not only help weed out abuses but also help create a positive sense of gratitude for institutions, see (Warne 2021).
- ¹² (Rosemann 2018, p. 115) Also see (MacIntyre 1988, p. 358).
- ¹³ (Py 2021, p. 413) *Italics mine*.
- ¹⁴ Note that the author is neither Quaker nor Catholic. These traditions were drawn upon for illustrative purposes only and not an endorsement and sweeping criticism of any particular organization, institution, or tradition.

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