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Institutions and Process

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An Abstract of
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The following pages explore the social reality of institutional lag. Since existence is processive, institutions founded on certain principles and circumstances must be subject to careful examination and subsequent adjustment when they no longer produce valued results. The social reality of institutional lag, however, has roots in a more personal reluctance to relinquish certitude and undergo change. Since growth is accomplished through such a process, the reluctance to address change and make adjustments must be addressed. Thus, this inquiry begins with the recognition and analysis of institutional lag, evolves into an analysis of the individual and, finally, discusses the complicated and interwoven nature of the problem and possible solutions.
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Abstract

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Chapter One

Introduction

Good philosophy challenges us to consider the relationship between ourselves and the world; human institutions are extensions of ourselves that become part of the world. They are self-consciously designed to be fixed, i.e., their purpose is to provide stability by staying more or less the same over time, though their diversity and multiplicity throughout the world at any given time is a testament to the ever-changing nature of human reality. The focus of the following pages is "institutional lag," or the inevitable tension between the changing nature of human reality and our enduring need for stability as it manifests in conflicts between institutional inertia and social needs. For example, some old social needs (e.g., sanitary waste elimination) require new and improved institutional solutions as ever more people live closer together. Other social needs (e.g., safeguarding electronic information) may be unprecedented. But in all cases, our needs will outstrip our institutions since institutions are ultimately responses to our needs (even as they seek to define and determine what our needs are, e.g., in what sense do we need freedom or privacy? Do we need these things in the same sense as clean air, water and sanitary waste elimination?).

The following pages are devoted to the examination of a particularly distressing fact of social existence, namely the inertia by which institutions resist valuable
adjustments to changing circumstances. In physics, a body at rest tends to stay at rest and a body in motion tends to stay in motion unless acted upon by outside forces. In politics, an institution will persist and seek to secure its future, unless challenged by active inquiry. In politics, however, there is one clear difference: the institution can be challenged from without as well as from within. This thesis will examine the individual and the individual’s relationship to the community. In examining these issues, the value of ‘truth,’ ‘fixity,’ ‘questioning,’ ‘reflection,’ ‘change’ and ‘growth’ are in turn scrutinized in a way that is vitally relevant to the life of the individual and the community. This inquiry begins with the recognition and analysis of this particular social fact, evolves into an analysis of the individual and, finally, discusses the corresponding nature of the social and personal problem of institutional lag.

It must first be noted that the following pages are prefaced on the assumption that circumstances change. Change is prevalent throughout the greater, physical world and the individual. Existence is processive. There is no explicit argument or defense of this position. However, numerous examples make this position more apparent and, perhaps for the unconvinced, compelling. These examples include the change in social values, technological advancements, changing environmental conditions, and even the shifting and transient nature of the meaning of words. It is further maintained that these changing circumstances pressure or compel corresponding changes in human nature and that changes on the individual and social level change the literal landscape of the world. That is, change is not only prevalent but also ongoing.

The second chapter centers around the institution and the problems that develop for a community undergoing continuous change. The focus, then, is on the harmful
qualities of society’s institutions. Institutions are also, on the other hand, a vital component of the everyday life of its citizens and I do not wish to ignore or degrade their worth. In the words of James Hayden Tufts, the institution is capable of “conserving a large measure of what experience has taught…. It brings a sense of direction and organizes impulses, habits, and collective strength to deal with the situation or conflict” (Tufts, 1934, p. 331). The community’s citizens would not be able to function so effortlessly without the institutions by which the community is comprised. Yet, it is the institution which also stifles progress and, with the considerable social power it has been bestowed and its subsequent inertia, resists necessary social change.

Thus, one of the most difficult and deceptive problems facing a continuously adapting society stems from its own institutions. A society’s institutions - although they provide stability and efficiency - cause problems because of the inertia with which they persist. Institutions often continue to execute outmoded and ineffective procedures, policies and laws when others would be more adequate. The slow pace with which institutions adjust to changing social situations causes a great deal of friction between the inertia of the institution and the needs of those in the community. Often this situation deteriorates as friction between the inertia of the institution and the needs of the public cause suffering for those members of the community who no longer benefit from such an institution. In the following pages numerous examples, both great and small, are discussed to illustrate and substantiate this idea. This problem, while an extremely difficult one because of the power and momentum of the institution, is also extremely complex. An institution’s ability to respond quickly and adequately to the community is in constant danger of being undermined because the social and environmental conditions
the institution faces are always in flux, always undergoing change. The historical examples of agriculture and the invention of the written word easily illustrate how physical and social change cause tension and precipitate institutional change. As a result of continuous flux, institutions will always be subject to some amount of lag.

The argument developed in chapter two is further supported by citing a number of examples. These examples range from the simple and mundane to the complex and highly problematic. In order to further demonstrate the complicated and interconnected nature of institutional lag with a more personal inclination to resist the bother of change, the examples will resurface throughout the paper. First, we examine the nature of some local and minor laws and the way in which they restrict citizens. What becomes clear through this example is the exceedingly transitory nature of such laws, the fact that they are utterly inapplicable and absurd under different conditions, in different times, or for people with different values. The second example explores the very complex problem of poverty and reproductive rights in Latin America. The power of custom and tradition - secular and religious - limits the exploration of possible solutions to the problem to a single, traditional ‘solution’ or one that will at times prove to be no solution at all. The attempt to address the changing circumstances of this population with any sort of different and novel solution is prematurely cut off because of its ‘deviant’ character. The third example illustrates, through discussing the often unquestioned wisdom of the U.S. Constitution, the assumption of the universal applicability of its doctrines.

We thus see that the problem of institutional lag is also a deceptive one because the institution’s original procedures, policies and laws are too often considered absolutely
and universally right.¹ The assumption that the founding institution is capable of adequately addressing any situation too easily insulates one from more careful and conscientious examination and reflection. A response to practices that no longer yield valuable and progressive results will be slow and halting without close observation and consideration of the consequences of these institutional procedures, policies and laws. Assumptions that unfaultable solutions have already been derived, and that these solutions are absolutely and universally applicable, strengthen and even promote resistance to change that might address divergent situations more adequately. When people who are committed to this traditional perspective face problems that are too evident and troublesome to be ignored, they too often seek solutions by returning more rigidly to the original doctrine or intent of the institution, not by examining and discussing divergent or novel solutions. Within this conservative tendency to obstinately maintain and promote an institution’s past procedures, policies and laws in the face of situations it no longer reflects, one can identify an inclination to reject the new and unknown in order to hold firmly to comforting habits and customs. This inclination is not only a problem for the community at large; but it is also a problem on an individual level, for outmoded and harmful habits and customs can easily become too cumbersome and limiting. Yet, because they are also intimately known and comforting, such habits and customs resist crucial, helpful adjustment.

Thus, what began as an investigation into communal problems must turn, in chapter three, into an examination of the individual. Institutional lag reflects not only the inertia inherent to an institution, but also a willingness on the part of individuals to

¹ By absolutely and universally right I mean to describe policies, procedures or laws that are understood by too many as true for everyone, anywhere and at anytime. These are policies, procedures and laws that seem to have no exceptions and, further, that seem to have little need for exceptions.
assume that what has worked in the past will also work in the future. Institutional lag is, in part, traceable back to the reluctance people exhibit when facing necessary adjustment. This reluctance can be found even in the face of a habit or custom that hinders and harms the individual. Given a human tendency to feel more at ease with habits and customs, and thus to feel some amount of unease when facing possible change or the unknown, we find a willingness to resist fruitful adjustments. The human propensity to resist change is found even when previously established habits break down and cease to work, even when institutions cease to reflect and aid a changed society; and thus this propensity can be found both on a personal and a social level. It is significant indeed because habits and customs shape the individual’s character. Of even more concern is the fact that, the stronger the habit or custom is, the less likely it is to be consciously recognized as such, let alone recognized as problematic.

In examining this problem both generally and specifically, it is important to emphasize the complicated and interwoven nature of society (namely the institutions that form this society) and the individuals within the society. Institutions attempt to enforce certain actions, certain modes of being, while individuals within a society, on the other hand, attempt to both conform to these demands and compel concessions that permit better accord with the changing environment. The force the larger society is capable of exerting on the individual is powerful; and, in the face of rigid and static institutions and a human tendency to resist the bother of change, individuals facing different situations and serious problems are less likely to receive valuable help in a timely manner. However, this problem need not be so severe. With close observation and reflection, with a willingness to undergo change, society is capable of a more timely and
compassionate response to changing conditions. Or is it?

In chapter four, we will see that critics of the view outlined above point to the limits of human nature’s capacity for responsive and altruistic adjustment. Reinhold Niebuhr, whose criticism I examine in depth in this chapter, denies the possibility that society can resolve its major problems. He admits only the *possibility* of very minor and temporary social improvements, if one first affirms an educated, although naive, optimism. John Dewey, a prominent figure in the following pages, is willing to affirm the possibility that society is capable of a more significant progress than Niebuhr anticipates. While Niebuhr admits that optimism is the key to making possible even slight progress, he himself lacks this quality. Society, for Niebuhr, is incapable of ever finding authoritative solutions to its problems both because of the limitations of human nature and because of the changing, evolving nature of society and thus of its problems. It follows that, if existence is processive, as I have claimed, then society faces and will continue to face changing situations. As a result, many of society’s problems will also change and thus what might have been a solution in the past may no longer be one in the future (and might itself even become a problem). With this assertion alone it follows that there can never be a final solution. Dewey, however, holds this assertion as well and never offers one; he, in fact, affirms that there will never be final, lasting solutions. This alone, then, is no criticism. Niebuhr also asserts that society is incapable of significant improvement because of the limitations of human nature. While his argument seemed initially troublesome, I will conclude that to so limit and define the capacities of human nature is, at the very least, ill advised. Given the extent to which society can shape our nature, it follows that we may be capable of great progress, of tremendous and altruistic
actions, and of unforeseen transformations.

The path towards being able to more quickly and adequately respond and adjust to changing social and personal problems is a path that starts with the recognition that no matter how sure one is of the answer at which one has arrived, there is still value and possibility in the willingness to continue to examine and question. One must first be willing to put back into question, to reflect on and discuss, what one firmly believes. If one’s core beliefs, once questioned, lead to contradictory conclusions or harmful results, one must be willing to subject even these core beliefs to revision. There must be the recognition that what one “cannot help believing today,” one may “thoroughly disbelieve tomorrow” (Peirce, 1905, p. 337). Once there is this realization, there is an openness that allows harmful practices and beliefs to give way to modification more easily. Only then are more adequate and timely adjustments more likely.

Of course, the following pages are not intended to suggest that habitual states or institutional regulations should somehow not be ‘fully’ formed. Rather, my conclusion is that habitual states must be acknowledged as such and individuals must be brought to an awareness that their habits need to be subject to careful thought and possible revision. Institutions will be more or less flexible depending on the flexibility of the individuals they serve. “What is necessary,” Dewey writes, “is that habits be formed which are more intelligent, more sensitive, perceptive, more informed with foresight, more aware of what they are about, more direct and sincere, more flexibly responsive than those now current” (Dewey, 1922, p. 90). Within the following chapters there are oft-repeated words, words such as ‘observation,’ ‘questioning,’ ‘reflection,’ ‘change’ and ‘growth’. These terms all reference a common theme: the theme of education. These words all imply, essentially, a
potential process of continuous growth, of continuous development and hence of education. There is no fixed goal. The process is the goal and the process is that of life. Thus, “our net conclusion is that life is development, and that developing, growing, is life” (Dewey, 1916, p. 54).

Benjamin Barber, a well-known political theorist and author of *Strong Democracy*, coins the word ‘talk’ to describe, on a social level, the process outlined above. It is in talking with others that we are forced to reëncounter some of our most fundamental beliefs. In the discussion of one’s beliefs with others (who themselves may hold different or even opposing beliefs), one’s own beliefs are more likely to be subject to open, perhaps rigorous scrutiny. What had previously seemed to be an indubitable fact, a strong core belief, may under this scrutiny look highly suspect. ‘Talk,’ then, gives ineffective, questionable beliefs and habits the opportunity to undergo communal analysis that may prevent the obstinate continuation of these same questionable or harmful beliefs or habits. Careful deliberation is effectively inspired by ‘talk,’ by discussion. This will be considered highly significant since “the thing actually at stake in any serious deliberation is… what kind of person one is to become, what sort of self in the making, what kind of a world is making” (Dewey, 1922, p. 150). As will be demonstrated in the following pages, it is dangerous, both on an individual and a social level, to fix upon one answer, to understand any one answer as indefinitely, universally applicable. In contrast, the type of understanding that is suggested below can diminish institutional lag, prevent unnecessary harm and promote continuous personal growth.
Chapter Two

Institutional Lag

One of the greatest social problems facing a continuously changing community, a problem that actively resists and obstructs change, is the rigid structure of institutions. Institution is, in the context of the following pages, defined to mean simply “any established and successful arrangement for carrying out a purpose, such as business [or] education” (Baldwin, 1901, p. 556). An institution’s inherent power and control is recognized as both beneficial and dangerously limiting. Thorstein Veblen sums this tension up nicely in The Theory of the Leisure Class.

Institutions are not only themselves the result of a selective and adaptive process which shapes the prevailing or dominant types of spiritual attitude and aptitudes; they are at the same time special methods of life and of human relations, and are therefore in their turn efficient factors of selection (Veblen, 1899, p. 188).

The origin of institutions, then, is a development of prevalent social habitudes; it is a selective process. However, the continuation of these institutions proceeds to select and cull, to reign in and foster, acceptable ‘methods of life.’ Thus, “the development of these institutions is the development of society” (Veblen, 1899, p. 190).

“It is institutions,” James Campbell writes, “that transform the fleeting advances of human insight into sustained practices.” Institutions are inherent to and prevalent throughout all societies; they are found in the formation of languages, laws, customs and all sorts of organized practices. Thus it is that institutions are formed to “address
recurring difficulties in our shared lives” (Campbell, 2004, p. 43-44). If this is the institution’s function, it follows that it must be capable of modification based on changing circumstances. When beneficial modifications fail to occur, however, the institution ceases to operate as a valuable and helpful tool for the community and begins to operate in opposition to the community’s needs.

It is also true that institutions are at the same time the projection of social habitudes and are thus resistant to transformation. Institutions are created by those living in certain conditions and times, facing particular problems; and so they are created by those who are limited by a particular understanding of the world and their lives. Institutions, then, are created within specific modes of being. They “are products of the past process, are adapted to past circumstances, and are therefore never in full accord with the requirements of the present” (Veblen, 1899, p. 191). Institutions have the capacity to fully represent only their own particular perspective adequately, however diverse or limited that perspective may be. Thus, institutions lag behind continuously changing conditions. It is clear that institutions often outlive their founders. And, although those who create the institution die and the conditions in which the institution is embedded change - the particular problems therefore changing as well - the institution maintains or endeavors to maintain its founding rules, regulations and intent.² It is because of this changing situation that the institution far too often outlasts its usefulness. Even worse, the institution resists any form of reorganization and obstructs any appeal to readdress conditions and problems it no longer adequately addresses. The rigidity of a

² Although institutions are maintained by individuals, once they are established, they have their own inertia. It is this inertia that can endeavor to maintain the institutions founding rules, regulations and intent beyond the point of their usefulness. Of course, people within an institution also most often work to maintain it and, in chapter three, this will be discussed in depth.
good number of social institutions, whether political, religious or economic, prevent a continually renewing public from efficiently addressing different concerns, concerns that are both mundane and imperative. John Dewey specifically addresses this phenomenon in his 1927 volume, *The Public and Its Problems*.

In political terms, Dewey describes institutional lag and confirms that the public’s only opportunity to address its changing conditions is found in the face of an overly rigid system or agency, in the fracture of the current resistant institution. In Dewey’s own words,

> the new public which is generated remains long inchoate, unorganized, because it cannot use inherited political agencies. The latter, if elaborate and well institutionalized, obstruct the organization of the new public. They prevent that development of new forms of the state which might grow up rapidly were social life more fluid, less precipitated into set political and legal molds. To form itself, the public has to break existing political forms.

Although such words sound dire, the rigidity of the system directly corresponds to the amount of force necessary to direct a change in the political form that would more accurately address the changing circumstances and problems. “This is why the change of the form of states is so often effected only by revolution” (Dewey, 1927, p. 254-255). Although he specifically addresses the form of states in this passage, effectively addressing this problem on an elevated scale, it pervades all levels of social and political life.

Even when facing less extreme circumstances, even when slow and painful adjustments are attempted, lag is never entirely absent. It must be noted, though, that “when an institution is functioning properly in a society, its presence is hardly noticed; and, when it is reasonably flexible, its presence will continue to go unnoticed.” While
occasionally capable of meliorating the situation, slow but reflective attempts to adjust dysfunctional institutions never fully catch up, never reach a final end point that is wholly sufficient. Thus, institutions, “as habitual creations, tend to lag behind the developments in social life and become constricting” (Campbell, 2004, p. 45). Veblen writes,

in the nature of the case, this process of selective adaptation can never catch up with the progressively changing situation in which the community finds itself at any given time; for the environment, the situation, the exigencies of life which enforce the adaptation and exercise the selection, change from day to day; and each successive situation of the community in its turn tends to obsolescence as soon as it has been established (Veblen, 1899, p. 191).

Hence, the process is continuous but never entirely sufficient. However, the degree of adjustment and the speed with which adjustments are made is subject to the fixity with which old institutions have been embedded and maintained. Both mundane and large concerns are, from day to day, subject to change and this is easily recognized with only a minimum of examples.

On a more mundane level, city ordinances are adjusted based upon the specific conditions the city faces. People within any given community take into account their own population, environment, values and a myriad of other concerns they, as a community, face when forming regulations. For example, it is clear that a local ordinance specifying the responsibility of home owners to both cut and water their lawns to a certain specification is considered highly absurd, pointless even, at other times, for other locales and for other people (people with differing values). For those living within different communities, at various other times and with various different concerns, may find no value in such a law. It is further evident and common that even some within such a community find little or no value in such regulations. It is clear, as well, that time
changes these conditions and therefore the resulting concerns as well. Changing natural or social conditions, however, do not often coincide with a timely and parallel changing of the regulations and their enforcement. Even minor changes in the structure of laws and regulations lag behind the need for their change, often for an unacceptable length of time. The nature of the institution may well carry a discretionary, even tolerable amount of lag with it, but any assumption by its founders of its universal applicability, serves to render its future more secure at the expense of a changing public. Even such tedious and mundane concerns can cause tremendous problems when change is rapid and the institution is resistant or alarmingly unprepared.³

An extreme, although apt example of rapid change and the resulting ineffective methods of life developed through previously established institutions can be illustrated through the example of the American frontier. Since institutions shape the acceptable modes of life, the people who develop through and within these institutions face a high degree of tension and difficulty when conditions change radically. This is, in some sense, natural but also problematic. Thus, when conditions call for a different mode of being, a way of thinking and acting that is alien, there is not a blank slate on which to learn this new way, but resistance. These are the conditions “the complex European life” faced when confronted by the wilderness and its “simplicity of primitive conditions” (Turner, 1894, p. 206).

Frederick J. Turner describes the American frontier as a radical shift, a shift in which the acceptable modes of life that developed through European institutions could not continue to function as a whole. The institutions that eventually developed out of the

³ Sanitary waste elimination can cause tremendous problems for a community when conditions change rapidly or when the institution is unprepared or resistant to addressing this change.
frontier were not simply recreations of past institutions, but uniquely American. “Little by little he [the frontiersman] transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe… The fact is, that here is a new product that is American” (Turner, 1894, p. 201). The old European institutions and the social habitudes it created ceased to function to promote life on the frontier and in this collapse new institutions developed. As we will see, much of the old life had to literally be thrown out in order to survive.

With the social habitudes developed through the European life “the frontier… environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions it furnishes, or perish” (Turner, 1894, p. 201). European values had to be set aside, literally thrown to the side of the trail with the piano and other culturally-valued property, in order to survive the conditions of the frontier. “For a moment, at the frontier, the bonds of custom are broken and unrestraint is triumphant.” There is either a collapse of these institutionally nourished traditional values or a failure to survive. Many were at first unprepared and ill-equipped to deal with such a radically different life. The new demand the environment placed on these people was likely often met with some amount of resistance because of the ingrained customs and habitudes that developed through European institutions (even though these customs and habitudes were ineffective). As we know, on the whole, tradition gave way to the novel. Turner describes this tension:

The stubborn America environment is there with its imperious summons to accept its conditions; the inherited ways of doing things are also there; and yet, in spite of environment, and in spite of custom, each frontier did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness, and confidence, and scorn of older society, impatience of its restraints and its ideas, and indifference to its lessons, have accompanied the frontier (Turner, 1894, p. 227).
In the end, the old institutions were overcome and the new ‘product,’ America, developed. If too many of these European institutions were regarded with sacred and absolute authority, the changes needed for survival and the subsequent new ‘life’ could not have been met. Many of these institutions first had to be recognized as ineffective and unproductive to a life faced with radically different conditions.

I have no doubt that many examples can be used to demonstrate the appalling conditions that arise when institutions and the people shaped through these institutions are ill-equipped, ineffective and indeed disinclined to deal with social or environmental change. The following pages will illustrate a few more examples. The point, however, is clear: universal and absolutistic principles only exacerbate resistance to addressing changing social conditions, and therefore exacerbate human suffering. Although institutions are created to address the very real and urgent needs of the public at the time, the degree of institutional lag can serve to indicate that people far too often create these institutions not with working hypotheses but rather with what they have thought to be permanent remedies. “The doctrines,” Dewey writes,

served a particular local pragmatic need. But often their very adaptation to immediate circumstances unfitted them, pragmatically, to meet more enduring and more extensive needs. They lived to cumber the political grounds, obstructing progress, all the more because they were uttered and held not as hypotheses with which to direct social experimentation but as final truths, dogmas. No wonder they call urgently for revision and replacement (Dewey, 1927, p. 326).

The finality with which the solution is reached is all the more dangerous, appallingly so, for its inability to address any new or different situations. Having derived the solution in its inception, having reached the known Truth, there is no longer any need to seriously examine or contemplate the matter again. Indeed, doing so may seem only
counterproductive to the continual advancement of the solution and the institution. Not only is the institution resistant to an in depth reëvaluation of its founding assumptions, it is scornful as well.

The reasoning behind this resistance is further explained by Benjamin Barber in *Strong Democracy*. He writes, “with one starting point and one model of reasoning, there can only be one true (logically consequential) outcome and thus only one true notion of politics, rights, obligation, and so forth” (Barber, 1984, p. 31). This is utterly contrary to Dewey and Barber’s own position. Instead of assuming any original and universal starting point, there is a willingness to respond and develop through the situations at hand. In this case, the reasoning behind and justification for any decision reflects the changing circumstances and not necessarily some historical, preordained principle.

This resistance is based upon a principle that rests on the assumption that there “exists a knowable independent ground - an incorrigible first premise… from which the concepts, values, standards, and ends of political life can be derived by simple deduction” (Barber, 1984, p. 46). However, the demand to adhere to previously established doctrines and institutions diverts awareness from (and consideration of) the results of these same established doctrines and institutions. Focus, here, shifts “toward the need to render intelligibility absolute and justice incorrigible - even at the high cost of distorting or abandoning the subject matter under study” (Barber, 1984, p. 49). This diversion is deeply unacceptable to conditions that are always undergoing change. Unreflective adherence to past institutions cannot work when “politics is archetypically experiential and thus experimental in Dewey’s sense. It is the art of planning, coordinating, and executing the collective futures of human communities” (Barber, 1984, p. 53).
communities are not recreations of the past, but always and fundamentally renewing creations, then previously established institutions must themselves undergo change; institutions must be capable of swiftly adjusting to fulfill the demands of a new situation.

For Barber, “politics is not the application of Truth to the problem of human relations but the application of human relations to the problem of truth” (Barber, 1984, p. 64). Absolute truth is irrelevant to the complexity of an acting populace. Instead, the goal should be a better approximation to current and fluctuating standards that respond to the genuine needs of the community. In fact, Barber says that in the presence of absolute and universal truth the need for politics is utterly absent. “Where there is certain knowledge, true science, or absolute right, there is no conflict that cannot be resolved by reference to the unity of truth, and thus there is no necessity for politics” (Barber, 1984, p. 129). Barber quickly demonstrates that founding an institution based upon the assumption of its utter certainty and applicability leaves the political realm utterly unnecessary. When facing ‘absolute right’ the only option, in the face of obstacles, is to return to those same principles and to attempt to more rigidly follow their strictures.

In establishing an institution, rules and standards are established. These rules and standards naturally define what is acceptable and, by establishing such boundaries, exclude other possibilities. However, since institutions develop through and within the community, there is no need for them to excessively limit the ‘right’, nor rigidly and narrowly define and enforce standards. George Herbert Mead, in *Mind, Self, and Society*, more broadly defines the social institution, its intent and its possibilities.

Social institutions, like individual selves, are developments within, or particular and formalized manifestations of, the social life process at its human evolutionary level. As such they are not necessarily subversive of individuality in the individual members; and they do not necessarily
represent or uphold narrow definitions of certain fixed and specific patterns of acting.

As most communities are diverse, their institutions could reflect this diversity instead of limiting it. This should especially be possible given that the institutions develop within the community itself. Mead continues by stating that the institutions need only broadly and generally define social life. This way, the institution is capable of “affording plenty of scope for originality, flexibility, and variety of such [individual] conduct” (Mead, 1934, p. 262-263). Giving free reign to originality and maintaining flexible regulations more easily acknowledges and addresses new problems and incorporates novel solutions. In a certain sense, then, the method by which institutional lag is addressed is an experimental method.

For Dewey, the enduring problem of institutional lag is diminished by an approach that is also provisional and experimental. Experimental is here not meant in a narrowly scientific sense, but instead is meant to convey a system that continually seeks out the results of its more tentatively held solutions, a system that more openly and willingly redefines and reworks its solutions based on their results. This method is spelled out clearly in The Public and Its Problems. Dewey states:

When we say that thinking and beliefs should be experimental, not absolutistic, we have then in mind a certain logic of method, not, primarily, the carrying on of experimentation like that of laboratories. Such a logic involves the following factors: First, that those concepts, general principles, theories and dialectical developments which are indispensable to any systematic knowledge be shaped and tested as tools of inquiry. Secondly, that policies and proposals for social action be treated as working hypotheses, not as programs to be rigidly adhered to and executed. They will be experimental in the sense that they will be entertained subject to constant and well-equipped observation of the consequences they entail when acted upon, and subject to ready and flexible revision in the light of observed consequences (Dewey, 1927, p. 361-362).
This means, of course, that we no longer assume *a priori* the correctness and infallibility of our institutions.\(^4\) Instead, we continually examine the institution’s assumptions and its outcomes, committing to the institution only to the extent that its results continue to satisfy the community’s changing needs. The results that mire the community in problems and cause suffering will be traced back to their potential causes. There will be consideration for other possibilities. The current problem will be resolved through doing away with our attachment to its cause. In order for the community to move forward with other possibilities, possibilities that may address and resolve the community’s current problems, there must be a willingness to undergo this process. In this way an institution can more closely mirror the needs of a public, whether that public is relatively homogenous or diverse, and in times of relatively slow or rapid change.

In disregarding the possibilities inherent in the method described above, institutions are far more likely “to lag behind and then to warp the new into conformity with themselves.” This method, however, increases the institution’s viability through changing circumstances because outcomes that continue to work will continue to be employed. Outcomes that cause conflict will cause more examination of the problem, more discussion, and therefore more possibilities for meliorating conditions. That is:

\(^4\) This can be demonstrated through a number of examples. First, people often consider the institution of marriage to be, *a priori*, fitting and good. There is too often little reflection behind this assumption. A second and well-used example by Reinhold Niebuhr is that of patriotism. Intense patriots are often inclined to assume their country is in the right. This assumption is an extension of their inclination to unquestioningly support and love their country. In Niebuhr’s own words, “there is an ethical paradox in patriotism. The paradox is that patriotism transmutes individual unselfishness into national egoism… The unqualified character of this devotion is the very basis of the nation’s power without moral restraint” (Niebuhr, 1932, p. 91).
If social institutions are conceived, as Social Pragmatism conceives them, as solutions to communal problems, then their existence, evolution, and demise must be related to the social problems that we face. In a changing world, it is thus necessary that we periodically reconstruct our institutions to reflect contemporary developments.

Understanding the institution’s purpose as one of addressing and solving communal problems begins to counter the institution’s own inertia, an inertia that can easily prevent any form of reconstruction, even vitally necessary reconstruction. What one must recognize “in this discussion of institutions and their reconstruction is the extreme difficulty of changing social institutions once they have developed” (Campbell, 2004, p. 45-46). It is clear as well that an institution understood in light of how well it addresses the community’s problems is capable of a flexibility that more adequately and judiciously addresses human concerns, capable also of sustaining itself where its rigidly bound opponent must either enforce itself at the possible cost of some amount of human suffering or shatter completely. An apt and devastating example of the former comes to mind.

Latin America has been, for quite some time, an acute example of conflict and human suffering. Here institutions built around traditional ideals too often reinforce a suffering already at appalling levels because of extreme poverty and corrupt, ineffective governments. One of the most influential institutions in Latin America, the Catholic Church, enjoys a very widespread influence in these countries and it officially denounces abortion under all circumstances while at the same time refusing to support any form of unnatural contraceptive methods for preventing pregnancy. This along with the cultural

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5 The Catholic Church, in so far as it corresponds with Natural Law Ethics, does have an exception in which abortion is acceptable. There is the Principle of Double Effect in which indirect abortions may be acceptable. For instance, if a woman is pregnant and has a cancerous uterus, her uterus can be removed. In this case, there is a ‘double effect,’ one good and one bad. The baby is killed, but that is an indirect
worth attributed to men with many children forces some families with already existing levels of poverty to face ever-worsening conditions. The choice for some women already unable to feed their families is not only a very limited one, but one with ominous consequences.

It is also the case that in some of these countries the availability and financial means for acquiring contraceptives is severely limited by the Church’s control, the traditional values of the community and the socioeconomic status of these families. Conditions such as these have led some women to pursue illegal abortions; too often facing rape, infection, severe hemorrhaging, or even death by the hands of their ‘doctors’. The highest rate of death in the world due to abortion is found in Latin American countries. Abortion-related deaths exceed thirty percent in some of these countries and this statistic is likely to misrepresent the real statistic because of underreporting. With little real legal recourse at the time and no financial means of pursuing such an avenue, with a culture resistant to reconciling traditional values with the people’s pressing needs and with a powerful and influential institution actively resisting genuine reform, the needs of these families and these women progressively go unmet. In fact, such circumstances, circumstances where traditional values are rigidly held to, not only force human needs to go unmet, but can be said to cause and perpetuate such suffering.

 consequence. The mother’s life is saved through removing the uterus, not killing the baby. The indirect effect of removing the uterus does kill the baby, but if this is not the intent, it is okay to proceed. It must be noted, however, that in a similar situation, a situation in which the mother has a heart condition and carrying the baby to term would almost surely kill her, there is often no option for an abortion under this principle. This is because killing the baby would be the means by which the mother’s life is saved.

I certainly have my own theory as to why an institution, in the past, might have wanted to prohibit any courses of action that prevented or hindered reproduction. However, the point is rather that the Catholic Church’s official position not only fails to address the human concerns society now faces, but enforces this suffering on a public that the Church’s official policy may no longer actually, adequately represent. Both the government and the Church have acknowledged the data that confirms Latin America has the highest incidence of illegal abortions in the world and both have agreed that education is the best method to combat this problem. The Church’s solution in 1999, however, entails “educating young women to make more informed decisions about pregnancy and parenthood.” This solution is, essentially, not a realistic and comprehensive solution at all because it fails to address the core of the problem. Statistics reveal that seventy-nine percent of those hospitalized from abortions were married, eighty-six percent over the age of twenty, and over half had already given birth to at least two children. The response to this real human concern has been inadequate. The education of young women fails to address the need at its core, for it is most often married women (who often already have children) that are continuing to conceive against their wishes. Conceiving many children is culturally valued and conveys a high status to the father and educating young women does little to address this side of the issue. The proposed solution is limited by the Church’s official adherence to traditional doctrine and unwillingness to consider a broader range of solutions that could more adequately address the needs of these women. The Church’s decision has been based on a solution, an

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9 It must be noted that Latin American countries that are larger and more developed, such as Mexico and Chile, have been far more successful at slowing their own population growth and decreasing family size over the last twenty plus years. At the same time, however, poorer and less developed Latin American
ideal, that no longer promotes human flourishing in a world that has drastically changed from the world in which it was first established.

Far worse, the Church’s position is held as a universal and abiding truth about human existence. As such, it enjoys a privileged position; a position that because of its privilege is subject to less scrutiny, questioning or reflection. Any reflection will be prefaced by the almost immovable commitment to the principles of the doctrine. In reference to Peirce’s discussion of “sham-reasoning,” Susan Haack defines and explains the results of such prior and steadfast commitment. Sham reasoning’s primary characteristic is “the reasoner’s prior and unbudgeable commitment to the propositions for which he seeks to make a case” (Haack, 1996, p. 459). This reasoning can be witnessed, she says, in the theologian, who is obviously previously committed to a particular doctrine and now only seeks to strengthen his claim through whatever means are presented. In this sense, Haack recognizes the importance of inquiry that is not ‘unbudgeable,’ but is instead malleable. Genuinely worthy values and truths are, for a position such as the Church’s, supernatural and mostly above the necessity for change. In some sense earthly troubles are low and sordid. Humans are weak, frail, ‘sinners’ and so subject to the absolute and immutable truths that have been previously ordained.10

Thus, the moral standard by which the ethical viability of abortion and contraception is rejected is a standard at once officially recognized by the Catholic countries have seen much less improvement and face far more successful resistance from the Catholic Church. See Rodriguez, Emilio (June 2005). “Family Planning Policy in Latin America.” Policy Studies, 26, 211-227.

10 This does not mean, however, that the Church has not made some concessions throughout the past centuries; it certainly has. The Church has been, in some instances, forced to concede its points (whether to science or changing communities in general) in order to continue to exist. Throughout most of history, though, we find evidence of the Church’s strong resistance to this change. When these changes are acknowledged, we observe that the Church finds ‘reasons’ for many of these changes by, I would say, conveniently reinterpreting scripture.
Church as an abiding truth that is universally applicable. This vice grip on traditional
values has numerous and far reaching effects on the surrounding community, as Dewey
points out:

The chief practical effect of refusing to recognize the connection of
custom with moral standards is to deify some special custom and treat it as
eternal, immutable, outside of criticism and revision. This consequence is
especially harmful in times of social flux. For it leads to disparity between
nominal standards, which become ineffectual and hypocritical in exact
ratio to their theoretical exaltation, and actual habits which have to take
note of existing conditions (Dewey, 1922, p. 81-82).

The conditions some Latin American women have faced literally and forcefully illustrate
this point. The danger is all the more severe because this ideal does not come from any
custom or limited good based on the relevant conditions of a community, but rather from
an Authority that invokes the ideal with its absolute and immutable Truth. As a doctrine
of an institution it automatically resists any change that would limit its appeal or make it
obsolete. Its power is magnified to an even greater extent, however, because those who
hold to its immutable truth see less need to examine it further, to question its usefulness,
observe its consequences, or engage in dialogue about its limited possibilities. How does
one address human suffering with such barriers present?

A rigidly held institution unaccommodating of a public it no longer represents
ends up breeding harmful results, generating unnecessary tensions and suffering,
maintaining barriers against effective change and shattering only through opposition or
revolt. However, such consequences do not have to ensue. Institutions are a necessary
and vital part of the social process, but such rigidity is not. For George Herbert Mead, as
for Dewey, this rigidity is not only undesirable but wholly unnecessary.

Oppressive, stereotyped, and ultra-conservative social institutions – like
the church – which by their more or less rigid and inflexible
unprogressiveness crush or blot out individuality, or discourage any distinctive or original expressions of thought and behavior in the individual selves or personalities implicated in and subjected to them, are undesirable but not necessary outcomes of the general social process of experience and behavior (Mead, 1934, p. 257).

Instead, he advocates institutions capable of a flexibility that allows a more adequate and appropriate response to changing communities along with a greater breadth for individuality and difference. Within this flexibility there is room for an examination of the present issue, discussion of possible solutions, and actions that have the potential to address the situation directly; within this flexibility there is room for intelligent response.11

“The problem,” for Mead, “is in the hands of the community as far as it reacts intelligently upon its problems” (Mead, 1934, p. 251). The community we explored in our last example did not, as a whole, react intelligently or were delayed or prohibited from reacting intelligently to the problems they were facing. Not only are the problems that the institutions faced in their creation no longer necessarily the problems of the present time, but it is also the case that the issues now crying out for a resolution were probably not issues that existed during the formation of the institution. Such issues may not be within the repertoire of the institution; its founding principles may be inapplicable to the altered landscape of the community. It is, then, not necessarily any form of a real solution to attempt to apply or reinterpret the inherited institution’s rules and regulations to a problem it no longer and perhaps never did adequately address. This can, in fact, prohibit a community from intelligently reacting to its problems. For Mead, maintaining

11 A response is ‘intelligent’ in so far as it is not an immediate and unreflective response to a novel or complicated situation. An intelligent response is here meant to contrast a response that only refers back to some traditional standard and, without any further thought, uses this standard to resolve some novel problem or complex situation.
an institution’s founding doctrine is no longer the main goal; it is rather adequately addressing the changing situation of the community in its dynamic and intricate reality. In fact, Mead takes particular pains to argue against any conception that understands the institution to necessitate fixed doctrines that must be upheld.

Mead understands the institution to be a development of the social life process at an evolutionary level and, as such, something that does not have to conform to or uphold any narrow or limited way of being.

Social institutions, like individual selves, are developments within, or particular and formalized manifestations of, the social life process at its human evolutionary level. As such they are not necessarily subversive of individuality in the individual members; and they do not necessarily represent or uphold narrow definitions of certain fixed and specific patterns of acting which in any given circumstances should characterize the behavior of all intelligent and socially responsible individuals… as members of the given community or social group.

The institution as a development of the social life, of a process, is not forced to uphold any set of doctrines exclusively, absolutely, or indefinitely. The institution can instead more generally define social responsibility, more broadly address the nature of a shifting situation, and more adequately stay at pace with its surrounding conditions. With this understanding, institutions “need to define the social, or socially responsible, patterns of individual conduct in only a very broad and general sense, affording plenty of scope for originality, flexibility, and variety of such conduct” (Mead, 1934, p. 262-263). With this openness it is no longer necessary to uphold any fixed doctrine as necessary simply because it was present at the foundation. It also becomes easier to respond to a developing situation with some amount of originality and flexibility; it opens dialogue, and makes it all the more likely that some form of cooperative action will be taken.
The institution, then, can attempt to solve a problem and evaluate its success in two differing ways: either through evaluating its effects on the community or by maintaining its original intent as closely as possible.\textsuperscript{12} Mead proposes that an institution should attempt to solve societal problems and to judge its success by evaluating the effects of its policies and actions. Success, defined thusly, becomes the institution’s ability to deal \textit{effectively} with \textit{present} problems. This involves letting go of policies and regulations that are \textit{not} working effectively. In fact, Mead describes the human mind as just such a means of problem-solving.

\begin{quote}
It is their possession of minds or powers of thinking which enables human individuals to turn back critically, as it were, upon the organized social structure of the society to which they belong ... and to reorganize or reconstruct or modify that social structure to a greater or less degree, as the exigencies of social evolution from time to time require (Mead, 1934, p. 308).
\end{quote}

Survival, in evolutionary terms, depends upon our ability to adjust and respond to different conditions, something previously illustrated through our frontier example. On a very basic level, it is clear that conditions physically change and that adjusting the standard responses by institutions to these changes can lessen the duration and extent of human suffering. An intelligent response to changing conditions by those who run the institutions begins with a willingness to identify the problem and openly attempt to acquire the means of resolving it, even if those means are not within the original formulation of the laws or intentions of the institution.

\textsuperscript{12} It is highly improbable, if not impossible, that an institution can focus on maintaining its original doctrine while at the same time demonstrating a sincere willingness to address the concerns of a community that has deviated from that doctrine (that no longer benefit from that doctrine). Since the institution, once established, has its own inertia and since it is far easier to continue on with the status quo, I think it is imperative that there be focus on the institution’s effects on the surrounding community.
The other way in which an institution can evaluate itself is through judging its faithfulness to its original intention. When this method of evaluation is employed it too often becomes the case that either consequences of these beliefs are ignored or, if they are not capable of being ignored, then the solution to the problem is had by reviewing the tradition more closely and admonishing any who drifted away from its original intent. Problems that are not easily ignored are addressed by attempting to more strictly and precisely mirror the original foundation of the institution, by going back to the original intent and more carefully following its maxims. Such a solution reflects the assumption upon which this perspective rests: that somehow, someone got the answer right in the beginning and the only thing left to do now is to stay loyal to the foundation and oppose those practices that (or persons who) do not. This perspective, then, extends to supporting any policies and people loyal to the institution and, therefore, automatically rejecting and opposing any policies and people that would change the institution.

Here, the only necessary requirement is to stay loyal to the tradition and take care of those supporting the same tradition. It is not one’s job and, indeed, there is no need to carefully reflect on the effects of the institution because the tradition upon which it was founded upholds the right doctrine. One need only experience a willingness to conform and follow authority, the answers (customs) have already been established. As Dewey writes,

> the inert, stupid quality of current customs perverts learning into a willingness to follow where others point the way, into conformity, constriction, surrender of skepticism and experiment. When we think of the docility of the young we first think of the stocks of information adults wish to impose and the ways of acting they want to reproduce (Dewey, 1922, p. 47).
In fact, reproducing and ensuring traditional and group values is a goal central to any society. However, strictly instilling and reproducing current values cannot possibly prepare present citizens for the future in a changing world, a world unlikely to reflect all current values and customs. Holding rigidly to traditional values and replicating ineffective doctrine simply to maintain tradition severely limits imagination and impedes possibilities for more effective and humane action in a community no longer represented by those values.

It also becomes clear that elevating certain traditions and values to permanent and universal standards causes other human concerns to seem trivial and petty, negligible in comparison. As Dewey writes, “the needs of actual conditions are neglected, or dealt with in a half-hearted way, because in the light of the ideal they are so mean and sordid. To speak of evils, to strive seriously for change, shows a low mind” (Dewey, 1922, p. 8). The privileged position with which the solution is held forces the conditions under which the current community lives to be held as inferior, mundane concerns that need not seriously occupy too much time, cause too much distress or force too much effort. Intelligent, reflective response to human suffering becomes even less likely within this perspective. There is no requirement here for serious reflection on the actual conditions the community faces, no imperative for timely and effective action to meliorate the situation; there is only the need for blind loyalty and continued reproduction.

This latter method is easily recognizable in our second example. A Latin American woman facing the circumstances I have previously described is not encouraged to question or critique her tradition’s influence on her life, nor to attempt to find some new or different means for alleviating her suffering or improving her family’s conditions
other than those which fall within the traditional perspective. The solutions to most problems she may face are found in the authority of the Church, scripture, tradition or custom. She should stay committed to her religion’s doctrine and her culture’s expectations. This is the reason why women in Latin America who arrive in hospitals hemorrhaging and facing death after an illegal abortion have been left untreated, why doctors who do treat those women have lost their jobs, why when a request for abortion is made because of incest some judges have failed to rule until its too late to perform the abortion.13 Such women have sought solutions that are not sanctioned by the Church or their customs. In fact, the results of this method are easily described by citing any number of conditions we find ourselves in today. Limiting myself to another good example, namely the U.S. Constitution, clearly illustrates the point.

The Constitution is often thought of as unquestioningly right, for when difficult and novel conflicts arise the answer is sought through referring back to and, if need be, reinterpreting the Constitution. There is little room for reflecting on the differenced and novel complexity of each issue and situation, little room for nuance, little room for discussion of solutions that do not adhere to the original doctrine. The question is not what the best solution may be, but rather what solution most closely adheres to the Constitution and its ‘intent.’ Again the underlying foundation of this perspective assumes the absolute rightness of its position, assumes an original wisdom. The tradition is the answer, strong and immediate support is its only demand. Effective action that deviates from this traditional mode of being never becomes a possibility because thought in this direction is clearly prohibited.

Mead suggests that there is a need to move from such a traditional evaluation of the institution to a more rational, effect based evaluation of the institution. This move is not only resisted by those with a strong commitment to ensuring that the original intent is maintained; it is also restricted by the sheer amount of work such a move requires and by the daunting task of releasing old habits in order to generate new, more useful ones. Even more daunting, such changes, on a social scale, require that citizens are re-trained or re-educated. Such a method requires first a willingness to recognize a problem and then to identify the source of the problem, even if that source links back to values and institutions one originally supported. It requires relaxing loyalties and traditions and opening up possibilities for more effective means of being with one another in the world. It requires reflection and action that is prefaced by careful consideration of all possible options (even those that deviate from tradition and current doctrine). Dewey describes this process in *Human Nature and Conduct*.

Reason as observation of an adaptation of facts to valuable results is not however a mere idle mirroring of preexistent facts. It is an additional event having its own career. It sets up a heightened emotional appreciation and provides a new motive for fidelities previously blind. It sets up an attitude of criticism, of inquiry, and makes men sensitive to the brutalities and extravagancies of customs (Dewey, 1922, p. 55).

The resultant sensitivity of this method provides a precaution against continued suffering that the opposing method, with the aim of simply maintaining traditional standards, does not. In a world where there is too much unnecessary suffering and too many inadequate institutions, institutions that are no longer fully capable of addressing serious human concerns, this shifting of perspective is truly vital to beginning to more adequately engage and meliorate human suffering.
A method based on effectiveness does not, of course, ensure that things will necessarily get better, but it does not resist the possibility for improvement in change either. Dewey writes,

Such a morals would not automatically solve more problems, nor resolve perplexities. But it would enable us to state problems in such forms that action could be courageously and intelligently directed to their solution. It would not assure us against failure, but it would render failure a source of instruction (Dewey, 1922, p. 11).

The focus is on the effects of the institution on the community and its ability to more accurately reflect their genuine needs. As such the possibilities for instruction and improvement in failure only grow more likely with this method. We no longer necessarily continue to repeat current failures because our intent is to stay loyal to our traditional values. Our options are no longer limited to discounting or ignoring lesser communal problems so that our main focus is on higher ideals, nor on attempting to solve our problems only by endeavoring to more closely mirror some original intent. This shifting of focus assumes that there is no reason to believe that anyone necessarily got things right the first time through, but it does not necessitate that this did not or could not happen. Instead, it simply wards against the likelihood of forcing a community to endure institutions that hinder their progress and neglect their needs by continually examining the effects of the institution on the community. From this perspective a set of direct questions is continually asked: is this institution still adequate, still reflecting the community’s genuine needs? And, if not, how can these needs be more adequately addressed?

14 By genuine needs I mean to exclude such things as the ‘need’ for a color television or the ‘need’ for the latest fashion. A definition of a genuine need is harder to establish since a community’s needs may (and often do) change over time.
Such reflective criticism requires a willingness to embrace social change that more closely mirrors the needs of a changing public and therefore a willingness to depart with or deviate from treasured traditions that no longer work productively, but hinder and harm the community. However, such a process also entails a willing and flexible mind, compassion and empathy; such a process must be anteceded by a willingness to change ourselves. Change, adjustment, is necessitated by conflict, a disturbance in some more natural or easy flow that cannot be ignored but must instead be overcome through a reworking, through modification. “The changes,” Mead explains,

that we make in the social order in which we are implicated necessarily involve our also making changes in ourselves. The social conflicts among the individual members of a given organized human society, which, for their removal, necessitate conscious or intelligent reconstructions and modifications of that society by those individuals, also and equally necessitate such reconstructions or modifications by those individuals of their own selves or personalities (Mead, 1934, 309).

Just as an institution requires modification to reflect a changed and changing public, so does an individual need to rework a barren or encumbering doctrine in order to embrace forms of working and flexible hypotheses that reflect the surrounding environment. The one entails the other and calls forth the need for adjustment.

For Mead, the process of personal change and the process of social change are at least partially linked processes; they reflect on each other, they are natural and reciprocal.

Thus the relations between social reconstruction and self or personality reconstruction are reciprocal and internal or organic; social reconstruction by the individual members of any organized human society entails self or personality reconstruction in some degree or other by each of these individuals, and vice versa (Mead, 1934, p. 309).

In extreme circumstances, a failure to adjust to the environment entails a failure to survive. Rigidly held doctrines, theories, and traditions that no longer work to ensure life
hinder and endanger life. Times of rapid change often bring painful and forced change to those under its influence, either this or death. Military training can be understood as such a forced and rapid change, a change that if not fully undertaken can mean even more certain death in hesitation on the battlefield. The great frontier also represented rapid change for those that had before only understood a way of life no longer maintainable in the harsh wilderness. However, in other more prosperous times and places, in an accommodating environment, a flexible community, diversity and rich difference can flourish. Some change can appear and progress more slowly, can creep up gradually, and adjustment may not seem harsh or forced, may not even be visible. However, either way it is clearly a function of life. “And since,” as Dewey writes, “conditions of action and of inquiry and knowledge are always changing, the experiment must always be retried; the state must always be rediscovered” (Dewey, 1927, p. 256).

In this vein both Dewey and Mead emphasize the need to continually reflect on the effects of our mode of being in order that we may meliorate the problems and suffering that arises when such modes no longer enhance life but, instead, hinder it. “The authority,” Dewey writes, “is that of life” (Dewey, 1922, p. 57). However, our instilled knowledge or assumptions of accurate and lasting truth are strong, comforting; they are safe. Ferreting out the flaws in our inherited doctrine, contemplating its limitations, recognizing any painful and damaging effects, or admitting its possible falsity brings only painful uncertainty, discord and discomfort. It does not even ensure more certain and better answers for the future. And, worse, those who advocate such a path advocate its continual usage, admit that such a process never ends. However unpalatable it seems, however undesirable, it is my ambition to bring to light more fully, and on an individual
level, its desirability, its vital, imperative nature for the continual development of human life in a changing world.
“Each mind reflects differently - even the same mind reflects differently at different moments - and in any case reality doesn’t stand still long enough to be accurately mirrored” (Menand, 2001, p. 200). Thus we continue to complicate a complicated situation. As we have seen, a continuously changing society compels some concessions from the individual while continuously changing individuals attempt to compel concessions from society. Inherent to this, indeed throughout this entire process, there is, inevitably, some amount of lag. Although reflective and responsive change is always preceded by some amount of lag, this lag is diminished through first a recognition, an acknowledgement, of the changes that have taken place and then through a willingness to undergo reflective adjustments, allowances or transformations. For example, some of the changes in Latin America include: an increased rate of survival of mothers and children as well as the potential to exert more control over reproduction thanks to new medical advancements.

Technological advancements also provide us with a plethora of obvious examples of concrete changes, subsequent lag and eventual adjustment on both a personal and social level.15 Technological advancements have rapidly changed the social landscape

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15 Some of the technological advancements that come first to mind are the computer, the internet and the cell phone. Many other examples could be cited. The examples I mentioned, however, suffice to make it clear that such technological advancements have changed the social landscape rapidly and caused
and with this rapid change there has been a need to reëxamine, readjust or even introduce new regulations, laws and institutions. These advancements have changed the landscape of our personal lives as well, often requiring or compelling some amount of adjustment to individual lives. These social and personal adjustments have lagged behind the technological advancement sometimes for only a short period of time and, sometimes, for far too long. Either way, before adjustment can occur there must first be an acknowledgement of the changes, careful reflection and discussion, and then a willingness to undergo beneficial adjustment. Since this process reflects both the need for personal adjustment and social adjustment, it will be prudent to more fully explore the personal element as well.

The inherently personal element of this process is aptly described by Dewey in his article, “The Need for a Recovery in Philosophy.” He writes:

Since we live in a world where changes are going on whose issues mean our weal or woe; since every act of ours modifies these changes and hence is fraught with promise, or charged with hostile energies – what should experience be but a future implicated in a present! Adjustment is no timeless state; it is a continuing process (Dewey, 1917, p. 9).

Here, we see the intricately bound nature of individuals and their environment. It is clear that society and the environment directly influence and affect individuals, calling for specific modifications and adjustments in order to better approximate a fluctuating balance. In making these changes, we shape our own future and, to some extent, our own current environment. Thus, close observation yields quicker recognition of changing circumstances and generates reflection on new or different possible solutions that better subsequent adjustments in many individual lives. These advancements have also caused the introduction of new laws and new institutions. Some might also argue that a number of beneficial regulations have yet to be instituted in response to these advancements. There is some amount of lag in the social response to these changes.
address the observed change.

Dewey, though, goes even farther in demonstrating the intricate relationship between social institutions and an individual’s character. He explains, “social customs are not direct and necessary consequences of specific impulses.” Instead, “social institutions and expectations shape and crystallize impulses into dominant traits” (Dewey, 1922, p. 86). Social pressures shape and mold the individual; they exert pressure and demand a particular mode of being. This shaping and molding is inherently limiting and this limitation forms barriers, boundaries, which separate the known and comforting from the strange and dangerous. For Dewey, right is only an abstraction that signifies “the totality of social pressures exercised upon us to induce us to think and desire in certain ways” (Dewey, 1922, p. 224). Thus the new and different is, in some way, opposed to the ‘right,’ opposed to the customary way in which one thinks and desires. Mead notes that “ethical problems arise for individual members of any given human society whenever they are individually confronted with a social situation to which they cannot readily adjust and adapt themselves” (Mead, 1934, p. 319). If this new social or environmental demand is strong enough, however, it forces the old habit or belief to give way and, in time, this new demand will take the place of the seemingly ‘right.’

Thus, the generation of reflection caused by recognition of a changed situation is most often first identified in the breakdown of the old belief, rule or law. The old belief breaks down in the sense that it ceases to work, ceases to maintain the operational value it once held, and so causes confusion, puzzlement and problems. “Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates to invention. It shocks us out of our sheep-like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving” (Dewey, 1922, p. 102).
207). We see from this passage that this conflict is the instigator of insightful thought and such conflict is initiated by a break down. Dewey says: “The alteration first shows itself negatively, in the disintegration of old beliefs” (Dewey, 1927, p. 337). In order for a belief or habit to be extensively modified it must first collapse or give way and this causes some amount of confusion, irritation and work; it forces thought to return to what had been previously and satisfactorily settled but that is now in need of reëxamination. As Thorstein Veblen says, “all change in habits of life and of thought is irksome” (Veblen, 1899, p. 199).

Charles Sanders Peirce makes a similar observation. Genuine doubt, for Peirce as for Dewey, arises when the techniques one uses to address the situation no longer work, when the unexpected happens, when abrupt change puts into question old beliefs or when education forces custom into a new light. Thus doubt motivates inquiry. This process is a struggle to rid oneself of doubt through inquiry that results in a satisfied state. In fact, Peirce calls doubt the only direct and pressing motive for finding satisfactory beliefs.

The irritation of doubt is the only immediate motive for the struggle to attain belief. It is certainly best for us that our beliefs should be such as may truly guide our actions so as to satisfy our desires; and this reflection will make us reject any belief which does not seem to have been so formed as to insure this result (Peirce, 1877, p. 114).

Although the primary point of this inquiry may not be truth, the belief that is sought is not simply any belief; it is a belief that works.

Peirce further maintains that the entire intent of inquiry is the cessation of the irritation doubt has caused; the intent is the fixing of beliefs. “With the doubt, therefore, the struggle begins, and with the cessation of doubt it ends. Hence, the sole object of inquiry is the settlement of opinion.” The object is not the truth or falsity of the position,
but the return from doubt into a settled, comfortable state. For Peirce, “as soon as a firm belief is reached we are entirely satisfied, whether the belief be false or true.” Often one is inclined to think, wrongly, that doubt ceases in some sort of truth. Instead, it is essential to recognize that doubt most often ceases in a hasty conclusion that works well enough for the individual. He notes that “the instinctive dislike of an undecided state of mind, exaggerated into a vague dread of doubt, makes men cling spasmodically to the views they already take” (Peirce, 1877, p. 114-116). To be unsure for any considerable amount of time is equivalent, for most minds, to being unhappy or discontent. It is far easier to continue with questionable views that are held tightly and left unexamined than it is to put oneself in the position of examining and doubting ill-supported beliefs.

In fact, Veblen goes so far as to say that this instinctive repulsion from the new, this ‘irksome’ quality of change, is simply a feature of human experience. “Any one,” Veblen writes,

who is required to change his habits of life and his habitual relations to his fellow-men will feel the discrepancy between the method of life required of him by the newly arisen exigencies, and the traditional scheme of life to which he is accustomed (Veblen, 1899, p. 195).

This discrepancy is another difficulty that must somehow be overcome by either finding a new and temporary equilibrium with the changed situation or by retreating and returning to the old and comforting, albeit bankrupt, belief or habit (an option not always, truly available). As Dewey has pointed out, this instinctive dislike of bother is an aversion to anything new and strange. Veblen makes the same point. “It is an instinctive revulsion at any departure from the accepted way of doing and of looking at things - a revulsion common to all men and only to be overcome by stress of circumstances” (Veblen, 1899, p. 199). For Veblen, at some point fallible and unprofitable habits not only cease to work
but also become so entirely cumbersome that a departure from them will be necessary.

This shifting point, the point at which external circumstances impel the individual to recognize a now problematic and cumbersome habit, is the point at which the old belief or habit breaks down. This shifting point, then, is the instigation of a state of doubt. Change in the individual begins with this state. Doubt, although an unsettling state, carries with it a vital imperative to struggle through to a solution and this, of course, requires inquiry. Dewey notes:

We inquire when we seek for whatever will provide an answer to a question asked. Thus it is of the very nature of the indeterminate situation which evokes inquiry to be questionable; or, in terms of actuality instead of potentiality, to be uncertain, unsettled, disturbed (Dewey, 1938, p. 109).

This unsettling state, then, impels the desire to work through and resolve the problem quickly and satisfactorily. Hence, at this stage the unworking habit has already been recognized as such and the task to find a new one, one that will work, has the potential to begin. A state of doubt is, as we have previously seen, a necessary and vital constituent of a life that can never be in constant balance with an environment that is in flux and undergoing continuous change. “Any achieved equilibrium of adjustment with the environment is precarious because we cannot evenly keep pace with changes in the environment” (Dewey, 1917, p. 9). Since this process of readjustment begins in doubt, this state is significant indeed. Habit, like the social institution, is in constant danger of becoming a hindrance and thence in constant need of reëvaluation and readjustment.

Readjustment, reëstablishing equilibrium, occurs naturally by finding resolution. The resolution of a state of doubt into a state of belief has, over time, the potential to develop into a habit and, further, into an unreflective habit. Peirce defines belief by listing its three properties and its function.
First, it is something that we are aware of; second, it appeases the irritation of doubt; and, third, it involves the establishment in our nature of a rule of action, or, say for short, a habit. As it appeases the irritation of doubt, which is the motive for thinking, thought relaxes, and comes to rest for a moment when belief is reached (Peirce, 1878, p. 129).

Belief, then, resolves itself into habit. Habits are roughly defined by Peirce as rules of action, as set ways of being in the world. Beliefs establish ways of acting and allow the mind to more easily pursue other things. Beliefs do not, of course, cause us to act immediately, but they do set us up to act in some certain way. A state of belief is, in this way, satisfying and calming; it relaxes the mind and allows focus to shift to something else (Peirce, 1878, p. 114).

It is important to note, however, that beliefs set us up to act in the world and that the world is a relative and changing environment which necessarily leads to the readjustment of beliefs that no longer work. Peirce explains, “since belief is a rule for actions, the application of which involves further doubt and further thought, at the same time that it is a stopping-place, it is also a new starting-place for thought” (Peirce, 1878, p. 129). As much as the settling of belief is a stopping point in the process of inquiry, the state of the world and the necessity for satisfactory action forces belief back into a tentative and questionable starting point when the belief no longer ‘works’ well enough. Louis Menand summarizes Peirce’s position on beliefs and the state of the world nicely. “In a world that never repeats itself with exactitude, all believing is betting” (Menand, 2001, p. 365). Originally successful beliefs, the bets that pay off develop themselves into habits.

It is key for Peirce that the successful belief quickly resolves into habit; in fact, belief is, in some sense, a habit of mind. And yet, at some point or relative threshold, a
belief or habit that hinders or prevents productive action must dissolve into doubt and spur on the need for further inquiry. It is significant in Peirce’s work that belief is a self-satisfying and self-perpetuating state that does not seek, itself, to be undone or reëxamined (Peirce, 1905, p. 337). It is this tendency in belief, its own self-satisfaction, which resents and prevents further and perhaps vital reflection on its own limitations and faulty assumptions. Thus it is that a state of belief dominates and attempts to prevent or circumvent a state of doubt. Peirce further warns of the tendency of beliefs to move from simple and useful habits to unreflective habits of action. As one prepares to act, one fixes the action to a closer approximation of one’s intent. The repetition of habitual action fixes modes of being and calls for less and less reflection on the matter. This, Peirce says, lessens the possibility for any form of critical and internal reflection, for any form of self-reproach.

Consequently, there is a tendency, as action is repeated again and again, for the action to approximate indefinitely toward the perfection of that fixed character, which would be marked by entire absence of self-reproach. The more closely this is approached, the less room for self-control there will be; and where no self-control is possible there will be no self-reproach (Peirce, 1905, p. 337).

Although this is the way in which we learn to do any number of necessary actions such as riding a bike or driving a car, it is also the way in which we become more automatic and less capable of self-reflection. When the goal is no longer learning to drive, when the goal is, instead, a fixed belief laden with complex moral value, it is no longer a fruitful process. This loss of self-control and of self-reproach is rather a departure from potential growth. This loss allows and maintains stagnant, unhelpful and outmoded beliefs and habits because any form of defense, namely self-reflection and reproach, against such beliefs dwindles.
This is not to say, however, that habits are not necessary and valuable traits. James notes first that habits simplify, bring accuracy and reduce fatigue. Habits allow the mind to economize and allow focus to drift to other concerns and in doing so they open up further possibilities. “Habits,” Dewey claims in *The Public and Its Problems*, “economize intellectual as well as muscular energy. They relieve the mind from thought of means, thus freeing thought to deal with new conditions and purposes” (Dewey, 1927, p. 273). Habits, like institutions, can be applied to some varying situations and make tangible and manageable what would otherwise be neither. According to Dewey:

A possibility of continuing progress is opened up by the fact that in learning one act, methods are developed good for use in other situations. Still more important is the fact that the human being acquires a habit of learning. He learns to learn (Dewey, 1916, p. 50).

Developing a habit of learning is a vital and significant habit indeed. In fact, such mechanisms are, on some level, what make us human. It is habit that frees the mind from continuous, mundane, but basic human needs and allows the focus to shift to other matters. “Secondly,” James writes, “habit diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed” (James, 1890, p. 117).

The problem arises, as Peirce notes, when some specialized habit no longer calls on any conscious reflection, but acts with an immediacy that is automatic and unconscious. Similar problems arise when those in positions of power seek solely to preserve or increase their own position and power through maintaining or increasing the strength of the institution; similar problems arise when people seek to maintain the same intent and direction of the institution, to protect and enhance the institution, under changing conditions. In both cases any form of reflective intelligence is diminished and approximates an instinctive “knee jerk” response. This, of course, becomes a problem
when considering complex social and moral concerns. “An original specialized power of adjustment secures immediate efficiency, but, like a railway ticket, it is good for one route only” (Dewey, 1916, p. 49). The process of generating efficient responses calls forth experimentation, advances reflection and generates numerous possibilities for more efficient action, but in the solidification of the habit this process is lost and an automatic, ‘one route’ response is formed.

One of the most difficult barriers we experience in honestly assessing our own habits is that they become a part of our very character. Because habits are our dispositions, our immediate and intuitive thoughts and responses to situations, they often go unrecognized. We recognize the force of habit most readily only when dealing with ‘bad’ habits, habits labeled by others, perhaps by society, as unhealthy or unwise. Such a dichotomy is inherently false and misleading. Dewey writes,

Habits reduce themselves to routine ways of acting, or degenerate into ways of action to which we are enslaved just in the degree in which intelligence is disconnected from them. Routine habits are unthinking habits; “bad” habits are habits so severed from reason that they are opposed to the conclusions of conscious deliberation and decision (Dewey, 1916, p. 53-54).

Although this lack of intuition on the very extensive power of habits that are not understood in a negative sense is, in some way, natural, it is yet deceptive. Recognizing the power of habit is the first step to being better able to control and adjust those habits that no longer produce desired results.

Recognition of rigid habits in no way comes easily to consciousness, for rigid habits are thoughtless ones. These fixed habits, although difficult to recognize, create ease and comfort. Dewey states:

Rigid habits insist upon duplication, repetition, recurrence; in their ease
there is accordingly fixed principles. Only there is no *principle* at all, that is, no conscious intellectual rule, for thought is not needed. But all habit has *continuity*, and while a flexible habit does not secure in its operation bare recurrence nor absolute assurance neither does it plunge us into the hopeless confusion of the absolutely different. To insist upon change and the new is to insist upon alteration of the old (Dewey, 1922, p. 168).

The admonition that most habits should be held reservedly, tentatively, forces one to sacrifice a certain measure of ease and comfort, and to replace this with the need for a degree of conscious action. Thus, one who follows this advice no longer finds the same reassuring, comforting and full-proof assurance of ‘rightness’ in every habitual belief. However, this person is also no longer subject to the wrenching force experienced in having to face circumstances so altered that their presence is entirely alien and ‘absolutely different.’ Thus recognition of the continuous possibility that the old may be in need of adjustment more effectively prepares one for this constant likelihood.

The recognition that the old may be in need of adjustment brings with it a disruption that is perhaps more disturbing than has previously been suggested. These disruptions are not welcomed interruptions to a habit that has not only been previously reflected upon and then established, but trained through repetitive actions to a comfortable and precise degree. All this work must be done again, we must return to a state of doubt and rework our original assumptions, modify an established habit. The freedom from being forced to work through such beliefs is taken away and we are again ‘bothered.’ “The indeterminate situation,” Dewey writes, “becomes problematic in the very process of being subjected to inquiry.” We must first discover the particular problem, arrive at possible solutions and then weigh their “anticipated consequences” (Dewey, 1938, p. 111, 113). The effortlessness with which the original habit was performed is replaced with difficult questions, clumsy fumbling and more work. Dewey
again stresses the intense force a habit exerts:

when interfered with, it swells as resentment and as an avenging force. To say that it will be obeyed, that custom makes law, that nomos is lord of all, is after all only to say that habit is habit. Emotion is a perturbation from clash or failure of habit, and reflection roughly speaking, is the painful effort of disturbed habits to readjust themselves (Dewey, 1922, p. 54).

Although this may be a painful process, it is a necessary and vital element in a world that is run through with change. Thus the key to reworking habits and outmoded beliefs is intelligence, reflection and continuous inquiry.

Some complain that those who do not hold tight to their ideals somehow find themselves, in the end, without any. In spite of this claim, the lack of rigidly defined ideals need not result in a lack of ideals altogether. Chaos and rampant immorality are not the necessary consequences of holding views with reserved and attentive reflection.

“Life is interruptions and recoveries” (Dewey, 1922, p. 125).

What is necessary is that habits be formed which are more intelligent, more sensitive, percipient, more informed with foresight, more aware of what they are about, more direct and sincere, more flexibly responsive than those now current (Dewey, 1922, p. 90).

With habits such as these the mind is more capable of recognizing inconsistencies between the conditions of today and institutions that do not reflect these changed conditions. The individual more capable of ‘flexibility,’ more willing to readjust and redefine habits and beliefs, is thus the individual capable of more quickly and accurately recognizing and responding to institutions that are not ‘in-tune’ with their environment.

The inherently interwoven nature of habits and institutions becomes apparent through the proceeding discussion of their natures. In fact, Veblen defines institutions as, in some sense, simply common or established habits among individuals and any given community. He says,
The institutions are, in substance, prevalent habits of thought with respect to particular relations and particular functions of the individual and of the community; and the scheme of life, which is made up of the aggregate of institutions in force at a given time or at a given point in the development of any society, may, on the psychological side, be broadly characterized as a prevalent spiritual attitude or a prevalent theory of life (Veblen, 1899, p. 190).

It follows from this that the entire grouping of dominant or prevalent habits shape the formation of institutions; the intrinsic correspondence between the two cannot be dismissed. In fact, “the adaptation of habits of thought is the growth of institutions” (Veblen, 1899, p. 213). As he just defined institutions (by describing the sum of the institutions in a community), they are equated with the community’s ‘scheme of life.’ Amassing all the various institutions that make up some community, then, amounts to the community’s dominant ‘theory of life.’ Thus, just as habits represent a powerful, commanding force in the individual, these institutions represent a powerful, commanding force in the community.

Dewey recognizes this same point. The closely interwoven nature of habits and institutions is revealed when we trace the origins of our beliefs. In doing so, the closely tied and interdependent nature of an individual’s character (insofar as one’s character is the sum of one’s habits and beliefs) and the society’s more prevalent and powerful institutions (insofar as institutions are defined broadly and generally) emerges. For, the stuff of belief and propositions is not originated by us. It comes to us from others, by education, tradition and the suggestion of the environment. Our intelligence is bound up, so far as its materials are concerned, with the community life of which we are part (Dewey, 1922, p. 216).

In some sense, an individual is constrained by the forces of society and its institutions at large. However, the more active and reflective the mind is, the less it is constrained by these dominating and limiting powers. In contrast to this ‘active’ mind, “the natural
unaided mind means precisely the habits of belief, thought and desire which have been accidentally generated and conformed by social institutions or customs” (Dewey, 1922, p. 225). Thus the shaping force of these institutions cannot be ignored; the power they exert in both the active and more passive mind is enormous and, as such, the implications are vast.

These powerful, commanding forces have long-term effects, they shape the future. Institutions and situations of the past have had a helping hand in the formation of the institutions of today just as the institutions and situations of today will have a powerful hand in shaping those of the future. How does this generally happen? Veblen explains:

the situation of to-day shapes the institutions of tomorrow through a selective, coercive process, by acting upon men’s habitual view of things, and so altering or fortifying a point of view or a mental attitude handed down from the past (Veblen, 1899, p. 190-191).

Prevalent habits and institutions are enforced and promoted through prior habits and institutions. Drastic alterations in the institution and radically altered habits are those that are forced into existence through extreme changes in the environment or society. Thus another corresponding parallel is found between habit and institution.

It is to be noted then, although it may be a tedious truism, that the institutions of to-day - the present accepted scheme of life - do not entirely fit the situation of to-day. At the same time, men’s present habits of thought tend to persist indefinitely, except as circumstances enforce a change (Veblen, 1899, p. 191).

From this passage we see clearly the retarding force previous prevalent habits and institutions exert on the possibility for reflective and responsive change.

Both on a personal and social level, we find reluctance to change. When nurtured, this reluctance translates into apathy and indolence. Veblen labels the personal
and social reluctance to change a conservative factor. “This is the factor of social inertia, psychological inertia, conservatism” (Veblen, 1899, p. 191). Veblen, like Peirce, maintains not only that change is made reluctantly and tardily but also that it is the stress of external circumstances that breaks through this reluctance and forces change.

The evolution of society is substantially a process of mental adaptation on the part of individuals under the stress of circumstances which will no longer tolerate habits of thought formed under and conforming to a different set of circumstances in the past (Veblen, 1899, p. 192).

The same follows for the adaptation of habits that find themselves, under changed conditions, no longer plausible.

A readjustment of men’s habits of thought to conform with the exigencies of an altered situation is in any case made only tardily and reluctantly, and only under the coercion exercised by a situation which has made the accredited views untenable (Veblen, 1899, p. 192).

Thus we see that a corresponding change in the individual or the institution to a changed situation is caused by external pressures that not only no longer permit, but that hinder the customary approach. “We are doubtful,” Dewey notes, “because the situation is inherently doubtful” (Dewey, 1938, p. 109). Even so, an aversion to change remains.

Why? The most obvious and common answer and one given by those cited in this paper is that external change forces internal adjustment and thus forces an interruption to comforting regularity. Change creates and then recreates inconvenience. “The aversion to change is in large part an aversion to the bother of making the readjustment which any given change will necessitate…” (Veblen, 1899, p. 203). In order to alleviate the bother this situation generates, answers may be acquired far too quickly, leaving little room for reflection on all the possibilities at hand. “When a suggested meaning is immediately accepted, inquiry is cut short. Hence the conclusion reached is not grounded, even if it
happens to be correct” (Dewey, 1938, p. 115). The case on a macro level, on, that is, an institutional level, generates a more powerful and forcible resistance than generally exists on the individual level. Thus it is that Peirce notes this tendency in both the individual and society. He writes,

> To say that we cannot help believing a given proposition is no argument, but it is a conclusive fact if it be true; and with the substitution of “I” for “we,” it is true in the mouths of several classes of minds, the blindly passionate, the unreflecting and ignorant, and the person who has overwhelming evidence before his eyes. But that which has been inconceivable today has often turned out indisputable on the morrow (Peirce, 1892, p. 305).

The instinctive resistance to change is strengthened by the powerful force of society and further intensified by the institutions of that society. Taking this into consideration leads to the conclusion that timely and responsive adjustments on an individual level also become less likely, less timely and far more difficult to instigate. “A consequence of this increased reluctance, due to the solidarity of human institutions, is that any innovation calls for greater expenditure of nervous energy in making the necessary readjustment than would otherwise be the case” (Veblen, 1899, p. 203).

In making necessary readjustments to one’s surrounding environment, one is not only forced to reluctantly fall back from one’s own accepted practice, but to fall back from and reject the force exerted by the commonly accepted ‘theory of life.’ The amount of work necessary to commit to this process increases as the retarding pressures of outmoded institutions exert their force. As conditions change the pressure to adjust one’s own habits and beliefs rise, but the pressure to conform and maintain an accordance with the institutions one identifies oneself with does not, in any way, abate. This generates even more anxiety, discord and internal conflict. Thus the “protracted and laborious
effort to find and to keep one’s bearings under the altered circumstances” is only exacerbated (Veblen, 1899, p. 203).

The force that the larger established community exerts through the solidarity of its prevalent institutions is far stronger and more powerful than has even yet to be suggested. This force can so focus and shape a life that it naturally and inherently limits that same life. So it is that an individual can be unable to recognize clearly the necessity for change and thus be unable to establish helpful adjustments. Under this same force it is also the case that even when there is recognition of a changed situation there is an unwillingness to make the necessary adjustment. As Dewey recognizes, the force of institutional rigidity has a twofold consequence. The force that powerful and unyielding institutions exert severely limits people, so that they “may not be able to perceive clearly the needed change, or be willing to pay the price of effecting them” (Dewey, 1922, p. 89-90). This inability to perceive the need for change and, if it is perceived, this unwillingness to undergo crucial change is a serious obstacle because the community’s circumstances alter continuously, compounding the situation. “It is foolish,” Dewey writes, “not to observe how old principles actually work under new conditions, and not to modify them so that they will be more effectual instruments in judging new cases” (Dewey, 1922, p. 165).

It may be helpful at this point to explore a particular long-standing principle, examine the common and established answers of this highly controversial moral issue and see how it works under the conditions of today. The particular moral issue under scrutiny here is that of abortion. Under a traditional and conservative light this issue has an answer. However, this holds true for the steadfast opposition as well. Under a pro-choice perspective this issue also has a definitive answer. If one has forgotten the
answer, one only needs to glance back or look it up, it is that simple. The resolution is found through politics, not through thought. The solution, for both sides, is known and so all each side must do is convince or coerce their opponents. Thus it is that pro-choice and pro-life, although opposing forces, share a foundational principle. James Campbell explains,

This joint starting point is the belief that the abortion problem has an answer. This answer may be either that abortion is wrong - and therefore never to be permitted - or that abortion, while not a positive good, is not wrong - and therefore permissible when a woman desires to obtain one. The essence of both cases, however, is that there is a fixed answer: abortion itself is either right or wrong (Campbell, 2003, p. 19).

Given that there is a fixed answer, the only trouble for both sides is the other side. The complex moral issue of abortion is not all that complex for those on the ‘right’ side. Since the answer is simple for both sides of this issue, the response given to the opposition is usually one that does not take this other position with the amount of seriousness needed to fully explore the opponent’s reasons and then adequately address the complexity of the situation as it is today. The answer is, prior to any form of extensive inquiry, already given.

There is, however, a series of other significant and missing factors that should lend support to our deliberation on the issue. First off, it is important to understand the reasons why and the conditions under which society has, in the past and present, taken any position. “We must realize that there were reasons why abortion came to be seen as an evil that society had a legitimate interest in preventing, and may still have an interest in preventing in some cases.” It is important to note that, historically, abortion carried with it great risk, risk that has substantially abated today. Campbell also notes that, “the desire of traditional morality to prevent abortions grew out of sociomedical conditions
under which all too frequently the child died anyway.” Based on the ruthless precariousness of each life and the limited ability to sustain that life, especially under the hazardous conditions of pregnancy and childbirth, the focus was naturally “restricted to maximizing lives rather than maximizing the quality of any one’s life” (Campbell, 2003, p. 19-20).

However, there are, in a complex moral problem with a long past, always other issues involved, issues that carry their own weight and deserve reflection. Hence it is that we can trace the historical role of women and their perceived duty and then judge the role it has played in the abortion issue. Campbell writes:

There is also a tradition of antifeminism that runs through our society, a tradition that sees pregnancy and childbirth as a women’s duty in life. She owes children to her husband as her contribution to the family, and to the country as her contribution to the state. For a woman to obtain an abortion is to shirk this sacred obligation (Campbell, 2003, p. 20).

Reproduction, as a sacred obligation, is given such an elevated position of importance that most physical suffering undergone in the service of fulfilling this obligation is understood as acceptable and necessary. This sense of obligation has, at least to some extent, diminished over time. Even though it carries less explicit weight as a factor today, it likely still carries an implicit force, a force behind the historical decision that has (due to a sort of blinding acquiescence) accidentally continued.

With only these two primary examples, we see evidence of changing conditions and societies. We also see evidence of traditional reasons and customs that no longer adequately reflect a changed situation, but which lay hidden behind unreflective traditional answers to the abortion issue. Such quick and ready-made answers to the issue assume, with no firm basis, that the original answer was, is and will be applicable
for all times and all people. However,

precedents should not be followed but studied. The fact that some people once felt a certain mode of valuing life was good is a useful datum for all circumspect moralists; but a datum as such imposes no duty on us beyond encouraging us to take it under advisement when we attempt to evaluate current situations (Campbell, 2003, p. 21).

The problem is the ease by which the traditional answer carries on as if the conditions under which it was founded have not changed, as if the world has not moved on but stood still. A fixed and stable world is, as Dewey notes, a fiction. “The assumption of a stably uniform environment (even the hankering for one) expresses a fiction due to attachment to old habits” (Dewey, 1922, p. 38). Long standing habits of thought, instilled as doctrines when one is young, introduced and maintained as absolute truths, effortlessly carry on under conditions they no longer actually address because, as final answers, there is no need for a study of their past or their current results.

And thus we come back to the bound nature of an individual’s comforting and long-standing habits and the power of institutions that seek to maintain their founding principles. Institutions can maintain and propel themselves by and with the powerful, emotional attachments individuals place on their long-standing and revered, though outmoded, habits. Dewey explains, “emotional habituations and intellectual habitudes on the part of the mass of men create the conditions of which the exploiters of sentiment and opinion only take advantage” (Dewey, 1927, p. 341). This exploitation is run, too frequently, with and by fear. As is commonly said in one form or another, the ‘old’ is what is intimately known to a person and therefore on some level also comforting (for at least we know what to expect); the ‘new’ is the unknown and so, often, what is also feared.
It must be noted that this fear of the new is more or less consistently covered up and hidden by an idealization of older tradition. Dewey explains:

The fear is the more efficacious because like all deep-lying fears it is covered up and disguised by all kinds of rationalizations. One of its commonest forms is a truly religious idealization of, and reverence for, established institutions; for example in our own politics, the constitution, the Supreme Court, private property, free contract and so on. The words “sacred” and “sanctity” come readily to our lips when such things come under discussion (Dewey, 1927, p. 341).

As has been stated previously, this adoration of founding doctrines carries with it an assumption of the absolute rightness of the original founders and its utter and universal applicability to all times and all people. One can often find, underlying this assumption, a fear of what would take place if things were to change, a fear of the unknown. This fear generates a willingness to cling to what no longer really works, given that the situation has changed. This fear also generates a willingness to cling to what is already known and previously established. Fear, then, strengthens the force of society’s institutions and in doing so elevates their status to one that is sometimes seen as absolutely and universally certain, in some instances even sacred. As Menand points out, “if the conviction of rightness is powerful enough, resistance to it will be met, sooner or later, by force” (Menand, 2001, p. 62).

Given the strength of this retarding force, how does the individual cope with these contrary forces? How does the individual respond promptly to changing exigencies?

This, Dewey says, is the crucial question.

Existing institutions impose their stamp, their superscription, upon impulse and instinct. They embody the modifications the latter have undergone. How then can we get leverage for changing institutions? How shall impulse exercise that re-adjusting office which has been claimed for it? Shall we not have to depend in the future as in the past upon upheaval and accident to dislocate customs so as to release impulse to serve as

In what way can this situation be meliorated? As we have seen, upheaval, revolt and rebellion are often the results of an inhumanely rigid institution butting up against a community that can no longer endure (because of a drastically altered situation) the current enforcement of custom. Although some changes have been and are drastic and abrupt, many others have occurred and continue to occur accidentally, unconsciously and very slowly; these changes are only really acknowledged subsequent to their taking effect.

In fact, Dewey says that most changes have occurred in this way, have occurred accidentally. He recognizes that society must always start anew with every generation and that this renewal happens rather unintentionally. Society, Dewey states, “is always in process of renewing, and it endures only because of renewal”. However, this renewal has been, in large measure, accidental and initially unrecognized, unacknowledged. “For the most part, this continuous alteration has been unconscious and unintended. Immature, undeveloped activity has succeeded in modifying adult organized activity accidentally and surreptitiously” (Dewey, 1922, p. 69). Thus it is unwise to continue to solely rely on the renewing force of the young. The force that the ‘next generation’ can exert diminishes as the traditional force of the older groups and the established institutions increases. No matter how well intended, this older group attempts to instill some doctrines with a force strong enough to ensure the doctrine’s continuation even though circumstances might call for a change. Even if the previous claims about relying on the renewal power of the young are not strong enough to stand alone, it still follows that
relying on this renewal power of the young is not sufficient and, accordingly, that it in no way *proactively* diminishes the problem of societal lag.
Chapter Four
A Critical View

Progress is possible because humanity is malleable. This malleability, however, is restricted by the ‘all or nothing’ attitude which has us thinking we must either have an absolute answer or no answer. Progress is not a move toward some ingrained state of perfection but a departure from this state. Reinhold Niebuhr, however, does not see the possibility for either humanity’s malleability or for significant progress.

Niebuhr responds to Dewey’s position that more careful reflection and a greater willingness to adjust to changing circumstances may lead to significant progress. In so doing, Niebuhr both commends and attacks the position. He affirms, in absolute terms, that humans are incapable, based on their nature, of seriously improving their situation. He offers this ‘realistic’ critique without offering a solution of his own. For Niebuhr, Dewey’s approach to the problem of societal, institutional lag will not, cannot, ever fully or adequately resolve the problem because the problem is inherent to human nature. I find, however, embedded within Niebuhr’s critique, a presupposition that he shares with Dewey. Both Niebuhr and Dewey understand that existence is processive. That is, they both understand that change is continuous and that responses must vary in accordance with these complex fluctuations. Niebuhr states:

Though human society has roots which lie deeper in history than the beginning of human life, men have made comparatively but little progress in solving the problem of their aggregate existence. Each century
originates a new complexity and each new generation faces a new vexation in it (Niebuhr, 1932, p. 1).

Thus Dewey and Niebuhr are in accord on one foundational level, namely, that conditions change and possible solutions must undergo alteration in response. For Niebuhr, though, not only has the human race made little progress in solving its own problems, it will, moreover, never actually be capable of making significant and striking progress.

Niebuhr’s critique, generally speaking, rests on the assumption that although men of learning “may view present realities quite realistically,” they still “cling to their hope that an adequate pedagogical technique will finally produce the ‘socialized man’ and thus solve the problems of society” (Niebuhr, 1932, p. 24). This hope, Niebuhr says, will never be realized. A final solution to the problems of society is never an attainable goal because 1) men are fundamentally incapable of reaching such a goal and because 2) the problems that society faces change and, with this change, the previous solution is no longer a solution at all. No technique can fully and finally address these two problems. Human nature is unable to overcome itself in order to fully solve society’s problems; further, any large scale solution to society’s problems would cease to apply as future conditions deviate too far from the conditions under which the solution was formed.16

Niebuhr does, however, allow that some small amount of improvement in the current, complex situations of today is possible and thus we can address, in some small

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16 Niebuhr does not only point out the failings of education, but also points to the limits of religion and love. “Religion encourages love and benevolence, as we have seen, by absolutising the moral principle of life until it achieves the purity of absolute disinterestedness and by imparting transcendent worth to the life of others” (Niebuhr, 1932, p. 71). It follows that the absolute may, in complex circumstances, “overreach itself and end by destroying the ethical possibilities it has created” (Niebuhr, 1932, p. 59). Niebuhr also points out that the unselfish character of love diminishes as the community in which it is professed grows. He demonstrates this point through the example of patriotism, a form of altruism that is also “simply another form of selfishness” (Niebuhr, 1932, p. 48).
fashion, the problems the community *now* faces. Niebuhr, like Dewey, finds this small hope in reflective education and conscientious intelligence. “Education can no doubt solve many problems of society, and can increase the capacity of men to envisage the needs of their fellows and to live in harmonious and equitable relations with them” (Niebuhr, 1932, p. 24-25). Within Niebuhr’s critique there is thus hope for small and transient improvements (given the undercurrent of continuous change), in the capacities of institutions, of communities. These minor improvements enable the institution or community to respond more effectively and there is definite value in even minor progress. There is, though, simply no one method with which to finally resolve the problems of humanity.

Although the ‘men of learning’ have misled themselves about the power of their ‘pedagogical technique,’ in this misleading conclusion there is some valuable, tangible good. The confidence these ‘men of learning’ have in the results of their methods gives them an optimistic outlook, leads them to expect progress, and in this optimistic perspective there is that very potential. “Since there are always unrealized potentialities in human life, which remain undeveloped, if hope does not encourage their development, the optimism of the rationalists and educators is not without value” (Niebuhr, 1932, p. 24). Those, on the contrary, who understand the situation to be irredeemable, utterly and totally doomed, do not and will not attempt to make any overture towards meliorating the conditions because *there is no hope*. The optimism of the misled is key: “for the vision of a just society is an impossible one, which can be approximated only by those who do not regard it as impossible” (Niebuhr, 1932, p. 81). The contribution this ‘educated’ group may make, then, has serious and continuous potential to do real, although limited,
good. By approximating their ideals, something tangible is accomplished. This is done, Niebuhr says, only by those who are not without hope.

While Niebuhr openly acknowledges the potential of this optimistic, educated group, he steadfastly remains ‘realistic.’ Niebuhr’s position is one in which the difficulties of society are understood as utterly unfixable. Furthermore, since there is no ultimate fix, there is often less need to redress the current problems. Like those who have in their possession the answer, those who think there can be no answer have no need to reassess the current problems. That is, if the situation is irredeemable or if the answers are already known, then there is less of a pressing need to reconsider the matters at hand. In the second case, as we have seen, the answer in one’s possession, when revered, requires no further rational reflection. In both cases, however, there may be a willingness to live with circumstances that are not conducive to one’s life because there is little need to reconsider the situation. Worse, it follows that

An irrational society accepts injustice because it does not analyze the pretensions made by the powerful and privileged groups of society. Even the portion of society which suffers most from injustice may hold the power, responsible for it, in reverence (Niebuhr, 1932, p. 31).

The power society wields in the formation of each of its members is immense. This immense power is revealed with alacrity when examining those who hold society’s standards in reverence while, at the same time, suffering from those same standards. As William James writes,

Habit is thus the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent. It alone is what keeps us all within the bounds of ordinance, and saves the children of fortune from the envious uprisings of the poor. It alone prevents the hardest and most repulsive walks of life from being deserted by those brought up to tread therein… It dooms us all to fight out the battle of life upon the lines of nurture or our early choice, and to make the best of a pursuit that disagrees, because there is no other
for which we are fitted, and it is too late to begin again (James, 1890, p. 121).

What would otherwise not be withstood is accepted without thought because of the very rigidity of habit. This is further enforced by the inertia of society’s institutions. These institutions serve to perpetuate and enhance the powerful forces of habit and custom.

The power of institutions, of society, to denote moral standards, even to denote world perspectives, can be qualified but never eliminated. Niebuhr commences to defend this position with the social example of class bias. He writes:

A higher degree of intelligence and a more acute rational perception might conceivably destroy class bias to some degree. It can certainly increase the number of individuals who are able to penetrate through the moral illusions which confuse the mind and conscience of a majority of the class. It might even qualify the certainty with which most of the members of the class hold to their illusions, and thereby insinuate a rational element into the inevitable struggle between the classes. But it cannot abolish the egoism of a class (Niebuhr, 1932, p. 141).

Thus we return again to the limited power of intelligence and rational perception to modify socially prevalent modes of thought. Although these powers of intelligence and conscious perception do some good, they can never do enough. He cites both man’s innate selfishness and the tragic history of mankind as evidence for his claim that the problems of society can never be fully addressed. Man’s innate selfishness, man’s need “to make himself the centre and source of his own life,” is the irredeemable source of his sin. Man “is betrayed by his very ability to survey the whole to imagine himself the whole” (Niebuhr, 1941, p. 16-17).

The other evidence Niebuhr uses in support of his claim against the ability of societies to finally and adequately respond to their situation is one that has already been mentioned in passing. Final solutions for society’s problems are not attainable because
even what may seem to be an absolute solution in a given instant will require reëvaluation and readjustment under circumstances that have changed beyond the extent one had previously envisioned. Here Niebuhr makes the same claim as Dewey. All of these absolute claims, Niebuhr says, are formed in particular circumstances. Further, some of these absolutistic moral claims give way to other claims under certain stressing circumstances. Thus, reëvaluation is consistently a necessary process and ready-formed answers do not always adhere to the given situation adequately. Niebuhr writes:

It is well to note that even in the comparatively simple problems of individual relationships there is no moral value which may be regarded as absolute. It may, in a given instant, have to be sacrificed to some other value. Every action resolves a certain competition between values, in which one value must be subordinated to another (Niebuhr, 1932, p. 174).

Niebuhr gives an example in support of the assertion that even moral claims that seem to be utterly unquestionable must, at times, be subordinated to others. Thus even those who maintain that all life is sacred may be forced to make a decision between “types of life, and sacrifice an unborn infant to save the life of a mother.” It must be noted that one cannot escape this moment of decision by somehow remaining neutral; wallowing in indecision will not prevent the inevitable. Here inaction and indecision still result in a ‘default’ action, turning this indecision into an action in itself. Thus, “a reflective morality is constantly under the necessity of reanalyzing moral values which are regarded as intrinsically good of judging them in instrumental terms” (Niebuhr, 1932, p. 174). Adjustment is a timeless state and thus final solutions are unattainable. While the example of urgent decision-making under unforeseen circumstances demonstrates the necessity of reanalyzing even one’s most treasured moral values, there are more mundane examples that demonstrate how standards adjust to changing circumstances.
The changing connotation of common words over time illustrates this point nicely. Benjamin Barber lists examples of social terms whose meanings have changed to demonstrate the prevalence of these adjustments. Barber states:

*Poverty* was once a sign of moral weakness; now it is a badge of environmental victimization. *Crime* once proceeded from original sin; now it is an escape from poverty. *States’ Rights* once bore the stigma of dishonor, then signified vigorous sectionalism, then was a code word for racism, and has now become a byword for the new decentralized federalism (Barber, 1984, p. 195-196).

There is no final solution to the problems of crime and poverty because, even if the problem remains, the understanding of the problem itself changes. The solution previously conceived may now be understood as part of the problem, the problem itself may now be a symptom of a deeper problem. It is even the case that what was a social problem may no longer be considered as such; now, it may be considered an acceptable social practice. With changing standards and changing problems there is no final solution and, with no available final solution, there is a need for constant observation and reflection, a need for adjustment. This is true for Barber and for Niebuhr. However, for Niebuhr our ability to adjust and respond is always fundamentally limited.

In fact, as Dewey says, the more an institution or habit benefits a particular, historical situation, the less likely it is that it will benefit the situation of today. Of course this lack of fit depends on how far the temporal and spatial distance has altered the circumstances of today from those of the past. In general, “the old principles do not fit the contemporary life as it is lived, however well they may have expressed vital interests of the times in which they arose” (Dewey, 1927, p. 135). Thus it is often the case that the doctrines of the past, in being derived and fitted to respond to the circumstances of the time, find themselves to be inadequate doctrines in the present. Past doctrines…
served a particular local pragmatic need. But often their very adaptation to immediate circumstances unfitted them, pragmatically, to meet more enduring and more extensive needs. They lived to cumber the political ground, obstructing progress, all the more so because they were uttered and held not as hypotheses with which to direct social experimentation but as final truths, dogmas. No wonder they call urgently for revision and displacement (Dewey, 1927, p. 145-146).

These past doctrines are in need of extensive examination; they are in need of observation based upon their effects today. Such doctrines should not be understood in universal and absolute terms, but, as Niebuhr says, in instrumental terms.

It becomes obvious, then, that Niebuhr rejects the assertion that a priori justification can be applied to actual social circumstances without observation and reflection on the results of these assertions. He again makes this point by citing another example.

A community may believe, as it usually does, that reverence for life is a basic moral attitude, and yet rob a criminal of his life in order to deter others from taking life. It may be wrong in doing this; but if it is, the error is not in taking the life but in following a policy which does not really deter others from murder. The question cannot be resolved on a priori grounds but only by observing the social consequences of various types of punishment (Niebuhr, 1932, p. 175).

Niebuhr, like Dewey, understands that close observation of the results of our actions and our greater institutions is needed in order to adjust what may no longer work. He does not think - he explicitly rejects the possibility - that society will ever be fully capable of doing so on a large scale and at an adequate pace. To continue with his point, however, Niebuhr also states that “society may believe that the preservation of freedom of opinion is a social good, not because liberty of thought is an inherent or natural right but because it is a basic condition of social progress” (Niebuhr, 1932, p. 175). The primary concern in institutionalized laws is not their a priori and absolute value, but their very real results.
Does this law, code or institution serve to better the situation of today or does it harm citizens, deter and stifle progress?

Thus, Niebuhr offers a ‘final and authoritative answer’ on whether or not society can solve its own larger problems: it cannot. Humans, as inherently limited beings, have a perspective that is also inherently limited. The answers one most often finds in life are relative to the experiences one has had and the conditions one has faced. Thus, there is no one absolute answer to complex moral issues. Niebuhr writes:

On the question of the relative value of freedom and solidarity no final and authoritative answer can be given. Every answer will be relative to the social experience of particular individuals and groups, who have suffered from either anarchy or autocracy and tend to embrace the evils of the one in the effort to escape the perils of the other (Niebuhr, 1932, p. 175).

Since the solution is based upon particular conditions, conditions never capable of exactly reproducing themselves, this solution will not stand in good stead for all time.

Another primary reason Niebuhr offers in rejecting the possibility that society will overcome its problems is the nature of mankind. This second universal claim of Niebuhr’s asserts that “man will always be imaginative enough to enlarge his needs beyond minimum requirements and selfish enough to feel the pressure of his needs more than the need of others” (Niebuhr, 1932, p. 196). Some amount of observational compassion is possible and this may go a little way in meliorating the unfair conditions others face; but this compassion, for Niebuhr, has a definite limit and it does not extend far enough to put an end to such problems.17 He further defends his point by describing the imaginative power of the human mind and its innate ability to extend itself.

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17 Compassion can, however, be expanded through either religion or education. Although this is a caveat to the limitations Niebuhr points out, it does not completely negate these limitations. Both religion and education, while capable of expanding our compassion, do so only to an extent and the imagination still overextends the limitations of the individual.
Human self-consciousness is a high tower looking upon a large and inclusive world. It vainly imagines that it is the large and inclusive world. It vainly imagines that it is the large world which it beholds and not a narrow tower insecurely erected amidst the shifting sands of the world (Niebuhr, 1941, p. 17).

Beyond this illustration, Niebuhr defends his position by looking back on human history. In ‘looking back’ one finds his position verified and the future, Niebuhr asserts, can be expected to offer only more of the same. The ‘men of learning’ have mistaken exaggerated hopes for the ability of communities to progress.

Dewey makes a similar claim, in terms of the individual and the institution, although he does not do so in absolute terms. Instead, he writes of selfishness by emphasizing the weight one’s vested interests have in 1) swaying one’s opinion and 2) glossing over one’s meaner reasons for doing so. Dewey says, “too often the man who should be criticizing institutions expends his energy in criticizing those who would reform them. What he really objects to is any disturbance of his own vested securities, comforts and privileged powers” (Dewey, 1922, p. 168). Thus, many cling selfishly to that which is familiar and comforting; and they at the same time resist the honest self-reflection that points to their real motivation. For Dewey, however, there are powers of education and observation that counter this tendency. Although Niebuhr gives this possibility some minor role in making the situation better, he sees the possibilities of education and observation to be severely limited. In understanding the possibilities of education and observation to be limited, however, he necessarily limits their very potential to do some good. As he has said, it is those who believe in the possibility of progress who most fervently make any small advance a reality.
In one respect, though, Niebuhr is correct in his conclusion about society’s capacity to solve its own problems. In a very real sense, society is incapable of finding and maintaining a solution that works. Niebuhr is correct in this conclusion to the extent that he identifies the changing conditions by which any previous working solution becomes undermined. This Dewey identifies as well. “The most skillful aptitude bumps at times into the unexpected, and so gets into trouble from which only observation and invention extricate it. Efficiency in following a beaten path has then to be converted into breaking a new road through strange lands” (Dewey, 1922, p. 173). Because this process is constant and continuous, there is never a final, universally applicable solution. There is, rather, only the process.

From the acknowledgement of the process it follows that “because there is no final recipe by which to decide this question all moral judgment is experimental and subject to revision by its issue” (Dewey, 1922, p. 279). Moral judgment is experimental in the sense that it is subject to observation of its own results and subject to adjustment based on this observation. Morality is no longer an *a priori* realm from which we obtain all of our values; it is, instead, a process of refinement, of education, by which moral values subject themselves to continuous revision. Every new situation has the potential to alter current standards. “Every situation has its own measure and quality of progress, and the need for progress is recurrent, constant.” However little or much this process brings about progress, this progress has no end point in a final, perfectly good state. “It is clear that such progress brings no surcease, no immunity from perplexity and trouble” (Dewey, 1922, p. 283). In this way, Dewey and Niebuhr are of an accord.
Niebuhr, however, thinks that the extent to which society is actually capable of making this progress is grossly overestimated. He seems to think that ‘men of learning,’ such as Dewey, believe their advice will solve the problems of society. Dewey, in fact, offers no such guarantee and never maintains, as we have seen, that society’s problems are ever entirely and finally solvable. In fact, he continually maintains that there is never an end to the process of adjustment and progress, never an absolute answer.

No matter what the present success in straightening out difficulties and harmonizing conflicts, it is certain that problems will recur in the future in a new form or on a different plane. Indeed every genuine accomplishment instead of winding up an affair and enclosing it as a jewel in a casket for future contemplation, complicates the practical situation (Dewey, 1922, p. 284-285).

On every level this is a process without an end. It is, indeed, a process even without guarantees. Moreover, adjustments that produce valuable, beneficial results are still themselves capable of producing further problematic issues. “From the side of what has gone before achievement settles something. From the side of what comes after, it complicates, introducing new problems, unsettling factors” (Dewey, 1922, p. 285). There is no discord here between Dewey and Niebuhr, other than the fact that Niebuhr miscalculates the extent to which Dewey offers final and authoritative answers to social problems.

Dewey does not even offer the assurance of steady, slow progress. Regress is as much an option as progress. “Progress is not steady and continuous. Retrogression is as periodic as advance” (Dewey, 1927, p. 30). In fact, Thorstein Veblen made this same point earlier. Not only is change itself very difficult but progressive change is even more so. It is far easier to return to a previous state than it is to open up a new and unknown path. He writes:
Any change in men’s views as to what is good and right in human life makes its way but tardily at the best. Especially is this true of any change in the direction of what is called progress; that is to say, in the direction of divergence from the archaic position - from the position which may be accounted the point of departure at any step in the social evolution of the community. Retrogression, reproach to a standpoint to which the race has been long habituated in the past, is easier (Veblen, 1899, p. 196).

Retrogression is easier because it is a path that is already well known, and in that knowledge there is comfort. One can, without much difficulty, assume that small divergences - maladjustments - from the ‘right’ path were the cause of the disharmony in the current situation, and that all that is needed is a more rigorous adherence to tradition. To depart from traditional doctrines and well established habits is to depart into the unknown. Even though both retrogression and progression are possible, it seems easy to infer that Niebuhr thinks the possibilities of progress are limited to a far greater extent than does Dewey. Naturally, this also means that there is an acknowledgement that neither regress nor progress are certainties. And thus, with conscious and careful effort, progress becomes ever more possible. Campbell notes that “although there cannot be guarantees that our efforts will make our situation better, the improvement of our situation is a real possibility” (Campbell, 1995, p. 13).

Niebuhr, however, in defining the absolute limit of human nature’s capacity to move beyond selfish motives and make definite, leaping progress, may, in fact, be mistaken. For one, in making such an absolute claim about the feats of human nature he, by his own admission, limits the possibilities he said were available to those who in striving for progress open up the possibility for it to occur. I think it is also clear that “we cannot know in advance the limits of selfless action.” It is further the case that through social customs and education we learn how to be: how selfish, how selfless. “We learn
the limits of the self; we learn that higher levels of selflessness are possible through education” (Campbell, 1995, p. 235).
Chapter Five
Conclusion

What must we do to deal more effectively with changing circumstances? We require a method by which we are able to form provisional answers, answers that effectively respond to the needs of the current situation, but that also give way when they no longer respond as effectively. Components of this method have already been listed. They include: careful observation, reflection, openness, responsiveness and so forth. “One must conceive maxims,” Barber writes, “that can motivate action and create consensus while having the malleability, flexibility, and provisionality of historically conditioned and thus ever-changing working rules” (Barber, 1984, p. 165). Given the problems that develop when outmoded beliefs or institutions are applied to situations that no longer reflect the conditions under which the beliefs or institutions were founded, one must ask what can be done to meliorate these conditions. Barber developed a method that closely reflects Dewey’s own approach.

Under Barber’s method the maxims by which one operates are flexible, provisional, developed through public-action and based upon particular circumstances. They are not, thereby, weak and susceptible of being undermined by strong and possibly ‘immoral’ maxims. Moral claims derived through and continually subject to careful observation, discussion and reflection can still be powerfully strong claims.

The norms yielded by political judgment are provisional not because they
are relative or feeble - they may in fact be vigorous and inspire decisive action - but because they issue from a communal will that is itself provisional and subject to constant emendation. They are produced by an ongoing process of democratic talk, deliberation, judgment, and action, and they are legitimized solely by that process, which exhibits and refracts the political culture’s changing circumstances and evolving communal purposes (Barber, 1984, p. 170).

Communal norms, developed through continuous “talk, deliberation, judgment, and action” are constantly reflected back on the community because of the process by which they are formulated. Since this process subjects communal norms to continuous observation and, based upon this observation, to discussion of their value, they are also more quickly subject to revision when they no longer produce valued results.

Of course, the value of this method presupposes a recognition that the community itself changes and that with this change their needs and purposes change as well. Campbell notes: “this position denies the possibility of a final, complete, perfect, and certain moral code that we could apply to all people and all actions at all times” (Campbell, 2003, p. 21). We have seen, both through simple, mundane examples (mowing one’s lawn) and through complex, weighty examples (abortion), that the community’s circumstances certainly undergo change. With the recognition of this change there should be a corresponding change in the laws and institutions of the community. Barber, as has been previously stated, also recognizes these changing conditions and the need for subsequent change in the community’s institutions.

Changing circumstances often influence the collective concepts of a community. Communities facing significant change, whether drastic or gradual, often undergo a change in the very meaning of the terms they employ. As the community’s understanding of such terms change, the way in which the community perceives their
problems and the possible solutions to their problems change. Here, “the purpose of morality is to make human life more secure and valuable, not to satisfy some presumed prehuman code” (Campbell, 2003, p. 21).

Solutions, here, are no longer sought by simply referring back to previous solutions. There is no longer a search for fixed answers. Instead, there is a search for and discussion of possible working solutions, solutions that are sought to meliorate the conditions of the present. For Barber, these solutions begin in discussion.

Talk helps us overcome narrow self-interest, but it plays an equally significant role in buttressing the autonomy of individual wills that is essential to democracy. It is through talk that we constantly reencounter, reevaluate, and repossess the beliefs, principles, and maxims on the basis of which we exert our will in the political realm (Barber, 1984, p. 190).

Thus, it is talk which allows us to test our beliefs through the perspectives of others, to “reencounter” them and so “reevaluate” them. Within this interaction there is the possibility of testing our beliefs against other interpretations. Through this discussion, questionable beliefs will often fail to be upheld and will then either be adjusted or let go. Thus, “talk immunizes values from ossification and protects the political process from rigidity, orthodoxy, and the yoke of the dead past” (Barber, 1984, p. 190). There is, then, within these discussions also the possibility of more quickly responding to the community’s changing needs because one gains a broader and more accurate perspective of the community through being exposed to other perspectives.

In finding one’s beliefs less than accurate and persuasive during such discussions, a certain amount of uncertainty develops. In the political realm this uncertainty is considered a problem. For how does one act when facing less than decisive beliefs for acting one way or the other? In the ‘political realm,’ for the community, there are no
final, authoritative solutions and yet there are decisive political actions.

Of all the dilemmas facing democracy, that of uncertainty is the most poignant. Although politics is a realm of contestability and conflict where no independent ground can provide solutions, it is also a realm of inevitable decision and necessary action. The uncertainty that is part of the definition of politics vanishes the moment an action is taken. Yet measured against the uncertainty, the action must always appear somewhat fortuitous and contingent (Barber, 1984, p. 258).

Although there is no independent ground, no final and absolute solutions, there are decisive actions. Even inaction, in the realm of politics, can have sweeping results and bring about significant change.

This contrast between political action and political indecision brings about several troubling questions in need of examination. Barber asks:

How can we institutionalize regret without paralyzing common action? How can we, once we choose a road to take, keep on the horizon of our common imagination all the roads not taken? How can we keep possibility alive when we cannot avoid acting? (Barber, 1984, p. 259).

Merely by facing such questions, the reflective and aware individual will be more capable of keeping other possibilities open while, at the same time, being aware of the necessity to make a choice, to act. Such an individual will understand and even expect that all of the results of any one action cannot be known prior to the act. As such, this individual will be aware of the need for both careful observation of the results as well as the need for possible reevaluation of the beliefs behind the action. For, as Dewey writes, “no one can take into account all the consequences of the acts he performs” (Dewey, 1927, p. 52). There is always the possibility of the unforeseen, even in the most ordinary and mundane action.

Thus, each act we perform, instead of being understood as rigidly defining and limiting our character and path in life, becomes one act in a series that continuously alters
ourselves and our surroundings. Therefore, “the greatest change, once it is accomplished, is simply the outcome of a vast series of adaptations and responsive accommodations, each to its own particular situation” (Dewey, 1927, p. 84). This process, a process by which uncertainty is not avoided, but rather understood as a vital component to communal decisions and actions, is the process by which Barber promotes his theory of strong democracy.

The empathy and the imaginative reconstruction of self as other which are typical of strong democratic deliberation encourage an awareness of what might have been in the awareness of what will be. And the transitory character of every act and decision, each only one in a train of ongoing reflections and modifications intended to transform citizens and their communities over time, guarantees a certain impermanence in the decisional process and a certain mutability in the world of action that accommodates and even honors uncertainty (Barber, 1984, p. 259).

Understood in this way, each act gives way to the future and, subsequently, to the possibilities of growth within this future. It is with this understanding that institutional lag can continue to be addressed; it is with this understanding that the resistance to fruitful adjustment is diminished and significant growth is made possible.

“The key to adequate social reform is the existence of individuals who can transcend their inadequate situation.” One of the keys to successfully transcending one’s situation and thus to addressing the need for social reform is discussion and the subsequent widening of one’s inherently limited perspective. In order to step outside of one’s perspective, one must attempt to gain another, divergent perspective. It is hardly likely that one can form various, diverse perspectives with which to compare one’s own within the perspective one has been enmeshed without first glimpsing another perspective from which one can make a comparison. Thus, the “process of social reconstruction begins… with the individual and with groups of individuals who stand outside of
society’s currently held perspectives” (Campbell, 2004, p. 43, 45). This cannot be accomplished without divergent experiences, perspectives, and discussions.

Having diverse experiences and various discussions with other citizens makes the possibility of social reconstruction more likely. This process, however, is still a difficult one. First of all, it is clear that institutions have their own momentum and that attempting to swim against this tide in order to encourage their reconstruction is very difficult. “Institutions have an inertia that can work to prevent their reconstruction even when reconstruction is seen as necessary” (Campbell, 2004, p. 47). The institution, as a powerful social structure, is a strong force to oppose and to subject to necessary adjustment. Secondly, the individuals who do form wider, more divergent perspectives from those of main-stream society must also resist the powerful urge to conform or submit in order to attempt to address the need for institutional reconstruction. The power of tradition, custom, habit and the social conditions in which one has been embedded help create one’s very character and are incredibly powerful forces. Neibuhr notes, “even when they [people] do form their own judgments there is no certainty that their sense of obligation toward moral values… will be powerful enough to overcome the fear of social disapproval” (Neibuhr, 1932, p. 36). Beyond this force, there is the tactical problem of attempting to amicably share one’s values with others who more than likely do not share all or even many of the same views.

Mead emphasizes a key point that arises out of Barber’s own emphasis on democratic talk. The consequence of this talk is, hopefully, sympathy. Mead notes that “sympathy comes in the arousing in one’s self of the attitude of the individual whom one is assisting” (Mead, 1934, p. 299). There must first be the willingness to attempt to bring
out in oneself the feelings of the other. In attempting to arouse in oneself the feelings or attitude of the other, there is a capacity to respond. Without the capacity to respond there is no sympathy. Sympathy expands the perspective of the self and permits compassion that can inspire social action where before there was ignorance. There can be no sympathy and no responsive action when there is ignorance. Ignorance is, to some extent, not only a product of one’s own limited experiences but it can also be a conscious choice. For instance, those who benefit from a particular law or institution may consciously ignore or deny the harm this law or institution inflicts on those who do not benefit.

It is obvious, I think, that what may harm one group often directly benefits another group. It is also obvious that the people benefiting from a law or institution do not (and are likely less willing to) fully recognize and understand the perspective of those who suffer from the law or institution. He writes, “those who benefit from social injustice are naturally less capable of understanding its real character than those who suffer from it” (Neibuhr, 1934, p. 80). This is natural not only because this class does not personally experience the suffering, but also because “the criteria of reason, religion and culture, to which the class appeals in defense of its position in society are themselves the product of, or at least colored by, the partial experience and perspective of the class” (Neibuhr, 1934, p. 140-141). Although this is natural, the capacity to understand the perspective of those who suffer is extended by the willingness to listen, to talk.

In the attempt to connect, to understand, there is growth. Conversely, one cannot wisely and compassionately cope with what is not first understood. For “what cannot be understood cannot be managed intelligently. It has to be forced into subjection from
without” (Dewey, 1922, p. 5). Hence, with understanding there is a sensitivity to what was before unrecognized and so unacknowledged. Mead notes that the extent and expansion of one’s sensitivity to one’s surroundings is, effectively, a creative process. That is, “the community as such creates its environment by being sensitive to it” (Mead, 1934, p. 250). There can be no sensitivity, if there is no awareness. It is fairly obvious, I think, that awareness develops more fully when there is more engagement, more experiences and more ‘talk.’

Since action is necessary and since inaction has its own consequences, the benefit of reevaluating the beliefs and motives behind action cannot be ignored. “It seems evident,” Barber writes, “that maxims that are continuously reevaluated and repossessed are preferable to maxims that are embraced once and obeyed blindly thereafter” (Barber, 1984, p. 191). What might have worked well in the past, might no longer work at all, might even harm others or the community at large. When does the authority upon which one places value shift from some original doctrine or some personal authority figure, to that of experience? At what point does one check the doctrine against one’s experiences and attempt to honestly reassess its value? There simply is no one, particular point at which these questions become necessary because, essentially, testing one’s beliefs against experience is a necessary process. Deliberation and reflection on experience are continually essential; it is what Dewey refers to as “constant watchfulness.”

By constant watchfulness concerning the tendency of acts, by noting disparities between former judgments and actual outcomes, and tracing that part of the disparity that was due to deficiency and excess in disposition, we come to know the meaning of present acts, and to guide them into the light of that meaning (Dewey, 1922, p. 144).
In this process there is discovery. In the use of this method one does not get rid of conflict. Instead, there is here “an attempt to uncover the conflict in its full scope and bearing” (Dewey, 1922, p. 150).

In applying constant watchfulness to our recurring examples, we do not come to any sort of authoritative solution that, once and for all, resolves the issue. Instead, we become more willing to seek out and acknowledge the points at which a particular habit, custom, or law ceases to produce valued, helpful results. We also become more willing to discuss these issues, examine and weigh novel alternatives and act to promote changing communal interests. Thus, some communities may find a law enforcing certain lawn care specifications burdensome, unreasonable and impractical. Faced with different circumstances and concerns, different values, the community will respond more quickly, discuss alternatives and act to adapt such standards to their changing circumstances.

Our second example discussed the circumstances of some Latin American women and, more broadly, abortion. Again, no final and authoritative solution to these problems is offered. The failure to derive such a solution is often cited as a criticism of such a method. As we have seen, however, it is a necessary component of a method that must address continuously changing circumstances. Still, there are definite steps towards addressing the circumstances at hand. First, the complex problems faced by people in these circumstances will be more quickly and honestly recognized. Second and more importantly, all possible ways of addressing the situation will be discussed. The limitations of adhering to any past doctrine, original position or current law will be removed. The potential consequences of each possible action will be discussed. The community at large will be encouraged to intellectually and empathetically identify with
the perspectives of its different members and work together to find a resolution that aids this community, at this time, in these circumstances.

Our third example discussed the Constitution and the continuous reinterpretation of its intent. Instead of trying to address many current circumstances and problems through reinterpretations of the Founders’ intent, we could acknowledge that some of the circumstances we face today may not have been foreseen by the Founders. If such is the case, then it follows that there is no single way of accurately interpreting exactly how the Founders would address these circumstances. Even if such interpretations were accurate, it would still not necessarily follow that they were the best possible response to the current situation. To assume that the intent can always be adequately understood and applied to the circumstances of today is to assume, first, that the Founders somehow acquired all the critical answers right from the beginning and, secondly, that these answers apply to any and all circumstances, a dangerous assumption. The method suggested in the preceding pages suggests, instead, a willingness to address novel situations with either customary or novel solutions. Solutions are accepted or discarded by considering and testing their results. Those that do harm are discarded.

Morality cannot be simple adherence to a particular doctrine. Instead, Dewey maintains that morality must be subject to alteration, to the possibility of growth. This is for two reasons. Morals are subject to the possibility of continuous growth “not merely because all truth has not yet been appropriated by the mind of man, but because life is a moving affair in which old moral truth ceases to apply” (Dewey, 1922, p. 164). Dewey goes further and commits himself to classifying morality with education. “In the largest sense of the word, morals is education. It is learning the meaning of what we are about
and employing that meaning in action” (Dewey, 1922, p. 194). Moral progress is measured through experience and is reinforced or rejected depending on its relative value. “Does it [moral judgment] liberate or suppress, ossify or render flexible, divide or unify interest? Is perception quickened or dulled? Is memory apt and extensive or narrow and diffusely irrelevant?” (Dewey, 1922, p. 202-203). Such questions are designed to promote a morality that is vitally conscious of its own results. This process is vital under conditions that are subject to continuous change, to preventing and diminishing an inherent lag and the harm that results from it. There is here a joyful acknowledgement that “life is development and that developing, growing, is life” (Dewey, 1916, p. 54).


