

Situated institutions: philosophical investigations of the emergence of local institutions and institutional resilience

This project is dedicated to philosophical foundations of institutional theory. It investigates ontological as well as epistemological conditions determining the structure of institutions and their resilience.

There is a widely held belief that institutions are crucial factors deciding on the functioning and prosperity of societies. However, there is no consensus as to what institutions as such are – are they norms regulating our behavior from a top-down perspective, or bottom-up patterns embodied in behavior itself? Or perhaps they are specific places, like the city of Warsaw or the National Museum in Kraków (if so, we must be careful, though, not to conflate institutions with organizations). Therefore, as we can see, there is a certain conceptual indeterminacy in the field.

The starting point of this project is a belief that a good strategy to deal with the mentioned indeterminacy is a specific blend of two approaches: as a philosophical investigation, the project aims at providing a very general and abstract description of institutions, which means digging into their essential properties; on the other hand, however, the project takes an implementational standpoint, as I provisionally put it, which means beginning with a bottom-up analysis of successes and failures of enforcement/creation of institutions in local circumstances. Therefore, the key concern – almost completely neglected in the relevant philosophical literature – is local demand for an institution.

All that said, the project seeks answers to the following questions:

1. What does determine local demand for an institution-as-a-rule? Here the project sets forth a position according to which a deeper epistemological level of institutions needs to be unveiled, which does not boil down to systems of norms, but rather decides on what people locally recognize as goods worth pursuing; goods justifying normative regulation.
2. From this local-epistemological perspective, there comes a subsequent ontological puzzle of what such institutions are. Here the project defends a conception of institutions as higher-level cognitive niches.
3. Finally, there also emerges a problem of institutional resilience in cases of external shocks – which is especially pressing an issue in the times of health and security crises we've been living through since 2020. The project first targets epistemological conditions of institutional resilience, and then aims at providing an ontological model of it in terms of systems – we can say, in terms of something like a 'social immune system.'