In this book, Maxwell A. Cameron develops an account of the character traits of public officials, which he summarizes as “practical wisdom.” His starting point is the inability of political institutions to address “many of the biggest collective challenges of our times” (p. 1), which he attributes to the failure to understand that “institutions require people with the will and skill to serve the common good” (p. 2). The aim of the book is to provide such an understanding. Cameron uses an interpretive approach, arguing, in a reflexive move, that the social sciences are themselves institutions that require wise practitioners (pp. 21–28). He draws on numerous examples to examine institutions from the perspective of those who inhabit them.

To illustrate the dangers of institutional failures, Cameron discusses the example of the 2013 Lac-Mégantic train disaster in Quebec, in which a series of mistakes by different individuals (the railway engineer, the rail traffic controller, and so on) led to a catastrophe with 47 dead (Chapter 1). A core element of Cameron’s diagnosis of what went wrong is the relentless profit maximization by the train company, which “lacked a safety culture” (p. 8). The same pressures to cut costs and the same assumptions about human nature that reigned (and still reign) in many private companies also mar many public political institutions, Cameron’s main focus (see p. 19). That is why he continues his argument with a broader critique of “competitive utility-maximizing” (Chapter 2). His core claim is that it “excludes the knowledge, feelings, and skills that are necessary for the construction of the common good” (p. 29) by excluding deliberation, communication, and judgment. In addition, it fails to take into account the physical and biological limits of human nature and our planet (p. 35). For utility maximizers, the existence of common goods can only lead to the Hardian “tragedy” (see Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” Science 162, 1968). But human beings can also come up with (Elínor) Ostromian solutions for “governing the commons” (pp. 34–41). Cameron contrasts Aristotle and Hobbes in describing these different approaches, also drawing on anthropological research on the prosocial tendencies of human beings (pp. 47–49), which he connects to Adam Smith’s 1759 account of sympathy in The Theory of Moral Sentiments.

Cameron presents his alternative approach to human agency in Chapter 3. It focuses on the necessity to balance various goods, based on the quite plausible assumption that there are “perfectly defensible—indeed essential—notions of the good” (p. 56) that go beyond the summation of individual utility. Such an account of agency can accept pragmatic rules that leave sufficient space for discretion, but do not require slavish obedience (pp. 64–71). Cameron discusses institutions and practices (pp. 71–78) in ways that are very reminiscent of Alasdair MacIntyre (After Virtue, 1974) and defends this account against a number of objections. One could have added that sometimes other forms of agency, such as strict obedience to certain prohibitions, or even some limited forms of maximizing can also have their place in institutions. But in Cameron’s defense, we have enough accounts of such forms of agency, whereas the kind of wise balancing of different goods that he describes has received less attention.

In Chapter 4, Cameron gives flesh to the bones of this account by discussing case studies of three politically engaged individuals. The first is Michael Ignatieff, an academic who entered Canadian politics and later on reflected, very self-critically, about his lack of practical political judgment regarding understanding the “priority of the particular” (p. 84), “establishing his credibility with voters” (p. 88), and framing his statements in appropriate ways (p. 89). The second is Lloyd Axworthy, a former Canadian foreign minister who served as chief of an electoral observation mission and, in a critical moment, helped curb illegitimate foreign influence (pp. 90–95). The third example comes from local politics: Liz Evans is a psychiatric nurse who played a key role in improving the health services and support infrastructure for drug addicts (pp. 95–99). These portraits of individuals and their struggles are among the most fascinating parts of the book; they make one wonder whether moral exemplars should play a larger role in how we teach and think about morality.

But why has an understanding of institutions as requiring wise practitioners, which has a long historical lineage, faded into the background in recent decades? For
Cameron, it is the neoliberal unleashing of competitiveness that deserves to be blamed: it undermined deliberation and practical wisdom while promoting unhealthy levels of competitiveness and partisanship. In Chapter 5, he describes the ascent of neoliberalism, focusing on its “reliance on competition not only as an engine of growth, but as the basis of democracy, freedom, and prosperity” (p. 102). He critically notes that it is not even clear that the policies suggested by neoliberals have been successful in supporting growth (p. 107). Instead, they have led to levels of social inequality that are dangerous for democracy (pp. 107–14). The chapter ends with a sharp critique of the Citizens United decision that made possible the unlimited influx of money into U.S. politics (pp. 117–19). Chapter 6 continues the discussion of U.S. politics, focusing on the hyper-partisanship created by “the ethos of competitive utility-maximizing,” which “found its apotheosis in Donald Trump’s successful bid for the US presidency” (p. 121). With deliberation, compromise, and cooperation shoved to one side, democratic institutions can hardly function well. Cameron suggests, as a possible countermeasure, the schooling of politicians, discussing a summer school program for students as a promising example of training individuals in empathy and the search for compromise (pp. 138–40).

As an alternative, and bringing together strands of literature that had previously been rarely connected, Cameron discusses in Chapter 7 the relation between the capabilities approach and work on the quality of democracy. Wise practitioners could draw on these ideas when balancing different goods in political decision making. Cameron concludes with reflections on the kind of scholarship that is needed to grasp what matters about institutions. Such scholarship, he argues, cannot avoid embracing certain values. It must practice virtues such as “courage, integrity, and determination” (p. 162), and it must ask questions about the common good.

Cameron’s book is clearly argued and beautifully written, and it uses well-chosen examples. It is an intellectual pleasure for those who already accept the premise: the necessity for virtuous individuals within institutions. But—and this will be its greater achievement—it may also convince others, who so far have not yet paid much attention to the character of politicians. Cameron makes a convincing case for the claim that institutions are never “people-proof” (in the memorable line of John Hardwig, “The Role of Trust in Knowledge,” Journal of Philosophy 88 (12), 1991, 707). All too often, institutional design does not achieve what it is supposed to because it does not take into account the motivations and perspectives of those who inhabit the institutions. When institutions do not achieve their goals, the instinctive reaction of those trained in economics (or in the kind of political science that also relies on the assumption of competitive utility maximizing) is to say let’s have more control, more incentives. In times in which ever more fine-grained control and incentive setting by way of digital tools are on the horizon, the questions Cameron raises become ever more urgent: Where should we bet on rules and incentives, and where should we bet on character and judgment?

Let me note two points of partial disagreement. In his account of how neoliberalism came to power, Cameron arguably does not give sufficient weight to the fact that, at the time, at least some institutions (some universities might be examples!) were cliquish and governed by old-boy networks, without any attention to merit. The attempts to measure achievements objectively, by introducing rules and incentives, broke up some of these structures, and paradoxically gave women, nonwhites, and foreigners greater opportunities to attain positions. Although I certainly do not want to defend the introduction of “neoliberal” measures into every public institution, one should not idealize the past; in any case, the arguments from alleged fairness and objectivity are important for understanding why even many well-meaning people at the time could be won over by some neoliberal arguments.

Second, although Cameron’s focus on wisdom, judgment, and character is extremely important, especially in contrast to the focus on incentives today, character is not a completely independent variable. Institutions shape people, and to improve people’s character, changing institutions may be as important as schooling individuals. For example, hyper-partisanship in politics seems to be made more likely by first-past-the-post systems; in proportional voting systems, the need to build coalitions and to find compromises creates a counterweight to the competitiveness of electoral campaigns. In addition, wise regulations for campaign funding and media formats can contribute either to more competitive or more collaborative styles of politics. These kinds of complex interrelations between institutional settings and individual virtues deserve attention as well.

But these are minor quibbles with a book that is, overall, an extremely important and timely contribution to the discussion about institutions. And given how central institutions are to almost all questions of political theory and political science, one must wish it a wide readership.

Response to Lisa Herzog’s review of Political Institutions and Practical Wisdom: Between Rules and Practice
doi:10.1017/S1537592719002007

—I Maxwell A. Cameron

I am grateful to Lisa Herzog for her caref ul reading and insightful comments on my book. I respond to her objections and suggest a future research agenda here.
I agree that neoliberal reformers have often benefited from the perception that cliquish and opaque structures could be opened up by rules and incentives based on objective measures of merit. Setting aside whether neoliberal arrangements actually benefit women, nonwhites, and foreigners, my main claim is that the single-minded pursuit of any goal (such as a high score on a putatively objective measure of achievement such as income or reputational rank) may disadvantage those who have to balance multiple goals (like work and family, research and teaching, profit and social license). The use of extrinsic rewards or metrics can demoralize wise practitioners who seek to balance diverse goods. Imposing a market logic based on competition, especially on those who work in teaching, professional organizations divide the responsibility for outcomes; they thereby risk turning individuals into cogs in machines. How can we sustain our moral character and autonomy, and fulfill our ethical responsibilities, while retaining the advantages of organization? This question motivates Lisa Herzog’s pathbreaking study.

**Reclaiming the System** deftly integrates normative theorizing and qualitative methods. Based on interviews with managers, administrators, CEOs, traders, analysts, and other functionaries, Herzog, a political philosopher and economist, captures three complex dilemmas that all organizations face: how to prevent themselves from becoming iron cages that destroy the exercise of judgment, how to mitigate the tendency of hierarchies to breed mistrust and impede the sharing of morally relevant knowledge, and how to create organizational cultures that allow role occupants to fulfill their individual and collective responsibilities.

The starting point for Herzog’s analysis is that morality is a pervasive feature of social life and that to act morally requires supportive social contexts. Because organizations amplify the potential for moral harms, it is important that they respect basic norms. Injecting such norms into “the social spheres in which non-intentional, non-communicative forms of coordination take place” (p. 13) is what Herzog means by reclaiming the system. Institutions and organizations should not be “social realms that function exclusively according to a ‘systemic’ logic” (p. 255). What Jürgen Habermas called the colonization of the lifeworld by the system needs to be reversed: we need to moralize the system.

What basic moral norms might apply to organizations? Herzog suggests three: “respect toward all individuals. . .as
moral equals,” avoidance of “individually caused harm to others,” and avoidance of “contributing to collectively caused harm to others” (p. 51). These norms are “endorsed by a broad variety of moral views” and thus represent an “overlapping consensus” (p. 54). Aligning organizations with them would help create a society “in which the rights of individuals are strengthened, the legal structures of organizations are adapted to their purposes, the balance of rights and responsibilities of corporations is redressed, access to knowledge is restructured, and measures for ensuring meaningful work are in place” (p. 250).

There are notable parallels between our respective books. Herzog and I both affirm the moral dimensions of organizations and institutions, attributing many of their failings to the inability to grapple with these dimensions; we identify problems arising from systemic conditions that crush moral agency; we place practice and practitioners at the center of our analyses; we are interested in character and judgment, which we want to foster and preserve; and we reflect on the self as actualized through roles and functions. The main difference is that, whereas Herzog wants individuals in organizations to be supported by norms that enable them to be morally responsible, I want institutions to orient practitioners toward appropriate goods. Despite this difference, we both acknowledge the importance of practical wisdom (or phronesis).

Although Herzog does not use this term, she is an ally of research on practical wisdom for three reasons. First, she expertly refutes situationists who claim that character and wisdom are unreliable sources of moral conduct. She provides evidence that moral agency, like any capacity, needs to be appropriately scaffolded. Human agents are neither playthings of contextual forces nor fully autonomous rational individuals. The development of our moral character demands the recognition that we have a shared responsibility to create contextual conditions that support good character: “morality is something that we need to take care of together” (p. 41, emphasis in original).

Second, Herzog shows that, although rules and incentives are organizational necessities, they are blunt instruments that, blindly applied, “can do injustice to individual cases” (p. 93). Incentives assume people respond to carrots and sticks, instead of intrinsic motivations (p. 96), which can be insulting and demoralizing. Similarly, codes of conduct may indicate a lack of respect for practitioners whose knowledge and motivation are essential to morally responsible action.

Finally, Herzog offers numerous examples of practitioners who notice morally significant events, know when to enforce and when to bend rules, use their specialized knowledge in responsible ways, and help prevent organizations from failing. She emphasizes the importance of intrinsic motivations and of balancing aims; she extols the value of reflection, perspective taking, and listening; and, above all, she stresses the importance of transformational agency, “in which individuals put the results of their reflection into action, taking moral responsibility for what they do in their jobs” (p. 193). Such stewardship can keep an organization “morally on track” (p. 194).

And yet there is a subtle difference between asking how organizations can be aligned with basic moral norms and asking how institutions can enable practitioners to attain the aims intrinsic to their activities. Herzog directly touches on this distinction, writing that “questions about basic moral norms and questions about what it means to fulfill a role well are often intertwined. This has to do with the fact that basic moral norms require application to concrete practices, which in turn requires an understanding of what these practices are—and this question can hardly be separated from the question of what these practices should be” (p. 190, emphasis in the original). In this passage, Herzog implicitly acknowledges that norms are vulnerable to the same criticism she directs at principles—namely, that most moral theories tend to agree and will often come to the same or similar conclusions in the evaluation of specific cases (pp. 46–47). It is not moral agreement that is typically lacking in the case of moral failings so much as the motivation and judgment necessary to put principles into practice. What Herzog says about principles applies mutatis mutandis to norms.

Herzog’s basic moral norms may be uncontroversial, but using them to guide decisions in an organization takes practical wisdom. Just as knowing what it means to be a good engineer, or doctor, or banker, and doing it in the right way and for the right reasons, requires practical wisdom, so too does knowing how to comply with basic norms, especially in difficult or exceptional circumstances or where those norms conflict or provide insufficient guidance. What does it mean for a doctor to respect the autonomy of a patient or for a teacher to treat a student as a moral equal? How can we balance the mitigation of harms to future generations from climate change against avoidance of harm to vulnerable communities in the present? Answers to such questions are not found in abstractions.

The practical wisdom needed to make such decisions can be integrated into Herzog’s proposals for restructuring institutions and organizations. Relaxing strictness and uniformity in the application of rules by creating what she calls “safety vaults” and “spaces for reflection” within organizations holds the promise of allowing the exercise of judgment and shared responsibility (p. 100). “Organizations,” says Herzog, “can encourage dialogue and exchange among individuals with different organizational roles and different worldviews, so that these can acquire a clearer sense of what is morally at stake, despite the partial perspectives of their role” (p. 205). Dialogue may have a value in itself, if only by slowing down the pace of events.
and allowing agents to step back from their activities and place them in perspective. Yet what ensures that individuals will use those spaces well? How will critical reflection on roles improve practices?

Whereas Herzog places a strong burden on dialogue and the exchange of reasons, I believe her proposals are more likely to generate the goods we want, such as the better understandings of roles, when the spaces for reflection and safety vaults she proposes engage the stewardship of wise practitioners. Such practitioners are likely to be motivated by a desire to attain the goods associated with their activities. Likewise, good organizations will promote those who exhibit character and judgment and will encourage them to provide mentoring and modeling to others in their organization. Under the aegis of transformational agents, safety vaults and spaces for dialogue may serve their purposes well. An organization, however, that rewards the ruthless pursuit of money or power at the expense of well-being or the public interest will, I suspect, neither welcome these resources nor deploy them effectively. And that is why we need good institutions.

I am pleased to have had the opportunity to reflect on both the complementarities and tensions between our books, which I hope will generate new research. Reclaiming the System is an inspiring and innovative contribution to a problem that spans a range of disciplines, debates, and literatures. It should be read by all social scientists interested in organizations, ethics, and how we can begin to reclaim the systems in which we are too often imprisoned.

Response to Maxwell A. Cameron’s review of Reclaiming the System: Moral Responsibility, Divided Labour, and the Role of Organizations in Society
doi:10.1017/S1537592719002020

— Lisa Herzog

I am very grateful to Maxwell A. Cameron for his generous review of my book. In my response, let me reflect on what may or may not be remaining disagreements between our approaches.

One issue is the difference between “moral norms” and “appropriate goods.” In my book I set myself the goal of thinking through the division of moral labor between individuals and institutions such that basic moral norms are not violated; in contrast, Cameron wants “institutions to orient practitioners toward appropriate goods.” In Reclaiming the System, I use the term “normative organizations” for organizations that are structured around shared values. Maybe in the best of all possible worlds, all organizations would be “normative organizations” (I am not 100% sure about this, because if some people want to work together in a non-normative organization, without harming anyone else, and without wasting resources that might be needed elsewhere, what would give us the right to prevent that?) But in the world in which we currently live, we also see many organizations that fulfill rather trivial tasks, such as producing gadgets or categorizing data—tasks that may not be completely unnecessary, but would be difficult to describe as “appropriate goods” in a deeper sense. Nonetheless, such organizations have a moral duty not to violate basic moral norms. Hence, the difference between Cameron and me might be a methodological one that concerns different levels of idealization. Or perhaps Cameron would accept calling “fulfilling certain rather trivial tasks while not violating basic moral norms” an “appropriate good.”

A second issue concerns the notion of “wisdom.” Cameron is correct in enlisting me into the group of thinkers who emphasize the importance of judgment, because rules are never self-explanatory, because goods might conflict and need to be balanced, and so on. I have to admit that I have a—perhaps slightly irrational—dislike of the term “wisdom,” because in my native German it smells of old men with long beards, religion, and tradition, but this is, of course, not what Cameron has in mind. What I find more problematic about giving center stage to the notion of “wisdom” is that it is so hard to grasp what it actually is. This, in turn, raises questions about who has the right to define who counts as wise and who does not—and here, my slightly irrational associations with the word point to questions about social power, discrimination, and the right to raise one’s voice for the members of different groups. The examples that Cameron discusses, which include a young nurse, show that he is at no risk of falling into this trap, but it is one that deserves to be taken seriously when the term “wisdom” is used in practical contexts.

I had chosen to focus not on wisdom or judgment, but on the challenges that individuals encounter in organizational contexts. Grappling with them requires wisdom and judgment; organizational structures, in turn, must be such that those who dare to use wisdom or judgment are not alienated or driven away, but rather find support and like-minded spirits. This, I guess, is something Cameron would agree with.