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Accountability and Corruption in Global Justice Theory

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Abstract

Gillian Brock's *Corruption and Global Justice* engages with one of the presently most worrying topics of our world: the problem of corruption. Corruption is a major challenge because it implies that many of the tasks that should be carried out by public officials and other professionals are not carried out at all or involve higher costs than they otherwise would. This is deeply problematic, since the effective and efficient exercise of public and professional roles is crucial for realizing claims of global justice, including the fulfillment of basic human needs and interests. It might be surprising to learn then, as Brock tells us, that the topic of corruption has been largely ignored by global justice theorists. In this article we question this assumption by situating Brock's book in the context of intense discussions of the nature of global distributive justice and the desirability of realizing it through so-called international development assistance. Then, we present some of the key insights of this debate concerning the importance of structures of accountability for the effectiveness of such assistance. Finally, our article will question whether the backward-looking nature of these accountability structures is compatible with Brock's forward-looking framework of the responsibility to fight corruption.

Keywords: Global justice; accountability; corruption; aid effectiveness; Gillian Brock; Leif Wenar.

Summary: Introduction; I. Corruption and the Aid Effectiveness Debate; II. Accountability and Backward- vs. Forward-Looking Responsibility for Corruption; Conclusion; References.

Introduction

Gillian Brock's *Corruption and Global Justice* engages with one of the presently most worrying topics of our world: the problem of corruption. Corruption

is a broad concept that generally means some kind of moral deficiency. In her book, however, Brock uses this concept in a narrower sense. This narrower sense is the abuse of professional or political office or role for the sake of a private or political benefit in ways that are contrary to the office or role (2023, 27). Corruption is such a huge problem because it implies that many of the tasks that should be carried out by public officials and other professionals are not carried out at all or involve much more costs than they otherwise would. This is because those who are the beneficiaries of their work are required to pay extra fees or provide some other form of compensation. This is deeply problematic, since the effective and efficient exercise of public and professional roles is crucial for realizing fundamental claims of global justice, including the fulfillment of basic needs, the realization of basic liberties, as well as fair cooperation.

Accordingly, as Brock (2023, 23) highlights, "corruption is not just an injustice […], but it also acts as a barrier to achieving justice." In an intriguing analysis of how corruption represents such a 'barrier,' Brock points out that corruption undermines citizens' trust in public officials and political institutions. Thereby corruption obstructs the cultivation or nurturing of a sense of fairness. It can thus pervasively impact psychological conditions necessary for global justice, since without such a sense of fairness citizens will not be willing to do their part in the realization of just political arrangements (see Culp 2019, 2023). Hence, Brock's detailed analysis of the multiple forms of corruption and the ways in which these can potentially be constrained, is of great practical and moral significance. Therefore, it is curious to read that Brock writes in her *Preface* that the topic of corruption has not yet been the focus of a book on global justice (2023, vi). Brock (24) later repeats this claim, arguing that global justice theorists "have not been much concerned with what might be called omnipresent or fundamental barriers to the achievement of justice, such as corruption."

Yet did normative theorists of global justice truly neglect the topic of corruption? In this article we will argue that this is not the case by situating Brock's book in the context of intense discussions of the nature of global distributive justice and the desirability of realizing it through so-called international development assistance. For in these discussions moral and political philosophers such as Dale Jamieson (2005), Joseph Heath (2006, 2007), Leif Wenar (2006), Mathias Risse (2005, 2006), Nicole Hassoun (2012), Joshua Cohen (2010) and Julian Culp (2014, ch. 6, 2016) paid close attention to the ineffectiveness of international development assistance and the ways in which it was often caused by corruption. While none of these contributions represents a book-length, focused discussion of the problem of corruption, the debate nevertheless generated important insights of how to normatively think of and practically deal with

the problem of corruption. Furthermore, in a constructive spirit, we will present some of the key insights of this debate and focus on the importance of structures of accountability that the normative debate over the ineffectiveness of international development assistance brought to the fore. Finally, our article will question whether the backward-looking nature of these accountability structures is compatible with the forward-looking nature of Brock's framework of the responsibility to fight corruption.

I. Corruption and the Aid Effectiveness Debate

The aid effectiveness debate concerns the question of whether and, if so, to what extent, international development assistance can realize goals like reducing extreme economic poverty or infant mortality. In economics the debate consisted of two poles, one represented by Jeffrey Sachs (2005), calling for a "Big (Financial) Push" to realize the United Nations' Millenium Development Goals, and another represented by William Easterly (2006), who is highly critical of state-led development assistance and fundamentally questions the existing practice of international development assistance. This debate was of great interest to scholars of global justice and generated a considerable literature on the normative significance of the supposed ineffectiveness of foreign aid. This is because it put into question that the ambitious distributive requirements of global justice theorists could be met, even when donor countries and their citizens would be appropriately motivated to discharge duties of global distributive justice by way of financing state-led international development initiatives. After all, if such assistance turned out to be ineffective, then it would be pointless to ask the citizens of wealthy countries to contribute to the development efforts of poorer countries abroad. This led to a heated debate, especially since so-called post-development scholars had already been arguing for a long time that development assistance did more harm than good, namely by reinforcing international dependency and domination (see Escobar 2011). The wider public also followed this debate, as the former Word Bank consultant Dambisa Moyo (2009) prominently made the case in her bestselling book *Dead Aid* that economically poor African countries would be better off if the donor countries would announce the end of international development assistance.

Global justice theorists picked up this discussion in different ways. Hassoun (2012) as well as Sanjay Reddy and Minouio and Reddy (2009), for example, suggested that the empirical evidence for the ineffectiveness of development assistance was not compelling and that rich countries could effectively alleviate

suffering in poor countries. Jamieson (2005), Heath (2006, 2007) and Mathias Risse (2005, 2006), by contrast, were much more convinced by some economists' critiques of international development assistance and suggested that global distributive justice requirements could not effectively be met by means of international development assistance. Jamieson and Risse therefore claimed that international development assistance should only be granted in very limited cases in which its effectiveness was to be expected, such as when the receiving government fared well by "good governance" standards, but nevertheless insisted that state-led international development assistance was not the best route for addressing global distributive injustices. Internal changes of the political culture of the poor countries, so that the governments of these countries would be more responsive to the needs of their citizens, should instead be one of the key strategies for achieving global justice. By contrast, Heath (2006, 2007) suggested that it was not conceivable that international development assistance could ever realize highly egalitarian understanding of global distributive justice according to which, for example, human beings should have equal opportunities for social success regardless of not only their class but also their national backgrounds (cf. Moellendorf 2009). Therefore, he suggested that these highly demanding conceptions, often referred to as cosmopolitan or globalist conceptions of global distributive justice, would be invalid, and that global distributive justice would require at best the realization of a more minimal sufficiencitarian threshold, e.g. one demanding the fulfillment of all human beings' basic needs.

The point of referring to this debate which dates almost two decades is twofold. First, the existence of this debate demonstrates that global justice theorists have been indeed very much interested in the obstacles that impede the realization of certain understandings of distributive justice at the global level. These theorists engaged in detail with the relevant economic and other social scientific literatures. Second, the scholars involved in this debate also discussed the problem of corruption, given that one of the main reasons why international development assistance is deemed ineffective is precisely this problem. This can be corruption at the level of intermediary international organizations, corruption at the level of the donor countries, or corruption at the level of the recipient countries. Furthermore, this problem of corruption was analyzed, on the one hand, as a problem of countries' political culture (Rawls 1999, Risse 2005) and, on the other hand, as a problem of the lacking accountability mechanisms within the procedures through which international development assistance was carried out (Wenar 2006).

Brock's contribution in *Corruption and Global Justice* can thus be read as a continuation of these earlier discussions of corruption in connection with the

ineffectiveness of international development assistance, which represented one of the major subjects for studying practical obstacles for the realization of global justice. Brock moves far beyond these earlier discussions, however, by studying corruption not only within the context of international development assistance. Thereby she offers a more general and variegated approach that deals with multiple forms of corruption.

It is unfortunate, however, that Brock does not pay more attention to the discussion of how to achieve accountability in international development assistance. After all, this was indeed one of the insights that global justice theorists generated by way of studying the normative importance of the debate on the ineffectiveness of international development assistance. This work on the relevance of such accountability structures was carried out by Wenar (2006), and was also supported by adjacent work of Ruth Grant and Robert Keohane (2005). We will further explain the key insights of Wenar's work in the next section, as well as how they matter for Brock's forward-looking framework of responsibility for corruption.

II. Accountability and Backward- vs. Forward-Looking Responsibility for Corruption

The aid effectiveness debate not only raised doubts about the feasibility of ambitious distributive projects but also highlighted the question of how accountability structures shape aid outcomes. Here Wenar's (2006) contribution to the debate is particularly informative. Accountability, Wenar argues, is the "master value" in development, more fundamental than transparency or participation, because without accountability there is no way to ensure that aid achieves its stated purpose. Yet, unlike Brock, who seems to treat accountability as an intrinsic good, Wenar insists that it is only valuable instrumentally—to the extent it contributes to poverty reduction (Wenar 2006, 25). As he points out, accountability in existing aid structures is often misaligned: recipients in the Global South rarely have effective means to hold donors to account, while donors themselves tend to be more responsive to domestic constituencies than to the intended beneficiaries of aid (Wenar 2006, 10-11). Moreover, excessive or misplaced accountability requirements—such as burdensome reporting obligations—can sometimes impede aid delivery rather than improve it. In other words, more accountability is not always better. (Wenar 2006, 8) Wenar's reflections thus underscore that accountability must be carefully calibrated: too little accountability renders aid unresponsive, while too much of the wrong kind

undermines its effectiveness. The most promising reforms he suggests, are thus those that create modest, incremental improvements in accountability, such as peer review among agencies or independent evaluative associations. (Wenar 2006, 22-23)

Another influential contribution in a similar vein comes from Grant and Keohane (2005), who map out the diverse models and mechanisms of accountability in global governance. Whereas Wenar stresses that accountability must serve the interests of the poor to be meaningful, Grant and Keohane underscore that accountability is not a single principle but a plurality of mechanisms that operate with distinct logics. (Grant and Keohane 2005, 29) They distinguish between delegation models, in which agents are accountable to principals (for instance, bureaucracies to states), and participation models, in which those directly affected by decisions play a role in holding power-wielders to account. They further identify a range of accountability mechanisms—hierarchical, legal, fiscal, peer, reputational, and others—that operate with varying effectiveness in different contexts. (Grant and Keohane 2005, 34) The central takeaway is that more accountability is not always better: accountability mechanisms have different logics and may even pull in conflicting directions. Accountability is not a panacea: it can be ineffective, it can conflict with efficiency, and it can even be abused. (Grant and Keohane 2005, 37) This complicates straightforward calls to expand accountability, since it is crucial to ask who is accountable to whom, through which mechanism, and with what consequences.

Both Wenar and Grant and Keohane thus caution against treating accountability as a simple cure: it is indispensable, yet also fragmented, conditional, and at times can even be counterproductive. Against this backdrop, Brock's forward-looking framework offers a different kind of response, shifting the emphasis from holding institutions answerable for past performance to assigning duties that proactively prevent corruption. She urges states, corporations, professionals, and citizens to take on "action responsibilities" (Brock 2023, 24 and 195) aimed at building and maintaining just institutions. Her constructive orientation represents a valuable extension of earlier debates, since it highlights that the fight against corruption is not only about blame or retrospective sanction but also about proactive engagement. At the same time, the challenge is how such forward-looking duties can be embedded in institutional structures that remain subject to the practical constraints identified by Wenar as well as Grant and Keohane. Without some workable link between forward-looking responsibilities and effective accountability mechanisms, Brock's framework risks appearing aspirational rather than actionable.

Finally, it bears mentioning that in previous debates on accountability, aid

effectiveness and their implications for global justice some theorists sharply questioned whether reform of corrupt or ineffective institutions is always the best course of action. In the aid effectiveness literature, critics such as Easterly and Moyo have questioned whether aid itself entrenched dependency and corruption, while others, like Heath, have suggested that the persistent infeasibility of highly demanding distributive schemes undermine their normative force. Brock never engages with what we might call the 'disengagement option', instead assuming that in most (if not all) instances, institutions marked by corruption should be repaired and strengthened through better accountability and expanded responsibilities. This reformist orientation has clear appeal, but it leaves little room to consider whether in some cases disengagement might be the more justifiable path. A fuller account of corruption and global justice would therefore need to weigh both possibilities—reform where feasible, but also the option of exit where institutions prove too compromised to be salvaged.

Conclusion

Brock's *Global Justice and Corruption* is an invaluable and much-needed contribution to the philosophical and normative literatures on global justice. It is invaluable for at least two reasons. First, Brock puts the spotlight on the multiple forms and spheres of corruption that thus far have not been on the radar of these literatures. And in addition, she presents an argumentation that is not only normatively subtle but also well-informed by relevant work in law and the social sciences. Her book thus promises to build a bridge between the philosophical work on global justice and the legal and social-scientific work on corruption. Brock's book thus has the potential to show to those who are more interested in practical or applied questions of global justice that normative theory has an important role to play for how to frame and answer these questions, as well for deciding which of these questions to engage with in the first place.

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