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Political Corruption as Breach of Reciprocity: a comment on Gillian Brock's *Corruption and Global Justice*

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Abstract

Gillian Brock's book C*orruption and Global Justice* (2023) is a timely discussion on corruption. As Brock points out, this has been a neglected issue in political philosophy, even though its existence is a constraint on realizing many justice-related goals. The book tackles the important questions of what ought to be done about corruption, who ought to do it, and how responsibility should be shared. However, the book neglects to expand the issue of motivation, namely why citizens will join in the fight against corruption. Given that many of the solutions Brock proposes in the book require the participation of a range of stakeholders, lack of take-up by a significant number of citizens can compromise the feasibility of these proposals.

In my comment, I argue we should enquire into the wrongfulness of political corruption, to account for the motivational question. Moreover, by framing political corruption as a breach of cooperation as fair reciprocity, I believe we can both discuss corruption as a relational harm, but also better account for what undermines or encourages citizens' participation in corruption-curbing initiatives.

Keywords: Political Corruption; Reciprocity; Cooperation; Fairness; Motivation.

Summary: Introduction; I. Cooperation as Fair Reciprocity; II. Motivation for Countering Corruption; References.

Introduction

As Gillian Brock discusses in *Corruption and Global Justice*, (2023) the costs of corruption are tremendous: approximately one-third of the US budget to cover basic needs over 10 years can be lost to it (2023, 29). The book focuses on political corruption as instances in which "agents use public offices or

professional roles, typically for some personal or political gain, in ways contrary to the purpose of that office or role, thereby abusing their entrusted power" (2023, 4). Political corruption is pervasive and includes a multitude of practices, namely "nepotism, inappropriate favoritism for associates, fraud, extortion, kickbacks, election rigging, vote buying, bribery, state capture, cronyism and influence peddling" (2023, 4).

This is a timely and important book, that focuses on answering to three questions: what ought to be done about corruption, who ought to do it, and how responsibility should be shared (2023, 3). However, the book neglects to expand on the issue of motivation, namely, why citizens will be motivated to comply with their basic obligation "to join in, join up, or in other ways contribute to the joint venture" of tackling corruption (2023, 160). This question is relevant given that many of the solutions Brock proposes require the participation of multiple stakeholders. It is not evident that in all relevant cases, people will feel compelled to join the fight against corruption. And this is not only because of threats imposed by power and authority. It is also a result of systemic corruption, which undermines the motivational basis for acting against it. Given that this is a constraint for some of the proposals mentioned in the book, I believe we should consider it more seriously. To do so, we need to revisit the conceptual and normative discussion on political corruption. I will do so before tackling the motivation issue.

I. Cooperation as Fair Reciprocity

It is not easy to provide a conceptual definition of corruption. This is because the class of corrupt acts is varied, occurs across a wide range of institutional contexts, and involves multiple agents (Thompson 1993, 2013; Ceva and Ferretti 2017).

I am interested in the issue of motivation, mainly the reasons people have to "join in and join up" to fight corruption. Gillian Brock briefly takes up this discussion when introducing the benefits of collective action initiatives. She argues that it is not difficult to understand why people will join them, given "the problems they help solve and the important benefits they create" (2023, 151). Therefore, what matters is how someone is affected by corruption and whether actions are perceived as effective. I found this unsatisfactory: for one, it plays down the role of powerful structures, and how, in many instances, one might feel compelled to 'play along'. Second, collective action initiatives need to grapple with the payoffs faced by first movers. Third, we need to understand what will prompt those who benefit from corruption to change their behavior.

I believe this relates to the discussion of what is wrong with political corruption, which can be cashed out in consequentialist or deontological terms. In the former, political corruption is wrong because of its negative consequences. Gillian Brock's account is consequentialist in this sense. She claims that we should care about political corruption because it negatively impacts our efforts to realize justice. It follows that people will be motivated to join in a collective action initiative, given the detrimental consequences of living in a high-corruption environment. In the latter, political corruption is wrong because it treats citizens in a way that is "disrespectful of their normative status as right holders" (Ceva and Ferretti 2017). I will argue that we should take the second route, siding with those who see corruption as a relational harm (Ceva 2018).

Emanuela Ceva discusses political corruption as a relational injustice insofar as it "violates the logic of mutual accountability", which demands reciprocal justification (Ceva 2018). But it is worth spelling out what work the norm of reciprocity does. Reciprocity dictates that we return a gift we have received. In political philosophy, the work on reciprocity has focused on procedural concerns, [1] discussions on fair play (Brown 2020, 2023) [2] and distributive debates (Rawls 2001; White 2003). In cases of corruption, we often focus on the agents or groups of agents who engage in *quid pro quo*. In this sense, at the core of corruption lies a contingent, mutually advantageous exchange. But this is not what determines corruption. As Brock points out, it is about someone "abusing entrusted power" for political or private gain. I believe this directs us towards corruption as a breach of reciprocity, defined as:

> A entrusts B with power in exchange for B's commitment with doing X. A can be consenting to follow B's rules, to respect B's authority, to finance B's endeavors, while B promises to be impartial, to be transparent, to provide quality services for A.

When corruption takes place, B fails to comply with its end of the bargain: either in an extractive way, by using what A granted as a mechanism to favor others, which often implies not reciprocating altogether; or by failing to reciprocate in an appropriate manner, e.g., not providing a proportional or a fitting

[1] As argued by Brian Barry, Rawls' requirement that the principles of justice have to be mutually justifiable to rational and reasonable people, instead of an outcome that only reflects individuals' bargaining power, is influenced by reciprocity, justified by impartiality, see Barry 1989.

[2] Discussions on fair play assume that political obligations are burdensome, but generate significant benefits (i.e., peaceful and stable cooperation; infrastructures). As such, proponents of the fair play account use reciprocity when arguing that insofar people benefit from cooperation, they are bound to obey the law in return.

return (Brown 2020, 2023). Importantly, this account highlights the web of reciprocal relations at play in instances of political corruption. When corruption occurs, one set of social ties is prioritized over the other, for private or political gain. Thus, we can frame this form of political corruption as a breach of cooperation defined as fair reciprocity.

Consider Ceva's discussion of the "Keating Five" case, in which five senators were financed by Charles Keating, in exchange for improperly regulating his investment company. Later, a series of high-risk investments led to the company's collapse, resulting in losses for many uninsured customers (Ceva 2018, 132). According to Ceva, in benefiting Keating, the senators acted in a manner not justifiable to the public, given the power they had been entrusted with. Thus, this is a relational injustice, because "Keating is afforded a special political status to which the other citizens have no access and whose establishment may not be justified to them on public grounds" (Ceva 2018, 135). There is much I share with this perspective. The approach's relational focus aligns with my view of cooperation grounded in fair reciprocity, where the wrong of corruption lies in how certain social ties prioritize the interests of specific agents over others. Ceva's account also rightly points out that we need to consider which relations are being favored, and which are being ignored or insufficiently attended to (Ceva 2018, 135).

However, for Ceva, the focus lies on the requirement for justification, considering the agent's institutional role, [3] while my account places a greater emphasis on what the act itself symbolizes for social relations. To see this, let's consider once again the "Keating Five" case. By failing to regulate Keating's business in exchange for campaign funds, the senators have not complied with the expectations placed on them by citizens, altering future terms of cooperation. Now, one can argue that this renders my approach consequentialist. But notice that the problem is not merely the consequences for cooperation. My account diagnoses the wrong of corruption first, as failing to act according to the expectations [4] that fair cooperation requires, when others uphold their end of

[3] I take it this is similar to accounts on how Rawls' treatment of the criteria of public reason. The latter demands that the moral or political rules that regulate our common life be justifiable to all those persons over whom the rules have authority. In some accounts, namely those related with civic friendship, public reason should entail some form of reciprocity, where we abide by rules, provided others do the same, something which seems to be acknowledged in some way in Rawls' discussion on civic friendship. See, Rawls 2005; Leland and Van Wietmarschen 2017.

[4] The role of expectations is of course tied to public justification, and thus the reason why my account is offering a slight amendment, and not a definitive new view on the relational wrong of corruption. I merely wish to point out how focusing on reciprocity as an underpinning of acts

the bargaining, and second, the concern with the consequence that follows, namely, how it changes or undermines the possibilities for fair cooperation in the future. Therefore, when political corruption occurs, the nature of the cooperative contract shifts, thereby altering expectations about how others will behave, which, in the first instance, implies a violation of reciprocity and, in the second, pushes actors towards conformity and the normalization of corruption.

Grounding corruption on reciprocity requires a final argumentative move. Reciprocity is a relational principle in which the nature of the relation between those in cooperation determines the type of return required, and vice versa (Becker 2014), helping to build and sustain different relations. Hence, the reason why the rules we follow when reciprocating a gift to a close friend are different from the ones we abide by when it comes to strangers.

For the wrong of political corruption to be centered around the breach of cooperation as fair reciprocity, it implies that the wrong lies in how, in favoring some relations (for political, social or economic gain), the agent undermines the relation he should be catering to, given her role *qua* public official or citizen. And one could say that a relational account focused on reciprocity lacks the tools to claim this, given that reciprocal ties among family members or friends can be seen as thicker and thus deserving of priority, thereby seemingly legitimizing corruption.

But this would be a misreading of my view: the demands of fair reciprocity are not established by the ties of partiality, but by the role one has agreed to partake in the scheme of cooperation as a citizen, as a public servant or official. Thus, while in our role as parents we might be legitimate in exercising some degree of partiality, when acting as public officials our primary relationship is with our fellow citizens, and impartiality and equal treatment are the principles that help sustain the relationship we have agreed to enter into. To claim this is not the case, is to deny that we stand in fair cooperation with our fellow citizens.

II. Motivation for Countering Corruption

We can now consider the issue of motivation. Framing political corruption as a breach of cooperation as fair reciprocity helps explain the intuition that Brock evoked when saying that it is not puzzling that people will be willing to join collective action initiatives. For instance, in a highly corrupt environment,

of corruption, we can grasp its detrimental impact in changing the contract between parties who stand in cooperation.

citizens see their rightful returns given to others, thereby compromising their access to basic goods. This breach of what they see as fair cooperation motivates their action to fight back.

However, the focus on reciprocity also explains the issue of expectations beyond actualized behavior. If I expect corruption to be pervasive, I am inclined to modify my behavior in accordance with the terms of cooperation defined by corruption. This means that I might engage in corruption e.g., 'I expect public officials not to use the money from taxes to improve public good provision, so I will avoid paying taxes when I can'. Another possibility, is that I might withdraw from cooperation e.g., 'I expect public provision to be bad, so I will not use public services, and will avoid taxation and fight for lower tax burdens'.

Importantly, this is independent of the negative consequences of corruption. The expectation can suffice for such a mechanism to take place. Thus, there is a negative loop that changes or undermines cooperation, compromising the motivation to uphold norms of fair reciprocity. Actors can justify their actions by appealing to a new contract, making appeals to normative justification necessary, but ineffective, in the absence of collective strategies that focus on rebuilding trust and the normative landscape of cooperation.

This has important implications for Brock's project. Namely, it helps us understand why particular initiatives discussed in the book have been effective in tackling corruption, and why we should endorse similar ones in the future. If political corruption is characterized as a breach of cooperation as fair reciprocity, proposals that leverage mechanisms which are familiar to the literature on reciprocity and trust, such as promoting transparency, the social sanctioning of noncompliance, or the promotion of collective accountability, will likely be more effective, insofar as they expose the changing terms of cooperation, but also sanction them forcing compliance.

Consider the case of the "I Paid a Bribe Campaign", in which victims were encouraged to report bribery incidents (2023, 82). As Brock points out, the initiative works on the power of exposure (*Ibid*). In doing so, it taps into one of the most effective mechanisms for curbing free-riding in small-scale societies: transparency into others' behavior.

However, in many of these initiatives, the agents are motivated to fight corruption because they lose from it. But transparency can also be important in pushing corruptors to change their behavior. Consider cases where agents might lose out by not participating in corruption. For instance, what if you often have to go to the hospital, where there are long waiting lists, but your sister-in-law is the hospital manager and can always grant you a special pass, cutting your waiting time in half? Why would you be motivated to shame your sister-in-law as a

'corrupted agent' if you stand to lose if the practice is stopped? [5] I believe you might be persuaded to do so if transparency is leveraged.

While people know when there is corruption, this is not because corruptors publicize their acts to a wide audience. There is an element of concealment. However, measures that promote transparency e.g., publicizing the number of hours each individual is waiting in the hospital, can create an incentive to shift behavior, if they force a trade-off: either benefit from corruption or enjoy the respect of social peers. And we should not underestimate the power of social norms and the threat of being shunned as mechanisms that induce change.

This mechanism shows the success of another example discussed in the book. In the Fifth Pillar campaign, zero-rupee notes inscribed with the message "I promise to neither accept nor give a bribe" were distributed, encouraging people to hand them out when asked for bribes. The initiative made explicit that what was being offered was not compliant with the terms of cooperation that officials are supposed to uphold. It thus compelled an "integrity check", working on the power of shame to deter those who propose a bribe.

Finally, consider the case of multi-stakeholder initiatives. These are helpful because they promote joint monitoring and accountability as mechanisms for mutual assurance of compliance. They are thus effective at countering pervasive collective action problems. As Brock mentions, the crux of the effectiveness of MSI's comes from providing multiple points of accountability, where a mechanism of reciprocal assurance is at play.

However, MSI's raise a final challenge for the account I introduced. The Fifth Pillar and 'The I Paid a Bribe' campaigns are local initiatives and thus better capture the idea of political corruption as a breach of cooperation as fair reciprocity. Consequently, they are also better suited to leveraging mechanisms of transparency and accountability to motivate and induce change. But how about initiatives like MSI's, where those who stand in cooperation can be collective agents, e.g., NGOs, companies, and states, which might act transnationally? What will be the reciprocal relation of reference, and are there limits to some of the mechanisms discussed to motivate actors to act against corruption?

This is a scope challenge, [6] which I concede is a limitation for any relational account. Fair reciprocity requires a relation that is grounded in cooperation, beyond mere social interaction. And while there are accounts that plausibly argue that cooperation takes place at a global scale (Cohen and Sabel 2006, Ypi 2008,

[5] I am thankful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this point.

[6] I am thankful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this concern.

Valentini 2011), one can still argue that the social ties developed are weaker than the ones which are sustained domestically, and thus, the motivational thrust of mechanisms of social sanctioning is weaker. My response is twofold.

First, I acknowledge the scope challenge's strength. Thus, I find it likely that the broader the geographical scope of an initiative against corruption, the greater the emphasis should be on the duty to respect human rights, even if this lacks a motivational basis. But this does not undermine the claim I am making, which can supplement Brock's approach. Even in the international realm, framing corruption as a breach of fair reciprocity can inspire initiatives that reward participants by publicizing them as pioneers, industry or country leaders, or best practitioners among their peers. Such initiatives can have a strong motivational basis, especially in contexts of global market competition, but also in fights for geopolitical influence, even if the reciprocal social ties between these actors are weaker than those between individuals at a domestic scale.

Second, a lot of Brock's discussions involve different levels of action, working both in the international realm and supporting local actors and initiatives. If that is the case, the larger point of this commentary holds. Focusing on reciprocity helps us understand why some initiatives are successful and, thus, to survey which ones we should focus on at the local level and how we should devise strategies moving forward. Therefore, even if it does not fully capture the motivational basis for initiatives with a transnational scope, it does tell us what we can leverage at a local level, where such a fight is also undoubtedly required. Moreover, given an unfortunately increasingly hostile international environment, focusing on local initiatives might be one of our best options in the fight against political corruption.

Initiatives like those introduced by Gillian Brock help uphold norms of cooperation through fair reciprocity by focusing on deterrence mechanisms, such as collective monitoring and accountability. But, as noted, these accounts fail to explain why people will be persuaded to join these efforts, especially in a highly corrupt environment. It is here that reciprocity is helpful. Some of the initiatives Brock mentions are not only focusing on deterrence and collective accountability. They are also focusing on norm-building. For instance, the Fifth Pillar campaign is both exposing cases of corruption and encouraging people to disclose instances in which officials behave in accordance with their positions. In that sense, it is both deterring and norm-reinforcing, countering the negative loop that can arise when one faces systemic instances of political corruption. If one can see that, while common, political corruption is still not the default for all officials, one can be persuaded that change is possible and that cooperation, as fair reciprocity, should be the standard. That can be a powerful motivational tool for

fighting corruption. In high-corruption environments, empowering agents for change might require motivational boosts alongside collective efforts.

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