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Why Anti-Corruption Obligations (often) Start at Home

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Abstract

This symposium contribution highlights a pressing puzzle not fully addressed in Brock's *Corruption and Global Justice*: whether and how some anti-corruption initiatives ought to be prioritized over others. I argue that, given the prevalence of corruption in our current, non-ideal circumstances, citizens and public officials of the relatively affluent and powerful nations of the world often have justified reasons to address domestic corruption before attending to corruption in other polities. To motivate this claim, I present five reasons for why anti-corruption duties should start at home. First, the role associative duties in assigning remedial responsibilities; second, the implications of the causality, benefit, and capacity criteria of assigning responsibilities; third, considerations of effectiveness; fourth, concerns of moral standing and hypocrisy; and fifth, motivational feasibility. The combined force of these reasons suggests, I argue, that citizens and public officials of affluent and powerful nations ought to prioritize the eradication of corruption in their own state's institution as the most effective way to discharge global justice responsibilities.

Keywords: Global Corruption; Associative Duties; Responsibility; Hypocrisy; Motivational Feasibility.

Summary: Introduction; I. Associative Duties; II. Causality, Benefit, Capacity; III. Domestic Action for Global Effectiveness; IV. Moral Standing and Hypocrisy; V. Motivational Feasibility; Conclusion; References.

Introduction

Gillian Brock offers a compelling account of why philosophers and political theorists interested in global justice should say more about the problem of

corruption. In her aptly titled book, *Corruption and Global Justice (2023)*, [1] she provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for assigning responsibilities to curb corruption, as well as a broad range of approaches and initiatives aimed at addressing these complex issues on the intra-state, international, and transnational levels. While states are the "primary agents of justice" (142), and thus have anti-corruption obligations arising from their human rights commitments, other actors, including civil society organizations, professional associations, and private business corporations, share in the collective responsibility to ameliorate corruption as an impediment to global justice.

In this brief comment, I will take no issue with Brock's central argument that global justice duties include responsibilities to eradicate corruption, nor will I challenge the book's approach to the concept of corruption (Lister 2024; Beck 2025). Instead, I want to highlight a pressing puzzle that is unfortunately not fully addressed in the book, namely, the question of whether and how some anti-corruption initiatives ought to be prioritized over others. [2] Given the prevalence of corruption in our current, non-ideal circumstances, the necessity of trade-offs given limited political and material resources, and Brock's justified insistence on not merely general responsibilities but particular, special responsibilities of specific agents, this question seems to be of paramount importance – at least insofar as we assume a certain action-guiding role of the theoretical account.

The argument I wish to advance here is that, if this is correct, we – by which I mean citizens and public officials of the relatively affluent and powerful nations of the world – often have justified reasons to address domestic corruption before attending to corruption in other polities. Indeed, I want to make the stronger claim that often we all things considered ought to do so. This is not an idle theoretical speculation; as Brock rightly points out, the plight of corruption is not limited to the world's poorest regions (and thus only arises for 'the West' as a humanitarian or global justice concern) but is also prevalent in the world's most affluent and powerful nations. Writing these paragraphs in the first months of Donald Trump's second term as the President of the United States, it seems hard to claim that 'nepotism, inappropriate favoritism for associates, fraud, extortion, kickbacks, election rigging, vote buying, bribery, state capture, cronyism, and influence peddling' (4) are activities limited to dysfunctional poor states. Given this fact, Americans (and by extension, others in similar predicaments) ought to prioritize addressing corruption at home.

[1] Unless stated otherwise, all page references hereafter are to Brock 2023.

[2] See p. 160, where Brock briefly discusses the possibility of conflicting responsibilities in questions 7 and 8 of her list.

I what follows, I offer five reasons for why, under present circumstances, addressing corruption at home should take priority for citizens and public officials in affluent nations. The first two reasons are straightforwardly ethical ones, either extending Brock's framework of assigning responsibility to address corruption, or working within it. I first argue, *contra* Brock, that associative duties could be relevant to assigning special responsibilities to address corruption at home; and second, that Brock's own criteria of causality, benefit and capacity could also tilt the scale towards prioritizing domestic corruption. In addition to these two theoretical reasons, and as Brock's proposal aims to be action-guiding, I believe that more 'realist' considerations of effectiveness and feasibility are also relevant. This is the focus of the next three subsections, which deal with the problems of effectiveness, moral standing and hypocrisy, and motivational feasibility, respectively.

While the argument I advance here might superficially appear as antithetical to Brock's account of corruption as a global justice concern, I view it as following straightforwardly from her framework, and thus as a sympathetic application of the theory to current non-ideal circumstances. My reasons for thinking this are twofold. First, Brock rightfully eschews unhelpful narratives of global justice as a case of benevolent Westerners aiding passive victims in the rest of the world, in favor of a democratic, collective, and agency-centered approach to political institutions (see 2023, 59-63; 149-54). As such, this approach is pragmatically flexible to effective duty allocation according to context and circumstance.

Second, while Brock rejects 'compatriot favoritism' as the fundamental prioritization of the needs of fellow nationals over those of outsiders (52-54), she is careful to distinguish her view from one that requires impartial treatment in all circumstances. In her important book, *Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Account* (2009), she distinguishes this implausible first-order impartiality from second-order impartiality; as she currently puts it, 'justification needs to be made in terms that everyone, including those excluded from the state, can appreciate as compelling' (53). The five reasons I now present, I believe, meet this condition.

I. Associative Duties

In section 7.7 of the book (2023, 158-61), Brock briefly discusses two approaches to assigning responsibilities, one of which is David Miller's account of remedial responsibility (Miller 2007). As Brock summarizes his position,

Miller offers 'six ways in which remedial responsibility can be identified', including moral responsibility, causal responsibility, outcome responsibility, benefit, capacity, and ties of community (fn. 30, 158). In comparison, Brock argues that her 'list of questions approach' recognizes a much broader range of relevant factors, including, for example, role-related responsibilities, institutional standing, and past contributions. This is correct with one exception, that is present in Miller but absent in Brock: community.

I find this move curious, and Brock does not provide an explanation for why this criterion is left out. It is one thing to reject, rightly in my view, the extreme communitarian position that associative duties are all that matter, or that they always trump other sources of obligation. But that does not entail that associative ties to community are *never* a source of duty, and *cannot* generate responsibilities even in the absence of special capacity, causal connection, benefit, etc. As Miller describes it, 'it is integral to these relationships that they involve special obligations to fellow-members, when [a person] stands in need of assistance, an obvious place for her to look is to agents linked to her in this way' (Miller 2007, 104). It seems perfectly compatible with Brock's approach that associative ties could be one criterion among others.

In her other work, Brock seems to reject associative duties to compatriots as part of her broader rejection of liberal nationalism (Brock 2009). But associative duties to compatriots need not be framed in nationalist terms, and could otherwise be framed in civic republican terms as a commitment to social equality between citizens. Corruption, from this perspective, is a particularly dangerous vice of political institutions. As Brock herself notes, it corrodes social trust and a sense of shared obligations (42-43); and a republican might add that it renders political power – now diverted towards private interests – arbitrary and dominating. While we can agree that a consistent republican patriot would recognize the value of a free state for all, not just her own (cf. Erez and Laborde 2020), this does not negate the idea that she has a special duty towards her fellow citizens to fight corruption at home.

II. Causality, Benefit, Capacity

Even if Brock wishes to resist the siren call of associative duties, I think it is plausible to argue that following the relevant criteria in her list of questions (pp. 159-60) will often lead us to assign responsibility for addressing corruption in a manner that corresponds with my proposal: that citizens and public officials ought to prioritize addressing corruption at home.

One of the main advantages of Brock's approach to the subject of corruption, and global justice more broadly, is that by seriously considering the question of responsibility distribution and identifying the agents of justice, she avoids the pitfalls of abstract rights-based theories. As Onora O'Neill memorably puts it in her critique of the UDHR, 'since nothing is said about the allocation of obligations to meet these aspirations, we do not yet know whether these universal rights are matched and secured by universal obligations, or by obligations held by some but not by all agents and agencies' (O'Neill 2001, 184). This is important for our purposes: even if we accept the framework of universal human rights which are undermined by corruption, and recognize that, on a comparative basis, the effects of corruption on individuals in poor countries is often more severe than instances of corruption in more affluent countries, this in itself does not determine, for particular agents, which they should address first.

The point is straightforward with regards to agent capacity (question 1), and agent positioning within relevant institutions, organizations, and practices (question 5). Leaving aside for a moment questions of special moral duties, we can follow Robert Goodin's proposal of viewing '[s]pecial [r]esponsibilities [as] assigned merely as an administrative device for discharging our general duties more efficiently' (Goodin 1988, 685). Goodin argues, and I think Brock would agree, that this capacity-focused interpretation of special responsibilities does not generate special duties to prioritize the needs of compatriots in our non-ideal world (Goodin 1988, 686). But the case of addressing corruption is arguably different. Corruption may be a generic vice, but specific instances of corruption are enmeshed in institutional practices, cultural meanings, and distinct histories. It is plausible to think that agents are better equipped – both in material and epistemic terms – to address local form of corruption.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from the other items on Brock's list. Role-related responsibilities (question 4), such as a fiduciary commitment to a specific constituency or a public duty towards a particular public, would orient actions of public officials domestically rather than globally. Aligning with the state responsibilities of a particular role also means that this type of action is less likely to generate a clash between obligations (question 7). Local agents are much more likely to contribute, intentionally or unintentionally, to the facilitation of domestic practices of corruption than to corruption in other polities (question 2); and it is far more plausible to point to ill-gotten benefits of corruption in the domestic context (question 3).

The keen-eyed reader would have noticed my use of qualifiers such as 'often', 'likely', and 'plausible'. These are to pre-empt the obvious objection that some instances of institutional corruption clearly are global, in the sense that

corruption in one jurisdiction is facilitated (indeed, may only be possible) given the aiding and abetting of external players. Brock's central example of tax avoidance (Chapter 6) is a clear example of this form of global corruption; it is made possible only given the availability of a global structure of independent tax jurisdictions that are incentivized to engage in a race to the bottom, and the corrupt-yet-legal actions of tax professionals who are only too keen to benefit from assisting their clients in shirking their domestic legal responsibilities. It is clearly the case that even those who wish to prioritize anti-corruption within their own polities ought to act in coalition with others transnationally to address this problem effectively. Similarly, we may consider the role of Western-based Multinational Corporations (MNC) in facilitating corruption in poorer countries (cf. Erez 2020). I am more skeptical, however, that this case is generalizable to other instances of political corruption – election fraud, nepotism, judicial corruption, conflicts of interests, etc. (182-86).

III. Domestic Action for Global Effectiveness

The two reasons above are straightforwardly ethical ones, either extending Brock's framework or working within it. As the proposal aims to be action-guiding, I believe that more 'realist' considerations of effectiveness and feasibility are also relevant. This will be the focus of the next three subsections.

The first of these considerations is that, in order for institutional remedies for corruption to be successful, the institutions enacting these solutions must themselves not be plagued by corruption. All of the factors driving corruption (which Brock lists on pp. 12-5) are well in play for institutions and agents tasked with fighting corruption, and this is especially salient when these institutions wield legal, political, and economic power. This is a common occurrence in the intra-national level, and there is no reason to think transnational organization would be immune.

Consider the forced resignation of John Dalli, the European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, following an investigation by the European Union's Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF). OLAF's investigation showed that an associate of Dalli had approached a Swedish tobacco company and offered to relax the European Commission's tobacco legislation in exchange for a bribe of €60 million. Dalli claimed in reply that the charges were politically motivated, aimed at removing him before a push for stricter regulation on tobacco products. OLAF was criticized for lack of transparency, using illegal or questionable investigation methods (such as wiretapping), and for violating its institutional

independence from the EU commission. OLAF's chief, Geovanni Kessler, was later criminally convicted. [3] Without commenting on the details of this particular case, it is illustrative to the point that anti-corruption measurements can themselves be compromised by corruption. This provides an additional reason to prioritize the reform of these institutions before tasking them with addressing corruption elsewhere. And given that many of these institutions are based in affluent countries, the considerations of the previous two sections follow.

IV. Moral Standing and Hypocrisy

Corruption at home also undermines anti-corruption efforts abroad in a different way. As Brock notes, agents in 'the West' have a duty to support the creation of robust anti-corruption institutions in poor countries and on the international level (60). This could be done through sticks (for example, criminalization of certain activities, personal sanctions, withdrawal of trade) or through carrots (for example, with material and institutional support of grassroot civil society organizations). But assume that the states and organizations engaged in these efforts are themselves found to be, in some way, corrupted. This invites the common accusations, on the part of the targets of anti-corruption policies, of hypocrisy, selective enforcement, and double standards. Instead of being driven by an ethical obligation to eradicate corruption, these actions appear to be self-serving, thus harming public support. For example, speaking at an international anti-corruption summit in 2016, then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom David Cameron was heard saying that "We've got some leaders of some fantastically corrupt countries coming to Britain... Nigeria and Afghanistan, possibly the two most corrupt countries in the world" (Castle and Freytas-Tamura 2016). This statement was met with fierce criticism from commentators, who were quick to point out the UK's complicity in global corruption as was revealed in the Panama Papers just a few weeks prior to the incident.

Of course, we should not accept accusations of hypocrisy at face value; it is clear that at least sometimes they are used as a strategy to deflect valid criticism and the impede necessary policies. But unfortunately, this fact does not take away from the negative effects these kind of accusations have on the perceived legitimacy, and therefore on the effectiveness, of anti-corruption policies and institutions. This calls for what Shmuel Nili calls a preemptive strategy, where

[3] The scandal was sufficiently high-profile to merit a cinematic adaptation, *Une affaire de principe* (dir. Antoine Raimbault, France/Belgium, 2024).

'[g]overnments with a morally tainted record, just like individual politicians and ordinary citizens with such a record, are supposed to be able to preempt a charge of hypocrisy by prefacing their public critiques of others with some form of public admission of their own "deficits." (Nili 2024). And these claims would have more purchase if these governments can show that they are at least attempting to curb corruption at home.

V. Motivational Feasibility

Finally, prioritizing corruption at home has the added benefit of having a stronger claim on people's motivation, and thus more likely to receive public support – a crucial component, assuming the level of resources that will need to be allocated to systematically combat corruption. Brock has masterfully dealt with this kind of argument in her earlier work, discussing skepticism of the motivational feasibility of global justice proposals (Brock 2009, 329-33), and I am happy to concede that the solutions she provides there (enlightened self-interest, institutional design, cosmopolitan education) could take us some way towards public support for global anti-corruption measures (cf. Erez 2020).

Two points about the way corruption is experienced leaves me thinking that people will nevertheless remain more motivated to address it in institutions that directly affect them than those who are more distant. The first is that the effects of domestic corruption are more visible and visceral than the abstract and complex form structural global corruption takes. The second is that domestic corruption, especially when it is prevalent and visible, effects one's self-image as part of the political community, and thus provides self-directed integrity motivation to address it. Both of these factors do not necessarily mean that global efforts will have no purchase (it could well be, for example, that media portrayal of corruption abroad will highlight it over domestic corruption), but all else being equal it seems plausible to think that domestic corruption will present itself as the more urgent concern.

Conclusion

Corruption and Global Justice makes a compelling argument as to why international normative political theory should pay more attention to corruption, why different actors and institutions have global justice obligations to address the problem of corruption, and how – by bringing together political theory and

empirical political science – we can move forward in this herculean task. In these regards and more, I have learned much from the book. Where the book is less clear, and what I was aiming to push on in this short contribution, is how we should prioritize our ethical responsibilities in current non-ideal circumstances. Even acknowledging the force of Brock's account, I argued that citizens and public officials of the relatively affluent and powerful nations of the world ought to prioritize the eradication of corruption in their own state's institutions. Doing so is not an unjustified bias towards compatriots, but the most effective way to discharge global justice responsibilities.

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