

THE CONCEPT OF CORRUPTION: MORAL AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Introduction

Corruption can be defined as the use of money or gifts to get certain kinds of benefits and advantages. Corruption is used by enterprises, organizations, individuals or state institutions to obtain a certain goal. Corruption is often a mechanism of power and domination. Corruption is defined as controversial, illegal and unethical because it is an act that goes against or challenges established and well-defined conceptions and laws of justice (Rendtorff, 2009). Corruption can be present at all levels of society, in the private sphere, in the public sphere, in the sphere of enterprises and corporations and a high level of corruptions indicates often a society with little trustworthiness. It is generally presupposed that corruption will lead to the destruction of trust and stability of society and that corruptions destroys the possibility of a healthy and good society. A society with corruption is a society without trust and integrity and in this sense a society with no justice or fairness. In this sense with Alain Etchegoyen we may define corruption as a “theater of operations where the state and democracy are the only certain and sure victims” (Etchegoyen, 1995: 17). Accordingly, the social and political implications of corruption are important. Corruption attacks the fundamental political and social structures of a just society.

In this essay, we can say that I propose a phenomenological and hermeneutical investigation of the different dimensions of the concept and reality of corruption. I would like to discuss three dimensions of the concept of corruption in order to understand the role of corruption in contemporary society at the national and

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international level. Firstly, I will begin by a clarification of the conceptual dimensions of the concept of corruption and relate this definition to the conceptual history of the idea of corruption. Secondly, I will on the basis of the conceptual definition of corruption address the moral dimensions of corruption and discuss how to deal with corruption within the framework of ethics and moral philosophy. Thirdly, I will address corruption as fundamentally an issue of political justice and about the basic political structures of society. Corruption is in this sense one of the most important dangers to have a fair and just society and therefore, we have to take seriously the combat against corruption in order to defend democracy. Finally, in conclusion, I will sum up this conceptual, moral and political theory of corruption. I will present the possibilities of overcoming corruption and propose the idea of moral and political integrity at the individual, organizational and institutional level as the most important way to establish a defense against corruption.

The concept of corruption

What is corruption? How can we see corruption in the history of philosophy and social sciences? What is the meaning of corruption in ethics and business ethics? It is true that corruption more is a reality of society that destroys our humanity than a mere theoretical construct. We have many stories of corruption from the totalitarian societies of Nazism, Fascism and Communism in the 20th century (Arendt, 1951). It seems like corruption is an integrated part of the totalitarian domination and during the 2. World War Nazi-Germany used corruption to manipulate corporations and people in occupied territories to abandon their country in favor of the enemy. It is characteristic for the traitor that he or she is given certain advantages by the enemy so that he or she cannot resist abandoning personal political or social ideals in favor of following the offers of the enemy. In this sense, corruption also goes deep into the soul of the traitor and we can say that the existential dimension of corruption is that one is willing to sell one-self and ones ideals for money, privileges or goods. This is why corruption is the opposite of personal integrity because the person destroys his or her personal integrity for the benefits offered by the enemy. But corruption also destroys the integrity of the one who offers the corruption. Accordingly, we have two elements of the corrupt relation that imply the individual, organization or institution that uses corruption to obtain certain goals one the one hand and the individual, organization or institution that abandon themselves to corruption on the other hand. What is characteristic for these two important actors of the relation or operation of corruption is that the state or society or the third of community is excluded in order to focus exclusively on the advantages of the implied individuals, organizations or institutions in the corrupt relation.

In political and social philosophy corruption is a very fundamental concept. It signifies destruction, death and degradation of a community (Etchegoyen, 1995: 40). If we go back to the theory of degradation of society in Plato's political philosophy we see that a movement of corruption and decay is very fundamental to the movement of degradation of society from ideal state to tyranny. Aristotle also has a theory of corruption where he argues that we have movements of life and creation in society as opposed to movements of corruption and degradation. In this sense corruption is a danger for the good life in between friends in community because it destroys the mutuality and trust that is implied in enduring friendship (Aristotle 1928). In the theory of government of Montesquieu corruption is also present as a danger to the republic (Montesquieu 1748). The appearance of the corrupt relation may lead to the destruction of the principles of independence between legislative, executive and legal power of the state. Therefore, it challenges the unity of the republic and may lead to the breakdown of the state into a totalitarian society dominated by pure instrumental power in opposition to wisdom, fairness and justice. The power of corruption is dangerous because the parts of corruption will be put into a relation of mutual dependency based on destruction of fairness and justice.

Corruption is related to the fundamental structure of society because it deals with the social exchange of goods in society. Corruption is therefore central to political economy of society and it is related to the structures of gift-giving, of recognition and of economic exchange of a specific society. But in this sense corruption is also the negation of established structures of social exchange in a specific society and this is why corruption is so dangerous for democracy and political economy of societies. Being the negation of positive structures of exchange, merit and social development, corruption is a model of destruction and dissolution of society. We can say that corruption represents nothingness, an opposition within the positive social and economic structure of the relations of justice and gift-giving. If bribery is used to get a specific social advantage or product the relation of the free and fair competition at the economic market is suspended by an act of buying privileges which otherwise should be acquired by free choice. The corporation that uses bribery is in this changing its identity from being an acceptable actor at the economic market into a subversive agent that undermines the accepted social structures of sellers and buyers (Etchegoyen, 1995: 42). What happens, strangely enough, is that the role between buyer and seller is inverted so that the corporation is no longer uniquely the seller but also the buyer because it uses money or goods to sell its products or to be allowed to get into a specific market. At the same time, the buyer is now becoming seller because money is used by the corporation to get the right to sell products at the market. This destruction of roles is destructive for the ideals of free competition on a fair market, because the established roles of buyer and seller are suspended and exchanged.

We can therefore say that corruption is a fundamental threat to a liberal market economy. Corruption is linked to destruction, deconstruction, dissimulation, inversion, sabotage of the established rules of social exchange and of presupposed roles of buyers and sellers. With this we can perceive a vicious circle and negative mechanics or inflator corrupt economics where more and more bribery is needed to be allowed to sell specific goods and services at specific markets. The negative circle of corruption creates closed markets where it is impossible for other actors to intervene without following the contradictory logic of bribery. At the same time, increased corruptions eventually disseminates into the political system that will be suspended by the increased dissolution manifested by the logic of bribery.

The morality of corruption. Why is it morally wrong?

But why is corruption morally wrong? We have seen economists who argue that although there is a confusion of traditional categories of buyers and sellers there may be economic advantages to informal economies of corruption order to make societies work. We may call this a kind of negative “creative destruction” so why should we be so critical towards corruption as destruction of society when there may be evolution in the kind of dissolution that we find in corruption and bribery? The possible acceptability of such economic arguments for the social and individual advantages of corruption where companies may facilitate economic exchange by use of bribery and political actors may make keep their power and influence by the use of such instruments of bribery makes it very important to demonstrate the moral and ethical problems of corruption and bribery.

We can here emphasize the importance of ethics and responsibility of individuals and institutions in society. We can here say that both the one who is using bribery and the one who accepts bribery are responsible (Etchegoyen, 1995: 70). It is important to emphasize that corruption is a double relation between the two parts. Only if somebody agrees to accept bribery it is possible to bribe somebody. Also in order to accept a bribe somebody is needed to offer the bribe. We can say that a fundamental moral responsibility of democratic actors is to resist offering or accepting bribes. It is in this sense that there is a link between responsibility and integrity because the individual integrity is dependent on this ability to resist entering into the vicious circle of corruption.

At the same time as corruption will not appear if someone resists offering a bribe it will not appear if the bribe is not accepted by the one to whom the bribe is offered. It is a matter of integrity never to accept a bribe (Rendtorff, 2009). It is in this sense that the combat of corruption is fundamentally linked to moral responsibility

of individuals. If we have a society where the background mentality and morality of individuals is based on a healthy skepticism towards bribery and a sense of justice with regard to social exchange as well as a proud refusal of being bought for social services, we have the foundations for avoidance of corruption.

From the perspective of existentialist philosophy (Sartre, 1943) corruption can be considered as based on a false self-promotion, a kind of egoist ethics where the individual in order to get social privileges contaminates the social relation by denying accepted structures of social exchange. We can say that the individual is making the social relation into nothingness. The competitive relationship is suspended in order to promote personal liberties and personal advantages. From this perspective, it is not wrong when the devil sometimes is represented as the one who challenges individual temptation to abuse his or her power in order to get satisfaction of individual desires. However, we may also say that even from the standpoint of this egoism we can perceive problems with corruption because it is a negation of self. Therefore, the individual cannot with sincerity accept the corrupt relation and corruption is therefore denied and it appears as an act of bad faith of negated self-consciousness. In cases of escalation of the vicious circle of corruption this existential self-negation is even more present because the corrupt individual is submitted to the power of the situation and the self cannot escape from this lie to one-self.

Indeed, the great traditions of ethics in Western philosophy are also quite severe with the concepts of corruption and bribery. We have already mentioned the view of Aristotle that corruption belongs to the decadence and decay of community. In the light of Aristotle's ethics we can emphasize how the vision of the good life with others in political community is based on real mutuality, generosity and sympathy (Aristotle, 1928). The virtues in Aristotle's ethics presuppose the excellence of the individual and the estimation of this individual as a wise and good person who acts for the benefit of the good of community (Solomon, 1991). Corruption has no place in this kind of ethics because it does not belong to the virtues but it is a vice that destroys the coherence and organic unity of community. Corruption has no place in Aristotle's concept of justice where justice is defined as the virtue of giving treating equal individuals and cases equally.

We can perceive the same refusal of corruption in the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant (Bowie, 1999). In his practical philosophy Kant emphasize the importance of moral duty, sincerity and the need to obey the moral law (Kant, 1838). Moral duty has nothing to do with pleasure or personal interest but has absolute status. Always to tell the truth is an important aspect of the categorical imperative of obeying the moral law (Kant, 1838). Moral imperatives are universal in the sense that you should always act in the way that your action can be made into a universal law for everybody else in the same situation. Corruption and bribery are actions that suspend the absoluteness of moral duty of in the categorical imperative, because they are

actions related to personal benefit with not universal content. Therefore, there can be no justification of corruption and bribery from the perspective of Kantian ethics.

But what should we say about utilitarian or consequentialist ethics (Singer, 1979)? Would it be possible to find a justification of bribery and corruption within this kind of ethics? I don't think so. Although an immediate consequentialist argument would be that corruption is justified in order to avoid greater negative consequences for example in situations of torture or war etc., it is not possible to conceive of all the consequences of corrupt practices so there can be no general consequentialist justification of corruption although there may be situations where corruption is needed in order to avoid a greater evil. What about the war situation where offering a prison guard money can save innocent human beings? Here, principles seems to be subordinated the need to help fellow human beings. But these extreme situations are exceptions that are moral dilemmas where good people are confronted with evil-doers who are irrational and such situations cannot be used as foundations of general ethical argument. So there is really no ethical justification of corruption.

Political dimensions of corruption

We have seen that corruption is difficult to justify from the perspective of morality and ethics. But what does corruption really mean for a democratic society? How can we really justify that corruption is so damaging for the cohesion and stability of society and is it really possible to overcome corruption and reintegrate individuals, organizations and institutions in a good political community?

We can emphasize that corruption is as much a danger to the good society at the level of political governance as it was a danger to the fairness of the market economy with private business corporations as main actors (Rendtorff, 2009). The challenge of political corruption is the fact that absolute power corrupts. It has always been the case when some individuals or groups of people have acquired absolute power that they have turned the state into a somewhat corrupt unity and in this sense they have betrayed the ideals of a good and just society that they often argued for at the outset of their government.

We can in this context argue that political power without ethical responsibility ends in corruption. Political officials need integrity in order to resist the temptation of corruption. With this view of integrity we can argue that strong powers without this kind of responsibility are facing the danger of becoming a corrupt power. When we have strong power to make decisions we also have the danger of corruption (Etchegoyen, 1995: 123). The virtue of integrity involves the wholeness, unity and strong moral character of the individual. A politician with integrity is a person, who sticks to strong moral principles and who cannot be bought by gifts or other

kinds of support. A politician with integrity is able to act with “political morality” as defined by the legal scholar Ronald Dworkin who argues that integrity is an essential virtue of the good judge and good legal system. Integrity involves protection of rights and principles as essential to public institutions (Dworkin, 1986).

In politics there is a close link between integrity and justice and this is basis for avoiding corruption. If we apply the concept of justice of John Rawls (Rawls, 1971) we can emphasize that justice as it is supposed to be based on an original position where individuals select principles for their future society being behind the “veil of ignorance” not knowing their own particular position in that future society is a very good example of the close relation between justice and the fight against corruption. The principles of basic political rights founded on the veil of ignorance exclude the egoist struggle for personal privileges that are not founded on fairness and fair distribution to the members of society. So the universality and impartiality of the principle of justice with regard to protection of individual rights is essential for the exclusion of corruption from the good political community.

When we consider corruption as a danger for the just society we can also argue that corruption is a threat to democracy. Political corruption and bribery of politicians and public officials represent a challenge to the democratic unity of society because individuals are not getting privileges on the basis of merit, transparency or universally valid criteria, but rather in terms of their own power and ability to bribe the political system. This personal unfair search for power is in danger of bribing the public system.

It is in this context that we with Montesquieu and Dworkin can speak of the importance of the separation and balances of power in order to justify the protection of the transparency and fairness of democracy community. Montesquieu speaks of the danger corruption of government where the republic moves from wisdom to personal advantage (Montesquieu, 1748). This is the end of virtue and we face corruption as the end of good government. In contrast to the corrupt society, the democratic republic is built on justice and fairness as principles of justice. According to Dworkin (Dworkin, 1986) the doctrine of the balances of power is important in order to ensure the integrity of the political system and of the public officials because the balances of power mean that there is no absolute power and therefore we can avoid the corruption of the absolute power.

So without these virtues of separation and balances of power we face the danger of corruption in the republic society. Without proper checks and balances as well as conceptions of fairness and justice corruption will be a danger to the institutions of the republic. In this sense we can point to the importance of democratic institutions in a society as the most efficient way to avoid corruption. This may also be the reason why democratic societies are the most active in formulating legislation forbidding any kind of bribery and corrupt practices. We can for example mention the US Foreign

Corrupt Practices Act from the end of 1970s that was very severe in ruling out any kind of bribery by US private and public institutions at home and abroad (Rendtorff, 2009). This was done in order to avoid the strong corrupt of the state system.

However, we still face the challenges of corruption in private and public systems of democratic states. We can mention different attempts to bribe judges, police or public officials in order to gain personal advantage by individuals. Or we can mention immoral activities of corporations contributing to lobbying of government ministers or government officials in order to promote their interests or give private enterprises better contracts as the basis for collaboration with states. We can also mention international movement of capitals where corporations in contrast to established rules still act with corruption like practices for example when dealing with new contracts on foreign markets. Here we face the danger of international manipulation with powers of governments in different countries.

So we can only be very critical towards the danger of corruption in political communities. This becomes even harder when we face the grey zone between mutual sympathy and friendship between individuals leading to services and help to each other and acts of bribery. Of course many actions of sympathy and friendship are good for society. We do not want to rule out the ethics of friendship in order to avoid bribery. However, transparency is important because together with responsibility and personal integrity this can help to draw the line between friendship services and destructive corruption. Moreover, it is important for a community to be able to deal with cases of corruption in an integrative way so that we can overcome destruction. This is the case for a politics of amnesty where corrupt individuals or organizations after having experienced a proper punishment and anger are offered the opportunity to be reintegrated in political community.

Conclusion: Responsibility and Integrity as Essential in Business Ethics and Ethics in Politics

In conclusion, we can emphasize that corruption is fundamentally based on the lack of individual responsibility and integrity. We have to search for a good ethics and politics of avoiding corruption. Here we find basis in the strong Western traditions of ethics and political philosophy. Responsibility signifies the ability to conceive actions in a universal perspective according to the moral law. In this sense responsibility is closely linked to integrity. The concept of integrity expresses an ancient republican virtue of citizenship and it can be promoted to indicate the commitment of individuals or corporations to be virtuous and faithful to their obligations towards social and political community (Rendtorff, 2009). The concept of integrity is also an essential concept in business ethics because it expresses the virtue of civic commitment of the

corporation and its members. In this sense the idea of integrity is a common virtue for business and politics in order to socially destructive practices of corruption and bribery that change the good community into totalitarian lack of freedom.

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