

Plato's Ring of Corruption

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Although corruption has been widely reported and is easily recognized, often unfortunately after the event, its nature and causes are usually not well understood and remain for the most part conceptually unclear. This conceptual lack of clarity concerning the nature of corruption helps perpetuate its reign. In order to provide a better conceptual and ethical understanding of corruption, I have developed a philosophical model that seeks to conceptually identify, explain and ethically evaluate corruption through first identifying and defining its characterizing features. To that end, the paper will provide a philosophical account of contemporary corruption¹ by determining, through an analysis of the Myth of Gyges in Plato's *Republic*, the essential features that characterize corporate and other types of corruption. The analysis will adopt an applied philosophical approach, one that will attempt to reveal the significance and relevance of Plato's Myth of Gyges for an applied philosophical understanding of contemporary corruption.

1. Introduction

In this paper I will attempt to provide a philosophical account of corruption by determining through an analysis of the Myth of Gyges in Plato's *Republic* (1952: Book II, 359–61), some if not all of its essential characterising features. I will then apply those features to a specific area of professional practice to determine if those features of corruption apply generally to typical cases of professional and possibly other areas of recognized and not so well recognized areas of corrupt activity. Although a lot has been written on corruption in recent years, most of that literature focuses primarily on political and economic corruption which primarily examines its extent, sources and financial consequences. My present concern is to look more widely and more deeply at the phenomenon of corruption from a philosophical perspective. By identifying its essential characterising features, I hope

¹ For a more comprehensive philosophical account of corruption and anti-corruption, see S. Miller, P. Roberts and E. Spence 2005. *Corruption and Anti-Corruption: An Applied Philosophical Approach*. Upper Saddle River, N. J.: Pearson/Prentice Hall.

to demonstrate that corruption is more pervasive than first thought and extends beyond the political and economic boundaries of power and wealth.

Traditional accounts of corruption define it as “efforts to secure wealth or power through illegal means — private gain at public expense” (Lipset and Lenz, 2000: 112). In defining corruption too narrowly in terms of illegal or unethical acquisition of power or wealth, these traditional accounts of corruption though partly right, fail to provide a comprehensive analysis of the nature of corruption. An analysis that would indicate that corruption extends beyond the narrow limits of what corruption is ordinarily taken to be.

2. The Ring of Gyges

The following is a brief exposition of the Myth of Gyges as related by Glaucon to Socrates in Book II of Plato’s *Republic*.

Once upon a time a certain shepherd from Lydia named Gyges whilst tending to his sheep found a ring which he put on his finger. Gyges soon discovered that by turning the ring on his finger he could make himself invisible. A few days later he went to the palace with a delegation of shepherds to see the King. Then by making himself invisible, he seduced the Queen, killed the King, and assumed total power by becoming the new King. Glaucon continues the story by asking us to imagine an ordinary putative person who like Gyges has the ability through a possession of a similar magical ring to render himself invisible thus allowing that person the opportunity to act unethically at will with total impunity.

Through the words of Glaucon, Socrates’ interlocutor in Book II of Plato’s *Republic*, Plato asks us to consider what possible reason would a Gyges-like person have for acting ethically towards others if he had the ability to act unethically under the cloak of invisibility thus allowing the agency of his unethical conduct to remain invisible from others? For his ability to render the agency of his corrupt deeds invisible will in turn provide him with total impunity from the social disapproval and/or punishment or other punitive repercussions for his unethical conduct that is ordinarily reciprocated from others or the state. Moreover, under the cloak of invisibility, the corrupt agent would be able to act corruptly whilst maintaining an appearance of ethical probity and rectitude.

Glaucon refers to this possibility as the “highest reach of injustice, being deemed just

Plato (c. 427–347 BC).

when you are not". He labels this "the most perfect injustice" (Plato, 1952: Book II, 361). Given such a possibility, what possible reason then would someone like Gyges have for not being corrupt but being non-corrupt and moral instead? Especially, if we assume that the latter option was known to the agent to be to his personal disadvantage and personal instrumental loss? As Glaucon says to Socrates, one would be mad to be moral under those circumstances. Better to be immoral and corrupt if it is to your gain and advantage and simply appear to be moral and non-corrupt. Following Glaucon, I will refer to this proposition as the condition of "*perfect injustice*". The question of "why be moral" under Gygean conditions of perfect injustice is referred to in the ethics literature as the "*authoritative question of morality*" (Gewirth, 1978: 3). The philosophical debate as to whether a compelling answer can be given to that question is still ongoing. I will not pursue that debate here for lack of space. I will, however, consider the kind of answer that Socrates might offer and indeed it is the kind of answer pursued by Plato in the *Republic*.

Plato, through the character of Socrates, argues that neither absolute power nor invisibility exempts anyone from acting ethically towards others. Apart from harming others through one's unethical conduct, Plato thinks that in acting unethically one also harms oneself. He argues that unethical conduct is self-defeating for it corrupts the character of the person that acts unethically and causes internal disharmony that prevents the perpetrator of wrong deeds from being truly happy. Plato believes that behaving ethically provides the best means of living a good and happy life and it is only through ignorance that people act unethically since everyone wishes to be happy. Plato identifies happiness with virtuous activity and the possession of an ethical character which together are necessary for internal harmony and integrity both for the individual citizen as well as the State. In parallel fashion, Plato also argues that corporate or institutional injustice can create disharmony and conflict within the State that can ultimately threaten civil authority and the very stability of the State itself. Hopefully our discussion will prove more than a footnote to Plato. I will return to Plato later for further discussion of these issues.

3. The Characterizing Features of Corruption

Five essential features that emerge from the discussion of the Myth of Gyges by Glaucon in Plato's *Republic*, that seem, at least initially, to characterize corruption, are the *possession of power*, a *disposition* to exercise that power, an *opportunity* to exercise that power, *invisibility* or *concealment*, and *self-regarding gain*. I will define *power* as the possession of the ability or capacity to act in a manner capable of bringing about a certain intended desired outcome. A *disposition to exercise that power*, as the possession of a pre-disposition, pro-attitude or willingness to purposefully exercise that power. *Opportunity*, as having the opportunity, either presented to oneself or engineered by oneself, to engage in some activity for which

one's has the power and the pre-disposition to engage in. *Invisibility* or *concealment*, as the ability or quality an agent has for keeping the motives and the identity of the agency of his actions invisible, concealed or hidden from the gaze of others. In some special circumstances, the condition of invisibility can be self-directed. Directed, that is, towards the agent himself. Under these special circumstances, let us refer to them as circumstances of *self-deception*, the corrupt agent through specious rationalizations or through plain ignorance, deludes oneself in thinking that his actions or his motives or both, are not corrupt. Moreover, that his actions or motives involved in those corrupt activities are ethically appropriate. Some instances of "conflicts of interest" will fall into this category of corruption. *Self-regarding gain* is any gain, not necessarily financial, which accrues to the agent personally or to a group of which his is a member, as a result of his or the group's actions. With regard to the condition of invisibility, whilst the actions themselves may not be and need not be invisible, for in many cases they would be visible at least with regard to their effects and consequences, the identity of their agency will be invisible. Or at least the corrupt agent's intention will be to keep the identity of the agency of his corrupt activity invisible.

I will argue, pending further investigation, that these five characterizing features of corruption, usually if not always, are present and accompany acts of corruption. For without power, understood as the ability to act in a manner capable of bringing about a certain intended desired outcome, one cannot commit a corrupt act. Without a disposition to exercise that power willingly, the possession of power to engage in corrupt activities may not be exercised. Similarly, through lack of opportunity one cannot engage in corrupt activity even when one has both the power and the disposition to act corruptly.

Invisibility seems to also be a characterizing feature of corruption that is usually, if not always, present in instances of corrupt activity. Invisibility seems to be at least instrumentally desirable,² for without invisibility one might not be able to evade detection thus escaping possible social disapproval and punitive retribution from others or the State. Even for a Gyges-like person, keeping the identity of the agency of his immoral acts hidden, lest he invokes social disapproval which may eventually undermine his power to rule and invite retribution from those he harms through his unethical conduct, would be prudent. Like Glaucon's perfectly unjust person, the perfectly corrupt person is one who maintains an outward appearance of probity, justice and morality, whilst carrying out his corrupt deeds in secret. In

² By "instrumentally desirable" I mean the kind of practical prudence attributable to an instrumentally rational agent intending to act corruptly in an environment in which corruption is either illegal or if not illegal at least generally considered unethical. In such an environment it would be a desirable requirement of instrumental rational agency that the agent intending to engage in corrupt activity should take the required measures to keep the agency of his corrupt actions invisible or concealed. For not to do so, could prove self-defeating and therefore instrumentally irrational. An underlined presupposition in my argument is that the agent addressed throughout this paper is an instrumentally rational agent.

this way he maximizes his self-regarding gain, which can either accrue to him personally or to a group to which he belongs or cause to which he is committed, with little or no instrumental cost to himself, his group or his cause;³ at least in terms of avoiding social disapproval and/or punitive retribution from others or the State. Invisibility, therefore, seems to be a characterizing feature of corruption, at least for instrumentally rational agents. For it would be self-defeating for those agents to engage in corrupt activities openly and transparently since that would minimize, not maximize their means of achieving their corrupt goals at little or no ethical or legal cost to themselves.⁴

If all the above features are regular features that normally accompany typical cases of corruption they are nevertheless not sufficient in characterizing corruption. They are not sufficient for if they were, a house burglar or a professional bank robber would be deemed corrupt. However, though immoral, the actions of the house burglar and bank robber are not what we would normally describe as corrupt. The missing sufficient condition is a socially pre-established fiduciary relationship of trust between the corrupt person or group and the person or persons or group who are harmed in some way by the corrupt person's or the corrupt group's actions. The reason why house burglars or bank robbers are not deemed corrupt is because there is an absence of a prior fiduciary relationship of trust between the burglar and the bank robber on the one hand, and those who are harmed by their actions on the other; namely, the household owners, the banks and their customers. By contrast, typical cases of corruption and its sub-species fraud, involve an additional breach of a socially pre-established fiduciary relationship of trust between the corrupt agents and their victims, namely, those wronged by the corrupt agents' actions. Insofar as the role of a King, at least in principle if not always in practice, is to dispense equal justice to all his subjects then Gyges abuses that role by using the invisibility offered to him by the magical ring to act unjustly against his subjects. In so doing, Gyges abuses a fiduciary duty of trust he owes to his subjects in his role as the King. He does so, at least under the theory of the social contract that considers that legitimate authority can only be conferred to the office occupied by a King or other ruler, on the basis of his subjects' or citizens' free and unconstrained consent.

³ The *self-regarding gain* need not be merely a *self-directed* gain accruing to the corrupt agent himself. Thus the perceived gain from the corrupt activities of some of Nixon's associates in the Watergate affair was self-regarding, in the sense that it benefited the Republican Party of which they were members, but not self-directed in the sense that it benefited or was intended to benefit those associates personally.

⁴ Unless of course the corrupt agent is seeking exposure. By hoping that his corrupt deeds would be discovered and exposed, the agent might perhaps be seeking atonement for his corrupt deeds through exposure and subsequent punishment. Under these psychological circumstances, the instrumentally rational agent's non-avoidance of concealment for his corrupt agency is not self-defeating as its goal is maximized through the means used to bring about his eventual exposure and punishment.

The addition of the condition of a fiduciary duty is in keeping with one of the traditional dictionary definitions of “corruption”, namely, “the changing from the naturally sound condition” or “the turning from a sound into an unsound impure condition” or “the perversion of anything from an original state of purity” (Little, Fowler, Coulson and Onions, 1973:431).

The fiduciary relationship can be articulated in political, professional, social or familial terms. For example, there is a socially and professionally recognized pre-established fiduciary duty of trust, one that is constitutive of the role of police officers, that they will uphold justice and maintain law and public order. Insofar as police officers act in ways that undermine that role, for example, by taking bribes or running drug syndicates or organizing armed robberies, then they act corruptly for they abuse their fiduciary duty of trust to the public to uphold justice and the law and not subvert them through illegal or unethical practices.

Notice that if we were to remove the need for trust, whether it is familial, social, professional or political, we would revert to a Hobbesian State of Nature. Interestingly, however, corruption involves a halfway house comprising of actions that fall into a Hobbesian State of Nature on the one hand, and the agents of those actions which operate unethically in a clandestine manner within a contractually Hobbesian moral society. It's a case of having your civic cake and eating it too. Thus typically, a corrupt person avoids the ethical obligations of contractual and fiduciary relationships based on trust by operating under conditions approaching those of perfect injustice. He does so by committing his corrupt deeds under a cloak of invisibility that allows him to avoid the social disapproval and retribution of socially recognized unethical and illegal conduct, whilst at the same time securing the social approbation of recognized ethical conduct by wearing the dissembling mask of morality; at least in the negative sense of not appearing to be conducting himself immorally.

4. The Corrosion of Character

It would appear then that as long as the corrupt person ensures that the agency of his corrupt deeds remains undetected, he could reap the gains of immoral conduct with no moral or instrumental cost to himself. Let us understand moral cost here as measured solely in terms of social disapproval and social repercussions in the form of punishment from others or the State. Moreover, if the corrupt person is able to maintain a semblance of moral conduct he could pass himself off as a person of moral probity. As we saw earlier, Glaucon refers to this possibility as the “highest reach of injustice being just deemed just when you are not” (Plato, 1952: Book II, 361).

Although under Gygean conditions of perfect injustice one could in theory and possibly in practice avoid detection and thus act corruptly with impunity, one could not, however, remain totally immune from moral jeopardy. I want to suggest

that the moral cost to a Gyges-like character operating corruptly under conditions of perfect injustice might be one of emotional and cognitive dissonance. For on the assumption that a Gyges-like character is minimally rational and subject to the human sensibilities and sentiments of a normal socialised person, he might be liable to experience the inner psychological stress and strain caused by emotional and cognitive dissonance; a dissonance, between his real corrupt motives and actions on the one hand, and his false and merely apparent moral reputation on the other. Like Macbeth, he would be liable to inner conflict and the loss of inner peace. The double-life of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hide is no life for one who at least has some of the cognitive and affective sensibilities and social sensitivities of normal socialised persons; unless one can successfully engage in self-deception about one's corrupt agency or corrupt actions. Self-deception, however, may not always be practically feasible for all agents who engage in corruption.

If I am right, *impunity* from acting immorally does not guarantee *immunity* from moral jeopardy in the form of inner conflict and the loss of inner peace. If honesty is the best policy because it generates trust and trust is the necessary fabric for the social tapestry of social inter-relations and interactions, integrity of character is the indemnity against the moral jeopardy of inner conflict that might be caused by emotional and cognitive dissonance. It is for this reason that integrity is morally important. It has the dual function of protecting a person from psychological dissonance, as well as providing personal motivation for avoiding corrupt conduct, even under favourable Gygean conditions of perfect injustice.

Plato is right to make integrity of character the glue that bonds individual self-regarding prudential integrity with social other-regarding morality. The underlying factor is avoidance of harm and generation of good not only to others but also for one self. Our moral social inter-relation with each other is closely related to our moral intra-relation to our own individual characters and thus renders ethical conduct both socially as well as personally beneficial and desirable. By harming others through corrupt conduct we can at least potentially harm ourselves precisely because of the close relation between social external morality, on the one hand, and individual internal morality, instantiated through integrity of character, on the other. According to the Stoic philosophers this relation is intrinsic because of our metaphysical inter-relation of belonging to the one same unitary rational cosmic reality. But I won't argue here whether the Stoics were right or not. It suffices for our present purposes that the relation between social morality and personal morality is close, even if it is not intrinsic.

In conclusion of this section, although one can quite possibly act corruptly with impunity under conditions of perfect injustice, one might not be able to remain totally immune from the moral jeopardy of having one's character corrupted. The possible loss is one of inner peace and harmony through cognitive and emotional dissonance resulting from a potential loss of personal integrity as well as the psychological harm one might suffer through feelings of guilt and remorse, both with

regard to oneself and with regard to others. Moreover, the very attractive instrumental benefit of acting corruptly under conditions of perfect injustice is undercut and compromised by an unattractive potential loss of peace of mind resulting from a possible cognitive and emotional dissonance.

5. A Case Study in Corruption

In conclusion, I will illustrate the application of my adapted Platonic model of corruption and anti-corruption discussed above, through a contemporary case study in media corruption. The same model can be used to identify, analyse and evaluate other types of corruption, including corporate, political, sport, religious, medical, educational, and police corruption, among others.

In what has come to be known in Australia as the “The Cash for Comment” case, John Laws, a well-known Australian radio celebrity, abused his editorial power for the purpose of influencing the opinion of his 2 million-strong audience favourably towards a group of Banks for a sum of \$1.2m. The financial transaction of the \$1.2m between Laws and the Banks was carried out in secret and concealed from the public, including his audience. Just a few weeks prior to his deal with the Banks, Laws had repeatedly criticized the Banks on his radio program for acting unethically in imposing unjustified bank fees on their customers and cutting back on vital services.

Laws’ favourable comments of the Banks following the \$1.2m deal can be seen as a typical instance of an advertorial. *Advertorials* are advertisements masquerading as editorials. In the case of advertorials, the difference between advertising and editorial comment is often blurred to the advantage of the advertisers and their clients. The public would have been led to think that Laws was expressing a genuinely unbiased and informed view about the banks when in effect and unbeknown to his listeners he was advertising the banks’ “merits” for a price, offering editorial comment for cash.

If I am right about the six features that characterize corruption, Laws’ cash for comment incident counts as a form of corruption because it displays all those features. Laws had the power, the disposition, the opportunity, he kept the deal of the 1.2m payment from the Banks invisible from the public and his listeners, he did it for a self-regarding gain (money), and he violated a fiduciary duty of trust which he owed to his listeners of informing them on matters of public interest in an honest, truthful and objective manner. In his defense, Laws claimed he was an entertainer not a journalist and as such “ethics did not have a hook on him”. However, even if Laws did not see himself as acting in the role of a journalist, a role that in principle, if not always in practice, commits a journalist to informing the public truthfully and objectively, his listeners would have perceived him as such. It is precisely because his endorsement of the Banks carried more credibility as journalistic comment rather than a concealed advertisement that Laws chose to

conceal the fact that his comments were bought for cash. Moreover, Laws did all this whilst pretending to be informing the public and his audience about matters that were in their best interest. He had over the years developed a reputation for a defender and guardian of the “battlers” and a public scourge of corrupt or merely inept politicians and civil servants. Without too much exaggeration, he packaged himself as the “champion of the people”. Laws in other words, like Glaucon’s perfectly “unjust person”, appeared just when he was, if my analysis is right, both unjust and corrupt.

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