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Corruption and Global Justice: Editors' Introduction

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Abstract

Gillian Brock's (2023) *Corruption and Global Justice* is a transformative contribution to the field of global justice theory, which links normative discourses on political corruption to an idea of global justice. In this article we introduce Brock's argument that corruption is not merely a practical impediment to global justice but a core normative concern, since it hinders the realization of human rights. We then situate Brock's work within an established body of literature on political corruption and global justice theory, to highlight the original way she links these two discourses. Finally, we introduce the contributions to the symposium, which take Brock's arguments as a point of departure for a series of probing questions. Precisely by raising these questions, the symposium demonstrates how *Corruption and Global Justice* succeeds in opening space for the kind of critical, philosophically grounded engagement that the pressing problem of corruption demands.

Keywords: Global Justice; Political Corruption; Normative Political Theory.

Summary: Introduction; I. Corruption in contemporary normative political philosophy; II. Corruption as a Global Justice issue: Gillian Brock's contribution; III. Contributions to the symposium; References.

Introduction

Betty is a single mother with limited financial resources. Imagine that she lives in a society where basic human rights, such as the right to primary education and access to essential healthcare, are formally guaranteed by law. In this context, her vulnerability ought not to prevent her from ensuring that her children have access to basic education and essential medical care. But let us further assume that the institutional context in which Betty lives is riddled with

corruption. The officials in charge of healthcare and public schooling use their entrusted positions for personal gain, syphoning off public funds and requiring bribes for access to these basic social services. The practice is so entrenched in local government that it is an open secret. Everyone, including local politicians, profit from it where they can or at least look the other way. These circumstances transform the conditions under which Betty's rights can be exercised. She lacks the resources to bribe the local officials, and as a result, her basic rights and those of her family will remain unprotected. This human rights violation is not a contingent or merely incidental byproduct of corruption; rather it arises from the way corruption systematically distorts the allocation of public resources, violates the impartiality of institutions, and undermines equality among citizens.

Our fictional case can be easily generalized. All over the world, systemic corruption, often supported by major economic actors, subjects individuals to comparable forms of injustice. This occurs in both affluent states and less economically advantaged ones. In the latter, however, this type of economic relationship occurs within institutional contexts that are already fragile, where the state's regulatory capacities are limited and accountability mechanisms are weak. In these contexts, corruption constitutes a grave moral wrong and becomes a structural obstacle to eradicating poverty and achieving global justice. The causal link between corruption and human rights violations is therefore not merely empirical but fundamentally normative: corruption alters the institutional conditions that ought to secure fair access to rights and entrenches unjust economic and political relations. This book, *Corruption and Global Justice* (Oxford University Press, 2023), starts from these premises to argue that corruption must be treated as a core concern of global justice theory, rather than as a secondary or derivative problem.

I. Corruption in contemporary normative political philosophy

Corruption and Global Justice is the latest development in a recent push to reflect on the concept of political corruption under contemporary conditions which complicate the phenomenon, especially globalization. While philosophers from Plato to Hobbes concerned themselves with the issue of corruption—generally understood as rulers acting in their own interest as opposed to the common good—contemporary political philosophy had largely overlooked and under-theorized the topic (Miller 2023). Recently, however, corruption has re-emerged with urgency as scholars confront not only political corruption, in a

narrow sense, but new forms of institutional decay linked to globalization, financial systems, digital disinformation and the corruption of democratic processes. This has led to more sophisticated conceptual analyses of corruption, bribery, and institutional integrity, alongside philosophical work on anti-corruption systems and the normative foundations needed to protect public institutions (Miller, 2023). However, the bulk of this recent literature remains focused on corruption within domestic political institutions, primarily in Western democratic contexts.

Within this domestic account, several influential works have played a key role in shaping normative reasoning about corruption. Thompson's (1995) contribution has been pivotal in giving new momentum to the study of corruption by reframing it from an individual wrongdoing into an eminently institutional problem. If corruption is understood not primarily as an individual act but as a phenomenon that occurs when practices predictably distort core institutional processes even in the absence of corrupt motives on the part of individual agents, a new and distinctive space for normative political philosophy opens up. Building on this institutional turn, more recent contributions—such as those by Lessig (2013) and by Ceva and Ferretti (2017, 2018, 2021)—have further heightened awareness of the connection between corruption and justice. In particular, in their recent work, Ceva and Ferretti have grounded corruption in the idea of office accountability: corruption arises when an officeholder acts for reasons that cannot be justified in light of the mandate defining her institutional role. On their view, the wrongness of corruption lies not primarily in its consequences, but in a specific form of "interactive injustice"—namely, a failure to act in ways that can be justified to one's institutional peers within relations of mutual accountability.

While remaining committed to an institutional account, Brock extends the concept of corruption beyond office accountability. She begins with a fairly standard definition of corruption as agents using "public office or professional roles, typically for some personal or political gain, in ways contrary to the purpose of that office or role" (4). However, in the appendix, where she elaborates her definition, she acknowledges a much broader array of activities that can appropriately be considered political corruption (181n). On her view, corruption can occur prior to the holding of political office, such as during the process of office-seeking, and can also occur after an individual has left office (182). Her account likewise covers both individual and institutional corruption (186-9), and may even include cases which do not directly advance personal gain or private interest (198-191). The primary wrong-making feature of corruption is not that leaders or office-holders abuse the trust of the public, or negate

justificatory respect for their inter-institutional peers. For Brock, corruption is wrong because it undermines the very commitment to moral equality that institutions are meant to embody and protect (68). A vast array of individual and institutional actions and patterns can contribute to this troubling phenomenon (182-5). In addition, Brock's account significantly expands the dominant, domestically oriented literature, elaborating an analysis of corruption that extends beyond the boundaries of national political institutions and into a broader context which includes the global realm.

II. Corruption as a Global Justice issue: Gillian Brock's contribution

In *Corruption and Global Justice*, Brock argues that anyone who wishes to take seriously the project of global justice should be seriously concerned about the problem of corruption. The work a represents a path-breaking contribution to the field of global justice for its treatment of corruption as a core concern for the discipline, not simply a practical obstacle to be overcome. In the context of the global justice debate, Brock takes up the well-established post-Rawlsian line of reasoning which emphasizes that global injustices result less from natural facts, such as resource endowments, geography or scarcity, and more from the design and operation of political and economic institutions (e.g., Rawls 1999, Pogge 2008; Beitz 2009, Sen 2009, Tan 2008, 2012). While some authors, notably Thomas Pogge and Leif Wenar have highlighted the way the organization of the global economy (Pogge 2008) and resource trade (Wenar 2010, 2016) incentivize and entrench corrupt governance practices, Brock's account is the first sustained attempt to put the phenomenon of corruption front and center of a normative analysis linking it to global justice (Brock 2023, vii n2). Her central thesis is that corruption—whether in the form of bribery, cronyism, influence peddling or the use of public office for personal gain (Brock 2023, 4)—systematically blocks people, especially the world's most vulnerable, from accessing the goods and opportunities necessary to meet their basic needs, ultimately undermining their human rights. Corruption, importantly, is not confined to particular regions of the world or political regimes; as Brock stresses, it permeates both economically disadvantaged and affluent societies, and takes root wherever institutions and incentives enable abuses of entrusted power (Brock 2023, 4-5).

The book's organizing ambition is to clarify what ought to be done about this pervasive injustice, who ought to do it, and on what normative grounds responsibilities should be allocated. Employing her signature approach of

"engaged political philosophy" Brock (2023, 178) takes existing problems as a point of departure for moral/philosophical analysis. The real-world cases she carefully considers supply the "relevant goods with which to think and the materials that should inform our responsibilities here and now" (*Ibid*.). Such an approach promises not only to offer a normative analysis that holds true to the realities of the international political landscape, but also to offer practical solutions suited to institutional pathways available for reform. To achieve this, Brock combines philosophical argument with empirical evidence on what kinds of anti-corruption interventions have been successful, insisting that the feasibility of institutional tools must shape our account of moral duties. The project is thus both empirically rooted and theoretically ambitious. Effective strategies for reducing corruption inform and constrain the distribution of responsibilities, while normative principles help identify which agents—states, international institutions, private actors, or civil society—are obligated to act.

III. Contributions to the symposium

The contributions in this symposium take Brock's central claims as a point of departure for a set of probing questions: Is her approach to institutionally cautious? Does it adequately capture the role of power and the motivational dynamics of resistance? Can it reconcile lofty moral aspirations with the harsh realities of non-ideal politics? Precisely by raising these questions, the symposium demonstrates how Brock's *Corruption and Global Justice* succeeds in opening space for the kind of critical, philosophically grounded engagement that the pressing problem of corruption demands.

Julian Culp and Megan Foster draw a connection between Brock's work and a broader literature on global distributive justice and the effectiveness of international development assistance, thus challenging her claim that corruption has been largely overlooked in global justice theory. By revisiting earlier discussions, their contribution shows how corruption has long been recognized as a central obstacle to realizing distributive justice. Drawing on the aid effectiveness and accountability literatures, their contribution highlights the importance of understanding accountability as a complex, plural, and sometimes counterproductive set of mechanisms. They also question whether the backward-looking nature of accountability structures is compatible with Brock's forward-looking framework of the responsibility to fight corruption.

Catarina Neves deepens the discussion by asking what motivates citizens to join collective efforts against corruption. Building on Brock's account, Neves'

contribution reframes corruption as a breach of reciprocity, emphasizing it as a relational, rather than purely consequential wrong. Drawing on Emanuela Ceva's (2018) notion of relational injustice, Neves argues that corruption undermines the mutual expectations and trust necessary for cooperative social and political life. This relational lens clarifies why corruption not only hinders distributive justice but corrodes the motivational basis for collective action. By linking Brock's empirically grounded political philosophy to a richer account of reciprocity and motivation, Neves' contribution offers a framework for understanding both the persistence of corruption and the conditions under which citizens may be moved to resist it.

Lior Erez' article engages Gillian Brock's work by addressing the crucial question of how agents should prioritize among competing anti-corruption responsibilities under non-ideal conditions. He argues that citizens and public officials in relatively affluent nations often have justified reasons to address domestic corruption first, and supports this claim by providing five reasons why duties to combat corruption start at home. Still, Erez doesn't reject Brock's cosmopolitan commitments, suggesting that combating corruption at home is not an expression of unjustified partiality but rather the most coherent and effective way to fulfill global justice obligations.

Christine Hobsden's contribution spotlights the role of power dynamics in sustaining corruption, and calls for a contextually-rooted "utopian thinking" against what she perceives as a risk of status quo bias. While wholeheartedly agreeing with Brock that corruption should be understood as a pressing concern for global justice scholarship, she contends that Brock's empirically grounded, institutionally focused approach underplays the importance of power dynamics in perpetuating corruption. Drawing on African governance contexts and the South African case of state capture, Hobsden argues that credible interventions must address entrenched elite power and institutional cultures of fear.

Gordon Arlen commends the way Brock uses problem-oriented theory to illuminate pressing global issues, but argues that her approach amplifies an unresolved tension between "realism" and "moralism" in post-Rawlsian political philosophy. While Brock's viewpoint aligns with the realist inclination to root normative theory in the complex, messy world of politics, she also hints at a moral ideal of global justice where corruption is viewed as an affront to human dignity. He argues, that although Brock never reconciles the conflict between realism and moralism that her approach brings to the fore, this in itself is valuable, opening up a space for further important discussion and normative theorizing.

Notes on contributor. **Megan Foster** is a Postdoctoral Fellow at Luiss University in Rome. Her research focuses on international political theory, contemporary moral and political philosophy, and in particular the nexus between political legitimacy and normative stability. Her current project examines algocracy—emerging forms of algorithmic governance—and the challenges they pose for political legitimacy in an increasingly data-driven public sphere. She earned her PhD in Political Theory from Luiss University and has held visiting research positions at Goethe University Frankfurt and Central European University. **Valentina Gentile** is Associate Professor of Political Philosophy at Luiss University in Rome. She is Editor-in-Chief of Philosophy and Public Issues (FQP/PPI). She specialises in normative political philosophy, liberal theory, and especially the work of John Rawls. Her research explores core Rawlsian themes such as moral stability, pluralism, reciprocity, toleration, and civility, and extends this framework to transitional justice, intergenerational justice, and the role of religion in democratic societies. She is also interested in the intersections between ethics and business. Her work has appeared in several peer-reviewed journals, including *International Theory*, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, *Global Policy Journal*, and *Philosophia*. She is the author of *From Identity Conflicts to Civil Society* (Luiss University Press 2013) and *Freedom with Religions* (Routledge 2025). She also co-edited *Rawls and Religion* (Columbia University Press 2015), *Spaces of Tolerance* (Routledge 2020), and *The Ethics of ESG* (Cambridge University Press 2026).

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