The Corruption of Politics

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Abstract: This paper challenges conceptions of political corruption that rely on standards external to politics and explores an understanding of corruption as something that is part of the internal policing of politics. The paper draws attention to the multiple, conflicting ideas and principles that contribute to our understanding of corruption but argues that these often generate over-moralised and over-generalized and can become corrosive of the compromises and procedures that are central to political rule. The paper shows that recent accounts of political corruption often have highly attenuated understandings of 'politics' and are over-expansive in their normative commitments, and argues that how we understand and talk about the corruption of politics is of major significance for the stability and effectiveness of the political orders of Western societies.

Keywords: corruption, political realism, accountability, politics, public office, definition, virtue.

I. Ideals and Politics

In Book IX of *Republic* (580c-590), Socrates asks Glaucon to imagine fashioning a multi-coloured beast, with a ring of many heads that it can grow and change at will. He is then asked to fashion a lion and a human being, and then to join the three of them into one, and to cover it with the appearance of a single human being. Socrates's image is intended to illustrate the benefits of justice over injustice: with it being appropriate to 'subordinate the beastlike parts of our nature to the human – or better, perhaps, to the divine' and shameful to enslave the gentle to the savage.[1] Although Socrates presents the image in a discussion of the individual and justice, there is also an intended parallel with the polis. It must be ordered by wisdom, it must contain and control the conflicting elements of the multi-coloured beasts within it, and it must harmonise through reason and discipline the conflicting elements of which it is comprised so that all the elements in the state are ruled by the highest part.

This ideal order provides an external standard for probity and corruption. Corruption occurs when the appropriate standard for conduct in the public realm is violated by people in public or judicial office acting on motives and incentives that should be excluded from decision-making in such office.

In the *Republic,* the political world *is* the multi-coloured, multi-headed beast[2]: it consists in a plurality of conflicting objectives with mixed and thereby impure motives that combine interests, passions, and sentiments, and with rationality playing a largely instrumental role. Only if the beast is ruled by wisdom can it be tamed and ordered. On this picture, the concern is not with the corruption of politics, but with the corruption of an ideal order *by*

politics. Indeed, for the Plato of the *Republic*, political corruption would seem to be no more than a tautology.

Over the last thirty years political scientists and economists have in various ways replicated Plato's position (albeit using widely different principles).   We do not often think of economists as Platonists, but much neo-classical economics shares the view that the natural/ ideal order is distorted or corrupted by state and government regulation that interferes with incentives and creates opportunities for rents.[3] Similarly, much republican political theory identifies a conception of the state as securing the common good for its citizens and sees factionalism and the pursuit of private interests in the state as corrupting the attainment of the common good.[4] Both perspectives thereby deny that politics is fundamentally a response to deep conflicts of interests over which there is inevitably an ongoing struggle for power to establish a never wholly consensual or stable settlement. Both assume an ideal order, deviations from which are seen as involving corruption *by* politics. Even the more pragmatic approaches in public choice, which attempt to design mechanisms for incentivising behaviour, see institutional design as an external process of framing politics so as to reward some motives and penalize others according to a set of external criteria for good order. They do not acknowledge that their own position is itself inherently political and contestable in character.

Many ideal-based approaches also treat principles of conduct for public office as principles of morality or as ethical virtues and thereby as deep-seated features of character. Acting well in public office is seen as a function of having a good character; corrupt acts are seen as springing from and betraying the flaws of the individual's character. In the hands of some commentators, this becomes a somewhat Manichean issue: corruption and the corrupt are evil, the good act well, making possible the good polity. Judgments about corruption in these approaches are grounded in reference to more basic claims about order and justice that give these judgments their normative weight.

In contrast to these approaches, this paper proposes that we consider corruption from within politics, and draws on the insights of a realist perspective on political theory. This view underlines the difficulty of establishing an ideal basis for assessments in politics, and points to the widely varied ways of understanding public office and its demands even in Western political systems, let alone more widely. Western traditions tend to promote an ideal of bureaucratic objectivity and impartiality that underpin most recent definitions of corruption. This view is plausibly appropriate to (a particular conception of) administrative office, but is much more difficulty to apply to political office. Moreover, while definitions can be improved there remains a core contestability to them that lies at the heart of politics itself. In exploring the way we conceptualise political corruption my concern is to resist a range of recent attempts to widen and deepen the scope of political corruption, which have affected both academic debates and public commentary on politics. In both cases, as used by many modern commentators, the language of corruption presumes ideal standards that are inappropriate to much politics, can encourage a toxic level of accountability, and can de-stabilize elements in the political process.

In trying to understand political corruption from within politics my approach has some limited similarity with recent literature on 'institutional corruption', which identifies standards internal to and operative in a particular domain or set of institutions that provides a context for asking how far particular practices or actions support or subvert the

institution.[5] This approach raises four problems: whether there is an uncontentious account of those standards; whether the criteria derived from that account predicate only and exactly the appropriate set of actions, without excluding other actions that we see as corrupt or including actions we do not regard as corrupt; which elements appropriately demarcate a distinctive domain, or group an appropriate set of institutions for them to act as the frame for understanding an instance of corruption; and what it is that provides a common element that allows the term to be used intelligibly across a range of domains or institutions? Moreover, although this approach can work well with the analysis of corruption among officials in bureaucratic structures, it sits less comfortably with political office and with politics more broadly. Here the definition of corruption is necessarily less stable. Struggles within politics are simultaneously struggles over the nature of politics and the standards that should be institutionalized and applied. As such, they remain inherently political and contested: they are a part of the mêlée, they are not above the fray. Consequently, there is little prospect of full convergence in judgments either within or across different political orders. The 'Platonist' approach judges political corruption by sets of standards external to politics; the institutional approach localises standards to the ends of the institution; but the alternative proposed here points to the variability, complexity and contestability at the heart of politics which can provide only unstable ground on which to build the strong normative judgments that many commentators see as central to corruption.

II Political realism

My account here is influenced by recent debates on realism in political theory.[6] At the heart of what I take to be plausible versions of a realist critique of liberal thinking about politics is less a denial of the reality of values in the political sphere and more a recognition that, while these exist, they are always potentially in conflict. Fundamental conflicts between values means that any political ordering will involve trade-offs and will play down some areas of value while promoting others. Consequently, any particular ordering will be, to some degree, partial, and this will be true both for procedures (since these will involve imposing one particular reading of what the right balance of fairness, equality, justice, and rights of participation requires) and for outcomes. Those outcomes will, in consequence, command only limited legitimacy and will be only more or less stable. Moreover, the ability to get solutions to stick, and the claims on and use of the resources needed to do so (financial, material, ideological, persuasive and coercive) is a political process that is non-neutral, involves components of coercion and fiat, and is inherently local – being concerned with which issues need resolving here and now, and what compromises can be negotiated and enforced.[7]

On this view, what Bernard Williams calls the 'basic legitimation demand', will not be met equally for all participants, except under conditions of such unanimity of commitments that we should doubt that politics and its attendant compromises is necessary.[8] All legitimation is conditional, partial and potentially fragile, shored up (sometimes tightly consolidated, sometimes barely), by historical experience, traditions and habits, and backed by systematic enforcement by coercive institutions. Legitimacy has many sources and many degrees, but

the basic realist insight is that we cannot assume a free and open consensus as a foundation for politics, that political orders cannot long be sustained by such means, and that an irreducible element in politics is the laying claim to, and the exercise of, power – above all the power to impose solutions and to compel compliance. Similarly, there can be no unidimensional, linear metric of power allowing systematic comparison between states of affairs – how many are coerced, manipulated or cowed and to what extent involves judging across multiple dimensions of value, taking account of the conflicting commitments that generate the political problem that needs solving, and considering the way in which decisions are made, justified, and implemented. We can usually distinguish in rough terms between the very bad and the somewhat better, and we can occasionally recognise some Pareto improvements, but most judgments about A being better than B rely on giving priority to some goods, values or ends, over others, and those judgments cannot be wholly consensual and impartial.

Agreement on political standards is also forged politically and is always potentially open to objection by some element of the community. In societies with liberal democratic traditions and procedures, and an accompanying political discourse of legitimation that emphasises the rights of the citizen and the responsibilities of those in power, precision in the characterisation of the responsibilities of public office plays an integral part of its legitimation, and certain types of critiques or challenges to such characterisation can have serious implications for sustaining the legitimacy of the political order.

Seeing political corruption from within politics, means seeing it as part of the self-policing of a particular system of rule, and also as a rhetoric that can challenge political rule or particular decisions. The self-policing can be adjusted and reformed, and made more sensitive to those perspectives whose sense of the legitimacy of the order is most fragile and conditional. But where the political rhetoric demands uncompromising adherence to foundational values, the order and its legitimacy can be deeply threatened. Where this happens, political rule will be experienced as more heavy handed, and may indeed need to become so. In areas where an order's legitimacy is most fragile it is especially vulnerable to attack from more universalist and idealist positions. In such cases, political discourse has some responsibility to concern itself both with matters of substance and with acknowledging the procedures, rituals and discourses of legitimation upon which the political order rests. To be concerned with corruption *in* politics, rather than *by* it, means that we should recognise that our understanding of corruption in the West, is very closely tied to the compromises we have struck in the establishment of our political systems, and that challenging that understanding simultaneously challenges those compromises and the claims to legitimacy that sustains them.

III. Integrity in public office

On most standard interpretations, corruption involves those in public office using it to serve their own ends rather than those of the public. In modern, Western bureaucratic systems there is widespread agreement that public officials are expected to set aside their private interests in undertaking their official commitments. Although there is wide variation in the constructions of public office and of the lines between administrative and political office

amongst Western states (for example, in the interpretation of the roles of senior public officials in the USA, France, Germany and the UK)[9], the literature on corruption tends to assume a relatively standard model. This allows Bo Rothstein to emphasise the importance of impartiality as the principle at stake when public officials act corruptly.[10] In accepting public office the agent accepts that the role confers responsibilities that trump their private interests. Moreover, these roles are generally understood as constructs of rules and norms that are to be fully implemented.[11]

This model of administrative public office is widely held: corruption occurs when office holders use their office to pursue their own advantage, rather than serving the public. Not all derelictions of duty are corrupt: public servants can be idle, incompetent, prejudiced or can act *ultra vires*. Most definitions of corruption want to leave such cases outside the definition of corruption, while recognising them as forms of malfeasance. Similarly, there is an issue about when a public official's behaviour should be seen in terms of other categories of self-serving behaviour – such as theft, fraud, or venality – rather than being 'corrupt'. If corruption is to avoid becoming a catch-all category (which dramatically weakens its normative force) we need a clear line between such infractions and corruption. This is often provided by emphasising the extent to which corrupt officials (A) are implicated in triadic relations that distort the legitimate use of office to serve some interests (C) (which should not benefit) rather than others (B) (which should), while profiting from the distortion through the acceptance of incentives or benefits.

The slipperiness of the understanding of corruption becomes evident when we note that the emphasis on formal role leaves open a number of elements. For example, if we emphasise compliance with rules and norms what weight do we ascribe to people's motives for acting? Some see the terms of office as requiring a certain sort of person with a distinct set of personal and moral qualities or virtues – other emphasise behaviour, not motive. This latter view is in sharp contrast to Plato's account of the guardians and it sits uncomfortably with a good deal of republican rhetoric and with at least some understandings of the nature of religious integrity.[12] On these accounts, the qualities needed in office – virtue, *virtu*, spiritual insight - are taken to be qualities that should dominate other aspects of people's lives, in most cases to the point of wholly excluding other motives and interests.[13]

The more parsimonious approach is evident in the Seven Principles of Public Life set out by the UK's Committee on Standards in Public Life in 1995.[14] The principles of Selflessness, Integrity, Objectivity, Accountability, Openness, Honesty, and Leadership are seen as implicit in and integral to certain types of liberal-democratic, constitutional government. The principles and the 'descriptors' that gloss them, spell out general principles for the conduct of those holding public office; but they are not a catalogue of personal or moral qualities. This separation of office from character and morality is disquieting to many since mere conformity to rules and norms does not guarantee that the agent acts well – viz., the Nazi bureaucrat, the vindictive border guard or the inflexible refugee assessor. In each case, our discomfort with such cases arises from an expectation that the official ought to have a deeper integrity to provide some critical purchase on his or her formal role and its demands. At the same time, many think that public officials should exhibit compliance with the rules and loyalty and commitment to the order and should leave aside their moral impulses.

These tensions point to instabilities at the heart of Western conceptions of public office that flow from the fact that our expectations for public office represent a set of compromises on a range of issues and principles. They also derive from and import some of the commitments of early modern thinking about corruption (originally in relation to the corruption of church and doctrine, or in relation to the republic), together with an Enlightenment legacy of instrumental and technocratic conceptions of government administration, which sought to eliminate tradition, custom, and informality in the development and maintenance of institutions. In each case we retain elements of the language and expectations but deploy them in a dramatically changed context.

These tensions and contrasting tendencies are evident in the definition of political corruption. Most standard definitions of corruption are not informative. **'**Corruption involves the abuse of public office for private gain'[15], does not tell us what counts as an abuse (or what is a distinctively corrupt abuse); it encompasses many things like simple theft that seem distinct from corruption; it is overly restrictive in implying that private institutions cannot be corrupt and in restricting gain to private gain (when factional or party gain is often a major force for corruption); and it makes no mention of those who try illicitly to influence the way that those in office behave towards the public whose interests are harmed (the corruptors). David Beetham's recently proposed redefinition - "Distortion and subversion of the public realm in the service of private interests"[16] - is similarly flawed: what counts as distortion or subversion *might* narrow down types of 'abuse' – but gives us no criteria by which to identify what these involve, and no criteria for distinguishing this set of cases as cases of corruption. 'The public realm' is much broader than public office, and presumes it is a single coherent domain whereas in practice competing conceptions of the public realm and its ends will make whether or not something is corrupt a function of one's preferred conception. The 'service of private interests' is really no better than 'private gain' – and is open to the same objections about people who act in ways that are not motivated by private interests but who don't, for example, follow the rules.

No definition is watertight, in large part because different elements jostle for attention and vary in relevance and intensity across contexts and time. My own – 'Corruption in politics occurs where public official (A) violates the rules and/or norms of office, to the detriment of the interests of the public (B) (or some subsection thereof), which is the designated beneficiary of that office, to benefit themselves or a third party (C) who rewards or otherwise incentivises A to gain access to goods or services they would not otherwise obtain'[17] – pulls together aspects of both public-office and public-interest definitions, but these remain in tension since constructions of public office and its responsibilities often part company with conceptions of the public interest. The definition has the virtue that almost any case that meets all the conditions will be recognised as a case of corruption.[18] However, many cases that are seen as corrupt might meet only some conditions: the public may benefit incidentally or to a lesser extent; the public official may be responding to threats not incentives; and the benefit might be one that that the corruptor could have won in open public tender. Moreover, the definition is hard to apply in cases of corruption in relation to party funding (where no 'public official' may be involved), and it does not capture the populist use of corruption to denounce perceived exploitation of the masses by elites.[19] No one condition is necessary, and different combinations of conditions that fall short of including all, might nonetheless prove sufficient. Bo Rothstein and Aiysha Varraich have

suggested that the definition is flawed because its three components are essentially 'empty shells'. 'The shortcomings of these core values are that they are only applicable in a setting where the political culture is clearly shared and there are rules governing the conduct of both public officials and members of the pubic in their dealings with officials.'[20] But this misses three points: i. that fleshing out political corruption *must* involve situating the core definition within a particular political culture and filling out the elements in that context (unless one assumes an external, stipulative account, as does the impartiality account); ii. that political corruption does for the most part presume the existence of well-developed and delineated political cultures; iii. and that what the definition captures, in relation to politics, is that something is politically corrupt when the legitimated exercise of political rule is subverted so that the compromises and decisions of a political order are not in fact being implemented.[21] In my view, this is a non-trivial account of what corrupts political decisions and exercises of power and authority.[22]

Commentators who have sought to impose unity and coherence on the field by identifying a single *desiderata* that is taken to be at the heart of probity or corruption impose more consistency and coherence across political cultures than is plausible. This is true for Rothstein's appeals to impartiality,[23] but is still more so in the case of Laura Underkuffler who takes the bolder step of claiming that what holds ascriptions of corruption together is the view that corruption is fundamentally concerned with character. We should understand the claim of corruption as one that 'describes an individual's deepest character. *It is the capture, by evil, of one's soul*.'[24] This view is unapologetically haunted by fears of inappropriate motives, demanding that people do the right thing for the right reasons, even though we have very little reason for thinking that people in public office in the West have wholly unalloyed motives. 'There must be an alternative moral and ethical system which is aggressively advocated, and which is eventually regarded by officials and citizens as in their best individual and collective interests. A different normative system must be internalized by individuals and institutionalized as policy.'[25] This is tantamount to a demand fundamentally to change human nature. It also tries to explain a difficult concept by appealing to a still more controversial one.

In contrast to such trends, recent US Supreme Court judgments have stipulated that the core descriptive sense of corruption (albeit specifically in relation to members of legislatures) is *quid pro quo*. This has subsequently provoked critics to appeal to expanded definitions in a way that further widens the scope of corruption and challenges some of the deeper inequalities of wealth and power in modern societies, even though doing so simultaneously embroils the concept in a set of debates about the intentions of the Founding Fathers and the nature of modern democracy.[26]

That the definition of political corruption is so troublesome arises from the variety of the sources for our thinking and the strong normative commitments that attach to them, from the fact that political contexts vary considerably, and because people's positions are often politically freighted. Since the World Bank's decision to treat corruption as an economic (not political) problem there has been a dramatic rise in publications on corruption and in anti-corruption activity, and that has also been associated with a rise in the use of the term in public discourse.[27] In popular usage, for the most part, the judgment of corruption is treated as one of character not merely of behaviour, it assumes universality, and it treats

corruption as a 'thick' ethical concept, combining normative and descriptive elements. [28] Indeed, the uptake of the term in legislative and electoral politics as a general term of moral condemnation that accuses those in power of using their position to further partisan, factional, or personal ends, has become increasingly widespread. A 2015 Gallup Poll in the USA, found that 75% of respondents agreed that 'corruption is widespread throughout the government of this country.' [29] Similarly hostile judgments have been made of the governments of Western Europe, and Central and Eastern Europe states have struggled over the last twenty-five years with a corrosive culture of partisan accusation masquerading as moral repugnance to those in power.[30] The result is a range of claims, largely driven by ideal conceptions of the political order, combined with a visceral populist mistrust of governmental institutions, which find in the language of corruption a way to challenge the political order and to find it wanting.

The use of such inflated moral and ideological rhetoric in relation to public administration further undermines trust in the public service and often prompts attempts to increase popular accountability and further to delimit professional or bureaucratic autonomy. These moves sometimes promote aspects of public service, but as a sweeping popular rhetoric it can hamper decision-making, hollow out trust in institutions, and create a dependence of the public service on politicians that serves sectional rather than public-regarding interests. The institution of trust in public officials in modern democratic societies is a fragile achievement that is relatively easily damaged and populist claims of corruption can generate demands for accountability that are potentially toxic. [31]

I take the precise and consistent identification of cases of political corruption within political systems to be fragile achievements that are worth preserving. There is no set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the use of the term that both identify a discrete set of events and capture the full range of intuitions that accompany the term but, within any reasonably developed political system, criteria exist to pick out a core cases, even if any particular criterion can also generate cases that provoke disagreement. Against the demand for a clear moralised conception of corruption that claims cross-cultural validity, a realist conception of politics recognises that our definitions are limited and tailored to particular contexts and concerns, and will not perfectly align with our intuitive moral (and political) reactions. On this view, more sweeping understandings of corruption that purport to offer more consistency and that draw on theological or republican traditions, ideals of impartiality, or intense moral conviction, are wholly inapt as standards for the widely diverse political cultures of modern societies, and come with expectations that are over-demanding for the pluralist regimes we inhabit. Moreover, even where there is sufficient convergence across advanced western societies to acknowledge shared criteria for assessing administrative public office, definitional disputes become more bitter and divisive in relation to the conduct of political office.

IV. The assessment of political conduct

Political office stands in a very different relationship to impartiality than does administrative office. Political decisions are not impartial, and (by definition) cannot be. They are not

necessarily self-interested but, as Bernard Williams puts it, in them someone 'has lost'.[32] Politicians seek office by appeals to partial, sectional and particular interests as well as to general considerations. Political decisions favour some values, end and interests over others. Although the struggle for power is partly constrained by rules and procedures that define the process, underlying the exercise of political office is some sense that, in winning, one has the opportunity (perhaps a mandate, perhaps an obligation) to pursue some ends, values and goods rather than others.

Moreover, in many political systems politicians see themselves as appropriately self-regulating: they are elected to exercise their judgment, including judgment about what does or does not need regulation, and about appropriate and inappropriate conduct in political office.[33] Moreover they do so while factoring in considerations such as how to enhance their subsequent electoral prospects, how to raise campaign funds, how to present their policies in a more, rather than a less favourable light, and so on. This means that elements that are integral to winning, keeping, and exercising office sit together in an unstable and potentially conflicting mix with positional obligations, strategic political action, and prudential behaviour.

A great deal of political philosophy in the last fifty years has been directed to constructing political orders from first principles; rather little has addressed the nature of political rule and the character of political office.[34] At a minimum, such reflection should acknowledge that the occupants of political office must respond to a range of considerations that are distinct from the formal obligations of their political office but are integral to the process of competing for, holding on to, and exercising office - not the least of which concerns politicians' abilities to maintain their hold on political power against those contending with them. We should also recognise that the political world is not identical to the morality of private life. As Montaigne put it, reflecting on his experience in the civil wars of France in the 16th Century:

> Once I made an assay at using in the service of some political manoeuvrings , such opinions and rules of life as were born in me or instilled in me by education – rough, fresh, unpolished and unpolluted ones, the virtues of a schoolboy or a novice, which I practice, if not conveniently at least surely, in my private life. I found that they were inapplicable and dangerous. Anyone who goes into the throng must be prepared to side-step, to squeeze with his elbows, to dodge to and fro and, indeed, to abandon the straight path according to what he encounters; he must live not so much by his norms but by those of others; not so much according to what he prescribes to himself but to what others prescribe to him, and according to the time, according to the men, according to the negotiations.[35]

Even complying with the formal requirements of political office is not a clear cut imperative. For those in supreme executive office, formal requirements underdetermine action, they can be conflicting, and in some cases they may jeopardise larger political responsibilities. Making political decisions often involves precisely judgments about what the politician should or should not do that goes beyond what s/he is formally (and minimally) positively required to do. It is not just that there is larger scope for discretion (that is clearly the case); it is also that judgment plays a much more major role in determining and interpreting the responsibilities of political office than in administrative public office. One dimension, as Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel have emphasised, is that *political* judgment has to take

a consistently more consequentialist line on many issues – and more so than those in public (as distinct from political) office.[36] Moreover consequentialist judgments cannot be wholly a matter of following formal rules, since such decisions rely on interpretations of the objectives of political rule and about the weight to be given to different components among the conflicting values and principles in the wider community.

Faced with this messy reality, we might be tempted to try to constrain those in public office more effectively by increasing the determinacy of regulation and requirements. This strategy faces three difficulties: Increasing regulation of politicians hands power and discretion to the regulators and we have no reason to suppose that they have necessarily higher probity or impartiality (the 'Juvenal problem' viz: *quis custodiet ipsos custodies*). We also need the political process to pass whatever regulations we want to see implemented, and we thereby must enter the fray, rather than standing above it, and we too must be prepared to negotiate and compromise. Finally, the strategy ignores the fact that we have politics because we have fundamental disagreements that need to be authoritatively and determinately ordered, and that if we have systems that cannot take, enforce, and legitimate such decisions, and respond to the emergence of new divisions and conflicts, we create the conditions for crisis and collapse.

This is not to say that political office should be untrammelled. Most Western states have developed distinctions between formal and political dimensions of political office: the formal is what the office requires according to statute, formal procedural requirements, and institutional conventions; the political refers to how occupants interpret the powers, responsibilities, and purposes designated by their formal position, the processes by which policies are chosen and pursued, and the means they are prepared to endorse to secure the desired outcome.   Most legislatures have bodies, (sometimes independent of them, sometimes not) that conduct disciplinary proceedings against members who violate formal rules of Parliament; and members of legislatures are also held to account politically, at elections, through legislative debate and questions, and through public scrutiny.   While the distinction is, I think, clear, political judgment necessarily plays a central role in interpreting much of the 'soft' formal regulation surrounding office, which can make claims of corruption extremely contentious.

Nonetheless, much public commentary on and reactions to politicians obscures these differences between the formal components of office and matters of political judgment; and between formal and political accountability.   And politicians sometimes get these things badly mixed up – resolving consequentialist considerations in ways that ride rough shod over public trust (for example Nixon in Watergate and subsequently), or setting aside careful evaluation of consequentialist considerations in favour of absolute principle or moral commitment (perhaps Blair in Iraq).   Indeed, the two dimensions frequently pull in different directions – few want unprincipled consequentialists, but nor do they want moralists who stick to values irrespective of the costs they impose.[37] We probably want politicians to be decent people and to be politically savvy and effective so as to survive the political struggle; but the conditions of modern politics, (at least in adversarial political systems that are relatively open to public scrutiny) make it difficult to sustain the illusion that these are wholly compatible requirements. And the expectations and the language that most ordinary people bring to the evaluation of political office (and that commentators, media, and rival

politicians often encourage them to bring), generally looks for virtue, integrity, and judgment of a more or less uncompromised form. Yet the job politicians have to do, and the challenges they have to negotiate, often work against such uncompromising commitments. The result is an instability at the heart of the public evaluation of and of the legitimation for those in politics.

Politicians are flawed, they judge issues partially, and they pursue a number of potentially conflicting ends simultaneously: they have to defend their personal and political interests in holding on to office, while pursuing wider political and sectional ends; and their role is 'judgment heavy' and regulation light. From the outside, they seem self-seeking and corrupt, to a much greater extent than is the case for most officials. Moreover, because they are our representatives and we see them as serving our interests, our standards are sometimes still higher than they are for public officials.[38] 'Throwing the rascals out' is one common version of what they deserve,[39] and there have been repeated demands to clean up Washington and Westminster (and elsewhere).

Nonetheless, the problems of political office are exacerbated by destructive spirals of decaying public trust. When trust declines people demand increased scrutiny - with surveillance and accountability mechanisms functioning as a substitute for the perceived lack of integrity. Increased scrutiny of political office may make responsible political decision-making in highly charged contexts substantially more difficult. Politicians often need room in which outcomes, probabilities, and policy can be explored and compromises hammered out without immediate exposure to the public gaze. Finding an agreement that will stick and that people can commit to often requires that the precise character of the bargaining is shielded from wider scrutiny or publicity. People have been distressed by some of the deals made in the process of developing a peace agreement in Northern Ireland. There must be a question about whether the extent of these concessions was in fact necessary to conclude the peace process, but it is worth reflecting on how that question might be answered. If those involved judged them to be necessary, then we have to take it as a matter of political judgment that ending the war justified making those particular deals. Our ex-post judgment might be different, and we may punish people politically for the decisions they took – but (unless we can prove that they were struck for illicit gain) there are no formal grounds for doing so. Politicians will be reticent about exactly what was on the table, preferring to celebrate the deals they have struck. Yet, invoking freedom of information to reveal all will have an effect on what ministers can do, or can record having done, and will also have an impact on their ability to make deals and to ensure that these stick.

Negotiation and compromise are essential in politics, but they become more difficult the more the public know in advance the options and the commitments that people have made, since that knowledge makes it costly for politicians to change their minds or may make them seem to be resiling from expressed commitments. Because other people in the political world know this, they leak information to make it more difficult for a government or party, or minister to adopt a particular course or to change it. Furthermore, the more hostile you see your environment as being, the more cagey you are likely to be, and that can become a seriously destructive spiral, generating an increasingly vigilant press, increasingly paranoid behind closed doors decisions, active spinning and briefings against one's opponents, and a

sharp decline in collective political responsibility. Ongoing debates in the UK over the 'Brexit' process raise many such concerns: in a context of bitter populist mistrust and negativity towards government it is hard to see how an open process of negotiation can take place; but the more closed the process, the more fragile the legitimacy of the outcome will be. Moreover, political and formal accountability are often confused, and people use formal mechanisms for political ends, especially where there are low levels of trust, high political stakes, and/or weak commitments to procedures. The proliferation of news media and commentary add to the complexity: politicians need the media to convey their policies and to conduct the political fight with opposing parties; but that commits them to relationships that often prove intolerant of the rough and tumble of political decision-making, the necessities of political compromise, and the non-linear formation of policy.

On this account, a number of tensions are inherent in the politics of many modern, largely liberal, democratic states. We might take a Platonist view and see this as the result of the conflicting instincts of self-interested partisans. But, there are more credible conceptions of politics than this and there are several potential ways of proceeding in setting out a conception of politics from the inside that avoids the utopian moment, while retaining the capacity to conceive of corruption in, rather than by politics.[40]

In characterising the political realm from the inside we should emphasise the fragility of and limited scope for impartiality, upon which public expectations of public office tend to rely, and we can point to the problems that arise for impartiality where multiple conflicting dimensions of value require authoritative ordering, but where no ordering can give all reasonable constellations of value equal weight. This alone provides a powerful counter to some of the more naïve liberal certainties about the possibilities for a politics purged of emotion, interests, conflict, and power.

Within this more complex picture of the political realm, how should we understand claims about political corruption? The claims to authority and legitimacy by most Western political systems are conditional on a range of procedures, practices, right and privileges that are rooted in various historical, institutional and conventional norms and practices. They are political *systems*, whose rules and requirements distinguish appropriate and inappropriate conduct, probity and corruption, albeit in precise and detailed and hard to generalize ways. This makes claims about corruption a much more local phenomenon that addresses the inconsistency between one's conduct and motives and the prescribed norms or rules of office.

On this view our understanding of public office in the West involves a range of components that, within our particular political cultures, can give a precise set of meanings to political and public office corruption. These are largely built around a conception of office that dominates the occupant's private interests, but the exact set of expectations, the lines drawn in relation to motives, and the degree of trust reposed in such offices, varies considerably, being deeply affected by the history, traditions, and understandings that have grown up around the practices and institutions of different states. Different cultures have developed sets of rules and expectations in response to the particular contexts and conflicts they faced, and have produced orders that are able to sustain, for the most part, broad legitimacy.

At the same time, it is clear that such 'local' readings of corruption often do not satisfy people – they lack the conclusive moral weight usually attached to 'corruption', 'evil', 'subversion', etc. Bled of the expectations generated by the claim to high moral ground, the claim of political corruption comes down to saying that X has broken the rules in a certain manner (with a certain intent, in ways that subvert aspects of official duty and the legitimate exercise of authority). Political cultures can also press local understandings in more ideal directions and develop much more demanding conceptions of office, accompanied with more encompassing conceptions of public office corruption. But these broader claims are not neutral – they are not a crusade above the fray. They are themselves intrinsically political, although they often deny this. How far such claims are a cause for concern depends on the extent to which these claims corrode the legitimacy accorded to and the trust reposed in public office.

The narrower, more technical, and more local understanding of corruption in most Western systems generates a relatively restrained and precise evaluative language that provides constructive responses and reforms within the procedures and institutions of the polity.   In contrast, claims that, for example, party funding in the USA is corrupt because it reproduces substantial economic inequalities in the political sphere, and works against principles we share by living in a democracy in which civil and political rights are claimed to be equal, over-reach. The inequalities of influence strongly suggest that the system is flawed on its own understanding, but is it (and those involved in it) corrupt?[41] Such claims are more dangerous the less compromising and more demanding they are, and the less they acknowledge their own intrinsically political character.

Of course, there are states whose political orders are insouciant to their citizens, unconcerned to rule by procedure and impartial practice, and interested in more systematically exploiting their domination over their subjects. Nothing I have said denies this. With Williams we should recognize that liberalism (in this case, in relation to a set of standards for public office) is a language uniquely suited to the basic legitimation demand in advanced western states; but it cannot function for states with different historical and cultural legacies[42] and we need to address the problems of constructing more robust traditions of public office in states that currently identify political power as an opportunity for plunder. In doing so, we cannot assume that we can simply transfer our world to them; and we ought to be sure that we understand our own political orders and their particularities and vulnerabilities first.

Western politicians can be corrupt and many political systems betray strong currents of ethical drift. In most groups, members adjust their behaviour in line with their understanding of how other members of the group behave. This ensures that the norms and principles of the practice are shared in the community but it carries the risk that they become separated from wider public understanding. Moreover, the political 'bubble' may leave some aspects of people's conduct tacitly unobserved while being ethically dubious, as in Britain's MPs' expenses scandal. Also, power 'corrupts', producing misjudgments arising from a sense of self-importance – or encouraging people to favour those who flatter their self-importance. In addition, struggles in which political accountability encroaches on the territory of formal requirements often bleed into controversies over procedures and principles, politicising them in their turn and quickly developing into wider contests over

legitimacy. 'Toxic accountability' can turn decision-making into a battlefield, in which the process can be seriously damaged, with public trust in politicians and institutions evaporating, and encouraging more partisan demands for control and accountability.   Much in politics tests people's conduct and judgment. The result is an unstable mix – the tendency of those in political office to drift or hubris, the tendency among the electorate to confuse personal and political qualities and dimensions of accountability, and a more general waning of trust in those in power that demands ever higher levels of accountability and transparency.

These are good reasons for identifying more intelligent forms of accountability. These might accord politicians the space to deliberate on options and the time to formulate responses to problems, recognising that they may need to change their minds in the light of evidence or to respond to political exigencies that make the securable compromise something that falls short of the initial ambition but is nonetheless worth having. We can ask subsequently whether they got as good a deal as they could have got; but that is a matter of political accountability and one where political rules of engagement apply. That means that politicians cannot be expected to be wholly open and candid about what they tried to achieve in the process, what obstacles they faced, and what compromises they had to make. There are also *formal* questions, about whether/to what extent they acted in keeping with their positional responsibilities (and, where that is an issue, other forms of inquiry may be necessary). But these need asking by the right bodies. Crucially, almost any media questioning (in virtue of opening the politician to public scrutiny) will inevitably be treated as political and responded to as such – that is, prudently, without any obligation for full disclosure. That is why media inquiry about behaviour that raises formal questions is fraught ground (since it is being asked in a political arena which immediately colours it).

The ether in which people fight for, defend and see through their policies is deeply and intrinsically political. In that process, politicians have to weigh up what they are formally obliged to say or do, and beyond that, what it is expedient to say and whether, by not answering, they create problems for themselves for which they will end up paying too high a price – because they cannot carry their colleagues with them, because it leaves them vulnerable to opposition questions, or because it will lose them their post, or their re-election. But believing that there are clear high moral principles available here involves making a mistake about the nature of political contestation.

On this account, and *pace* recent claims, there is not much scope for transforming our political cultures or for dramatically increasing personal integrity among politicians. The aspiration for more 'morality' is troubling at many levels, but most crucially because one reason we have political procedures and institutions is authoritatively to resolve conflicts over the limits to which some people's moral convictions can be allowed to dominate those of others. Politics (and subsequently, decision and law)[43] is the process through which such clashes are settled – and any particular claim to high moral ground has only the standing that it can win in the political process. Bidding for public support for a view (however moral) is a political act – and, as such, it competes with others in the political arena and has no special status. Much of the time actors in the public domain (perhaps especially journalists) seek to persuade us that things are other than this – but that too is politics. As Montesquieu commented, with particular reference to England: 'In absolute monarchies,

journalists betray the truth because they do not have the liberty to tell it; in extremely free states, they betray the truth because of their very liberty for, as it always produces divisions, each one becomes as much the slave of the prejudices of his faction as he would be of a despot.' [44]

This is not to say that politics is undifferentiated. One of the achievements of many western political systems has been the development of procedures, institutions and practices that have secured widespread compliance and that come increasingly to frame and delimit areas of distinctively political activity. We protect those institutions and practices through a variety of formal institutions and offices and various types and processes of accountability. In doing so, political contestation is to some degree contained and does not break out into open conflict. But these procedures and practices are fragile. This makes it crucial that we support the formal elements of the system. If we recognize legitimation as the ether in which political systems operate, and acknowledge that such legitimation cannot rest fully on rationality or impartiality, then we should be addressing the question of how to sustain a public or civic culture and a political discourse that respects and supports these distinctions and the institutions that police them. What I hope to have conveyed is that this is not easily achieved or sustained, and that many of the central participants – whether politicians or journalists – often misjudge some of the central issues about what is procedural and what political and have incentives to over-reach and overstate their claims in ways that can weaken the integrity of the political system. Moreover, a more sociologically and institutionally informed political philosophy might usefully address more directed and local questions about what needs sustaining and what should be questioned in the mix of forces that secure the legitimacy of particular political orders.

V Conclusion

Commentators have drawn attention to the differences between the *Republic* and earlier dialogues, such as the *Gorgias*, in which the 'forms' play no role. Nonetheless, there is a consistency to the unsettling character of Plato's questioning across these texts. When Socrates demonstrates that Gorgias and his colleagues hold contradictory or implausible beliefs, he weakens the crowd's support for them; but he comes empty handed. He appears as an innocent abroad, discomfiting those who claim the political as their territory, while denying that he has any knowledge of that territory. But the *aporia* that his questioning generates is not a stable state: decisions must be taken, laws made, order legitimated and sustained, security maintained. In doing so, some interests, values and ends are served to a greater extent than others. The challenge is not to establish wholly impartial decision-making or rational principles but (in their inevitable absence) to establish systems and procedures that ensure that, to a greater or lesser extent, within the bounds of realistic possibility, those subject to the outcomes of decisions can mostly acknowledge them as having a degree of legitimacy, (perhaps, that losers do not lose too badly, that compliance relies only lightly on coercion, that winners show moderation, and that those who exercise power do so more for collective than for sectional ends; albeit in each case recognising that these judgements are 'on balance', imperfect, and potentially in tension).

Understood as part of the terminology of politics, rather than as appealing to a set of ideal standards outside of it, the claim that politics can be corrupted may support that legitimacy.

But it can also come to challenge it - much rests on how it is deployed. In the case of political office, the precise definition of the offence of political corruption, and the indictment of individuals for specific infringements of rules, is less corrosive to the political order than blanket claims that dispute the legitimacy of the system as a whole, or its political class. Sustaining these distinctions requires dull, precise work, and political theorists have often responded to the attractions of following their preferred normative thrust for the concept rather than sticking to its strict descriptive content within a determinate political system.   Yet, the more inflated rhetoric of corruption takes no hostages – the accused are fallen men and women, self-seeking, corrupt in character, evil, beyond redemption. That rhetoric can call on deep-rooted traditions of theological and republican thought that have little time for the niceties of context and complexities of motivation. But in plural, somewhat liberal, and somewhat democratic societies, whose achievement has been to build civic and political systems that tolerate a range of value commitments and protect individuals from the moral crusades of their fellow citizens, this kind of rhetoric can dramatically weaken the legitimacy of the political order and increase its instability. On the account I have proposed here, there is corruption in politics but politics is not itself intrinsically corrupt, and there is some responsibility for our political philosophy to recognise and to work with that.

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[1] *Republic* trans., Grube and Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997) 589c-d.

[2] The multi-headed monster is common trope in caricature representations of corruption: for example, "The champions of reform destroying the monster of corruption (George Humphrey, 1831), "The Champion of Oakhampton, attacking the hydra of Gloucester Place" (Thomas Tegg, 1809) or "Dispute between Monopoly and Power, from *The Satirist*" (William Henry Brooke, 1813).

[3] See, for example, Anne Krueger, 2The Political Economy of the Rent-Seeking Society," *American Economic Review* 64, no. 3 (1974): 291-303.

[4] Philip Pettit, *Republicanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 210-218.

[5] See Dennis Thompson, *Ethics in Congress* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Inst. 1995); Laurence Lessig, *Republic Lost: How Money Corrupts Congress---and a Plan to Stop It*. (Boston: Hachette 2011) and "'Institutional corruption' defined," *J. Law Med. Ethics* 41, no. 3, (Fall 2013): 553-5; Seamus Miller "Corruption," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed., Edward N. Zalta (Feb 2, 2011); and the paper by Daniel Weinstock in this volume. For criticisms of this approach see Mark Philp and E. David-Barrett, "Realism about Political Corruption," *Annual Review of Political Science* 18 (2015), 387-402; and Maria Paola Ferretti in this volume.

[6] See most famously Bernard William, *In the Beginning was the Deed* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2005) and Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2009). See also William Galston, "Realism in Political Theory," *European Journal of Political Theory* 9, no. 4 (October 2010): 385-411 and my "Realism without Illusions," *Political Theory* 40 (5) (October, 2012): 629-49.

[7] Indeed the boundaries of the political are themselves variable, locally policed, and unstable. See, for example, Matei Candea, "'Our Division of the Universe' Making a Space for the Non-Political in the Anthropology of Politics," *Current Anthropology* 52, 3 (June, 2011): 309-334.

[8] Williams, *In the Beginning …* ch. 1, 'Realism and Moralism'.

[9] These vary on their degrees of politicization, the training and qualifications required, the character of loyalty demanded, their conditions of service, and the type of legal system in which they operate.

[10] Bo Rothstein, *The Quality of Government: Corruption, Social Trust, and Inequality in Institutional Perspective* (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago University Press, 2011).

[11] Paul Finn, "Official Misconduct," *Criminal Law Journal* 2 (1978): 315. 'As an official is not permitted to subordinate the positive requirements of his office to his own judgment as to what he should or should not do, he is indictable for any deliberate refusal to discharge any mandatory public duty imposed upon him.'

[12] An important component given the extent to which corruption discourse develops in relation to the church in Western Europe (see Mark Knights, in this volume)

[13] Although there are in fact considerable divergences in Western systems in the exact understandings of what counts as legitimate personal interests, degrees of partisanship, and so on.

[14] See CSPL, *Standards Matter: a review of best practice in promoting good behaviour in public life* (London: The Stationary Office of HM Government, 2013); see also my *Public Ethics and Political Judgment* (London: CSPL, 2014).

[15] Or Transparency International's 'the abuse of entrusted authority for private gain', which allows a dramatically wider remit than public office.

[16] David Beetham, "Moving beyond a narrow definition of political corruption," in David Whyte, ed., *How Corrupt is Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 2015), 41.

[17] I set this out fully in "The Definition of Political Corruption," in Paul Heywood, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Political Corruption* (London: Routledge, 2014), 17-29.

[18] Almost…but perhaps not quite. We can imagine cases where the stronger condemnatory language of 'treason' might be used for cases that meet all these conditions.

[19] A line common in the 1640s, again in the 1790s, and not unknown today.

[20] Bo Rothstein and Aiysha Varraich, *Making Sense of Corruption* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 50.

[21] This is compatible with the definition by Emanuela Ceva in this collection: 'we have political corruption when public officials abuse their entrusted public power for the pursuit of a surreptitious agenda.'

[22] This also allows a degree of generality to the idea of politics, while recognising how important agent perspectives are in constructing an account of the exact way of filling out these detail of the account.

[23] Bo Rothstein, *The Quality of Government op cit*.

[24] Underkuffler, 69. See Mario Villareal-Diaz in this volume for a critique of character-based accounts of corruption.

[25] Underkuffler 243

[26] Zephyr Teachout, *Corruption in America* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), and see Richard L. McCormick, "Anti-Corruption in American History," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14 (2015): 441-454.

[27] See Susan Rose-Ackerman, *Corruption, and Government: Causes, Consequences and Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Many of the contributions to this literature pay lip-service to the difficulties of definition, only to produce a mass of data about 'corruption' to allow cross cultural explanations for levels of corruption. See for example, Alina Munui-Pippidi, *The Quest for Good Governance: How Societies Develop control of Corruption* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). James Ferguson's comment is pertinent here: 'In "development" discourse, the fact that there are no statistics available is no excuse for not presenting statistics, and even made-up numbers are better than none at all.' *The Anti-Politics Machine* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 41. On the counter-productive effects of corruption discourse see also Buckley in this volume.

[28] Critically assessed in Pekka Väyrynen, *The Lewd, the Rude, and the Nasty: A Study of Thick ethical Concepts in Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[29] Clifton, Jim, 2016, "Explaining Trump: Widespread Government Corruption" 6 January http://www.gallup.com/opinion/chairman/188000/explaining---trump---widespread---government---corruption.aspx?g_source=Opinion&g_medium=lead&g_campaign=tiles

[30] I. Krastev, *Shifting Obsessions: Three Essays on the Politics of Anti-Corruption* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004).

[31] Frank Anechiaro and James B. Jacobs, *The Pursuit of Absolute Integrity* (Chicago, Ill., Chicago University Press, 1996) and my "Delimiting Democratic Accountability," *Political Studies* 57 no. 1 (March 2009): 28-53; and "Access, Accountability and Authority: Corruption and the Democratic Process," *Crime, Law and Social Change,* 36, no. 4 (December 2001): 357-77.

[32] Williams, *In the Beginning…,* 13

[33] See, for example David Hine and Gillian Peele, *The Regulation of Standards in British Public Life* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), chapters 2-4.

[34] Nor, indeed, has there been much work exploring the implications of the variety of regime types and political form and their varying demands on incumbents.

[35] M. de Montaigne, *Essays* ed. M. A. Screech (London: Allen Lane, 1991), 'On Vanity', 1121-22.

[36] See their respective essays in Stuart Hampshire, *Public and Private Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

[37] Classically discussed by Max Weber, in *Politics as a Vocation* as an ethic of responsibility.

[38] One symptom of this is how much more we feel let down by them and how little we trust them. Surveys frequently report extremely low levels of trust in politicians – partly because the question used most often is whether people trust them to tell the truth; but also probably because we have high expectations and find feet of clay.

[39] See for example, G. Bingham Powell, Jr, *Elections s Instruments of Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 47.

[40] We can refer to a tradition of thinking about politics in which 'decisionist' elements are central, as in the work of Machiavelli, Weber, Schmitt, or Arendt. See my *Political Conduct* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 63-68.

[41] See, for example, Laurence Lessig, *Republic Lost… op cit.*

[42] The attempt to import Western values can be seen in the case of chapter 6 of the Kenyan constitution of 2010, which is full of the language of transparency and accountability but remains untranslated into any of the local languages, which have no equivalents for such terms.

[43] Shany Mor, *On Representation*, (D.Phil thesis, University of Oxford: 2014).

[44] Montesquieu L'Esprit des Lois, XIX(27). Montesquieu says 'historians' – I am suggesting journalists as a plausible modern translation.