Corruption as co-created rupture: A definitional etymological approach*

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abstract

We critically interrogate corruption via examinations of its meaning(s). Through examination of some of the definitions of elements of the word 'corruption' we engage in a textual reading whereby our typical conceptions of corruption are able to be put aside temporarily and are augmented if not replaced with alternative understandings. The notion of the co-rupture is surfaced through this basic language based technique and seems to be missing from the existing literature regarding corruption. Finally, we discuss some ideas of the co-rupture and in doing so open new possibilities for the theorizing of corruption as well as offer a glimpse of a braided methodological approach to a Deleuzian inspired take on metonyms.

Introduction

Corruption is a phenomenon which is treated as reasonably well understood and identifiable. However, taken for granted assumptions surface and are often uneasily dealt with when the need to ascertain how to pragmatically come to terms with corruption arises. This is evident, for example, in MBA classroom discussions about international business, cultural relativism and corruption practices. Once an absolutist understanding of corruption is challenged, unarticulated meanings become problematic in that they are missing the simple and instrumental nature of the taken for granted understandings.

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* Note: An early working paper version of this essay was presented in 2013 at the EGOS Conference in Montréal, Canada.

We think that it is useful to challenge absolutist understandings of corruption and expand beyond the meanings that the World Bank definition of corruption offers (i.e. 'the misuse of public office for private gain'). We intend to do this by means of a particular language based technique, namely an examination of corruption through the eyes of process and an exploration of meaning found around and in-between definitions. We think of corruption as a phenomenon that is in a constant state of becoming which Deleuze and Guattari might describe as an: '[...] act of thought operating at infinite [...] speed' (1994: 21). In Deleuze and Guattari's view, at any given point, definitions may become too rigid or even obsolete. Put another way, a definition is about what we already know about a concept, which likewise has already changed. This suggests that definitions never reveal everything about corruption, but that definitions always arrive somewhat too late. Consequently, to rigorously attend to a definition would not allow us to grasp any new appearances, forms or qualities the defined entity might have. Indeed, from this perspective, attempts to (re)define corruption would be a fundamental contradiction. So, this essay does not attempt to redefine corruption or even specifically critique existing definitions of corruption. Instead, this work seeks to use language-based techniques to examine the word 'corruption' itself. We loosely employ aspects of philology, which as a practice typically examines language in historical texts, and embark upon comparison and contrast with other meanings from other texts, languages and indeed contexts. Our approach seeks to explore and examine associated meanings which arise, thereby expanding our conceptual understanding of corruption.

One might expect our technique of examining related but underexplored meanings of corruption to be a breezy Foucaldian genealogical approach. Although we think that an etymological approach is a good starting point, it is not sufficient. Rather, we are engaged in a dance which involves a treatment of alternative definitions as being metonyms (naming something by other than its own name, but still retaining its meaning), despite Deleuze and Guattari's implied disdain for definitions of emergent phenomena. Metonyms are different than metaphors, in that a metaphor compares using an 'as if' comparative structure. For example, we could write of economic market forces functioning as if a well-oiled machine (metaphor) or we could alternatively refer to the 'invisible hand' at work (metonym). Typologies of these and other related rhetorical constructions (e.g. synecdoche) are various and contested, however the use of metaphors in organizational analysis is well entrenched, with much more recent moves in the case of metonyms. Our metonymical examination through derived and associated yet different meanings than the conventional, allows ones analytic imagination to soar, and has potential for new insights, incidentally breaking down absolutist understandings. We particularly agree with Holmgren Caicedo's contention that:

> Metonymic reading, as has been argued, can be of assistance in delaying interpretation. In effect, while metaphor unites at the level of the poem, discourse or situation, metonymy disintegrates. (2014: 246)

This research note lets the reader embark on a process of constitutive critical examination in which we attempt (in the spirit of the metonymy) to disintegrate and add to the discussion. That is, rather than attacking extant understandings and perspectives, the addition of other conceptualizations through simple lines of questioning is useful and thought provoking.

Reading the dictionary

As suggested above, to better understand what corruption is and how it works, one might initially use an etymological approach; that is, one can use a dictionary. In the authors' native languages of English and Dutch, the linguistic origins of the word corruption relate to being spoiled, expired, decayed or corruptible. Corruptible means that one allows ones behavior be dependent upon payment; a willingness to break rules or ethical codes for money. This can be considered a form of prostitution. A difference between corruption and prostitution might be that the former doesn't necessarily request taking your clothes of, whereas with the latter this might be helpful or even required. An example of this is portrayed in *Eyes wide shut*, the 1999 Stanley Kubrick film in which not only are the prostitutes masked but so also are their customers who are the wealthy powerful and elite of the community. In the film is the portrayal of a secret community or sect, which places itself outside the law and more or less outside of society. The film depicts the breaking of one ethical code and the replacement of it with another, complete with rules and a hierarchy. Beyond superficial analysis of the portrayed exchanges of sex for money, the film also offers the suggestion that this willingness to modify personal behavior, sanctioned or not by ethical codes, for personal gain directs society as much as it flaunts its condemnation of it. Thus corruption is about more than simply a misappropriation of resources from the public sphere for private gain. It is also about the willingness to break established codes of behavior and replace them with others, which may well have similarities to those that have been cast aside. This also brings up not only the need to study codes of conduct, but also codes of corruption, rather than seeing corruption as mere aberrations from the norm.

Another dictionary-based meaning of corruption is forgery. Forging can be understood as the illegal copying of words or things; a sort of unauthorized mimesis. Using a similar line of reasoning as that of Benjamin (1935) in his examination of copying of art through mechanical reproduction, a copy can be seen as a decay of the original. Consideration of this definitional element

highlights that for forgery to occur, there must be a recognizable original to be mimicked or copied. Take, for example, the very common and recognizable act of paying for government services. We would understand that, for instance, taxes, which are remitted to a government, are intended to pay for provided services. We can juxtapose this situation with the aforementioned World Bank definition in which resources intended for the public sphere are diverted to private interest for private gain. Corruption is therefore not a simple matter of, for example, an individual asking for money as in begging or mugging. Rather, a distinguishing feature of corruption is that there is a level of mimicry of the legitimate exchange of money with the understanding of public services to be rendered and the payment to be directed to the public institution. Put more simply, from the taxpayers' point of view the diversion aspect of corruption is largely invisible, but the act of paying for a specific service looks similar to legitimated form of exchange, for example the paying of licensing fees that allow one to operate an automobile. Such mimicry is reminiscent of Baudrillard's simulacrum (1979; 1993; 2005) whereby the copied outcomes of mimesis are so far removed from the original so as to gain their own ontological precedence through a process of reflection and perversion of the original.

Except that in the case of corruption we are able to see the legitimate original mode of exchange alongside the superficially similar corrupt practice; we can observe vestiges of the original, which has not yet disappeared as is the eventual case with simulacra. This is an important point; for corruption to exist, it seems that a simultaneous comparison between the corrupt and the corruptible, or clean, is necessary. To extend this thought further, one can thus consider that the evolution of a system in which corrupt practices are evident as forged reflections of acceptable practices has self-contained and self-referential aspects. As an example, the outsourcing and privatization of a government service involves exchanges whereby funds that are remitted to the public sphere (e.g. taxes) are effectively moved to the private sphere via contracting out of a service understood to be a function of the public sector. This example has elements in common with the World Bank definition of corruption, yet also seems barely one step removed from the normalized sense of legitimate public/private exchange. In this respect outsourcing government services is a hybridized variant of both corrupt and non-corrupt practice.

If corruption requires a legitimate comparison to both mimic and to be identified by, might the converse be true? That is, do legitimate forms of public exchange of resources derive legitimacy by distinguishing themselves from corrupt practices? Processes and outcomes are braided together in corruption, and disentangling the mechanisms at play in how corruption arises is challenging. Playing with ideas of forgery and mimicry allows one to ask questions that might not have

been initially apparent, such as: 'How does corruption allow for the rise of legitimate and sanctioned public/private exchange?' Inverting the taken for granted causal chain may reveal unseen linkages.

These readings of the implications of definitions are helpful in so far as they hint at some key processes involved in corruption: particular conditions of exchange which involve breaking of some sort of rule or norm and a hidden sort of mimesis or forgery which renders a tawdry copy of the original sanctioned process. These readings of definitions of corruption form an introduction to our metonymic approach. They allow for an expansion of the conceptual backdrop against which we view corruption. However, it is possible to further extend our method to somewhat more tenuous and conceptually adventurous terrains.

Between togetherness and the rupture

Having discussed the entanglement between corrupt and legitimate processes naturally leads to the consideration of the inflection point of change between something being sanctioned and accepted and the subsequent mimicry of such a process as being understood as corrupt. Likewise, in the spirit of inverting the presupposed relation, one also wonders at what particular point corruption could lead to legitimacy. To explore these ideas, we continue to extend our etymological approach to the word corruption through breaking the word itself apart.

Beyond definitions, the word corruption can be parsed out in another way through breaking it into parts. Rather than a focus on the Latin root 'corruptio', where the best turns into the worst, just as the sweetest wine makes for the sharpest vinegar, one can break the word corruption into interesting sub-units: co-rruption. 'Co' makes reference to accompaniment, a dialogic togetherness, and so it implies an existential requirement of the other; one part does not exist by itself. So co-rruption always involves at least two parties, participants, or phenomena implying mutual dependency between at least two actors and/or actants. Taken one step further, based upon earlier discussions, this furthermore involves an element of prohibition and a cloak of secrecy.

The other element of co-rruption is the 'ruption', or the rupture. A rupture is typically understood and experienced as dramatic and visible and yet our prior explorations about corruption suggest that corruption requires secrecy to persist. This dyadic relationship between concealing and revealing suggests a complex relationship between corruption and being in the open. If the corrupt and the legitimate require each other to exist, but such a relationship is hidden in plain view through a process akin to forgery, is it possible that corruption also needs to

be exposed to even exist? Put another way, perhaps one is able to discern corruption only when the separation between the corrupt practice and the legitimate one it mirrors becomes too great. On the other hand, the exposure of corruption can place unwanted attention upon it. Corruption seems to only be viable in the open when it is masked, visible perhaps but not without some sort of disguise. Perhaps this explains the aspect of mimesis examined earlier. An effective way to disguise corruption in the open is to have it closely mimic acceptable practices. Now the tension in our earlier example comparing privatization or outsourcing of government services and corruption becomes more apparent. Perhaps the adage that the best place to hide something is in plain view might be appropriate in the case of corruption.

So the rupture in corruption could be argued to be the tenuous and dangerous shifts between the unseen and the seen. If the mimicry is too close, corruption is so indistinguishable from legitimacy as to not exist, whereas if corruption to far removed from its legitimate original, it ceases to be disguised in plain view. The 'ruption' seems to be a continual state of becoming, with tensions between mimesis, disguise, hiding and existing only in juxtaposition with the other (be it corruption or legitimacy).

Recalling that the Latin root 'corruptio' is about the best becoming the worst and that ruptures rend asunder, one wonders about this disruption of the ongoing legitimate business that is conventionally understood to be ruptured through corruption. The situation is difficult to disentangle because it is not clear what the starting point is in the corrupt/legitimate relationship. Is it possible that there are accepted bureaucratic conditions of possibility that tend to lead to ruptures that manifest themselves as corruption? Normally corruption is seen as flourishing in various types of organizational deficits or absences (e.g. governance structures, laws, etc.). If corruption may be understood as a forgery of sorts, then the acts of both rupture and of mimesis suggest the possibility of unintended consequences. Simply put, corruption may require the existence of certain organizational features as much as the absence of others. Less than obvious intersectionalities of constitutive bureaucratic or structural conditions may be both dependent upon and constitutive of corruption. The rupture is contained in the tension between both.

This line of reasoning is not without some very real and pragmatic consequences, for it allows for the constant presence of corruption; not only corruption in a traditional way, but also corruption that becomes almost indistinguishable from non-corruption when framed as arising from legitimate practices. That is, one might consider corruption to be in a tension of being neither one state nor the other, but rather existing in a Deleuzian state of

becoming. This is the ongoing, near continual rupturing as a tension that allows for both the corrupt and the not corrupt to come into being. In this respect corruption becomes more or less a pharmakon (Derrida, 1981); it is a state that is constantly dying and resurrecting.

The dying/resurrection cycle is a representation of the process of corruption as hermeneutically bound in a system of legitimated bureaucracy and anti-corruption. The conditions of possibility for corruption are contained in legitimate practices and likewise the legitimate is contingent upon perceptions of a possibility of corruption. Such a perspective points to a relational approach to understanding not only how corruption arises but also how it allows for the retrenchment of process and systems based upon the reactional role of anti-corruption efforts. This offers an interesting tension between corruption, which is hidden or disguised, and governance, which is central, visible and understood to be integral to many organizational pursuits, including anti-corruption efforts.

Such ideas regarding corruption and its becoming, as situated in established practices, are examples of how an exploratory reading of definitions, taken as metonymically literal, can offer new conceptual insights into a phenomenon. It remains the realm of empirical work to explore how these conceptions may be evident or not.

Conclusions and works in progress

Notwithstanding the value in pursuing a broad philosophic approach to the topic of corruption, there are tangible possibilities for the research of corruption that arise from our metonymical approach. The ideas of corruption and anti-corruption being bound together in a concealing/revealing and dying/resurrecting process of becoming are areas that we are exploring through examinations of cases where we can tease out organizational changes that illuminate such dyadic relationships. Indeed, our exploration of the rupture as co-created was an unintended outcome of an empirical case study examining the role of masks and masking in an arts based music organization.

The main purpose of this essay has been to show how a comparatively simple approach of treating various definitions (both obvious and derived) as metonyms allows for the intellectual space to consider other possibilities and relationships. Naturally this is contentious when simultaneously invoking ideas of Deleuzian states of becoming, and yet such tension is revealing. Often, when a phenomenon presents with undesirable outcomes, we suggest reasonably linear underlying processes that contribute to it. This can result in conceptual, indeed

philosophical, blind spots which may not be revealed even through diligent empirical research. On occasion it may be fruitful to take a more naive approach and follow a line of inquiry which pushes the boundaries of the present understandings. This does not in any way devalue other lines of inquiry, but rather expands the field of possibilities and we hope becomes generative of interesting and indeed useful new perspectives.

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