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Conceptions of Corruption, Its Causes, and Its Cure

THIS IS A VERY BRISK WALK THROUGH A TOPIC THAT SHOULD BE taken slowly and treated in depth, but inevitably therefore at much greater length. Not the least of the reasons for engaging with it so briefly is that the institutions, if not always the practice, of Britain, the United States, and other liberal democracies today reflect efforts to rein in corruption that began in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but which drew on very ancient arguments about the individual and institutional failings that rot individual character and bring about the downfall of states by weakening their ability to resist foreign attack, or by turning accountable republican government into some form of tyranny. More recent arguments focus on the economic cost of corruption, leading some writers to distinguish quite sharply between political and economic corruption. It seems plausible to see them as two faces of one phenomenon: politicians enriching themselves by extracting favors from individuals and businesses, and the latter offering favors to politicians whose “friendship” they need. A greater focus on the economic costs seems apt for developing countries which cannot afford the damage to the welfare of their population, and a greater focus on the erosion of decent democratic governance more apt for rich countries such as Italy or the United States.

What follows is a series of vignettes, not a connected history. The vignettes reflect my interests more than the most urgent contemporary issues of corruption and transparency, which I take to be the

wholesale and pervasive corruption endemic in the former Soviet bloc, and the very slow progress toward cleaning up the politics and economics of resource-rich countries elsewhere. The episodes are these: republican virtue and its mockery at the hands of Bernard de Mandeville; Rousseau's denunciation of the duplicity and nontransparency of commercial society; Hume's defense of political corruption in maintaining the political "balance" in Britain; Bentham's recipe for the avoidance of corruption in his *Constitutional Code*; a short coda on sinecures; and some unkind observations about how little transparency does to inhibit American politicians from being bought in broad daylight. Needless to say, I do not think America is exceptional in this; much of the Italian public seems to accept political corruption with a resigned shrug, and the British were not startled to discover that politicians fiddled their expenses or that the Murdoch tabloids bribed police officers and hacked cellphones. Corruption in resource-rich countries with weak governance is a subject for others better informed. My theme is the variability of what has been described as corruption and the role of transparency in combating it.

I begin with two observations. The first and most obvious is that in order to decide what is and what is not corrupt behavior we need an antecedent view about what good behavior is like and how it comes to be corrupted. Discussions of corruption are invariably and rightly embedded in discussions of good governance. Since corruption frequently refers to the corruption of politicians by rich men seeking favors or the shaking down of rich men by agents of the state seeking to enrich themselves, any discussion of corruption requires a firm grip on what we think an uncorrupt political system looks like and what a "clean" economy looks like. "The opposite of contemporary Russia" is a good start but lacking in detail and sophistication. Universal corruption, of the sort endemic to communist Romania, where school teachers, doctors, police, and administrators all expected to be bribed by those who needed their assistance, is the paradigm of a "dirty" economy and political system.

The second is that questions about corruption are enmeshed in questions about individual character; the notion of an objectively

perfectly decent person engaging in objectively utterly corrupt behavior makes little sense. The notion of a person who is perfectly decent by their own lights engaging in behavior that an observer thinks corrupt is entirely intelligible; but we find it a stretch to think that they are *really* perfectly decent and yet “objectively” corrupt. At best, we shall think it is just about excusable, or a stain on their character that we can understand being overlooked in the circumstances in which they are operating. Sir Warren Hastings defended his conduct in India with the observation that when he considered the opportunities he had for enriching himself at the expense of the native population, he was astonished at his own moderation. American politicians in the Gilded Age might have said the same. I make this very simple point because anyone interested in institutional design will wish to think of ways in which decent persons not endowed with superhuman strength of character can be induced to behave in an uncorrupt fashion, and not be subjected to too much temptation to behave badly.

I have no general theory of good governance or of sturdy and incorruptible character, let alone how to render them universal. Robespierre’s *soubriquet* of the “sea-green incorruptible” reminds us that we may sometimes wish that people *would* be corrupted to the extent of not doing what they think to be their duty, either by simple good nature or by venality—prison officers who somehow lost well-connected political prisoners under the apartheid regime in South Africa come to mind. There are many platitudes about good governance that are too often honored in the breach and could be enforced more effectively by a combination of better institutional design and greater savagery in punishing breach of trust, but they are platitudes and need no belaboring. What may need more belaboring is how difficult good institutional design actually is, and how beset with vicious circles its implementation can be. It is easy to declare ourselves in favor of transparency and accountability, as I am, but it is very hard to create mechanisms of accountability that cannot be circumvented, subverted, or ignored. Anticorruption regulations also need to be supported by the local political culture if they are not to be

dead letters. Making demands of public opinion raises large issues of time and attention; human beings have short attention spans, limited powers of concentration, and a host of different matters calling for their attention. Walter Lippmann's *Phantom Public* is almost 90 years old but could have been written yesterday, and its title tells us all we need to know. No standard model of accountability is wholly capable of dealing with those constraints. Familiar devices meet some problems—random spot checks can ensure that nobody is skimming at the checkout—but with an outfit the size of Citibank or Walmart, such devices are hard to organize and easy to undermine. With enterprises such as arms manufacturers facing third world governments and a host of intermediaries expecting their payoffs, the job becomes almost impossible.

PRIVATE VICE AND PUBLIC GOOD

I begin two decades after the Glorious Revolution of 1688–1689. In the familiar self-congratulatory history of Britain, the eviction of James II and the installation of William III and Queen Mary led seamlessly to the prosperous eighteenth century in which Britain became a formidable military and naval power and acquired (and lost parts of) a substantial overseas empire. At the time, it did not strike the participants like that, especially in the first 30 or so years of the new regime. We talk of the “Whig theory of history” as implying a way of writing history as a story of progress, but the Whig view of history in the early years of the eighteenth century was not one but many. At the least, Whigs divided sharply between “court” and “country,” which is to say supporters of carrying on the king’s government (or queen’s government in the case of Queen Anne) with whatever compromises that entailed, and those who lamented the corruption of the new monarchy about as loudly as their predecessors had lamented the corruption of the government of Charles II and James II. Not for nothing were the tirades of Trenchard and Gordon called *Letters of Cato* and not without subsequent impact was their readership in the American colonies greater than that of John Locke’s *Two Treatises*.

Thumbnail sketches of political outlooks inevitably include as much error as truth, but the line of cleavage was in essence between those who were attracted to some version of a quasi-Roman republican system of government, and those who thought that a constitutional monarchy struck a balance between the excesses of democracy—the tumultuous government of Athens as depicted by its Roman critics, or the short-lived radical republic that succeeded the execution of Charles I—and the centralizing absolute monarchy of Louis XIV. Those who hankered after a republican form of government hankered after a society permeated by the republican virtue of which Cato the Younger had been the spokesman in the declining days of the Roman Republic. This was not a hankering after democracy, nor even after the polis of Aristotle's *Politics*; it was a hankering after a society built on a clear class structure with no more social mobility than the Roman *cursus honorum* had permitted to “new men.” To have a say in political affairs a man—this is the politics of the armed yeoman farmer—must have enough property to live on his own, and the most politically reliable form of property was land. Money was easy-come, easy-go, and a merchant or a banker might easily pick up and head for a different country; landed property was immobile, and its owners presumed to be so too.

Because the Roman republic had built its political system around its military needs, its census classifications had reflected a citizen's ability to provide for himself and equip himself with arms and armor for what was often a very extended period of service. Writers on English history and politics such as Francis Bacon and Sir James Harrington were obsessed with the capacity of sturdy farmers of the middle rank to take on and defeat the conscript armies of Catholic absolutist monarchs on the continent. This yielded a preference for the country against the town, for farming against trade, for an economics that aimed at a steady sufficiency but looked down on excess, and for militias over standing armies. This is the politics of citizen virtue rather than economic interest. “Virtue” was an elastic term, owing more to Machiavelli's concept of the *virtú* of a Roman citizen than to the Christian concept of virtue. Virtue was class and gender structured; a servant could hardly aspire to

virtue because of his personal dependency on the whims of a master, and slavery deprived a man of his virtue almost by definition; and it was a man's world. Virtue and freedom were not quite interdefined, but there was a presumption that only the virtuous, self-reliant citizens of the Roman myth could preserve their freedom, and virtue was always vulnerable to corruption. Money was the great solvent of virtue.

The world turned out differently. Institutionally, there were several cruxes, of which the creation of the Bank of England in 1694 was one, while the South Sea Bubble of 1719–1720 gave an opportunity to everyone who had their doubts about a regime fueled by debt to relaunch the familiar diatribe. The creation of the Bank of England sprang from the need to create a more effective army and navy; it was a predictable effect of installing William III that England was more deeply embroiled than ever in preventing Louis XIV from establishing a universal monarchy in Europe. That meant a much expanded role for the British Army. Since parliament was unwilling to pay for military expenditure on a “pay as you go” basis funded from taxation, borrowing was the answer. The Bank of England was a private undertaking—it was nationalized only in 1946—but its purpose was to advance loans to the government, for which purpose it sold bonds to investors. This created a class of persons whose wealth depended on governments continuing to borrow and reliably paying interest on the debt, and a class of stockholders who stood to benefit if the stock of the bank appreciated in value.

The most dramatic attempt to meet the government's increasing financial needs was the establishment of the South Seas Company in 1719. The subsequent bubble was not the first in European history, nor was it as disastrous as Law's near-contemporary Mississippi scheme in France or the Darien scheme that left Scotland all but bankrupt before the Act of Union of 1707. But it was a very good example of what was understood as “corruption” at the time, since it allowed speculators to make money out of thin air on the back of a (transparently worthless) government-backed trading monopoly and to make still more by puffing the company's stock. The beneficiaries were those who benefitted

from insider trading by being given early access to underpriced stock and, if they were lucky, the chance to sell out before its price collapsed. The rage the collapse caused “independent whigs” such as Trenchard and Gordon can be read in *Cato’s Letters*, where the scandal is treated as likely to cause the collapse of the British constitution unless the miscreants suffer the capital punishment that should have been dealt out to Sulla.

The other side of the new devices for borrowing money for the government was, of course, the expansion of government activity. Something like 20 percent of national income now passed through the hands of the government, as against 5 percent in the seventeenth century. The treasury was expanded to manage the flow of funds, and the various departments that handled military expenditure were supposed to have their accounts checked and double-checked by treasury officials. The basic rules of keeping an eye on those who had the opportunity to skim large amounts of money from food and clothing contracts were wholly familiar in the seventeenth century. But the career of Sir James Brydges, the future Duke of Chandos, Paymaster General from 1708–1713, and a byword for corruption, shows how possible it was to pocket very substantial sums of money from such sources—everything from tinkering with the exchange rate at which pounds were exchanged on the continent to handing over 90 percent of the pay intended for foreign troops, the balance split between local contractors and Brydges.

How far would “transparency” have helped? In this case, a great deal apparently, since Brydges went to all lengths to hide his operations while ensuring that he had plausible accounts and receipts to show to the treasury auditors. On the other hand, his ability to hide his tracks suggests familiar difficulties in ensuring that auditors dig as deeply as they need to. Why did they not do so? For reasons that then as now had to do with the political allegiances of the members of parliament who would have had to lean on the (as always too few and overworked) auditors to go after particular persons who might be suspected of skimming. A distinction worth drawing, however, is between Brydges’s

behavior and that of Robert Walpole, the first British prime minister from 1721–1742, and a man who was in fact jailed on a trumped up charge of corrupt dealing in forage contracts in 1712. Walpole made the most of the “perquisites of office,” which included a substantial salary as First Lord of the Treasury but also allowed him to spend £30,000 a year on his mistress and to use the Admiralty barge to import duty-free wine from France. “Perks” were not invisible and not illegal. *How* transparent the system was to anyone not involved is, of course, another question, and the later eighteenth century saw more or less continuous guerilla warfare between the ancestors of the twentieth century’s muckraking journalists and government ministers.

A world apparently infested by stock-jobbers and aristocrat embezzlers might be thought to be heading for ruin at a great pace, and such indeed was the rhetoric of the “country.” But Bernard de Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees* argued that it was “corruption,” understood in a great many ways but certainly including a taste for luxury, a willingness to cut corners in financial and commercial affairs, and a readiness to lie and cheat wherever necessary, that was essential to the prosperity of a modern commercial society. Were we the austere citizens of Cato’s imagining, the economy would collapse, as the final stanzas of the doggerel insist. Mandeville scandalized his readers, or at least presented them with a large target for public disapproval, but he has always been thought by later commentators to have had the better of the argument. In fact, of course, there were two layers to the argument rather than one. One, which commentators today pay less attention to, was a deeply skeptical account of the origins of morality in self-interest that seems to have distressed many of his readers. The other was the familiar idea that what we call “vice” is an essential component of keeping up demand, a good proto-Keynesian argument. As Lear observed, “give nature but what nature needs, man’s life’s as cheap as beast’s.”

ROUSSEAUIAN EXTREMES

Among those who would have none of it was Rousseau, whose two discourses, on the arts and sciences and on the origins of inequality,

denounced commercial society as essentially and intrinsically corrupt. In his second discourse Rousseau took the argument to a deeper level than anyone before by arguing that nobody had sufficiently considered the question of what man really was “by nature.” Given the two and a half millennia in which philosophers had appealed to nature and natural law to legitimate or criticize all manner of social institutions, especially property, slavery, and political authority but not sparing marriage and the regulation of more intimate areas of life, Rousseau’s claim that he was the first to investigate human nature properly was typically immodest. Nonetheless, it gave him considerable intellectual leverage. It allowed him to argue, as he did in *Émile*, that everything is good as it comes from the hand of God and corrupted by human tinkering. If, as he argued in the second discourse, true natural man must have resembled the orangutan rather than the Parisian gentleman or his valet, there must have been a long process of denaturing that turned the innocent animal in the Borneo forest into the corrupt inhabitants of our modern world. “Thinking man is a depraved animal.”

In one sense, Rousseau’s argument did not so much underpin the usual arguments about corruption as complicate them in several dimensions. The argument between country and court in early eighteenth-century Britain presupposed that at some points in human history both individuals and their politics had been uncorrupt; and Rousseau himself followed Machiavelli in thinking that the early Roman republic and Sparta had produced real citizens: patriotic, self-sacrificing, honest, public-spirited, and brave. But in the second discourse, corruption begins as soon as we become able to speak and reason. Once we can compare ourselves with others, we crave admiration and feel shame at our shortcomings; then we try to pretend to be what we are not, and suffer shame at the falsity of the appearances we present to others. Rousseau’s nice phrase “*l’homme est devenu hors de lui-même*” catches the kind of corruption involved. Animals are self-sufficient; we are not. We depend on the good opinion of others, whatever its basis. The solitary orangutan neither has opinions nor is vulnerable to them.

Things get worse with the invention of property and agriculture. At that point, the lazy self-sufficiency of the original natural man has vanished entirely; the fields are watered with the sweat of our brows, the propertied exploit the propertyless, and we have the ingredients for class warfare between rich and poor, which the invention of the state keeps only partly under control. This is the argument that led Engels to describe Rousseau as the begetter of historical materialism. That is right, but misleading because Rousseau was more interested in the psychological disasters of the civilizing process than in exploitation in the Marxian sense. And it brings in another aspect of the idea of transparency. Rousseau was notoriously hostile to the idea of the theatre, although he favored civic festivals of a classical kind and was himself the composer of an opera, *Le devin du village*. The theatre celebrated “seeming.” What he wanted was transparency; the character of the citizen should be visible to other citizens.

One therefore gets layers of “corruption” and layers of “transparency,” if such a thought is coherent. Our pure natural condition is “corrupted” by our becoming rational creatures; but it is better to be a successful rational creature—one that obeys the moral law—than to remain a stupid animal, even if Rousseau suggests that the chances of being a successful rational creature are remote. Rational creatures are capable of both deception and self-deception, and their miseries are real even if the wants whose frustration causes the misery are wants we would be better off without. So, we may be transparent to ourselves but deliberately nontransparent to others whom we set out to deceive; or we may be nontransparent to ourselves, saddled with inauthentic personalities, or we may be torn between the good we would but do not, and the evil we would not but do. When Rousseau wants to side with Machiavelli and the enthusiasts for Roman republicanism, the divide is between corrupt commercial societies like our own and tough republics like the ancient city states; where he wants to condemn society more generally, the contrast is more nearly between a lost golden age and the present. Corruption in the sense in which country Whigs used the term has been swallowed up in a wholesale condemnation of civilized society.

HUME'S DEFENSE OF BALANCE

Dr. Johnson accused Rousseau of “prating in favor of savages,” but once Rousseau’s obsession with nontransparency had been put into circulation it could not easily be got out of the modern mind. It could at least be bypassed, however, and one way of doing that is exemplified by Hume’s writings on British politics. Hume called himself a Tory, but is more plausibly called what Duncan Forbes called him: a “skeptical Whig.” Whig historiography, with its talk of social contracts and the like, was just silly, but the Whig values of toleration, politeness, and the other virtues of a society built on commerce and all that went with it were values he shared. Hume was nevertheless an anxious political thinker. He was, after all, a Scot, and all too aware that in 1715 and 1745, there had been serious attempts made to reinstate the Stuart monarchy. In theory, no doubt, the Stuart line was the legitimate line and the Hanoverian interlopers were just that. In practice, anyone who set about disturbing a settlement that was working well enough was guilty of an intention to sheathe his sword in the bowels of his neighbors and should be stopped.

But like many critics of corruption, Hume subscribed to the view that the great virtue of the British political system was its “balance.” Quite what the balance consisted in was debatable, but the notion that the trio of king, lords, and commons amounted to a mixed constitution in which the independent powers of each part of the trio preserved liberty as it had done in Rome was widespread. This was not the separation of powers that the American Constitution duly made canonical and that owed its origins to a combination of Locke and Montesquieu; the idea that the powers of government could be divided into legislative, executive, and judicial was not born in a moment and was anyway not uppermost in Hume’s mind. Locke’s division was legislative, executive, and federative, while Montesquieu thought of judicial authority as almost nothing. Even in its American incarnation, the legislative power was dominant as it is in Locke, where tyranny is defined as removing the legislative from where the people had placed it. The version on which Hume based his analysis was the practical politician’s version. In

his essay “Whether the British Government Inclines More to Absolute Monarchy or a Republic,” Hume saw politics as something like a tug of war between those who would have concentrated more power in the hands of the king and his ministers and those who would have given more to parliament, or more especially to the commons.

The role of corruption in holding the system together was not complicated. In principle, the commons could have determined the outcome of events by flexing their legislative muscles. If they refused supply, they could starve the executive into doing whatever they chose. If they consistently voted no confidence in the king’s ministers, government would be impossible. It was not. Governments generated innumerable jobs for members of parliament, their friends and allies; rotten boroughs, with minuscule electorates, would return members favorable to the ministry. Well-paid bishops would vote with the king’s friends in the House of Lords; exceedingly well-paid judges would prevent corrupt officials from going to jail. What became known as “Old Corruption” was a network of sinecures and obscure jobs that paid extraordinary salaries. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, George III sustained a succession of Tory ministries for almost all of his long reign, not least by creating large numbers of peers; the House of Lords grew from around 80 members to 400.

Hume did not offer a systematic defense of corruption but provided the ingredients for such a defense by insisting on the delicacy of the British balance. His own preference, as he said, was that if Britain tipped over in one direction or the other, he wished it to be in the direction of absolute monarchy even though it might be accompanied by the friar, the gibbet, and the stake. Still, the point was not to lose one’s balance, and for that purpose, what critics called corruption was useful enough to be taken less than wholly seriously. What put a stop to corruption on the scale of the late eighteenth century is something that historians have long debated, and I have nothing to add to the—to me—highly persuasive work of W. D. Rubinstein. Essentially, it was the result of a series of so-called economical reforms that amounted to the elimination of sinecure positions and the reduc-

tion of the absurd salaries of others. In the matter of transparency, one crucial contribution was made by Jeremy Bentham, who set about the question in his *Constitutional Code*. Bentham's analysis of corruption in chapter X is characteristically detailed—that is, to the point of absurdity; but he makes the excellent point that a constitutional monarchy of the British variety of the day is almost necessarily committed to a regime of corruption. The king cannot get his own way by brute force, since a constitutional monarch has to govern with the cooperation of parliament and the judiciary; but, says Bentham, force needs to be consciously deployed whereas he can corrupt whomever needs it in his sleep. Oddly, Bentham is here skeptical about parliament's role in checking corruption; if the ministry appoints a commission of inquiry it can make sure it is toothless, and since the “outs” want to become “ins” and reap the benefits of corruption in their turn, they will not cause trouble, either. The remedy is democracy. Only by ensuring that those who have a sinister interest opposed to the general interest can be thrown out by the electorate can we ensure the coincidence of interests that will eliminate corruption. Elsewhere, he is less skeptical of the “inquisitorial” system, while continuing to insist that any committee that is not an inquisition is a screen.

SINECURES

Before ending with some skeptical remarks about the ineffectiveness of transparency, I divert briefly to the subject of sinecures. The example best known to me is, of course, the fellowships of Oxford colleges over several centuries; they were not unique, since there were many government jobs that had no duties attached and religious positions where the minimal duties could be performed by a hard-up curate while the notional occupant of the position got the income. Bentham and others pointed out the absurdly high incomes attached to sinecure legal offices. Initially fellowships provided a small income for a fairly short period, on the assumption that the occupant would go on to do something useful in the service of church and state. Even then, pious founders usually provided that the relatives of the founder should have

preference in election, paving the way to centuries of the abuse of “Founder’s Kin” preferences. The similarity to “legacy” admissions to university today is hard to overlook. Subsequently, fellowships came to be a way in which a person of modest attainments could live in tolerable comfort without having to earn a living. The effects on the intellectual life of the ancient universities hardly needs explanation. As the dissenters observed in the eighteenth century, stagnation was the order of the day at Oxford and Cambridge while the streams of learning ran pure and free in the dissenting academies.

Although the incomes were not substantial, they were more than adequate since they came with board and lodging attached. For a gentry family with modest resources, the attraction was obvious. Moreover, many colleges possessed the “presentation” to parishes whose incumbents had substantial incomes by the standards of the day. Parking a younger son in a good living is the stuff both of Jane Austen novels and the history of higher education. The thought that it was in any sense “corrupt” arises only late in the day, at the point where the great Victorian tidying up of British institutions properly gets under way. The “corruption” was the diversion of funds from the purposes for which their endowments had been given; almshouses endowed for the infirm elderly of good character provided an income and a house for a warden and his family, and often for none of the intended beneficiaries; schools had few or no pupils but still paid a head teacher and gave him a house. The alternative complaint was that the corruption was the diversion of funds from the purposes for which governments should look tenderly upon endowments in the first place. Pious founders might have established colleges to ensure prayers were said for their souls, but 250 years after the Reformation, the endowments should serve the purposes of education and research. Transparency was not the issue, since there was nothing secret about what went on; accountability was an issue—once parliament flexed its muscles, the argument was over and it was clear that “the public” via parliament had a right to say how the money was spent. It was a shift in the moral climate that swept away what came to be seen as ancient abuses.

One of the more notorious institutions attached to the old system of corruption had been the East India Company (EIC). Eighteenth-century critics feared that much as in the Roman republic, whose institutions had been undermined by the wealth extracted from the conquered eastern Mediterranean, the British parliament would lose its character as “nabobs” purchased seats with the ill-gotten gains they had acquired in India. Burke’s long and eventually fruitless campaign against Warren Hastings, the former governor of Bengal, was predicated on just that fear, and perhaps on a more dispassionate hatred of the cruelty of the rapacity of the EIC. The company’s charter was revised in the early nineteenth century to turn it overtly into what it was in fact: an agency of the British government, governing India, not enriching the merchants who traded under its aegis. But it took the Indian Mutiny of 1857 to persuade the British government that a contracted-out form of government did not really suit the management of an empire of 150 million inhabitants, less because it was vulnerable to corruption than because it was clumsy.

On the view advanced here, transparency is certainly needed to suppress corruption; accountability is impossible if those who stand in temptation’s way don’t have to produce accurate and complete accounts, don’t run the risk of facing public hearings on the accuracy of their accounts, aren’t properly audited, and so on. Up to the point of simple information overload, making all this public is a useful procedure. It can be a pain in the neck if you are running something like a small college and have to spend a lot of your time explaining where the college’s income goes and where it comes from in the first place, but it is income entrusted to you for a purpose, and those who directly or indirectly contribute to it have a right to know that it’s spent on what it ought to be spent on. But transparency takes one only so far.

Consider the contemporary American political system. Although there are areas of the funding of political campaigns where more transparency would help—preventing donors of large sums of money from hiding behind a veil of anonymity—there is no great difficulty in discovering who has funded particular members of Congress. Nor is there any

great difficulty in connecting that funding to the voting record of the members of Congress, either. The difficulty is that there is no consensus on what corruption is. A substantial part of the population thinks it is the job of a member of Congress to lobby the government on behalf of the particular districts and economic interests to which they have given their allegiance. One person will think that receiving \$300,000 from the makers of medical devices and then doing one's damndest to get the Affordable Care Act's tax on such devices repealed is corrupt—essentially, selling one's vote. Another may think that since the device maker operates in the district you represent, your duty is to fight for the firm and its employees. To put it another way, flagrant, gold-plated, universally condemned corruption is something that greater transparency would root out. Contestable corruption is another matter; clean-up campaigns work only when there is a moral consensus behind them, and it is an understatement to say that we do not live in an age of moral consensus.

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