

MORAL IGNORANCE AND CORRUPTION

Oriare Nyarwath, University of Nairobi, Kenya

Corruption is an undeniable and pervasive human phenomenon. It exists in various forms and degrees in all societies at every level.¹ Many factors influence and determine the development of corruption in any given society. These include certain cultural beliefs and attitudes, political systems, economic conditions and legal institutions, among others. Since corruption is, at least partly, a function of human needs and desires, as these needs and desires change so too will the forms and magnitude of corruption. As a practice it poses a serious challenge to any advance in the quality of life. This is particularly true in Africa. Which misery in Africa, we might ask, is not compounded if not caused by corruption?

Forms of corruption may be hard to exhaust precisely because it is, partly, a function of human needs. As human needs and their possible fulfilment adjust, corruption is likely to adjust both in forms and magnitude. However, corruption as a practice poses a serious challenge to human ability for self-improvement. It is undeniable that humanity has made some tremendous improvement in many various spheres, but corruption also claims its own toll particularly in Africa where it is a major factor to the poor human condition. Which misery in Africa is not explainable, at least, on account of corruption!

The fact of corruption raises, at least, one fundamental question. How come the fight against corruption is not as spirited and ingenious as its perpetration? Herein lies the dilemma. I believe that an attempt to answer this question is in the right

direction in the fight against corruption. However, to attempt to answer the question demands that I first clarify what I understand by the concept.

Corruption

Corruption can simply be defined as moral depravity or badness². It must fundamentally be seen as a moral issue. This depravity emanates, at least, from moral ignorance or confusion. Corruption must be seen fundamentally as a moral issue because it affects human welfare in general, and in particular, negatively. And an act is moral or immoral when it affects human well-being. An act which augments human well-being is morally right while that which worsens human well-being is morally wrong.

Corruption is morally wrong since it affects the general human well-being negatively. In this case I concur with Kwame Gyekye. Kwame Gyekye has made an observation in reference to political corruption, but which is applicable to corruption in general; “that political corruption, despite its name, is essentially or fundamentally a moral problem...”³ Yes, as a kind of corruption, political corruption negatively affects human interests and welfare by depriving the public or, at least, some members of the public, their right to benefit from the public resources. Therefore, it worsens their condition.

Forms of Corruption

Corruption manifests itself in numerous various ways. I would not do justice if I

would claim that I can enumerate all of them here. But I would only mention some of them just to show its pervasiveness. These include favouritism which takes the form of either tribalism or nepotism—undue favouring of a person mainly on the basis of being either a member of one's tribe or a friend, or a relative⁴; giving or demanding of a bribe by a judge, police, custom's official; undue threat of arrest, sacking, demotion, deportation, closing of one's business, non-renewal of one's business or work permit; disappearance of documents from police files or court registries; grabbing of public lands, houses, cars; environmental degradation through air and water pollution, irresponsible garbage dumping, irresponsible clearing of forest, trees; construction of substandard roads, buildings; unjustifiable tuition fees in schools; reckless driving on road; crimes and other forms of violence; undue absenteeism from work or poor performance of duty; and many others.⁵ I can therefore see that corruption is much more than the often talked about political corruption which is simply "the illegal, unethical, and unauthorized exploitation of one's political or official position for personal gain or advantage."⁶ Since I cannot exhaust all the manifestations of corruption, I would like to say as a guiding principle against corruption that any human conduct devoid of the feelings of empathy and sympathy is most likely to engender corruption.

Effects of corruption

Since the manifestations of corruption are manifold and inexhaustible, so are its effects. However, these effects, whatever they may be, are essentially putrid. They are constraints to the improvement of human conditions. And here I agree with Gyekye's observation when he says that political corruption, as a form of

corruption, is a serious major hindrance to development in Africa:

It probably constitutes the most serious source of financial hemorrhage suffered by developing nations in Africa, constantly gnawing at their development efforts; it is undoubtedly the most common cause of the military overthrow of civilian governments in Africa, with the consequent disruption of the democratic process: thus it is the greatest and most serious disease of governments in Africa.⁷

Similar observations have been made by several other authors.⁸ However, it is not only political disruptions that result from corruption, but a general decline in the efficient provision of social services to which the citizens have a right. The wrong people are appointed to important positions, resources are misused, and living conditions worsen. As Mushanga puts it:

A corrupt society is a society in chaos. Nothing gets done, delays become chronic, money becomes the guiding light in the chaotic situation, human life loses its value, moral standards become unnecessary obstacles which in any case [can] easily be overcome, religious institutions become meaningless and in all this mess, it is the common man, the man in the street that suffers, not the social parasite.⁹

But I would disagree with Mushanga in some aspects. It is not true that only the common man suffers the effect of corruption. All people suffer the effects such as insecurity, poor roads, degraded environment, among others but in varying degrees. However, I strongly agree with him that human life becomes devalued.

I can therefore see how serious and harmful corruption is. And to emphasize its profoundness, I beg the liberty to ask the following rhetorical questions. How many lives have to be lost to corruption as a result of poor education, poor infrastructure, poor medical facilities, poor security, poor drivers on our roads, senseless wars and rivalries? How many governments have to be overthrown as a result of corruption? What justice can be expected when so many crimes go undetected or condoned by the police or law enforcement agents due to corruption?

Corruption undermines the principles and values that hold human beings and nations together. As a result, it creates conflicts among human beings and nations. It therefore undermines the general human well-being in general. Okullu aptly expresses this point when he states; “corruption subverts the principles and values which are the fibre of any society”.¹⁰

In the light of the foregoing, I believe I would not be so far from the truth by claiming that corruption is a major, if not the major, cause of ignorance, poverty, disease and death in Africa.

Causes of Corruption

An effective fight against corruption requires a clear and firm understanding of the factors that cause and conduce to it. In other words, I need to ask and attempt to answer the question: what makes a person corrupt?

Some factors have been given¹¹ as causal explanation to corruption. One of the common factors that gets commonly mentioned is poor economic condition which depresses one’s financial situation, hence may force one to look for supplementary means by corruption.

Another factor often mentioned is an inadequate legal and institutional system which would make one feel that one can engage in corruption with impunity. Extended family system is also seen as engendering corruption by exerting financial pressure to fulfill both one’s immediate and extended responsibilities which include some jobs for some kinsmen. This can easily lead one into tribalism or nepotism.

A political system that does not emphasize responsibility and accountability may also engender corruption. Quite a number of public officials would be tempted not to see their offices as positions of responsibilities and service, but as positions for individual enrichment – for getting as rich as possible as quickly as possible.

These social, economic, political and legal factors among others, have been advanced as causal explanations for corruption. However, my argument is that one would be hard put to accept these factors as real causes of corruption. Undoubtedly, they *induce* corruption, but they *do not cause it*. And unless the real cause(s) of corruption is addressed, any improvement on the political, social, economic and legal situations would not eradicate or greatly reduce corruption. Otherwise the claim that corruption is a universal human phenomenon is disputable. This is so, because even those societies or countries with apparent best political, social, economic and legal conditions are not without corruption. On this, Gyekye asserts:

The political system or process may be improved, its weaknesses removed; economic situations may improve and the salaries of public officials may be increased; legal institutions may be improved, the powers and activities

of law enforcement officers augmented and punishment for convicts of politically corrupt acts increased: yet none of these attempts at dealing with the problem of political corruption will eradicate it or considerably minimize it. That this is so is a matter of common knowledge.¹²

I hasten to add that this observation by Gyekye not only applies to political corruption, but to corruption in general. However, this argument should not be seen to exclude social forces from the perpetuation of corruption. Hountondji has beautifully explained how some social systems can perpetuate corruption.¹³ And in this I am in agreement with him. But a social force or system is here seen as a function of the human mind. It is created and sustained by human beings. Therefore, if a system perpetuates corruption and hence a bottleneck in the fight against corruption, then it can be changed only by those with moral knowledge, insight and power. As I have explained in the definition, corruption is basically a moral problem whose solution must be sought within the moral sphere. According to Gyekye, failure to recognize that corruption is fundamentally a moral problem explains why attempts to eradicate or minimize it have not made remarkable progress. There has been almost no emphasis on the moral approach to the problem.¹⁴

Morality and corruption

How do I therefore explain corruption in terms of morality? I have stated that corruption is a depravity, and it is this depravity which perverts one's moral vision or conduct. Therefore a corrupt person is "incapable of making the appropriate or desirable moral choice as may be demanded by a certain situation in favour of the common well-being".¹⁵

But the fundamental question that must still be asked is: What causes this depravity? This seems to be a very difficult question, yet I believe that an attempt to answer it is a vital step towards the fight against corruption.

Fortunately for us Gyekye has made a valuable attempt at it. To him, corruption is caused by the lack of commitment to one's moral beliefs which in turn is due to the weak moral will.¹⁶ The will cannot bring the behaviour to bear on the moral belief. So there are two points to note here. First, there are the moral beliefs, principles and values. Second, there is the moral commitment.¹⁷ The will is "the inner motive force, crucially relevant in the attempt to translate our moral intention and decision into action".¹⁸

However, Gyekye seems not to have adequately addressed the issue of the weakening of the will. What would therefore weaken one's will? I tend to suspect that this inadequacy in accounting for the weakening of the will is a result of Gyekye's apparent assumption that corruption is a problem of moral commitment but not of moral belief. Moral belief is used here in the wider sense to include moral principles and values.¹⁹ However, I want to argue the reverse. Corruption is neither essentially nor mainly a problem of moral belief. It is exclusively a problem of moral ignorance, in this case. Moral ignorance is used here simply to mean lack of knowledge as to what objectively constitutes a moral right or wrong. This does not mean that moral commitment does not bear on it, but not as much as moral belief. I am even being tempted, though hesitantly, to claim that it is exclusively a problem of moral belief – in this case, ignorance of the right moral beliefs, principles, and values. I therefore tend to agree with the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates (Plato) that whoever

knows what is good cannot do what is bad.²⁰ Plato believed that the knowledge of the good can be acquired through training (education). It was after the training that one can develop the intellectual capacity to know and understand the good. The training was intended to make a person acquire virtuous habits of behaviour. These habits could be acquired either through the development of mental power to know and comprehend the moral good or through imitation of and guidance by those who have developed the capacity to know and comprehend, and hence have acquired the virtuous habits.²¹

It was never lost to Plato that there are,

1. those who fail to develop their mental power to know and understand the good, and
2. those who develop the mental power to know and understand the good. In regard to this observation I am in agreement with Plato though there are some aspects of Platonic ethics over which I would disagree. But that is a different matter.

According to Plato, the first group of people can easily err in their judgement of the moral good and that is why it is the second group who should be the guardians (leaders). To some extent I also agree with Plato in this regard. Some people frequently mistake what seems to be exclusively in their self-interest for the moral good and so they act in line with that belief. Most of these acts seem to promise short-term benefits. But in the long-run these egoistic acts cause greater harm to the general well-being. And this is one of the problems with ethical egoism.

Acts which ignore or undermine the general well-being in essence undermine the very foundation of human society. A human society is founded on rules, moral rules inclusive, which are presumed

promotive of the general well-being not only of its own members but also of members of any other society to which it relates.

As for now, it seems to me that every person would prefer to live in society if we were to have security and harmonious living, and avoid the Hobbesian state of nature in which every person would be pursuing egoistic interests. In such a state one's interests would inevitably be in conflict with the interests of others, hence one would be at war with everybody. In such a condition of existence human life would be fierce, short-lived, poor, nasty and deprived of all that pleasure and beauty of life, which peace and society are likely to accord one.²²

Therefore, it is in everybody's interest and for the good of everybody that society exists and conditions promotive of peace prevail. But this can only happen when people obey moral rules whose purposes are "the survival of the society, the alleviation of suffering, human flourishing and the just resolution of conflicts of interests."²³

But for one to know and understand the moral implications of an act, together with their possible ramifications one would need some understanding of the nature of morality and moral choices. This would necessarily require some training and contemplation. But since situations that are likely to induce corrupt acts require weaving through the intricacies of the available moral alternatives in order to make a better moral choice, I do not expect a person without moral training or who has not spent some reasonable time contemplating the nature of moral conflicts and choices to make the right choices.

Besides, the view that corruption is essentially due to moral ignorance is also reinforced by some other considerations.

First, it appears to me a contradiction that one can wittingly do what one sincerely believes is wrong. And this is what some people do claim.²⁴ A wrong act is undesirable, why would one desire it! A right act is desirable, why would one not desire it!

I suspect that some people are led into this apparent contradiction by a confusion between what one is *told* to be morally right on the one hand, and what one *believes* to be right on the other hand. It seems to me that most people do not know what constitutes moral rightness or wrongness. Though they may have been told or heard or read now and again what others think and believe to be morally right or wrong, they may not actually share in those beliefs. Quite a number of people encounter conflicts between what they believe to be morally wrong or right, and what they know others believe to be morally wrong or right.

A second consideration for my claim is the fact that most people come to know about morality through unreflective moralization. They are simply told that it is right or wrong to do such-and-such a thing, but they are hardly given reasons for such claims. Such people often find themselves in dilemma of not believing some of the things they are told and yet not knowing the contrary. Such people are likely to have difficulties in making right moral decisions or solving real moral conflicts. Let us take for instance a case where one has been taught through socialization that one should be loyal to one's family or culture and so one should promote the well-being of one's family or ethnic group. If such a person finds himself/herself in a position of responsibility where he/she can influence employment to certain jobs, and one is faced with a choice between a kinsman with lower qualification or no qualification at all and somebody else who has met the

qualification to the job, then such a person is likely to influence the employment of the kinsman. And such a person may have no qualms about such an act. This is tribalism. And this kind of conduct is common in Africa. Since it is a prejudicial discrimination, it is morally wrong.

A third consideration is my belief that most people are taught wrong or inadequate morality. What I have in mind is teaching people non-objective morality. That can be in the form of either cultural (ethnic) or religious morality. Most of the recipients of wrong or inadequate morality tend to be discriminative which engenders tribalism, nepotism, regionalism, religionism, and egoism, in the very unenlightened sense.

Given the foregoing considerations, and in the light of our time, I can then infer that quite a number of people are never taught good morality at all. Imagine how many people who are not in our position! Those who never had the advantage of going to school in the first place, but if they did, never studied philosophy in the second place, and even to have studied ethics in the third place! I tend to think that these people find it very hard to make good moral decisions, or solve actual moral conflicts.

For example, how many of such would clearly understand why tribalism or nepotism or environmental degradation is immoral, and hence corrupt? Given, perhaps, their ethnic chauvinism, which may have been created by their cultural morality, tribalism or nepotism, is likely to appear to them the right thing to practise. I can therefore see how corruption is caused by moral ignorance, which of course is used here to include moral confusion, that is, not knowing what is morally right or wrong in a given situation.

Therefore, in conclusion I would like to suggest that the fight against corruption

must be fought essentially on the moral plane. This does not rule out other possible dimensions to the fight. But for the fight to be at least effective, it must involve the re-evaluation of our moral beliefs and practices. We should avoid, as much as possible, moral relativism and absolutism, which are difficult, if not impossible, to use in resolving moral conflicts or dilemmas.

Moral education, particularly the study of ethics should be made mandatory in our institutions of learning. Commitment to moral beliefs, principles or values, should be invigorated by, at least, some forms of sanctions against moral aberrations. We have to change our attitudes and fight the apparently increasing tendency towards implicit or explicit adoration of corruption. I believe that a person with moral knowledge and understanding is more likely to make the right moral choice.

Notes and References

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2. See Okullu, Henry., (1974) *Church and Politics in East Africa*, Nairobi: Uzima Press Limited, pp 34.
3. See Gyekye., *Op. Cit.*, pp 193
4. See Okullu., *Op. Cit.*, pp 46-47.
5. See *Ibid.* pp 35-39, 46-51.
6. Gyekye., *Op. Cit.*, pp 193
7. *Ibid.* pp 192
8. See Otenyo., *Op. Cit.*, pp 53. Chinua Achebe, (1983) *The Trouble With Nigeria*, Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya Ltd., pp 39
9. Tibamanya mwene Mushanga, (1976) *Crime and Deviance* Kampala, Nairobi and Dar-es Salaam: East Africa Literature Bureau, pp 130.
10. Okullu., *Op. cit.*, pp 38.
11. See Gyekye., *Op. cit.*, pp 194-197. Otenyo, *Op. cit.*, pp 60-62.
12. Gyekye., *Op. cit.*, pp 203.
13. See Hountondji, Paulin J. (1992) *Daily Life in Black Africa: Elements for a Critique* in Mudimbe V. Y. ed. *The Surreptitious Speech*, Chicago & London: The Chicago University Press, pp 344-364.
14. See Gyekye., *Op. Cit.*, pp 201, 204.
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16. *Ibid.*, pp 210.
17. *Ibid.*, pp 209.
18. *Ibid.*, pp 211.
19. *Ibid.*, pp 210-212.
20. See Russell, Bertrand., (1964) *History of Western Philosophy*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., pp 109.
21. See Popkin, Richard H. and Stroll, Avrum., (1969) *Philosophy Made Simple*, London: Allen W. H., pp 2-3.
22. See Bierman A. K., (1980) *Life and Morals*, New York et al: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., pp 111.
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24. See Gyekye. *Op. Cit.*, pp 210-212