**Civic virtue, corrupting social realities, and cynicism**

*Civic Virtues and Civic Vices, Bristol 16/7/22*

**Preliminaries.**

I suggest that a kind of *structural cynicism* is a civic virtue if applied to social institutions one recognises to be *corrupting*.

No strict definition of civic virtue (cf. Dagger, Edyvane, Snow):

1. certain stable dispositions of thought, action, and feeling
2. expressed through paradigmatically civic practices and activities
3. enabling sustainable forms of effective civic cooperation
4. animated and organised by some conception of the public good

Considerable variety/disagreement – likewise about political/civic vices (cf. Button).

**Corruption.**

Main claim: certain social institutions and practices are *corrupting* – insofar as our engagement with them is an active source of potential *moral damage* (cf. Tessman).

Think of corruption as an active potentiality to cause moral damage – cf. rhetoric of poison, toxicity, pollution (cf. Tyrrell).

Concept of corruption – once central to moral and political philosophy (Philp) – has three functions:

1. aetiology of vices
2. amelioration of vices
3. analyses of our moral and epistemic agency as socially-situated agents

In earlier work I developed a *character-focused account of corruption* (compare: Philp):

A social environment is corrupting when its internal conditions tend to facilitate

1. the erosion or extirpation of individual-level excellences (eg virtues)
2. the development and exercise of individual-level failings (eg vices)

A corrupting social environment therefore tends to inflict *moral damage* onto its members (cf. Lisa Tessman). *Corruption* names *damage to moral character*.

Comments:

1. corruption should be understood as a dynamic process (counter-corrupting resistance).
2. individuals have different degrees of susceptibility to corrupting forces, pressures, etc.
3. corruptors can be very diverse in kinds – norms, practices, incentives, goals, ‘cultures’.
4. corruptors can be intentional or unintentional features of social environments.
5. criticism should generally be directed at corrupting conditions, not corrupted persons.

**Corrupting conditions.**

My interest is in the ways that the arrangements and operations of social institutions can corrupt the moral characters of those engaged in, or embedded with, them. This character-focused sort of corruption seems largely absent from political theory.

eg Rose-Ackerman and Palifka ask ‘how the basic structure of the public and private sectors produces or suppresses corruption’ but do not consider damaging the characters of individuals.

Exception: Brennan and Jaworski Pt3 (who *reject* the claim that the market is corrupting) emphasise (a) a need for empirical support for corruption claims and (b) a need to distinguish claims that a structure (i) *causes* individuals to have a worse character or (ii) *reveals* individuals base character (this distinction is very relevant to cynicism).

Corruptors could *cause* or *reveal* failings of character – consider some examples:

1. absence of exemplars of virtue
2. derogation of exemplars of virtue
3. presence of exemplars of vice
4. valorisation of exemplars of vice
5. rebranding of vices-as-virtues (sincere or insincere)
6. rebranding of virtues-as-vices
7. increasing the exercise costs of virtue
8. decreasing the scope for the exercise of virtue
9. increasing the rewards of vice.
10. decreasing the penalties for vice.

Some examples of corrupting realities in civic life:

1. *Cultures of secrecy* – Blair Premiership came to evince ‘combination of a genuine need for confidentiality, a siege mentality, and habitual caution’, creating a culture of secrecy ‘tended to reinforce the walls of a closed world impervious both to diverse options and the consequences of its own actions’ (cf. Rhoades).

Such cultures enable one to conceal the considerations, evidence, and reasoning that inform political decisions – and insulate one from critical debate and rival perspectives.

Consequence: entrenchment of conditions that fostered individual- and group-level closedmindedness and dogmatism.

- such vices can be fuelled by (i) structural exclusion of alternative epistemic options and (ii) concealment from public of which options one *has* (Battaly).

1. *Performative superficiality* – increasingly reliance on ‘spin’ and artful manipulation of political information to present civic administrations in a positive light – creating ethos of performative superficiality which privileges (i) *looking good* over (ii) *doing good*.

- extreme example: epistemic insouciance and ‘post-truth’ (Cassam).

Consequences: (i) diminished appreciation for procedural virtues and (ii) increased employment of the vices of manipulation (cf. Barnet and Gaber).

- arrogant people will also *resist* demands to be procedurally correct (Tanesini)

**Structural cynicism.**

Imagine a person with (a) desires to be civically engaged, but (b) perceives the social world as systematically corrupting, and (c) recognises that becoming civically engaged will require them to cultivate certain new virtues – virtues needed to cope with a corrupting world.

Candidate: a specific kind of *cynicism* (*contra* critics who see cynicism as *anti-political*).

Characteristics of cynicism: (a) the professed motivations are different from the operative ones and (b) the operative ones, if identified, are likely, or are likely to be, morally inferior (and not necessarily invidious, just lesser). Conjunction of (a) and (b) motivates suspicion/distrust/etc.

Compare this with Samantha Vice’s account:

Cynicism is

1. a stance of disengagement,
2. and distrust, contempt and/or scepticism (to differing degrees)
3. adopted towards humans, their institutions and values;
4. adopted as a response to a belief that humans are motivated only by self-interest
5. or more generally, that human beings are of little worth.

Problems: (i) a cynic can disengage in various ways, or engage in different ways, or adopt new combinations of engagement and disengagement, (ii) distrust etc. should be defined and parsed, and (iii) no strong reason to build in contentious anthropological and axiological claims.

Bigger concern: distinguish *kinds of cynicism*:

1. *agential* cynicism
2. *structural* cynicism
3. *anthropological* cynicism

Suggestion: structural cynicism encourages critical epistemic and moral attitudes towards the arrangements and operations of social institutions – and this can be justified by recognition that (a) the institution is corrupting, (b) many of their agents will therefore be corrupted to a greater or lesser degree, and (c) one risks being corrupted if one engages with the institution.

- crucial: such suspicions must not become dogmatic nor exclude positive possibilities.

Differences from Vice’s account:

1. structural cynicism is more complex than *disengagement* – a structural cynic will be far more discerning about their patterns of engagement and disengagement (Chubb *et al*).
2. epistemic and evaluative attitudes (distrust etc.) directed to *institutions*, not agents or to human nature (about which a structural cynic can remain agnostic).
3. structural cynicism is consistent with a belief that human beings *are* of great worth and that we *are*, or can be, motivated by more than self-interest – consistent with conviction that many of our personal and collective failings trace back to corrupting environments.

Is such structural cynicism a civic virtue? Not by itself, no, but it could be a component of a virtuous *civic stance*, if coupled to other attitudes, dispositions, beliefs, goals (cf. parallels with classical Cynic emphasis on *parrhēsía* – ‘fearless truth-telling’ – cf. Dobbins/Foucault).

IJK

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