

## **The normative source of individual responsibility under systemic corruption. A coercion-based view**

### *1. The problem of systemic corruption*

At times, an office holder acts corruptly not in a deliberate manner, but because she is part of an organisation where corrupt practices have replaced formal rules and procedures. Failure to comply with those practices would be very costly for her; she could risk losing her job or suffer some form of retaliation from her corrupt colleagues, whose privileges would be undermined by her non-compliance. Can we hold this person individually responsible if her behaviour is dictated by the need to adapt to actual organisational practices?

### *2. Normative reasons to adapt and individual responsibility under systemic corruption*

To address the question above, we provide a normative analysis of action under systemic corruption, which aims to establish whether and how individuals retain some sort of responsibility under such circumstances, in addition to causal responsibility.

We argue that individual corrupt behaviour under systemic corruption is interestingly similar to submissive action under threat (Nozick 1968). The individual is called to consider and weigh the normative force of pragmatic reasons to adapt to corrupt organizational practices. The model of coercion by threat can be usefully deployed to demonstrate that agents acting under systemic corruption retain some significant decisional powers, which are exercised in deliberating about whether, how, and to what extent to adapt to corrupt practices.

In the course of these deliberations, individuals engage with each other. Thus, their rational agency is not completely shut down. To wit, in responding to threats, they must exercise this agency for the threats to be effective. Notably, the coerced retain some deliberative power to decide whether to accept the threat. They have the 'power to refuse', where refusal makes the threat ineffective (Nozick 1968, 1981). Moreover, the coerced retain the normative power to participate in the negotiation, even though they have not decided to enter it deliberately. They are not physically or psychologically disempowered by the threat, but challenged and engaged. Finally, they retain the discretion to decide what they have a reason to do, even though they are forced to take into account the options that have become salient because of the threat. Therefore, in such cases, the coerced are recognised as rational agents capable of acting for reasons and implicated as such.

On the basis of this analysis, we show how corrupt individuals are responsible for acting under systemic corruption as a circumstance of duress; they can claim moral responsibility and are answerable for their action. In fact, this is part of the damage and moral wrong done to them and in which they are implicated.

### *3. Moral wrongs under systemic corruption*

While the similarities between individual adaptation to corrupt practices and coercion by threat generally hold, a significant disanalogy remains concerning the absence, in these cases, of an individual coercer. Therefore, a full account of the wrongness of individual corrupt behaviour in these circumstances requires a closer normative examination of systemic corruption.

We build on a normative understanding of the moral wrongs under systemic corruption as consisting in the surreptitious alteration of the logic of public accountability that ought to regulate the relations between the members of an organisation. We understand organisations as embodied systems of rule-

governed roles to which powers are associated with a specific mandate. Office holders are publicly accountable to each other for the uses they make of their entrusted power. This accountability is *public*, because these uses of power should not cohere with a personal agenda, but with the rationale of the mandate with which that power was established and attributed to a certain role. It is *mutual* because all office holders are expected to answer primarily to one another for the uses they make of their entrusted power. Corruption consists in uses of entrusted power whose rationale contradicts the terms of its mandate and, therefore, cannot be publicly justified. Such corrupt uses of power are wrong because they make agents publicly unaccountable to each other and, therefore, surreptitiously alter the normative nature of their relations.

In the light of this normative understanding and our analysis in the previous section, we show that when such corrupt uses of entrusted power have ordinarily replaced the public rules that should govern its exercise, we can consider systemic corruption as an instance of coercion by threat. Those individuals who, because of the costs of non-compliance with this parallel system of rules, give in to peer-pressure to adapt to corrupt organisational practices are *fully responsible* for their actions. While they can be considered as acting under threat, this does not provide them either with a justification or an excuse for their individual corrupt behaviour. The logic of public accountability that ought to govern their uses of power makes them *answerable* to others for their wrongful action, despite the generalised pressure to conform, and *liable* for the harms done by and through it.

Like in cases of coercion by threat, a final question arises as to whether compliance with corrupt practices implicates such agents in wrongdoing both as victims (of a corrupt system) and perpetrators (of a corrupt behaviour). We conclude by arguing that our normative discussion sheds some new light on the mixed moral feelings often associated with individual corrupt behaviour under systemic corruption. Agents complying with corrupt practices characteristically feel resentful and indignant for being subjected to ‘corruptive systemic threats’, but also shameful and guilty, in ways typically associated with moral failure and wrongdoing. These mixed feelings are explained by the normative source of responsibility that such agents claim for themselves.

## References

- Nozick, Robert (1968). Coercion. In Sidney Morgenbesser et al. (eds). *Philosophy, Science, and Method: Essays in Honor of Ernest Nagel*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 440–472.
- Nozick, Robert (1981). *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.