



Discourses on Isopublic Podcasts Transcript and Show Notes

Series: Commentaries

Episode: 10.1 No, Lord Acton, Power Doesn't Corrupt

Posted: 22-Dec-2019

Transcript

Welcome to *Discourses on Isopublic*.

My name is Dean Adair—creator of isopublic, nation of political equals and the “rule yourself and no else” society.

I post a new podcast every Sunday by 7pm Eastern time US on a topic in some way related to isopublic--the philosophy, institutions, law, economy and more.

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♪ *Intro music*

This is Episode 10.1, titled “No, Lord Acton, Power Doesn't Corrupt.”

In 1887, in a letter to Archbishop Mandell Creighton, Lord Acton wrote the well-known dictum, “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”¹ The letter was part of an exchange in which Acton admonished the bishop for supporting the infallibility of church authority in particular and of political authority in general. And I'm in complete agreement with Acton's sentiment that power and corruption go hand-in-hand, but not because power causes corruption. I believe that we, that all humans, are born, quote, “corrupt” and its political power that makes that corruption manifest. In other words, it's not power that causes good people to become corrupt, but that human beings are inherently corrupt which political power enables. And that even if there are a few angels who walk among us, there's no way to know who is until it's too late.

At the end of the day, it might be considered a distinction without a difference—that is, whether corruption is a product of power or corruption was there all along. What difference does it make? Because Acton's words give a false sense of optimism. That maybe if we think corruption comes with power, a truly good person will be able to resist that pull. It's like thinking that, because Frodo was good, he could resist the corrupting influence of the One Ring, which in the end he didn't. But it's fantasy to believe there are, quote, “good” people to begin with. No human being would be able to withstand the temptation to use the Ring of Power because power feeds directly into our primal nature. Rather than think that political power corrupts, it's much more sobering and useful to believe *everyone* is already



corrupt and no one should be trusted with power in the first place.

But what does it mean to be corrupt? What is political corruption? Why does it matter? And what can be done to prevent it?

The word “corrupt” means immoral, perverse, depraved. If a system has integrity, it functions according to its nature. If it’s corrupt, it has lost its integrity and doesn’t function accordingly. In the political context, a political system is corrupt if it doesn’t function according to its nature. And a politician is corrupt if he fails to perform in accordance with the office he holds. But not just fail to perform since we wouldn’t consider an incompetent politician corrupt (though it does beg the question, “What is a competent politician?”). There should be a criminal quality to corruption as with intent, knowingly, or due to gross negligence the official’s failure to perform or to abuse their office. And if the political system fails to perform in a similarly criminal manner, the system is corrupt.

But for a political system to become corrupt, it must once have been virtuous. And for a politician to be corrupt, they must have taken office in a virtuous political system. Is it possible for a politician to be corrupt if they hold office in a corrupt political system? Why, for instance, do we believe that Richard Nixon was corrupt? Was he? Or was he simply acting in accordance with a corrupt system, just incompetently so?

The word “corrupt” has multiple meanings. On the one hand, corrupt means immoral which would be Acton’s meaning. To be corrupt also means loss of integrity as in structural integrity like data corruption. These meanings aren’t the same. In the sense of being immoral, a corrupt politician implies a virtuous political system. That if only the politician would act with integrity in office, he’d be acting virtuously. But a corrupted political system is one that fails to honor the laws it adopts, i.e. political hypocrisy.

For example, the United States Federal government is political hypocrisy. The Federal government began to act unconstitutionally almost before the ink of the Constitution was dry. Today, perhaps 90% of Federal law and regulations are unconstitutional by any honest and competent reading of the text. The Constitution grants no authority to the Federal government for agencies such as the FCC, Social Security Administration, HUD, FAA, HHS, Department of Education, etc. How much Federal government creep has been justified by the Supreme Court applying the “General Welfare clause” so-called and the “Necessary and Proper” clause? The former being in the Preamble and not a clause at all. The latter being an open door to Federal abuse, which Patrick Henry warned “would lead to limitless Federal power that would inevitably menace individual liberty.”² He got that right!

Raising the question, “Is the US Supreme Court dishonest or incompetent, or both?” If dishonest, then we’d have to conclude the Supreme Court is corrupt. You be the judge. And if the institution is corrupt, it doesn’t matter if any individual justice is virtuous if he or she is making decisions consistent with the general corruption of the Court. And given the Supreme Court has been subverting the Constitution since there’s been a Supreme Court, the corruption is now complete.

But what if the political system itself isn’t corrupt? Acton’s words presume that the power is virtuous



and that only by possessing it is one corrupted. What if that power was evil to begin with? Would we be surprised that anyone possessing it does evil acts? Would corrupting an evil power mean to make it virtuous? Or just to transform it from one evil into another?

My point here is that power in-and-of-itself and corruption in-and-of-itself have no useful meaning to us outside the context of a virtuous political system. That for a politician to become corrupt means both the political system and politician were virtuous beforehand.

So, what makes a political system virtuous? It's even hard for me to put those words together... "virtuous" and "political." You might be thinking, "Dean, you've lost your mind! Politics and virtue go together like oil and water!" That might be the way it's always been, but I don't believe it has to be. This gets into the subject of political morality, an involved topic for other *Discourses* episodes, but I'll give a nutshell treatment of the subject here.

The virtuous political system starts with the moral philosophy of evolutionary utilitarianism which states "the greatest equal freedom for the greatest well-being of the greatest number." This, because only by the maximum equal freedom of each to exercise their evolutionary advantages of tool-use, cognition, and language do we maximize human well-being across society and down through subsequent generations, all things considered over time. The state, thus defined, has only one mission within this moral framework which justifies its existence—to ensure society is able to operate freely under evolutionary utilitarianism, i.e. to secure what I call the eudemic society. Anything else the state does is not morally justified and, thus, would become a corrupt political system.

Deviating from evolutionary utilitarianism is a corruption because doing so reduces the People's peaceful exercise of their personal evolutionary advantages, thus, reducing their well-being directly or indirectly, all things considered over time. By using evolutionary utilitarianism as the standard of virtue for political systems, we can now consider "corruption" having actual meaning thus defined.

From evolutionary utilitarianism, we derive that the People must possess the unalienable equal rights of life, liberty, and property; or as expressed by the Eudemic Code's 1st Imperative—"The People shall possess the unalienable equal Rights of Selfdom, Freedom and Property." This, because selfdom, freedom, and property provide for maximum equal freedom. Within this moral framework I call eudemic morality, it's immoral for anyone, including the state, to intentionally, knowingly, or out of gross negligence to do harm to another—what in isopublic is the standard for a criminal act.

Thus, it's wrongful for the state to act on the People for any purpose other than what is necessary to secure life, liberty, and property of the People, and only those functions necessary to maintain the viability of the state, which for isopublic is found under the Eudemic Code's 3rd Imperative (you can read at isopublic.org). For the state to act on the People for any other purpose is to do wrongful harm to someone, and thus, become unvirtuous and corrupt. And by doing wrongful harm to the People without remedy, i.e. civil damages and jail time for those officials responsible, the more corrupt the state can be



considered.

Applying this standard of morality to the United States Federal government, how corrupt is it? As flawed as the US Constitution is, it does lay out a government that could be fairly consistent with the Eudemic Code... if the Federal government actually honored it, but it doesn't. Thus, the US Federal government is corrupt. Which should come as no surprise given the structural flaws of the Constitution. It was inevitable. Among these flaws causing the Federal government to become corrupt are—electing officials, no citizen assembly, a chief executive, dedicated legislature, appointed judiciary, and judicial review only after the People have been harmed by the government.

Since the time of Aristotle, it's been known that elections are oligarchic, not democratic. Candidates lie their way into office then engage in all manner of mischief to corrupt institutions and the law. A citizen assembly with veto powers is necessary to put a proper check on executive overreach. A chief executive like the President is monarchical, easily corrupted, and a corrupting influence. A dedicated legislature is a law-making factory with each law enacted diminishing liberty. A judiciary appointed by the very people who draft and enforce the laws—a clear conflict of interest. And the Supreme Court performing a judicial review only after grievous harm has been done to the People by the government. And if a law is struck down as unconstitutional, the only response from the government is a shrug and an "Oh, well." The officials responsible for enacting an unconstitutional law should go to prison.

In the democracy of ancient Athens, anyone proposing a new law could be accused of paranomon, an illegal attempt to corrupt the law, and face severe penalties. The men who drafted the Constitution, in secret of course, were educated and knew what they were doing. I suspect that they deliberately crafted the document to be corrupted. And once the integrity of the Constitution was lost, all the rights and protections the American people thought they had were in effect lost too. Consider how much the 2nd Amendment's "shall not be infringed" has been eroded.

A virtuous political system is imperative for the greatest well-being of the greatest number, but if it's integrity can't be maintained, as has happened with the United States government, then there wasn't much point in spilling blood to implement it in the first place. Think of all those who died fighting for American independence and the promise of freedom from tyranny resulting in little more than a "change of management." That after the smoke had cleared, after many made the ultimate sacrifice fighting for freedom, it turned out to be a con-job. What does it mean to elect a corrupt politician in the context of a corrupt political system? Why would we expect otherwise? Corruption becomes a concern with a virtuous political system that can actually *be* corrupted.

I've stated that all humans are corrupt. And if so, wouldn't that make the virtuous political system an impossibility? Not if we recognize that we *are* corrupt and implement effective countermeasures against it. The ancient Athenians were extremely concerned about political corruption and did just that. But let me explain what I mean by "all humans are corrupt."

I've made mention of our "primal nature." Our primal nature is what we've inherited from our ancestors over the entire genetic past of our species. As organisms, we have the innate urge to live to reproduce



and the natural instinct to do whatever it takes to that end. Thus, if by deception, stealing, rape, assault, even murder can satisfy our primal needs, nature has equipped us with the necessary instincts to do so. Then, over many millennia, humans evolved into social beings along with the faculty of reason. This led humans to develop into societies and with it the need for socialization.

Our primal nature gives us moral expediency and our evolved civilized nature gives us what Herbert Spencer called our “moral sense.”³ Thus, I believe that the corrupt nature of humans is our primal nature which is 100s of 1,000s of years old while our moral sense is likely not much older than civilization, maybe 10,000 years old. I don’t regard what we call “corruption” to be corruption per se, but behavior impelled by our primal nature, i.e. motivated by the primal makeup of our genes. That in the absence of social costs, we have a natural proclivity to regress to our primal nature. And not in a literal sense of acting like apes, but with a selfish disregard for the well-being of others except in so far as they are useful means to our ends.

Just consider the behavior of the average 2-year-old. The average 2-year-old can be expected to lie, steal, cheat, be aggressive, be fearful, be grandiose, be narcissistic, manipulate... what we call the “terrible twos.” Politicians exhibit these behaviors too but more suavely. Humans stop behaving this way as we go through childhood and adolescence because we become socialized. We learn that such anti-social behavior comes with costs, like punishment from our parents, rejection by our peers, etc. By the time we’re adults, our primal nature is under control, at least for most of us.

Political power allows humans to “act out” with impunity and indulge in their primal nature, the more power the more indulgent. As political power increases, the individual becomes more immune to the personal costs of anti-social behavior. A review of the history of Roman emperors is a case study of such descent into despotism, like a string of uncorrected 2-year-olds completely unmoored from the moral sense.

When individuals or businesses are corrupt and do harm to others, the state can act to correct the harm caused. When the state is corrupt and does harm to the People, the only means available for correction is revolution. When individuals or businesses are corrupt and do harm, the harm they do is limited. When the state is corrupt, the harm it does affects everyone. Thus, it’s vitally important to have a virtuous state and, once instituted, to maintain its integrity at all times.

Because all humans are corrupted by our primal nature, there must be effective countermeasures implemented that maintain the integrity of the state. This objective is more important than the state securing the People’s rights because if the state becomes corrupted, all rights are imperiled. And even if there are some few individuals who are angels among us, there’s no way to know who they are. This is why I propose democratic measures such as selecting officials by lottery, paranomon, and others for maintaining the integrity of the isopublican Tricuria. You can find a more complete list of democratic features of isopublic on the home page at isopublic.org under the heading “Ending political corruption with democratic measures.”



Here ends this episode of *Discourses on Isopublic*.

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This is Dean Adair signing off until next time.

♪ *Outro music*



End Notes

¹ “John Emerich Edward Dalberg, Lord Acton, Acton-Creighton Correspondence [1887].” *Acton-Creighton Correspondence - Online Library of Liberty*, Online Library of Liberty, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/acton-acton-creighton-correspondence>.

² “Necessary and Proper Clause.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 21 Nov. 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Necessary_and_Proper_Clause#History_leading_up_to_ratification.

³ Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics: or, The Conditions essential to Happiness specified, and the First of them Developed*, (London: John Chapman, 1851). 12/21/2019. https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/273#lf0331_head_014.