

INSTITUTIONAL CORRUPTION

THE TELEOLOGICAL AND NONNORMATIVE ACCOUNT

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CORRUPTION is widely recognized to be a major social problem, but its characterization continues to be very controversial. So, while it is frequently noted that corruption is “the abuse of power by a public official for private gain,” not all corruption needs to involve public officials (doctors need not be public officials but can be corrupt if they prescribe medicine in accordance with who pays them to do so, rather than with what is best for the patient) or involve a private gain (when a county clerk grants wedding licenses in line with their personal moral or religious convictions and not the law, it can be a case of corruption but need not involve any private gain whatsoever).¹

Indeed, it is now commonly noted that what is being corrupted need not be an individual person at all but can be an entire social institution.² This kind of institutional corruption has, especially in the last few years, come to be seen as ever more central and important.³ Many of the major contemporary social problems appear to center on the undermining of institutions like voting, the free press, policing, or health care: instead of every citizen being equally able to influence political decision-making, to be informed about what is going on in the wider society, to be secure, or to be healthy, the institutions meant to provide these goods often seem to fail in their task.⁴ This form of corruption thus deserves—and has seen—significant amounts of scrutiny in the last few years.

However, it continues to be a challenge to specify exactly what makes something a case of institutional corruption (IC).⁵ Exactly which actions subvert the

1 Nye, “Corruption and Political Development.”

2 Thompson, *Ethics in Congress*; Lessig, “‘Institutional Corruption’ Defined”; Miller, *Institutional Corruption*; Ferretti, “A Taxonomy of Institutional Corruption.”

3 Thompson, “Theories of Institutional Corruption”; Miller, *Institutional Corruption*.

4 Thompson, *Ethics in Congress*; Lessig, “‘Institutional Corruption’ Defined”; Miller, *Institutional Corruption*.

5 Thompson, “Theories of Institutional Corruption”; Ferretti, “A Taxonomy of Institutional Corruption.”

relevant institution, and exactly why is it the case that these actions subvert the institution? What, specifically, is an institution's purpose? This paper seeks to further the debate surrounding IC by answering these questions. After all, without a clear characterization of the nature of IC, fighting or avoiding it is difficult—for it is then not clear precisely what is to be fought or avoided.⁶

The paper, therefore, presents a general, philosophically and social scientifically well-grounded theory of IC that is centered on the idea that institutions have a social and not inherently normative function that is being subverted in cases of IC. While this theory shares some superficial components with some of the existing ones in the literature—especially those of Lessig and Miller—it is, in fact, quite different from the latter.⁷ In particular, by being built on the most compelling form of social functionalism, the theory presented here has a solid theoretical foundation, does justice to the complex ethical nature of IC, and is in line with work in the social sciences more generally. Moreover, this theory is shown to have several important novel features: it is graded (institutions can be more or less corrupted), general (it can be applied to political contexts, but also many other social phenomena, from social media to private corporations and nongovernmental organizations like the International Federation of Association Football [FIFA]), and unifying (it makes clear why highly corrupt societies tend to become unstable, whatever exactly the cause or moral status is of the corruption).

The paper is structured as follows. Section 1 lays out the nature of IC and develops desiderata for its characterization. In order to provide a grounding for the functional ascription at the heart of IC, section 2 presents the currently most compelling form of social functionalism. Section 3 uses this account of social functionalism to develop a new non-normative teleological theory of IC that satisfies the desiderata of section 1. Section 4 concludes.

1. INSTITUTIONAL CORRUPTION

Human social living centers around social institutions: the “rules of the game” that structure human interactions and which set out the kinds of behaviors that, in a given type of situation, members of the society are expected to—and expect others to—engage in.⁸ Social institutions, in this standard social scientific sense, comprise a vast array of familiar aspects of contemporary social

6 Rothstein and Varraich, *Making Sense of Corruption*.

7 See Lessig, “‘Institutional Corruption’ Defined”; Miller, *Institutional Corruption*.

8 Parsons, *The Social System*; North, *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance*.

living, from the structure of the government (e.g., representative democracy) and the economy (e.g., free enterprise) to that of the family (e.g., polyandry) and religion (e.g., Hinduism). Note that it need not be obvious *why* social institution *N* prescribes behavior *B* in situation *S*—i.e., what the function of the institution is. Similarly, it is not presumed that the behavior prescribed by the institution is morally obligatory: institutionally based norms are not necessarily moral norms.⁹ All that matters is that institutions dictate the norms of behavior for a given society.

Given this, IC concerns cases where people engage in actions that undermine a particular social institution. These actions need not involve a private gain or *quid pro quo* exchanges of favor; indeed, these actions need not be inherently immoral or illegal. However, these actions still prevent the institution from operating as it is meant to. Such cases have come to be seen as being of major importance when it comes to ensuring that societies function in ways that benefit all their members.¹⁰

For example, in a given democracy, elections might be won only if candidates can obtain vast amounts of funding from major sponsors: only this ensures that they get heard or seen by voters. In that case, though, the only candidates who have a chance of obtaining office are those able to attract the necessary funds to finance their campaigns. This gives big political donors (businesses or wealthy individuals) an outsize influence on the running of the democracy. In turn, this can cause ordinary voters to feel like their voices do not matter, so they cease to participate in the political process. Thus, decisions are made in line with who can pay for access to these lawmakers, not who voted for them. At its extreme, this can spell the end of the relevant democracy. Similar points can be made about other examples, such as the privatization of prisons—which incentivizes incarceration rates and can thus decrease public security, in opposition to what prisons are for—and the mass dissemination of misleading or false information—which can undermine belief in public information of any kind.¹¹

- 9 Miller employs a morally loaded notion of social institution that is furthermore restricted to *organizations* (roughly, complex structures of organized sets of norms). See Miller, *Institutional Corruption*. However, as noted in the text, this is not the standard notion used in the social scientific literature.
- 10 Miller, *Institutional Corruption*; Lessig, “‘Institutional Corruption’ Defined”; Thompson, “Theories of Institutional Corruption”; Ferretti, “A Taxonomy of Institutional Corruption”; Ceva and Ferretti, “Political Corruption, Individual Behaviour and the Quality of Institutions”; Della Porta and Vannucci, *The Hidden Order of Corruption*.
- 11 Satz, “Markets, Privatization, and Corruption”; Tsfati, et al., “Causes and Consequences of Mainstream Media Dissemination of Fake News.”

Cases like these have come to be seen to be of major importance: they are at the heart of some of the most widely discussed issues afflicting many contemporary societies.¹² A number of theoretical proposals have been put forward to make the nature of institutional undermining that underlies them more precise.¹³

So, Thompson argues that IC concerns cases where public officials—especially legislators—receive political gains for providing services that are “procedurally improper” and that have a tendency to damage the political process.¹⁴ Services are procedurally improper when they are not determined on the merits of the case, and/or they fail to follow the rules that ensure the political process is fair. If done systematically, such services can erode the public confidence in the political process—i.e., corrupt political institutions.

Not unrelatedly, Warren characterizes IC as instances where public officials *claim* to respect the egalitarian idea that all individuals affected by the collective decisions of the public officials should be able to influence these decisions, but where these officials *in fact* make their decisions so as to favor those who have provided benefits to these officials, and thus have privileged access to them.¹⁵ In other words, according to Warren’s account, IC is at heart about duplicitous violations of democratic egalitarian ideals: public officials pretend to uphold these ideals, but do not actually do so, and that in a way that is in fact harmful to some members of the public.

There is no question that both of these characterizations of IC have allowed for many useful insights and advances. Most obviously, the problems caused by some forms of campaign finance for contemporary US democratic processes are well illuminated by both of these accounts: such forms of campaign finance can be procedurally improper and in violation of egalitarian ideals of democratic political decision-making. Beyond this, the abstractness, especially of Warren’s account, also makes clear what is wrong with other ills afflicting contemporary (representative) democracies, such as gerrymandering and voter suppression. These are cases that violate the egalitarian ideals at the heart of a genuine democracy—and they do that in a way that is surreptitious and thus hard to notice, avoid, and combat.

12 Satz, “Markets, Privatization, and Corruption”; Miller, *Institutional Corruption*; Lessig, “‘Institutional Corruption’ Defined”; Thompson, “Theories of Institutional Corruption.”

13 For helpful surveys, see, e.g., Thompson, “Theories of Institutional Corruption”; Ferretti, “A Taxonomy of Institutional Corruption”; Brock, “Institutional Integrity, Corruption, and Taxation.”

14 Thompson, *Ethics in Congress*. See also Philp, “Defining Political Corruption.”

15 Warren, “What Does Corruption Mean in a Democracy?,” “Political Corruption as Duplicious Exclusion,” and “The Meaning of Corruption in Democracies.”

However, both of these proposals also struggle to go beyond this sociopolitical context and analyze IC more generally. It is not clear that these two proposals can be used to understand the IC of, say, prisons, the press, corporations, and not just that of political decision-making in representative democracies (and the US specifically). For example, the privatization of prisons is not obviously procedurally improper or done in a way that is democratically duplicitous. The issue with this privatization is not how it came about, which may have been entirely proper, or that it is inegalitarian, which it need not be, but that it undermines the institution it concerns. Much the same is true when it comes to the mass dissemination of misleading or false information (the source of which need not even be a public official at all). What matters is just that it concerns an undermining of the public press, not how it was decided on. In short: since IC is widely seen to comprise cases other than those of campaign donation in representative democracies, the proposals of Thompson and Warren appear insufficiently general—whatever other virtues they have.¹⁶

The account of Lessig is, therefore, a step in the right direction.¹⁷ According to Lessig, “institutional corruption is manifest when there is a systemic and strategic influence . . . that undermines the institution’s effectiveness by diverting it from its purpose or weakening its ability to achieve its purpose.”¹⁸ This influence need not be illegal, immoral, or procedurally improper; the key is just that it thwarts the *function* of the relevant institution. In this way, this account is significantly more general than the ones of Thompson and Warren. While it remains the case that the account in Lessig also tends to focus on the kind of (“dependence”) corruption of the democratic political process that Thompson and Warren focus on, there is no reason that it cannot be easily extended to cover the corruption of the prison system, the press, and other public or even private institutions; indeed, it has been applied to the pharmaceutical industry with much success.¹⁹

The main challenge the account faces is that it leaves open exactly what the function of a social institution is. What are prisons, or the press, or the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) for? Because of this, it also remains somewhat unclear exactly how this function can be undermined. Is the rise of social media undermining the press? Why? Without spelling this out,

16 See also Miller, *Institutional Corruption*, 300–4. For a historical study of political corruption, see also Sparling, *Political Corruption*.

17 See Lessig, “‘Institutional Corruption’ Defined”; this is further developed in Lessig, *America, Compromised*.

18 Lessig, “‘Institutional Corruption’ Defined,” 553.

19 See especially Lessig, *America, Compromised*; and Fields, “Parallel Problems.”

the account lacks a thorough theoretical grounding.²⁰ Now, given that Lessig's focus also is the IC of the US political system—whose function may be relatively clear—this need not be greatly problematic for many of the uses Lessig has put his account to.²¹ However, as a full account of IC, Lessig's account falls short; while it has a sufficiently general overarching structure, this structure is not spelled out in enough detail to be able to make sense of IC in all of its different facets.

The account of Miller attempts to fill this lacuna.²² Like Lessig's, the account is teleological and general in nature; however, unlike that of Lessig, it is more fully spelled out.

According to Miller, social institutions are organizations—i.e., sets of structurally related functional roles—that provide “collective goods by means of joint action.”²³ That is, on this account, the purpose of a social institution is the provision, through the joint activity of the members of the institution, of objectively moral goods that are made available to all members of the relevant society.²⁴ These goods comprise aggregated (needs-based) moral rights, freedoms, or well-being.²⁵ Note that it is not sufficient that an organization provides collective goods that are *thought* to be moral goods; only organizations that provide collective goods that are *in fact* moral goods qualify as genuine social institutions.²⁶ In this way, the account of Miller makes it possible to provide a precise and systematic statement of what makes it the case that a given social institution has whatever function it has: namely, the fact that the collective intentions and actions of the members of the relevant society create institutions whose end is the obtaining of a collective, objectively moral human good. In turn, this also allows for a clear and general account of IC. IC occurs when members of an institution intentionally engage in actions that tend to have the foreseeable and/or avoidable effect of undermining the function—spelled out as above—of the relevant institution (without, though, destroying that institution).²⁷

The account of Miller—like that of Lessig—is appropriately general. Since it makes the teleological nature of IC central to its characterization, it is not

20 Amit, et al., “Institutional Corruption Revisited”; Thompson, “Theories of Institutional Corruption.”

21 Thompson, “Theories of Institutional Corruption.”

22 Miller, *Institutional Corruption*.

23 Miller, *Institutional Corruption*, 23, 26.

24 Miller, *Institutional Corruption*, 106.

25 Miller, *Institutional Corruption*, 23.

26 Miller, *Institutional Corruption*, 23, 28, 34–45.

27 Miller, *Institutional Corruption*, 82–88.

restricted or tied to the corruption of the democratic political process (important as that may be). Instead, it can be straightforwardly extended to other phenomena—such as the corruption of prisons or the press—for these two are instances where the provision of the collective moral goods (security and transparency) is thwarted.²⁸ Furthermore, the account of Miller improves on the one of Lessig, as it spells out this teleological nature of IC in detail.²⁹ The function of social institutions is not left open as something to be filled in by the whims of the relevant researchers, but it is underwritten by a philosophically well-grounded treatment. However, Miller's account also faces three key drawbacks.

First, the theory does not speak to (what Miller calls) institutional corrosion (where actions are done that happen to slightly undermine the function of an institution but which fail the conditions for IC set out above), institutional destruction (where the institution is fully destroyed), or externally perpetrated IC.³⁰ However, this restrictive focus of the analysis is not greatly compelling. Institutional corrosion, destruction, and external IC all lead to the same kind of failure of the provision of the relevant collective good as IC in its proper sense according to Miller. While the source and exact nature of the prevention of the provision of the relevant collective moral good are different, the fact that there is this prevention is not. In this way, the account is overly limited. This is an important point to which I return below.

Second, the account of Miller needs to make strong commitments to highly contentious philosophical doctrines, such as a strong moral realism and methodological individualism. However, it is far from clear that these commitments are justified. For example, it is not obvious that the existence of objective moral facts—such as which collective goods are *in fact* morally good—can be made plausible.³¹ Similarly, there are some good reasons to think that a strong methodological individualism is not compelling in the social sciences in general.³²

Third and most importantly, Miller's account is made problematic by the fact that it is fundamentally normative. On this account, IC *must* be morally bad (at least *pro tanto*): the moral appraisal of IC (and of social institutions in general) is *built into* the nature of IC (and institutions in general).³³ However,

28 Miller, *Institutional Corruption*, 217–18.

29 A point also noted by Thompson, "Theories of Institutional Corruption."

30 Miller, *Institutional Corruption*, 66, 70.

31 Mackie, *Ethics*; Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*; Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value."

32 Ruiz and Schulz, "Microfoundations and Methodology."

33 Miller allows for the existence of "noble cause corruption," but this would be the case where corruption is engaged in for a (*pro tanto*) morally defensible reason (*Institutional Corruption*). However, this does not affect the main point in the text.

this fails to do justice to the moral complexity of IC.³⁴ When it comes to the moral status of IC, everything depends on the details of the case and should not be built into the characterization of the nature of IC. People can engage in actions that lead to or constitute IC, but these actions can be morally neutral or even morally good (e.g., when the relevant social institutions are morally problematic).³⁵

Put differently, the normative focus of Miller's account makes this account arbitrarily limited. From the point of view of the underlying causal mechanisms—i.e., from the perspective of what is happening to the relevant institutions—the IC of the Mafia or the Nazi Party may be identical to that of US representative democracy or the press. While our normative evaluation of the former two cases may be different from the latter two, the social phenomenon underlying the four cases is the same: they share the crucial feature of thwarting the purpose of a social institution. They should thus be treated in the same way, too.³⁶ This is an important point to which I return in section 3.

The point is further strengthened by the fact that the normative focus of Miller's account does not fit the long tradition of functional ascription in the social sciences more generally.³⁷ The next section lays this out in more detail, but for now, the key point to note is just that, according to the most compelling accounts, functional ascription in the social science is *not* fundamentally normative in the way that Miller's account is. Rather, in the social sciences, it is common to ascribe *nonnormative* functions to social institutions. Hence, Miller's picture of functional ascription does not match that of the social sciences

34 Lessig, "Institutional Corruption' Defined"; Thompson, "Theories of Institutional Corruption."

35 This makes this different from some other related phenomena. For example, arguably, abusing one's power is always (*pro tanto*) morally bad: it concerns cases where a person acts against the reasons why they are in a position of power. It may be that a person aims at morally defensible outcomes by abusing their power, but the fact that they achieve these outcomes by abusing their power is one (moral) reason that speaks against doing so. However, this is different from cases of institutional corruption: the latter does not directly refer to ways of acting, but to the status of a social institution, *viz.*, whether it is well-functioning. Put differently, an abuse of power *can result in* the corruption of an institution—but the latter can also result from behavior that is not an instance of the abuse of power. Importantly, also, since institutions can be morally good or bad, the well-functioning of these institutions can be morally good or bad as well. I thank Dale Dorsey for useful discussion of this issue.

36 Miller considers the latter a case of "organizational corruption," and thus excludes it from the analysis (*Institutional Corruption*, 28).

37 See, e.g., Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*; Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*; Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens*; Pettit, "Functional Explanation and Virtual Selection"; Bigelow, "Functionalism in Social Science."

more generally—which is problematic, as the investigation of IC is a part of the social sciences.

Putting all of this together, it becomes clear that what is still needed is an account of IC that has the following three features:

1. *General*: The account needs to focus on the teleological nature of IC generally and not be restricted to the undermining of the (us) political process only.
2. *Spelled out*: The account needs to ground the function of social institutions in a plausible theoretical treatment and not leave it open to the intuitions of a researcher.
3. *Nonnormative*: The account needs to spell out the function of social institutions in a way that does not presuppose that this function aims at some human good; rather, the moral valence of the social institution needs to be assessed depending on the details of the case.

An account that satisfies these three desiderata is able to combine the best features of the existing characterizations of IC while avoiding their drawbacks.

To make headway in developing such an account, the next section outlines the currently most compelling theoretical framework for functional ascription in the social sciences. On this basis, section 3 lays out a novel account of IC that satisfies desiderata 1–3 and that has some further useful implications.

Before doing this, though, it is important to note that implicit in desiderata 1–3 is the idea that IC is, in its nature, quite different from individual corruption. As just noted, this is a common assumption in many views of IC (notably those of Thompson and Lessig), but it is not without controversy. For example, some authors argue that IC reduces to individual corruption and that strongly separating out individual from IC obfuscates the mechanisms by which corruption spreads from one institutional context to another.³⁸ Relatedly, it is implicit in desiderata 1–3 that IC is to be analyzed teleologically (in terms of what the purpose is of the relevant social institutions) and not, say, deontologically (in terms of what it is our duty to do as members of a certain institution) or in terms of virtue (in terms of what virtuous members of the social institution are like).³⁹

Without question, there is a lot that could be said about these alternative, individualistic treatments of IC. However, instead of engaging in these debates directly, the approach here is the reverse. The paper shows that adopting a teleological and non-individualist perspective on IC is coherent and has several

38 Ceva and Ferretti, “Political Corruption, Individual Behaviour and the Quality of Institutions”; Ferretti, “A Taxonomy of Institutional Corruption.” See also Philp, “Defining Political Corruption.”

39 See, e.g., Rothstein and Varraich, *Making Sense of Corruption*.

advantages. In turn, this provides a reason for adopting this kind of view of IC. Of course, no pretense here is made that this has settled all the issues surrounding this issue (or, indeed, IC in general). Rather, the aim is more modest: it is just to show that a compelling, teleological, and non-individualist perspective on IC is available. If an alternative treatment is to be adopted, it would have to be shown to be superior while taking these benefits into account. (I return to these points below.)

With this in mind, consider ways of spelling out the function of a social institution. This is important, as the very nature of institutional purpose is sometimes seen as incoherent—which would thus make it a highly problematic basis for an account of IC. As the next section makes clear, though, this impression is misleading.

2. SOCIAL FUNCTIONALISM

There is a long tradition in the social sciences that sees value in analyzing social institutions in terms of their function.⁴⁰ By understanding what a social institution is for, it is thought that we can better grasp what the institution is, how it relates to other social institutions, how stable it is, and how to best alter it. However, this functionalist approach toward social science has also been faced with some major criticisms; in particular, it is thought that it cannot be made empirically plausible.⁴¹ As it turns out, though, recent advances in this area make clear that social functionalism is, in fact, a compelling and well-grounded research program in the social sciences.

To see this, begin by noting that, according to the traditional version of social functionalism, what grounds the function of a social institution is some form of biocultural evolution.⁴² This account of functional ascription can be related to a parallel development in the biological and cognitive sciences.⁴³

40 See, e.g., Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*; Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*; Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*; Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens*; Pettit, “Functional Explanation and Virtual Selection”; Bigelow, “Functionalism in Social Science.” Of course, functionalist accounts of various phenomena go back at least to Aristotle. However, as far as the discussion in the social sciences is concerned, the classic, “traditional” sources are the ones cited in the text.

41 Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens*; Pettit, “Functional Explanation and Virtual Selection.”

42 Bigelow, “Functionalism in Social Science”; Rosenberg, *Philosophy of Social Science*; Kincaid, “Assessing Functional Explanations in the Social Sciences”; Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens*.

43 Millikan, *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories*; Millikan, *Varieties of Meaning*; Papineau, *Reality and Representation*; Neander, “Content for Cognitive Science”; Garson, “Function, Selection, and Construction in the Brain”; Papineau and Garson, “Teleosemantics, Selection and Novel Contents.” Note that these views differ in numerous particulars,

On these models, the function of the human heart is to pump blood because pumping blood is what the heart was selected for. Humans with hearts that pumped blood (or whose hearts pumped blood more reliably or efficiently) had a greater expected reproductive success than those whose hearts did not pump blood (or as reliably or efficiently). Other features of the heart—such as the noise they make—did not contribute to their expected reproductive success. Hence, it is the fact that hearts pump blood (reliably or efficiently)—not that they make a certain kind of sound—that should be taken for their function for this supported their spread in the population.⁴⁴

Transposing this to the social realm, a number of authors have argued that a given social institution N has the function F if past tokens of N were biologically or culturally selected to do F .⁴⁵ If past tokens of N that did F had a higher chance to reproduce N than those tokens of N that did not have F , then N (now) has the function to do F . In short, functional ascription is about identifying the selective reasons for the spread of an institution or trait.⁴⁶

However, this way of grounding functional ascription in the social sciences faces what has become known as the “missing mechanisms argument.”⁴⁷ At the heart of this argument is the claim that few social institutions have the kind of selective history needed for them to have a function of the above sort. Hence, they either need to be seen to have no function—thus undercutting the

but for present purposes, these differences do not matter. Note also that there is an alternative view of functional ascription in the biological and cognitive sciences according to which the latter is to be grounded in the causal roles a given trait or component plays in a larger causal system: see, e.g., Cummins, “Functional Analysis.” Interestingly, some classic works in the structuralist functionalist tradition in the social sciences follow this line, too: they see social institutions as akin to elements in a large social system and ground their functions accordingly (see, e.g., Parsons, *The Social System*). However, views like this face the problem that it makes the nature of a function observer-dependent: depending on what causal system is chosen, the causal role function of a trait or institution will differ. This is particularly problematic in the social sciences where one of the major reasons why a functionalist approach was sought in the first place lies in the fact that it allows for an analysis of social dynamics that is not purely observer dependent. For this reason, the etiological accounts have come to dominate the discussion there.

44 Millikan, *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories and Varieties of Meaning*.

45 Bigelow, “Functionalism in Social Science”; Rosenberg, *Philosophy of Social Science*; Kincaid, “Assessing Functional Explanations in the Social Sciences”; Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens*; Rappaport, *Pigs for the Ancestors and Ecology, Meaning and Religion*.

46 Millikan, *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories and Varieties of Meaning*; Papineau, *Reality and Representation*; Neander, “Content for Cognitive Science”; Garson, “Function, Selection, and Construction in the Brain.”

47 Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens*; Pettit, “Functional Explanation and Virtual Selection”; Bigelow, “Functionalism in Social Science.”

motivation for the entire functionalist approach—or their function cannot be grounded in their selective history. In a bit more detail, the missing mechanism argument can be seen to rest on three pillars.

First, a genuine selective process requires variation.⁴⁸ However, it is not clear that actual social institutions, in fact, display this kind of variation. Instead, there is often only ever one version of an institution that was present. Hence, this institution cannot have been selected *from* a background population: there was no such background to select from.

Second, even in cases where there *was* the relevant kind of variation, this variation often does not appear to have greatly impacted the evolution of the relevant social institution. Instead, this evolution appears to have been heavily driven by chance alone.⁴⁹ A familiar example of this is the adoption of the “qwerty” keyboard, which, for largely fortuitous reasons, ended up the prevalent keyboard design despite its inherent *disadvantages* compared to rival designs.⁵⁰ Hence, there was no genuine *selection* of these institutions.

Third and finally, genuine selection requires reproduction.⁵¹ However, social institutions generally differ only in their propensity to survive or grow (assuming the relevant variation even exists) but not in their propensity to have offspring social institutions.⁵² The qwerty keyboard design did not give birth to a second generation of qwerty keyboard designs; rather, it simply persisted at the expense of rival designs. Hence, this is not a case of genuine selection.⁵³

Now, it does need to be acknowledged that there are limits to the scope of this “missing mechanism argument.” In particular, more recent analyses suggest

48 Godfrey-Smith, *Darwinian Populations and Natural Selection*; Brandon, *Adaptation and Environment*. See also Schulz, *Structure, Evidence, and Heuristic*.

49 Godfrey-Smith, *Darwinian Populations and Natural Selection*.

50 David, “Understanding the Economics of QWERTY”; Lewin, “The Market Process and the Economics of QWERTY.”

51 Brandon, *Adaptation and Environment*; but see also Godfrey-Smith, *Darwinian Populations and Natural Selection*. Note, though, that the exact nature of the inheritance processes can differ across different cases. See Boyd and Richerson, *The Origin and Evolution of Cultures*; Godfrey-Smith, *Darwinian Populations and Natural Selection*; Sober, “Evolutionary Theory, Causal Completeness, and Theism.” Note also that evolutionary processes do not need to involve replication in a narrow sense, but merely reproduction with some resemblance. See Godfrey-Smith, *Darwinian Populations and Natural Selection*; Sober, *Philosophy of Biology and The Nature of Selection*.

52 Hodgson and Knudsen use the labels “successor selection” and “subset selection” (derived from Price) for this distinction (*Darwin’s Conjecture*, 94–104).

53 Brandon, *Adaptation and Environment*; Vrba, “What Is Species Selection?”; Schulz, *Structure, Evidence, and Heuristic*. But see also Godfrey-Smith, *Darwinian Populations and Natural Selection*.

that, for at least some social institutions, the needed biocultural selection processes may well have been present.⁵⁴ For example, some moral frameworks and political systems may have existed in different versions which competed for copying success in novel settings.⁵⁵

However, this point ultimately does not greatly affect the strength of the “missing mechanism” argument. To be a truly compelling approach toward social analysis, functionalism needs to be widely applicable.⁵⁶ If there are only a handful of cases to which it can be usefully applied, social functionalism becomes a mere methodological footnote and will not allow for major progress in the social sciences. Therefore, even if it turns out that the historically focused version of social functionalism works in some cases, it remains true that it is not general enough. As a general approach toward the social sciences, it cannot do the kind of work we ask it to do.

Fortunately, more recent treatments of social functionalism are available that improve on the traditional historical account. One of the most influential of these is the account of Pettit.⁵⁷ According to the latter, functional ascription in the social sciences should not be seen to rest on an institution’s *actual* biocultural selective history but on whether and why that institution would be *virtually* selected. More specifically, according to Pettit, a social institution *N* has function *F* if, in cases where the existence of *N* were threatened by some external factor, *N*’s having *F* would ensure that *N* continued to exist. How *N* actually evolved—whether its existence ever actually got threatened—is not relevant to its function. In this way, Pettit sees social functions as counterfactually grounded: what matters is how the institution would respond if its continued survival were called into question.⁵⁸

This new form of social functionalism certainly has much to recommend it. By shifting the focus away from the actual (selective) history of a social institution, Pettit’s account sidesteps all of the above problems concerning the absence of such a history for a large number of social institutions. On top of this, by focusing on what ensures that a given institution is buffered from threats to

54 See, e.g., Boyd and Richerson, *The Origin and Evolution of Cultures*; Henrich and McElreath, “Dual-Inheritance Theory”; Wilson and Gowdy, “Evolution as a General Theoretical Framework for Economics and Public Policy”; Heyes, *Cognitive Gadgets*.

55 Henrich, *The Secret of Our Success*; Nichols, *Sentimental Rules*; Kumar and Campbell, *A Better Ape*.

56 Pettit, “Functional Explanation and Virtual Selection”; Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens*.

57 Pettit, “Functional Explanation and Virtual Selection.” See also Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*.

58 Pettit, “Functional Explanation and Virtual Selection.”

its existence, Pettit's virtual selectionist account fits well to the major motivation behind social functionalism. As Pettit notes,

The tradition of thinking associated with the likes of Durkheim in the last century and Parsons in this is shot through with the desire to separate out the necessary and the reliable from the contingent and the ephemeral. The idea in every case is to look for the core features of a society and to distinguish them from the marginal and peripheral. Functionalist method is cast throughout the tradition as a means of providing "a basis—albeit an assumptive basis—for sorting out 'important' from unimportant social processes" (Turner and Maryanski [1979], p. 135).⁵⁹

However, that said, the account of Pettit also faces several problems that prevent it from being fully compelling as it stands.

First, the truth-functional evaluation of counterfactuals is generally very difficult. Would *Y* happen if *X* were to happen? There is no clear method known for assessing these sorts of claims.⁶⁰ This is problematic as Pettit's account requires us to know which of the relevant counterfactuals are true. Assuming the NCAA allows young athletes to obtain a college education they could not otherwise afford, what would happen if the number of NCAA scholarships became severely restricted (e.g., due to falling revenue at NCAA games)? Would people still attempt to join the NCAA—and thus, would the NCAA persist—or would they seek other career paths? Would alternative institutions (such as expanded minor leagues) arise that have similar benefits? How do we know?

Note that the issue here is again not that we *never* know how to evaluate counterfactuals.⁶¹ Rather, the point here is just that there are very *many* counterfactuals that we do not know how to evaluate. This matters, as it introduces a parallel problem to the "missing mechanism argument" for the historical versions of social functionalism: it makes Pettit's account too narrow to be useful. We would only rarely be able to say what the function of a social institution is. This does not make for a robust social scientific methodology.

Second, it is not clear which shocks a social institution needs to be protected from for it to have a given function. Requiring that an institution would be able to persist in the face of *all* shocks is too strong. If a new social institution—a professional second division sports league, say—appeared that also gave young athletes the funds and time to obtain a college education, it is not implausible that the NCAA might cease to exist. This, though, might not be

59 Pettit, "Functional Explanation and Virtual Selection," 300.

60 Stalnaker, "A Theory of Conditionals"; Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*.

61 Fodor, *The Theory of Content*.

seen to speak against the NCAA having the function to help young athletes obtain a college education they could not otherwise afford; after all, it may be precisely *because* the professional second division sports league co-opts this feature that it can push the NCAA out of existence in this counterfactual scenario. However, what determines the limits of the counterfactual circumstances to be considered when determining the function of *N*? Every answer to this question seems arbitrary. In turn, this would make functional ascription in the social sciences arbitrary too, and thus violate another key motivation behind social functionalism.⁶²

However, this does not mean that it is impossible to provide a compelling version of social functionalism. To do this, the function of *N* should be seen to be dependent on those features of *N*—if any—that increase the expected survival or reproductive success of *N* in its *current* sociocultural environment.⁶³ That is, the key idea of the account to be defended in what follows is that a social institution *N* has function *F* if it is *now* selected or sorted for *F*. More precisely:

Presentist Social Functionalism: Feature *F* of social institution *N* is (part of) the function of *N* if *F* makes it more likely that *N* will survive or reproduce in the current sociocultural environment.

To put this slightly differently, unlike Pettit's account, functional ascription is seen to lie in actual, not virtual, selection pressures. However, unlike in the historical version of social functionalism (derived from biofunctional accounts like those developed by Millikan), the focus here is on which traits are *adaptive*, not which are *adaptations*.⁶⁴ To understand this better, consider the key features of the account in more detail.

First, Presentist Social Functionalism groups together genuine selection (i.e., the heritable differential reproduction of social institutions) and mere "sorting" (i.e., the differential growth or persistence of social institutions). This is useful since (as noted earlier) it is not generally plausible to see social institutions as reproducing, but it is plausible to see social institutions as growing or surviving at different rates. So when it comes to social functionalism, the focus *should* be on the latter kind of process (though, as noted earlier, the former

62 See also note 43 above.

63 Pettit at times hints at the importance of the current adaptive pressures on a given social institution ("Functional Explanation and Virtual Selection"). However, these hints are not developed as they are here.

64 For functionalism in the biological and cognitive sciences, see, e.g., Millikan, *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories and Varieties of Meaning*. For more on the adaptation/adaptive distinction, see Sterelny and Griffiths, *Sex and Death*; see also Nanay, "Teleosemantics without Etiology."

need not be ruled out *a priori* either). Hence, the fact that social functions can be grounded in either “sorting” or genuine selection is made explicit on the present account.

Second, according to Presentist Social Functionalism, saying that *N* has function *F* is making a claim about what is true about *N* *now*. It is not making a claim about why *N* came to have feature *F*. Like Pettit’s account, though, this matches a key motivation behind social functionalism: to express what parts of society are its reliable, core parts.⁶⁵ Presentist Social Functionalism allows us to home in on those features of social institutions that make their survival or reproduction more likely—and thus are better able to identify the institutions that are the stable parts of society.

Third, according to Presentist Social Functionalism, the only counterfactual that matters to the evaluation of the function of a social institution *N* is this one: would *N*’s expected reproductive or persistence success decrease if it did not have *F*?⁶⁶ This is a much more restricted use of counterfactuals than what is found in Pettit’s account. In particular, we do not need to assess whether *N* with *F* would continue to exist in all (relevant) possible worlds. In this way, Presentist Social Functionalism can sidestep the major problems that befall Pettit’s account.

Fourth, since Presentist Social Functionalism does not use the history of a social institution to ground its function, it avoids the problems of the historically focused versions of social functionalism. On the one hand, Presentist Social Functionalism can allow the actual biocultural evolution of *N* to have been heavily influenced by chance. It just implies that *N*’s having *F* *increases* the expected survival or reproductive success of *N* *in the current environment*. It does not even require that *N*’s having *F* fully determines the survival or reproductive success of *N*: only that it is made *more likely*. On the other hand, the past existence of a population of varying institutions of the same type is not required here either. In fact, Presentist Social Functionalism does not even require the *current* existence of a population of different institutions of the same type. The question is just whether *N*’s having *F* increases its expected survival or reproductive success of institution relative to a (possibly) counterfactual version of *N* that lacks *F*.

Fifth and finally, the present account can still allow for malfunction. It is not like anything that *N* does is part of its function. Rather, only those features that contribute to its expected reproductive or survival success are part of this

65 See also Bigelow, “Functionalism in Social Science.”

66 Indeed, precisely the latter is at the heart of Nanay’s “Teleosemantics without Etiology” as well.

function. So, to see a social institution N (the NCAA) as having function G (to provide a space for the twenty-five members of the board of governors to get to know each other better and deepen their professional networks) might turn out to just be *wrong*; while G may indeed be a feature of N , unless G increases N 's expected reproductive or survival success (which is plausibly not the case when it comes to the NCAA), it is not its function. Indeed, G might *lower* N 's expected reproductive or survival success: networking among the members of the board of governors could make it harder for the NCAA to fulfill its true function (say, enabling college students to stay fit and healthy). If this is so, then if board of governors meetings are used for networking purposes rather than for finding ways to keep students fit and healthy (say), the NCAA is *malfunctioning*.

Now, it is important to note that in the background here—and of Presentist Social Functionalism in general—is the need for an individuation schema that determines what the relevant social institutions and their features are. Many things can impact the likelihood with which a social institution survives or reproduces, including the presence of other social institutions and various external features of the biosocial environment.⁶⁷ However, these do not necessarily become part of the function of a given social institution. Only if they are features of the institution could they be part of its function. This point also extends diachronically: it needs to be determined when a social institution remains the same social institution and when it becomes a new one. If institution N has feature F at time t_1 and a different feature G at time t_2 , is it still the same institution or a new one (e.g., if a company that solely produced consumer technology at t_1 also starts to provide consumer lending services at t_2 , does it become a bank)?

These, though, are familiar issues for all the relevant accounts of functional ascription (throughout the social, cognitive, and biological sciences)—and, indeed, the nature of evolution by natural selection in general.⁶⁸ Fortunately, for present purposes, it is not necessary to determine the right social institutional individuation schema; any reasonable approach can be used in conjunction with Presentist Social Functionalism.⁶⁹ That is to say, Presentist Social

67 For example, the appearance of the institution of fantasy football leagues can make the institution of the NFL more likely to spread and persist. I thank an anonymous referee for useful discussion of this issue.

68 Bertrand, "Proper Environment and the SEP Account of Biological Function"; Laland, et al., "On the Breadth and Significance of Niche Construction"; Odling-Smee, et al., *Niche Construction*; Dawkins, "Extended Phenotype—but Not Too Extended" and *The Extended Phenotype*; Griffiths, "Review of 'Niche Construction'"; Griffiths and Gray, "Developmental Systems and Evolutionary Explanation."

69 Bertrand, "Proper Environment and the SEP Account of Biological Function"; Griffiths and Gray, "Developmental Systems and Evolutionary Explanation."

Functionalism should be seen to be built on an existing theoretical foundation that individuates society into different institutions with various features.⁷⁰

In this way, it becomes clear that functionalism is an important theoretical approach to the social sciences that can be given a compelling gloss: Presentist Social Functionalism. Importantly also, this gloss is nonnormative. It is not the case that the function of a social institution needs to be focused on a human good. Rather, anything that contributes to its expected survival, growth, or reproductive success can be part of this function. (Indeed, the fact that the function of a social institution is not tied to a human good is something that all of the major versions of social functionalism—historical, counterfactual, or presentist—have in common.) With this in mind, it is possible to return to the question of the characterization of the nature of IC.

3. INSTITUTIONAL CORRUPTION: A PRESENTIST SOCIAL FUNCTIONALIST ACCOUNT

With the presentist theory of social functionalism in the background, a novel characterization of IC can be developed that satisfies all of the desiderata laid out in section 2 and that has several further useful beneficial implications. In particular, given the plausibility of Presentist Social Functionalism, IC can be characterized as follows:

Institutional corruption: The extent to which the actions of a set of agents prevent a social institution N from fulfilling its function F , where F is the set of features of N that increase N 's expected survival or reproductive success.

Several aspects of this characterization are important to note.

First, it is worthwhile making explicit how this characterization satisfies all of the desiderata laid out in section 1.

It is *general*: The present characterization of IC applies to all kinds of social institutions and is not restricted to the context of representative democracy (in the US or more broadly). This is due to the fact that the characterization is teleological and sees IC as the thwarting of the purpose of a social institution. Hence, it applies to any social institution

⁷⁰ Of course, as is standard in non-foundationalist sciences, Presentist Social Functionalism can also be used to help bootstrap such an individuation schema. The point here is just that such a schema is separate from Presentist Social Functionalism—though the latter also brings out the importance of determining such an individuation schema for the study of institutional corruption.

with a function—which includes the prison system, the press, as well as the NCAA, corporations, or even such social institutions as the Mafia (among many others).

It is *spelled out*: The present characterization of IC is based on a well-grounded theory of the function of social institutions. Indeed, this is one of the two reasons why the defense of Presentist Social Functionalism in the last section is important here. This defense ensures that the characterization of the functional ascription of social institutions underlying IC has a strong theoretical basis and is not left to the intuitions of the relevant researchers.

It is *nonnormative*: The present characterization of IC does not inherently see the purposes of social institutions as moral and, therefore, does not see IC as inherently normative. In this way, the present account of IC avoids the challenges faced by Miller’s “Institutional Corruption” account: by making the ethical status of IC dependent on the details of the relevant institution, it can do justice to the ethical complexity of IC.

The fact that the above characterization of IC satisfies all of these desiderata further matters, as it shows that the notion of institutional purpose can be spelled out in a coherent manner and thus form the basis of a compelling account of IC. In this way, the present account can respond to some of the worries that have been levied against teleological accounts of this phenomenon more generally: namely, that its core notion—institutional purpose—cannot carry the weight it needs to.⁷¹ As the defense of Presentist Social Functionalism makes clear, it is possible to provide a cogent grounding to the notion of institutional purpose and thus to use the latter as a foundation for a plausible account of IC.

This leads directly to the second important point to note about the present characterization of IC, which has also already been hinted at but deserves to be spelled out in more detail. This point concerns the fact that this characterization fits a general theoretical framework in the social sciences. This is the second major reason why the defense of Presentist Social Functionalism from the previous section is important here. Unlike the account of Miller—which is also spelled out in detail—the present account is not disconnected from functionalism in the social sciences more generally.⁷² On the contrary, the present theory of IC is a natural extension of this general account of functionalism in the social sciences.

71 See, e.g., Rothstein and Varraich, *Making Sense of Corruption*.

72 See Miller, *Institutional Corruption*.

This not only gives this theory of IC a solid theoretical backing, but it also allows the easy extension of existing findings from the social sciences to the further investigation of IC. In particular, we do not need to establish the function of social institutions anew but can rely on the work already being done in the social sciences. For example, we can rely on whatever theory of the function of corporations ends up being the most plausible one (whether it is the shareholder-benefit one or the stakeholder-benefit focused one), and we do not need to derive this function from scratch in the context of the investigation of potential IC. This way, we may also find instances of IC that we would have otherwise overlooked (for example, concerning the IC of corporations).

The third point to emphasize about this characterization of IC is that it does not require that the cause of the corruption is a systematic, intentional, immoral, or illegal action. Institutions can get accidentally corrupted, and they can get corrupted for moral or legal reasons. On the present account, IC is like the corruption of (electronic) data. If a flash drive (or printed out spreadsheet) falls into a river, it is likely that the data on it will become unusable and functionless. This is so whether the flash drive (or printed out spreadsheet) was intentionally, legally, or morally—or not—thrown into the river, and whether or not the data on the drive (or table) were moral or legal in content.

This is thus another way in which the present account does justice to the complexity of IC: it may sometimes require censure, it may be ethically problematic but excusable, it may be ethically neutral, and it may even be ethically permissible or even required. In this way, the present account can bring out what is common to all cases of the undermining of institutions (including corrosion, rebellion, and accidental prevention of function) without being forced to morally evaluate all of them in the same way. In turn, this places the normative and moral considerations squarely where they can do the most good: in the details of the relevant case.

For example, if someone acted in ways that undermined the function of the Nazi Party, then that may have been morally required. Indeed, even if this undermining of the Nazi Party is the result of mere laziness on the part of the relevant agent, it is still IC, and it is still (*pro tanto*) morally good—though the person engaging in it need not deserve praise.⁷³ For the same reason, the source of the corruption need not be systematic: just one action—such as the distribution of fliers in front of the University of Munich—can (partly) undermine the Nazi Party and can thus count as IC.⁷⁴ (In a similar way, the data on a flash

73 Fricker, “What Is the Point of Blame?”; Friedman, “How to Blame People Responsibly.”

74 For this reason, Sophie and Hans Scholl can be praised for corrupting the Nazi Party. (We can also praise someone for sabotaging—corrupting—a bomb so that it fails to go off and cause harm.)

drive or printout can be corrupted with one-off behaviors—throwing it into a river—as well as with systematic actions, such as the careless treatment of the drive or piece of paper that, over time, leads to it getting dirty and unreadable.)

It is important to emphasize that the generality of the present account is one of its features, not one of its bugs. Of course, it is possible to make finer distinctions and focus particularly on certain forms of IC—say, ones that are internally, intentionally, and systematically caused and that target immoral institutions.⁷⁵ However, this does not mean that there is not also value in providing a general account of the phenomenon. On the contrary, the generality of the present account is one of its key novel benefits.

In particular, by not using the sources and consequences of the undermining of an institution to characterize the nature of IC, it becomes possible to bring together what many superficially different social phenomena have in common.⁷⁶ For example, the Russia-based social media manipulation in the run-up to the 2016 US presidential election and the Trump administration's allegation of wide-scale voter fraud in the aftermath of the 2020 election differ in numerous particulars. The former is driven by sources external to US democratic institutions, the latter by sources internal to these institutions. The cases may also differ in intention and systematicity. However, there is also something important that is shared by these cases: they both (partially) prevented US democratic institutions from functioning properly, and they did so in similar ways—by increasing polarization and spreading propaganda.⁷⁷ This is theoretically valuable to bring out when studying democratic resiliency and the ways to improve it. For example, it suggests that similar responses may be useful in both cases, such as ensuring that the electorate is as well informed about the facts as possible. The fact that the present account of IC can bring out these communalities is thus one of its theoretical advantages.

Similarly, it is a major benefit of the present account of IC that it brings out clearly that societies with many instances of IC are less likely to be stable. These are societies many of whose institutions are made less likely to survive

75 As is done by, e.g., Ferretti, "A Taxonomy of Institutional Corruption"; Miller, *The Moral Foundations of Social Institutions*; Ceva and Ferretti, "Political Corruption, Individual Behaviour and the Quality of Institutions."

76 This is similar to other generalizing accounts. There are good reasons to often distinguish viral from bacterial diseases. However, there are also good reasons to often treat these subsets of the same overarching phenomenon: an infectious disease. This allows us to find common causes (e.g., the presence of other infected individuals) or common treatments (isolation, hydration, etc.).

77 In fact, this is shared with other cases, such as attempts to weaken the dictatorship in North Korea.

or reproduce. Importantly, this is so independently of whether the corruption is systematic, intentional, or moral. On the present account, people living in highly corrupt societies—whatever distinguishing details there may be between these societies—have in common the fact that they need to deal with highly unstable institutions (i.e., institutions that face major barriers to their survival and reproduction). This brings out a key common feature of highly corrupt societies that other accounts would miss: whatever the details of their causes, a conglomeration of IC leads to institutional instability.

Importantly also, this is not a trivial inference. Rather, the present approach ties IC to the prevention of an institution fulfilling its function (and not to, say, duplicitous violations of democratic egalitarian ideals) and then spells out the function of an institution to those of its features that give it a current biocultural selective advantage. In this way, the present account can *explain* why societies with much IC are less likely to be stable—this follows from the present characterization of IC. Furthermore, this is not something that is, at least on the face of it, the case for the characterizations of Thompson, Warren, Lessig, or Miller, which would not lead us to expect much IC to go with much social instability: undemocratic and immoral societies can be stable.⁷⁸

Here, it is also noteworthy that not every crime or misdemeanor will count as an instance of IC on the present account. For example, ordinary theft need not block the function of an institution, and neither need all cases of nepotism: the stealing of a bike need not have any implications for the institution of private property to survive or persist.⁷⁹ The present theory thus provides a general, encompassing account of the phenomenon without being either trivial or forced to accept contentious moral or metaethical propositions, as is true of other theories in the literature, such as that of Miller.⁸⁰ The present account allows us to separate the analysis of the presence and consequences of IC from its causes and moral status. This gives us more degrees of freedom in tackling this phenomenon in a way that is both feasible and compelling.

The fourth point to note about the above characterization of IC is that the source of the corruption need not be an individual human being but can also be a collective agent, like a corporation or foreign government. In particular, the characterization recognizes that an institution can be prevented from fulfilling

78 Thompson, *Ethics in Congress*; Warren, "Political Corruption as Duplicitous Exclusion"; Miller, *Institutional Corruption*; Lessig, *America, Compromised*.

79 Miller, *Institutional Corruption*, 110–15. However, it is important to note that this will depend on the details of the case. If theft becomes sufficiently common, every additional theft could well make it harder for an institution of private property to persist. See also the discussion of graded IC below.

80 Miller, *Institutional Corruption*.

its function by the concerted effort of a number of human beings.⁸¹ For example, if a social network eases the spread of political misinformation, this can prevent the public press from fulfilling its function.⁸² Importantly, this is so even if no individual can be seen as the source of this IC: owners and employees of the social network may not have been responsible themselves for furthering the spread of the misinformation—and may even have attempted to block this spread. Indeed, no individual user need have had any kind of significant impact on this spread. However, with sufficient numbers of users and sources of misinformation, misinformation can spread far and quickly, merely as the result of the structure of the institution of the social network.⁸³

In this way, the present account diverges from those presented, e.g., by Ceva and Ferretti: IC need not reduce to the corruption of an individual agent.⁸⁴ To begin with—and as noted earlier—the IC need not be immoral, and even where it is, it need not result from the actions of a morally culpable individual. More importantly, though, the corruption need not even be analyzable into the intentions, ends, and behaviors of individual humans, as is assumed by Miller.⁸⁵ Rather, it can be the upshot of a genuinely collective agent.⁸⁶ This matters, as it opens up a wider class of sources of IC and can thus help the study and prevention of the latter.⁸⁷ In particular, the present characterization does not need to get involved in debates about the plausibility of individualism in the social sciences but can work with whatever is the upshot of these debates.⁸⁸ This is especially important due to the fact—noted earlier—that there is good reason to think that the holism/individualism debate may call for a pluralist solution that allows for both individualism and holism to sometimes be the best approach to a given social scientific issue.⁸⁹ In this way, the present account's openness

81 This is a point also stressed by Miller in *Institutional Corruption*—though, as noted below, the latter is committed to spelling out this kind of collective agency in individualist terms. See also Vergara, *Systemic Corruption*.

82 See also Miller, *Institutional Corruption*, 304–9.

83 O'Connor and Weatherall, "Modeling How False Beliefs Spread."

84 Ferretti, "A Taxonomy of Institutional Corruption"; Ceva and Ferretti, "Political Corruption, Individual Behaviour and the Quality of Institutions"; Ferretti and Ceva, *Political Corruption*.

85 Miller, *Institutional Corruption*.

86 List and Pettit, "Group Agency and Supervenience."

87 See also Vergara, *Systemic Corruption*.

88 See, e.g., Elster, "The Case for Methodological Individualism"; Kincaid, "Open Empirical and Methodological Issues in the Individualism-Holism Debate"; Jones, "Methodological Individualism in Proper Perspective"; Epstein, *The Ant Trap* and "Why Macroeconomics Does Not Supervene on Microeconomics."

89 Ruiz and Schulz, "Microfoundations and Methodology."

to collective agency and social holism frees it from the constraints imposed by the individualistic commitments of Miller, Ceva, and Ferretti.⁹⁰

This deepens a point that was mentioned in section 1 already. Without a doubt, there is much complexity in the debate surrounding the question of whether all cases of IC reduce to cases of individual corruption. The same is true for the debate as to whether instead of a teleological account of the phenomenon, a deontological one (say) should be provided. The present treatment cannot be seen to address (or even to attempt to address) all the issues here. However, the point to note is that the present, teleological and non-individualistic account has several key benefits. In particular, it is coherent, it fits well to research in the social sciences elsewhere, and it brings out novel social patterns (such as the greater likelihood of instability in countries with many social institutions whose purposes are undermined). In turn, this means that good reasons need to be provided for giving up these benefits. If an individualistic, moral, and non-teleological account of IC is to be shown to be superior, it would have to be made clear that it has benefits, the sum of which is greater than that of the present account.

The final point to note about the present account of IC is that it is the first one in the literature that explicitly makes IC a matter of degree. This is important, as actions can prevent *some*, but not all, aspects of the function of a given social institution, and they can merely make the fulfillment of that function *harder*. For example, if one particular postal worker, out of tiredness, delivers mail a little late one day, then while this technically is a form of IC, it is a very weak one: the function of the postal service is undermined, but only negligibly so. By contrast, if postal workers are being so overworked—e.g., because of employment cuts—that they *all always* deliver mail late, then this is a more serious case of IC: the function of the postal service is seriously undermined. Finally, if the postmaster general orders the employees *not* to deliver mail, then that would be a very strong case of IC: the function of the postal service is fully undermined.⁹¹

The present account can easily handle this. It allows for IC to occur on a bigger or smaller scale: the greater the corruption, the more functions of an institution are undermined, and the more strongly they are undermined. The present account thus provides the right kind of framework with which to handle the complexity of the phenomenon. There is no need to make a call

90 Miller, *Institutional Corruption*; Ferretti, “A Taxonomy of Institutional Corruption”; Ceva and Ferretti, “Political Corruption, Individual Behaviour and the Quality of Institutions”; Ferretti and Ceva, *Political Corruption*. Of course, this then raises a host of further questions concerning the ways in which collective agents can be morally responsible for their actions, etc. However, these questions can be left for a future occasion.

91 Note also that these cases span different sources—individual actors and collective actors—as well as different degrees of systematicity and culpability.

as to whether something definitely is or is not a case of IC; instead, we can allow something to be more or less of a case of IC. This is helpful, as existing accounts have tried to handle this fact by requiring genuine IC to be the result of actions that have the “tendency” to undermine the function of an institution.⁹² This, though, then requires an account of what such a tendency consists of and when it exists. In turn, this is not easy to do and may be somewhat arbitrary. It is clearer to describe the phenomenon as it is: namely, as leading to more or less of an undermining of the function of the relevant social institution. This is exactly what the present account does.

An example may make this clearer. Consider FIFA. This association may have a number of functions, including growing the sport of football internationally, advocating for fair play, and ensuring it is accessible to everyone. It has, however, been alleged that various actions have led to some of these functions being undermined; for example, its ability to advocate for fair play may have been hindered by some of its officials taking bribes for sponsorship contracts or the awarding of tournaments.⁹³ However, others of its functions—such as its ability to grow football internationally—may not have been so undermined. In this case, FIFA can now more clearly be stated to be *partially* institutionally corrupted, rather than us having to decide whether the actions of FIFA officials have, or have not, *fully* corrupted the organization.⁹⁴

All in all, therefore, the present theory of IC sees it as the outcome of actions that partly or fully prevent a social institution from fulfilling its function—i.e., which partially or fully negate those features of the institutions that increase its expected reproductive or survival success. This theory is theoretically well-grounded in a general account of social functionalism and has several further benefits—especially in doing justice to the inherent complexity of the phenomenon.⁹⁵

4. CONCLUSION

The characterization of and response to IC has come to be recognized as a major task of the social sciences (broadly understood). In this paper, I advocate for a

92 See, e.g., Miller, *Institutional Corruption*; Thompson, *Ethics in Congress*.

93 See, e.g., Jennings, *Foul!*

94 Of course, these actions may also have been *individually* corrupt.

95 Another benefit of the account is that it allows for a novel take on US campaign finance laws: instead of just considering individual corruption as a limitation on free speech and campaign finance, it becomes possible to consider some forms of campaign finance as being limited due to their systemically corrupting character (e.g., of the voting process). Further analysis of this goes beyond the bounds of this paper, though. I thank an anonymous referee for useful discussion of this issue.

novel theory of this phenomenon. According to this theory, IC is the result of an individual or collective agent acting in ways that prevent a social institution from partially or fully fulfilling its function. In turn, the function of a social institution is spelled out in line with the currently most well-developed account of social functionalism in the literature: Presentist Social Functionalism. Presentist Social Functionalism sees the function of a social institution as those of its features that increase its expected reproductive or survival success in the current sociocultural environment.

This theory of IC is a useful addition to the literature. It is teleological and thus general, fully spelled out, and non-normative. In particular, it ties IC to the thwarting of the purpose of a social institution and provides a solid theoretical grounding to these purposes, but it does not require them to be based on normative considerations. In this way, it situates the study of IC in a wider functionalist approach toward the social sciences and does justice to the complexity of IC—both when it comes to its inherent nature and its moral evaluation.

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