



December 4, 2008, Convo Hour  
Foley Green Room

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## Benevolent Skulduggery

Is corruption ever justified? Typically, theoretical analysis of the concept of corruption has focused on its definition: what counts as corruption, and how can it be distinguished from morally permissible forms of political conduct. But just as we can distinguish between the question “what counts as a lie?” and the question “are lies ever justified?”, so too we can distinguish between the question of what counts as corruption and the question of whether such conduct, though presumptively impermissible, may nevertheless be warranted or excusable in certain situations. This is the question I intend to explore in this chapter. I employ as a stalking horse a hypothetical case envisioned by Michael Walzer in his seminal article on moral dilemmas in public life. Faced with the choice of accepting a shady deal to facilitate one’s chances in an election with vital public policy consequences, Walzer asks, is it wrong for the candidate to make the deal, or wrong to fail to make it? I begin by sketching the contours of the classic corruption case as Walzer presents it. Next I try to situate this case against an array of comparable cases, seeking to establish what features the classic case possesses that persuade Walzer of its permissibility. Finally, I evaluate Walzer’s argument for the justifiability of corruption.

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