

In *Of True Religion*, as well as throughout much of his work, Augustine focuses on three human vices that lead to evil, lust, pride, and curiosity. This essay focuses on political bribery — which can be defined as “corrupt solicitation, acceptance, or transfer of value in exchange for official action.”— and its connection to these vices of lust, pride, and curiosity. I will show that they lead to universally flawed and corrupt systems of government.

Before we look into the reasons political bribery is so evil, we need to first review its nature, so we can why it is so problematic. First of all, it is important to know that Political Bribery undermines the integrity and effectiveness of governments. It does this by removing transparency, accountability and fair representation of the interests of citizens.

Second, it is important to note the extreme costs of this sort of corruption. Political bribery leads to significant losses for both individual countries and the world as a whole. ¹ To put this into perspective this 25% amounts to an astonishing 5% of the global GDP being lost to corruption.² Given the worldwide GDP is estimated to be around 112.6 in 2023, then we lose

¹ 1. UN Development Programme, “The Cost of Corruption,” Medium, December 5, 2022, <https://undp.medium.com/the-cost-of-corruption-a827306696fb#:~:text=Of%20the%20approximately%20US%2413,are%20related%20to%20public%20spending>.

² Mauro, Paolo, Paulo Medas, and Jean Marc Fournier. “The True Cost of Global Corruption – IMF F&D.” IMF, September 1, 2019. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2019/09/the-true-cost-of-global-corruption-mauro>.

around \$5.63 trillion annually to corruption.^{3 4 5 6} It is important we keep in mind bribery is not only something that affects less developed and developing nations, but something that is, and has always been universal.⁷

Corruption is quite prevalent across all societies, because it comes about from three vices that are shared by all people.

Lust is one of these vices. An example of Lust can be seen in the people working at Airbus.

In 2020, Airbus' executives agreed to pay fines of \$3.9 billion after an investigation into their large bribes to state-run airlines.⁸ The sales team and middle management made these bribes in an effort to secure contracts. This was able to happen without any alarm from the executive team, comptroller, financial team, accounting department, or mid level employees. The people at Airbus aren't imbeciles, they knew their actions were wrong, but they bribed clients anyways, while the rest turned a blind eye. Lust—which is the desire for bodily pleasure according to Augustine—is seen here. Individuals at the company wanted more sales, because more sales inherently leads to more money in salaries and bonuses, and growth in general. For executives

³ PopulationU. 'Countries by GDP.' PopulationU. Accessed July 21, 2023. <https://www.populationu.com/gen/countries-by-gdp>.

⁴ The World Bank Group. 'GDP (current US\$).' The World Bank. Accessed July 21, 2023. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>.

⁵ <https://www.worldometers.info/gdp/gdp-by-country/>. This website contains data on GDP

⁶ I used the percents and the GDP numbers to calculate the math for everything.

⁷ Kara, Hakan. 'Corruption: An Overview of Its Definition, Causes, Effects, and Solutions.' IntechOpen. Accessed July 21, 2023. <https://www.intechopen.com/online-first/84674>.

⁸ Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs. 'Airbus Agrees to Pay over \$3.9 Billion in Global Penalties to Resolve Foreign Bribery and ITAR Case.' The United States Department of Justice. Accessed July 21, 2023. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/airbus-agrees-pay-over-39-billion-global-penalties-resolve-foreign-bribery-and-itar-case>.

and management specifically, the better the company does, the higher their salaries and bonuses. It also allows the executives and sales teams to spend more on expensive dinners, bodily experiences, and future bribes. As shown, Lust played a major role in the case of the bribing state officials.

Pride also intertwines with the Lust (Greed) here. Pride is a desire for power, status, and dominance over others. People who were not directly involved in the sales of the Airbuses, and are also not executives, are also affected by pride in this situation. What keeps them quiet is not a desire for more pride, but a fear of a decrease or loss of their current level of pride. They fear that if they speak up they might lose their job. This would lead them to having to shamefully explain that they no longer have a job. This is an extremely strong example of how even without striving to beat others, but just desiring to maintain social status among peers, individuals can still be affected by pride.

We also see here Airbus' desire to influence the decision makers to manipulate the process of acquiring airplanes in their favor. This is also related to pride. In certain economies people like to claim this is a cost of doing business, and necessary to cut through red tape, but it is not a cost of doing business, and so claims like these are wrong. If neither Boeing nor Airbus had been willing to provide a bribe, one of the companies airplanes would have still been selected since airlines need airplanes regardless of bribery. To return back to this desire to influence, we can see this is connected still to the notion of pride. They may be a connection to the pursuit of bodily pleasure. This is because better the company does, the more the executives can spend on expensive dinners, lavish parties, and exorbitant expenses. In the end though, these expensive dinners, lavish parties, and exorbitant expenses are more fully related to pride, as

when eating gold on an expensive meal for example, no taste is added so there is no additional satisfaction related a lust for such a food, except the social aspect.

There is also an intertwined desire for both curiosity and pride. The team at Airbus was attempting to find if they could get away with each evil deed, and if they could continue to do so. The team of people at Airbus were aware bribing could improve their position, the executives and sales people making the bribes were curious if they could pull it off. Then having pulled it off once they were further curious and excited by this curiosity. Spurred by this and the pride of getting away with the crime, they desired to see if they could do it again. Then the more they got away with the crime, the worse the loss in pride would be if they got caught, which made it even more unlikely as time passed that anyone involved would be willing to admit to the crimes. Overall this demonstrates a strong, tangled, and overlapping relationship between lust, pride, and curiosity, which allowed the evil deeds to develop and multiply, while also preventing anyone from correcting the evil deeds.

Another important aspect of understanding that which leads to evil outcomes is the decision process of those who take bribes. Bribery is universal. Bribes have been given and taken throughout human history. One example of someone who have taken a bribe is Susan Rice, the former national security advisor of the United States as an example. The information being shared is from a primary source that works for a government organization. This source gave non-public knowledge, and specifically asked not to be identified. Susan Rice is not being singled out, this is just an example of the universal human tendencies towards lust, pride, and curiosity. They can be found in all individuals, but it is easier to see them come to light in those in

positions of power and influence. This is due to the fact that people are far less able to see these vices in themselves due to some strong cognitive biases, so providing a modern, drastic example helps provide a more accessible example.⁹

In terms of Susan Rice and taking bribes, Susan Rice, would hold important meetings related to matters of military importance. In many of these meetings, men in suits would walk into the meeting and hand her envelopes of cash. An example of one of the meetings that occurred was a meeting to determine if the United States should authorize the sale of predator drones to a few Autocratic nations with human rights abuses. The deal was faltering until men brought cash in multiple envelopes.

In terms of Mrs.Rice's motivations in this case, it is quite clear there was pride involved. Mrs. Rice is valued at around \$40 million today.¹⁰ Clearly, there was a desire to have more money, not just a sufficient amount, but more than others. A desire to maintain or even raise social status. Also, there was clearly some sadistic form curiosity, accepting bribes in front of others, seeing if they would rat you out and become a whistleblower at major risk to themselves, their jobs, and even their lives, or if they would just watch you continue to break the rules. Another way of putting this is that this 'experimentation' with corruption may have given her a thrill and sense of superiority attempting to find out and eventually realizing she had the power to bend or break rules without repercussions.

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¹⁰ Zen12. 'Susan Rice Net Worth Revealed: How Did She Make \$50M Working In Obama's Government?' Steemit. Accessed July 21, 2023. <https://steemit.com/news/@zen12/susan-rice-net-worth-revealed-how-did-she-make-usd50m-working-in-obama-s-government>

It is harder to argue a direct connection to Lust in this case, but it is very common in other cases of accepting these bribes. In my time in Miami, I met a man who sold kitchen equipment to restaurants who told me he once bribed the head chef of a kitchen to buy equipment from him by providing him a “hooker” (prostitute) and keeping the man’s wife and young children occupied with a new flat screen tv. The man who received the hooker, clearly was lustful and curious. There could even be an argument for pride, with a desire to assert dominance over his wife, the prostitute, and his children. Even more interestingly though, and less obvious is the mans family. Their curiosity for the new flat screen tv, with “better resolution” and “higher quality colors”, which they had not previously experienced allowed them to be distracted.

In conclusion, it is apparent that Augustine's triad of vices - lust, pride, and curiosity - have a significant role to play in the widespread occurrence of the evil that is political bribery. Both on the giving and receiving end, these vices motivate the actions of individuals, often leading to the erosion of institutional integrity and a significant loss of public resources. From Airbus’ desire to assert dominance in the industry and the thrill of bypassing rules, to Susan Rice's hunger for power and social status, to the head chef's immoral pursuit of bodily pleasures, these examples bring clearly forward the pervasiveness of lust, pride, and curiosity in the realm of corruption (political bribery). The manifestations of these vices may change, but the end result is the same - the corrosion of ethical boundaries and the growth of inequality and unfair practices.

Despite this abhorrent reality, recognizing the vices that drive such actions can provide valuable insights for anti-corruption strategies. Addressing these underlying sins is crucial for

promoting integrity, accountability, and fairness in human systems. Whether we are trying to enhancing transparency, strengthen regulations, or promote education, we should focus on attacking these vices and turn towards virtues that contribute to a more equitable and just society.

In the end, confronting corruption is not just about the systems and regulations, but about addressing the our shared vices that lie at the heart of these behaviors. As Augustine understood, we must look inward and address these base sins to make the world a better place.