

How power corrupts

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Hubris is a serious and recurrent problem associated with the processes by which individual, group and organisations simultaneously create meaning. It leads to 'mission drift', pain and loss of learning. The history of politics is replete with thinking about hubris. In particular we have very good histories of the ancient world (dealing with leaders such as Tiberius and Nero). Corruption by power is associated with four groups of symptoms:

1. Aggrandisement, disinhibition, inflation of self, *narcissistic* outlook
2. Growing contempt for subordinates who may increasingly be perceived to be in the way, even treated cruelly, belief in one's own superiority and superior knowledge of the common good
3. Separation from the organisation, especially a physical separation which results in the isolation of leaders and a progressive inability to learn
4. Total lack of awareness that there is any problem.....this lack of insight is not strategic or pretence (making therapy well nigh impossible).

There is a shutting down of perception making the excessively powerful 'blind and deaf' (Ghandi) or 'limiting their outlook' (Dewey).

Corruption by power involves both individual and collective information processing systems. Cognitive neuroscience has shown that the genius of the human mind is in its capacity to simplify and select information using 'schema' (speeding up cognition by using simplifications, shortcuts and heuristics such as bias) and to automate the learning process (so, like driving, we become unaware of our decision-making processes).

Organisations use similar strategies to deal with information overload, one of which is choosing a leader - who can deliver a decision on time. Organisational corruption is a cost of hierarchy. A hierarchical organisation loses its ability to learn and adapt to its environment when it simplifies knowledge processing by choosing a leader to 'take over' organisational knowledge processing.

Largely missing from neurobiological accounts of hubris is the corruption of followers noticed by Rousseau and Machiavelli. Such corruption leads to chronic dependency (Seligman's 'learned helplessness' which might be thought of as collectively beneficial free-riding) and blind obedience (a dangerous ceding of cognition and ethics to a leader).

Tackling the social problem of *controlling* leaders requires a vigilant citizenry (Machiavelli's 'ferocious populism') but the ease with which corruption slips beneath awareness leads to *forcibly* removing tyrants. There is only one effective defence against corruption by power: democracy, especially the division of power associated with liberal democracy. On an individual level our only defence is the constant hauling into consciousness of the almost-certainty that each of us is likely to be oppressing someone without knowing it. We need to *keep* reinventing the wheel.