

Hypocrisy

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Examples of hypocrisy: Paradigm and non-standard cases

What is hypocrisy? We are all familiar with some obvious cases. For example, an evangelist preaches passionately that homosexuality is a sin worthy of hellfire but is discovered to be a regular patron of gay prostitutes. Another paradigm that many might cite is this: A politician gets elected by promising to curb big banks, eliminate poverty, and provide universal health care but once in office enriches himself by catering to the big banks and rejecting all policies that would aid the poor and the sick, all while continuing to pretend he is a champion for the down-trodden. Classic examples exist in many cultures in which members of one social or religious class present themselves as virtuous and show contempt for lower classes on the basis of a universal standard that if fairly applied would condemn them more than those they look down upon. Additional examples of people or literary characters who are widely regarded as hypocrites include Dickens' Uriah Heep, Moliere's Tartuffe, Shakespeare's Iago, Hawthorne's Dimmesdale as well as certain portrayals of Oliver Cromwell.

A person may be called hypocritical in limited contexts without being judged to be a hypocrite overall. For example, a generally honest and straightforward person might sometimes offer an argument that would be deemed hypocritical (in part because the premises she deceptively asserts are ones that she knowingly continues to condemn in other contexts) even though she is not generally regarded as a hypocrite. In this case, we can suppose, hypocrisy is not a persistent vice or character flaw (see CHARACTER; VIRTUE); her hypocritical argument under stress was a lapse from her normally virtuous behavior. In a similar way, perhaps, we may distinguish between being a liar and telling a lie on a particular occasion. Telling a lie can be a rare lapse or even a justified or excusable deviation from one's normal behavior, and if so this would not be sufficient to justify "He's a liar!" when describing the agent's character in general. (By contrast it only takes one act of murder to earn the label "murderer.") Hypocritical acts are what we expect from hypocrites; they are how they often, characteristically behave over time. The closely related questions, then, are "What is a hypocrite?" and "What is it to act hypocritically (like a hypocrite in relevant respects)?"

In at least the most obvious cases, hypocrites act in ways that display a double standard (see RULES, STANDARDS, AND PRINCIPLES) by which they condemn others but not themselves for doing what is "the same thing." What the hypocrite does may be different in many respects but it is "the same" in those features that the hypocrite professed or presumed to be relevant in condemning others. Typically in acting hypocritically we are trying to present ourselves as

better than those we condemn. We pretend or act as if we accept and follow a standard while criticizing or looking down on others for not meeting it, even though in fact we seriously fail to live up to the standard ourselves. Hypocrites characteristically violate their own professed principles or unfairly hold others to norms that they fail to apply to themselves. Sometimes, of course, there are good reasons why there should be different specific norms for people in different roles and contexts, for example, for generals and privates, doctors and patients, Presidents and journalists. This is not a “double standard” in the pejorative sense insofar as there are relevant differences that justify the different standards by a higher principle that is applicable to all. The hypocrite’s double standard, however, is unjustified and usually expresses a baseless desire to be or appear superior to others and better than one is. Unsurprisingly, hypocrites are not so much feared as distrusted, despised, and dismissed (see TRUST). Hypocritical arguments are commonly condemned less on their merits than for the way they display a false posture and undermine the credibility of those who give them.

These general remarks seem to apply to most cases of hypocrisy, including the familiar cases with which we began. The hypocritical evangelist, for example, uses one standard when preaching and a quite different standard in his private life. He pretends to be superior to those he condemns for homosexuality but he can cite no relevant difference between them and himself. He will be criticized by many for appealing to an unwarranted norm in his sermons, but independently of that his hypocrisy lies in the disparity between what he practices and what he preaches. Similarly, our cynical politician declares allegiance to one standard

when trying to get elected but follows flagrantly inconsistent principles when actually making public policy. When campaigning he pretended to have aims and principles that would make him look good to voters but his subsequent behavior belies the appearance. Finally, as suggested in biblical texts, the privileged hypocrites who look down on the lower classes tend to see their superiority as grounded in religious doctrine and moral principle when in fact their doctrines and principles, if applied without bias, would reveal their claims to superiority to be baseless self-serving arrogance.

An intention to deceive (see LYING AND DECEIPT), an awareness of using a double standard, and an aim to appear superior are features of hypocrites (and hypocritical behavior) so common that they may be thought to be essential or defining features, but are they really? Let's consider two of these features in more detail.

First, often hypocrites pretend in order to deceive others, but is this always so? Suppose a person sincerely believes he is living up to a high standard and condemns others for failing to do this, but in fact (though he did not realize it) the standard has implications that condemn him above all. Here we may think of the Pharisees in the Bible whom Jesus calls "hypocrites." Some of them may merely pretend to follow their code and secretly cheat, but the main fault for which Pharisees are criticized is that they openly affirm a religious code of conduct for themselves and others and present themselves as superior for following it strictly when in fact they interpret and apply it in a narrow self-favoring way because they fail to appreciate its universal message. This could be willful self-deception

(see SELF-DECEPTION), but it need not be. For example, imagine a newly enlightened Pharisee who finally realizes how his life has violated the high norms that he professes because he has focused exclusively on strict adherence to minor aspects of the code. When he then confesses “I have been a hypocrite,” we need not doubt the sincerity or truth of what he says, despite the fact that he had no intention to deceive himself or others about his supposed moral superiority. Or, again, consider a self-described liberal husband who long professed belief in gender equality in marriage but in his last years, by his own account, came to see that he regularly subordinated his wife. In his earlier life self-awareness and intent to deceive were absent, but it seems clear that there was hypocrisy.

And, second, do hypocrites necessarily present themselves as “better” than others? Typically, the hypocrite presents himself as better or superior in some respect that is relevant to the context, but this not necessarily moral superiority. The pretext may be merely that one is suitable for a group in which one wants to be accepted. Imagine an outsider trying to fit into a religious group that is united in their practice of publically confessing their sins. In order to be accepted he loudly bemoans his made-up record of grave sins, confessing as if he were the lowest of sinners. He is not falsely claiming to be better than others or better than he is, but he may still be considered a hypocrite. He does present himself as more worthy of inclusion in the group than he is, but not as a better person.

Historical conceptions of hypocrisy

The word 'hypocrisy' apparently derives from the Greek '*hypokrisis*', which meant playing a part on stage. The Latin equivalent was later used in a pejorative sense by Cicero (1991: 79; 122-3), who regarded it as a form of dissimulation in which someone knowingly acts immorally in ways that are meant to give the appearance that he is a virtuous person, and also in ecclesiastical writings, which condemn outward religious expression without inward devotion. Aquinas (1964: II-II:110-11) (see AQUINAS, SAINT THOMAS) regarded hypocrisy as a form of lying in which the hypocrite, for purposes of attaining gain or glory, intends to deceive others through actions or objects that signify him to have a character that is better than the one he takes himself to have. The sin of hypocrisy, for Aquinas, is either mortal or venial depending on whether the hypocrite's aim in affecting virtue is vicious or not.

Although explicit discussions of hypocrisy do not figure prominently in the history of moral philosophy, many of the main historical figures make more than passing reference to it. Hobbes (1839: 165; 96-7; 1994: 3.42.29, 88) (see HOBBS, THOMAS) primarily criticizes the form of hypocrisy in which a subject of a commonwealth engages in sedition, rebellion and regicide, in pursuit of her own interests, while pretending that these actions are instead motivated by moral or religious commitments that supersede her Sovereign's authority. Hobbes calls hypocrisy of this sort "double iniquity" because it involves injustice in breaking the law as well as injustice in deceiving others about the fundamental moral requirement to obey the laws of a legitimate Sovereign.

Hume (1983: 28, 60, 95; 1998: 4.3, Appendix 2.1) (see HUME, DAVID) describes a form of hypocrisy in which a person falsely affects a personal trait that is widely regarded as a virtue, such as beneficence, earnestness or religious zeal, in order to manipulate, deceive or control others for his own selfish purposes. Hypocrites, according to Hume, typically know that they are putting on a disguise of this sort, but religious hypocrites, in particular, often lack full awareness of their true motives for appearing pious. Rousseau (1997: 2.27) (see ROUSSEAU, JEAN-JACQUES) argues that hypocrisy, in the form of pretending to have certain personal qualities so as to secure esteem or power for ourselves from others, is an effective but vicious way of expressing our vanity and ambition and of responding to our material dependence on those we cannot control by force (Grant 1999).

And Kant (see KANT, IMMANUEL) describes several types of hypocrisy in his ethical and religious writings. Hypocrisy of one sort occurs when a person pretends to respect the moral law but actually prioritizes his self-interest above his moral commitment or acknowledges the moral law out of fear, personal advantage or other natural desires (Kant and Gregor 1996: 6:484; Kant et al. 1998: 6:43; Kant and Gregor 2007: 5:72, 171). Another sort of hypocrite is someone who deceives himself or others for his own purposes by feigning servility in the form of affected sighs, showy acts of devotion or ascetic self-punishment (Kant 2001: 27:731; 2007: 7:273). And, Kant discusses inner hypocrisy, which exists when a person professes to himself that he possesses certain convictions, such as certainty of God's existence, even though his reason

tells him that he cannot or does not have those convictions (Kant et al. 1998: 6:189-90).

Other historical figures have also noted some ways in which hypocrisy can have good features or good effects . Feigning piety, fidelity, humanity, religious devotion and sincerity, according to Machiavelli (1985: 68-71) (see MACHIAVELLI, NICCOLÒ), is a necessary means for princes to pursue their political interests when force, coercion or associative ties are not enough to secure the support of other princes or their own subjects. Civility, politeness, manners and other social virtues, according to Mandeville (1732: 200-02; 1988: 146, 85) (see MANDEVILLE, BERNARD), are often forms of hypocrisy that are essential for a well-functioning society. Fashionable hypocrisy of this sort is pretending to have a reasonably good character simply to avoid ostracism and embarrassment and to be amenable to others (see CIVIC VIRTUE). Hegel (1991: 2.129-40) (see HEGEL, GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH) thought that one redeeming quality of deceiving others into thinking we are better than we are is that, in doing so, we at least recognize that there are objective principles of right. Nietzsche (1976: 525; 1996: 39-40) (see NIETZSCHE, FRIEDRICH) argued that firmly maintaining a set of commitments while pretending to affirm different ones at least involves an admirable fortitude to resist abandoning one's principles as a result of a common tendency to come to internalize the convictions that we pretend to have. And Henry Sidgwick (1981: 490) (see SIDGWICK, HENRY) argued that, by the standards of his utilitarian theory, government officials should

sometimes act as if they accept certain commonsense moral standards even when they secretly reject and violate them on utilitarian grounds.

Why is hypocrisy a vice?

As we see, there are variations in historical conceptions of hypocrisy as well as in the familiar cases of hypocrisy discussed in the first section, but in order to consider why hypocrisy should be considered a moral vice, we can work with a tentative summary of its central elements. Let us suppose for now that hypocrisy is the intentional or unintentional application of an unjustified double standard or different judgments to oneself and others that makes oneself falsely appear superior to or in a more advantageous position than others.

Understood in this way, why is hypocrisy a vice and why are hypocritical actions typically wrong? Often, the hypocrite intentionally deceives others about her own supposed virtue or moral uprightness in contexts in which honesty about such matters is important, such as in matters of religion, morality, loving relationships and politics. Typically, a hypocrite lacks integrity (see INTEGRITY) because she fails to live by the principles that she affirms and professes. Hypocritical actions are usually motivated by vicious forms of arrogance, false pride, greed, lust for power and selfishness. And such actions often exploit or harm those who are deceived (see EXPLOITATION; HARM). In some non-standard cases of hypocrisy, the hypocrite fails to sufficiently scrutinize her own motives and intentions; she may also be negligent about the mistaken impressions about herself that she unintentionally gives to others.

Is hypocrisy distinctively vicious and are hypocritical actions distinctively wrong? Philosophical discussion suggests several explanations to consider. First, consequentialists may point to bad effects that hypocrisy can have on the welfare of those subject to it and even to the hypocrite himself, though these consequences will vary from case to case and do not seem to explain what is distinctively vicious or wrong about hypocrisy.

Second, some may argue that paradigmatic hypocrisy is incompatible with an ideal of mutually-respectful relations that we arguably should strive to instantiate and follow (see RESPECT). On this view, when we relate or engage with other people, we should aim to do so sincerely and in good faith; we should try to approach other people with reason and argument; we should regard and treat them as full and equal members of the moral community (see EQUALITY); and our goal should be to find terms that all would and actually do accept. By deceptively presenting herself as morally better than she is, taking unfair advantage of others by using an unjustified double-standard, and masking her true desires and intentions, the hypocrite not only fails to satisfy the requirements of this ideal herself but she also tends to undermine its widespread realization (see Wallace 2010).

Third, hypocrisy also distinctively conflicts with the basic moral idea of 'universality' (see UNIVERSALIZABILITY) that some philosophers think lies at or near the heart of ordinary moral thought and practice. In its thinnest form, all moral principles, no matter how specific and context-sensitive they may be, are universal in the sense that they are meant for everyone yet the hypocrite who

fails to apply to herself a moral principle that she openly expects others to follow is unjustifiably treating herself as special. The idea of universality has also been expressed in more robust forms, such as Kant's suggestion that the fundamental mark of moral wrongness is when one's own policy about how to act conflicts with an imagined universal law that would allow or require everyone to act in the same way. Many kinds of maxims or personal policies fail this hypothetical test, according to Kant, but what is special about the hypocrite is that she actually manifests this conflict in her own will, by both affirming a universal law yet making it her policy to violate it. For further discussion of morality as 'meant for everyone', see Baier (1958) and Hare (1952), as well as Kant's Formula of Universal Law (Kant et al. 2002: 4:420-1) (see HARE, R.M.; CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE; KANTIAN PRACTICAL ETHICS).

And, fourth, hypocrisy often involves not just taking advantage of others, but doing so by playing on their morally virtuous traits. In particular, a morally good person, it seems, tends to admire, trust and form personal bonds with others on account of their evident moral virtue. By feigning moral goodness, the hypocrite exploits these admirable second-order traits in others for her own selfish purposes. Through hypocrisy a vicious person publicly "pays tribute to virtue" but at the same time privately mocks it by treating it merely as a means to his own ends.

Are Hypocritical Actions Always Wrong?

As with other vices, hypocrisy can be condemned on many different grounds, especially in the paradigm cases, and it is perhaps a mistake to search for one single factor as “the reason” why it should be avoided. But we may still ask whether these considerations are always sufficient? Is it always vicious to act hypocritically? Is being a hypocrite a good thing in some contexts?

To avoid confusion, we should perhaps acknowledge that the words “hypocrite” and “hypocritical” are commonly understood as pejorative words, expressing moral disapproval, and so to call someone “a virtuous hypocrite” or his pretense “justified hypocrisy” would sound odd. If so we may reframe the question by asking whether it is sometimes justified to behave like hypocrites in significant respects, for example, falsely presenting oneself as living by standards and holding beliefs at odds with how one secretly acts and thinks. Reflection on cases suggests that this may be justified in certain contexts when necessary to hide from unjust oppressive treatment, protect oneself from debilitating shame or ostracism, improve one’s own character, or avoid being rude on social occasions. For example, a Jew may be justified in pretending to be Christian in order to escape the wrath of the Nazis. A woman from an observant Muslim family who has become an atheist liberal feminist may justifiably fast for Ramadan, while hiding her true beliefs, to avoid alienating her parents and community. A repentant racist may justifiably present herself as wholeheartedly endorsing moral and social equality in the hope that doing so will help her to reform her attitudes and character. And, a diplomat may justifiably

exchange the expected pleasantries, courtesies and signs of respect with a leader whom she thinks is ignorant, foolish and himself a hypocrite.

[Cross-references]

AQUINAS, SAINT THOMAS; CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE; CHARACTER; CIVIC VIRTUE; EQUALITY; EXPLOITATION; HARM; HARE, R.M.; HEGEL, GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH; HUME, DAVID; INTEGRITY; KANT, IMMANUEL; KANTIAN PRACTICAL ETHICS; LYING AND DECEIT; MACHIAVELLI, NICCOLÒ; MANDEVILLE, BERNARD; NIETZSCHE, FRIEDRICH; RESPEC; ROUSSEAU, JEAN-JACQUES; RULES, STANDARDS, AND PRINCIPLES; SELF-DECEPTION; SIDGWICK, HENRY; TRUST; UNIVERSALIZABILITY; VIRTUE

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[Suggested Readings]

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