

The Nature of Hypocrisy, Part I

This essay is part one of two. Part two is [here](#).

by [Christopher DeGroot](#) (September 2018)



House of Caiaphas, Gustave Doré, 1875

I should find
Some way incomparably light and deft,
Some way we both should understand,
Simple and faithless as a smile and shake of the hand.

—Eliot

Everybody is quick to condemn the politician for his latest blunder. That person is rare who is equally severe on himself. For where we condemn another, we easily give ourselves a pass, especially if it is only others, not ourselves, who suffer from our actions. Then, when others reproach us, our actions may be interpreted in terms of our own interests. In other words, we *misinterpret*, and so, in our own minds, we are off the hook.

For our greatest values are our own good and self-preservation; ultimately, therefore, we tend to care much more about realizing our own ends than we do about practicing good moral conduct. What is more, when others mistreat us, we usually know it: we *feel* wronged. Our mistreatment of others works rather differently. We may not know—or may delude ourselves about—what we have done. Thus, the object of mistreatment, the person who has been wronged, is much more likely to be aware of the evil than the doer himself.

There are many doctors who, though they took an oath to do no harm, and though they are decent enough moral agents as people go, still regularly subject their patients to all sorts of [needless tests](#) and even [needless surgeries](#) because it is profitable to do so. For the same reason, they prescribe needless and often fatal opioid drugs. They are aware, certainly, that morally all this is not right. Still, in their order of value, that awareness does not outweigh their desire for financial gain. It is not uncommon in lawsuits for the attorneys who represent the opposing sides to deliberately drag out their exchanges, knowing that by so doing each is increasing his billable hours. Every year people cheat the IRS not because of a desire to do wrong, but because they would rather keep their money than pay taxes, even though the latter is required per a social contract in which they are willing participants. All this and more happens every day, every hour of every day, and yet the people who do these things do not consider themselves to be bad characters, and again, in many cases, they are not, relatively speaking of course.

A man professes ardent commitment to something, but then his circumstances change and suddenly he feels hindered. So much,

then, for the earlier endeavor; he will not abide it now.

Purpose is but the slave to memory,
Of violent birth, but poor validity,
Which now, like fruit unripe, sticks on the tree,
But fall, unshaken, when they mellow be.
Most necessary 'tis that we forget
To pay ourselves what to ourselves is debt.
What to ourselves in passion we propose,
The passion ending, doth the purpose lose.
The violence of either grief or joy
Their own enactures with themselves destroy.
Where joy most revels, grief doth most lament.
Grief joys, joy grieves on slender accident.
This world is not for aye, nor 'tis not strange
That even our loves should with our fortunes change.

—Hamlet 3.2

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Finally, the moral life, simply put, is a lot of work. We must *will* the good even when we stand to benefit from not doing so, nor is there a lack of enticing, rewarding evil in the world. A series of perpetual tests, the moral life amounts to an enormous burden, and it is an exceptional character indeed who does not frequently fail to live up to his principles. No wonder saints are so rare. No wonder, too, we are natural and incorrigible hypocrites, as it were.

Not that we all recognize this. For what makes this aspect of our nature so difficult to perceive is the fact that we spend so much of life feigning to be what we are not, and feigning belief in what we think we should believe (or in what we want others to believe we believe), that much of the time we do not even realize we are pretending: As an effect of habit the false becomes our norm, and we live in and by hypocrisy, like the squid who changes color to abet its hunt.

That often what appears to be benevolence is merely a mask for egoism—this, of course, is not news to men. La Rochefoucauld, with his immortal *Maxims*, remains the greatest authority on this enduring subject. Bernard Mandeville, author of *The Fable of The Bees: or, Private Vices, Public Benefits*, is another fine classical writer here. Then there are Dr. Johnson's essays, Nietzsche's essays and aphorisms, and finally, in our time, the works of Robin Hanson and other researchers on "hidden motives," a very rich subject when it comes to human hypocrisy. Mankind has a preternatural skill for deceiving others, for affecting an appearance of virtue for selfish reasons. It is only fitting, then, that the wisdom of the species should attest to the nature of hypocrisy. "This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me," we read in Mark 7:6. Thus Christianity commands us to resist the insidious desire to deceive others, to make ourselves appear just in their eyes, so that we might get an advantage in some way: "Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 6:1).

Our egoism is ever acute at perceiving the misdeeds of others, and unless we expect to gain from not doing so, we probably won't scruple to make them grounds for reproach, especially if we ourselves are the evil's object. It is as if, were it not for our self-interested awareness of others, we'd have no knowledge at all of moral evil, so undisturbed are we by our own errors, and so casually forgiving of them. Says King Lear:

Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand!
Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back;
Thou hotly lust'st to use her in that kind
For which thou whipp'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener.

Even charity furnishes profound evidence of the pull, of the undertow of hypocrisy. Our nature, indeed, is so attached to the falsity and the wickedness that lie beneath the surface of our virtuous appearances that it is not uncommon to feel a poisonous resentment and a fierce pride *because* we have received the charity of others. It is humbling to receive charity, but as we learn from Dostoevsky and his close student Knut Hamsun, much of the time pride and humility are one. Humbled by those who have done us good, we may resent them because to be humbled can seem a wound to our pride. And for their part, humble persons, as Pascal pointed out, may be proud to be so. In short, wholly sincere and pure moral conduct proves to be elusive even among those who are exceptionally moral; there is often a subtle hypocrisy, very difficult to notice, mixed in with our praiseworthy behavior. The only surprising thing about hypocrisy occurs when people realize *they themselves* are guilty of it (as opposed to others), something that does not always happen, to say the least.

Just before he died Wittgenstein wrote: "God may say to me: 'I am judging you out of your own mouth. Your own actions have made you shudder with disgust when you have seen other people do them.'" Wittgenstein had a rather difficult personality, and there is debate about whether he died an unbeliever, but what is striking here is the unusual honesty of the man, reflective of the deep moral seriousness for which he was known, and for which people regarded him with awe. Why are we all not like this? Why are most of us so untroubled by, so blind to our own hypocrisy, as Wittgenstein was not? Of course, we want to be hypocrites, and so we are. The question is why we want to be so. It is easy to answer, as people now do in regard to everything, that hypocrisy serves a certain evolutionary function. But very useful though this adaptive form of self-interest assuredly is, would it not be of much greater evolutionary value for us to be a lot more honest and consistent, a lot more exacting and rigorous than we are? Yet perhaps that is just too much for man, or for most of us, anyway. Perhaps Wittgenstein's anguished grasp of the nature of hypocrisy is part of that darker general awareness which only men like himself can know.

Their dawns bring lusty joys, it seems; their evenings all that is sweet;
Our times are blessed times, they cry: Life shapes it as is most meet,
And nothing is much the matter; there are many smiles to a tear;
Then what is the matter is I, I say. Why should such a one be here?..

Let him in whose ears the low-voiced Best is killed by the clash of the
First,
Who holds that if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the
Worst,
Who feels that delight is a delicate growth cramped by crookedness, custom
and fear,
Get him up and be gone as one shaped awry; he disturbs the order here

—Hardy

Believers, of course, attribute hypocrisy to original sin. Being an atheist myself, I do not accept that explanation, which for me raises an insuperable difficulty, namely, the deep implausibility of the God that comes down to us from the Jewish and Christian traditions. Observation shows that believers, on average, are no less given to hypocrisy than the rest of us, and as with mankind in general, much of their moral pretense is motivated by fear: they'd do more evil than they do were it not for the fear of consequences.

Schopenhauer, in a letter to Goethe of November 1815, observed that

almost all the errors and unutterable follies of which doctrines and philosophies are so full seem to spring from a lack of . . . probity. The truth was not found, not because it was unsought, but because the intention always was to find again instead some preconceived opinion or other, or at least not to wound some favorite idea, and with this aim in view subterfuges had to be employed against both other people and the thinker

himself. It is the courage of making a clean breast of it in the face of every question that makes the philosopher.

It is evident to me, both from introspection and observation of others, that on the whole truth means much less to us than belief. This preference can be seen from the widespread tendency, which we all display at least some of the time, to blur the distinction between truth and belief in practice. Belief is primarily a functional and purposeful thing, a matter of what we can *do* with what we believe to be true, or necessary, or useful, or whatever, and when it comes to their most important values—be they religious, political, or cultural—it is not much different with how people tend to conceive of truth: like belief, it is a matter of human wishes, which, God help us, we would have not be in vain.

Here, as Schopenhauer notes in this letter which may have influenced the Nietzsche of "[The Prejudices of Philosophers](#),"* even great thinkers are no exception. A philosopher presents himself as a disinterested seeker after truth, and his philosophy, we are to believe, is the result of his disinterested inquiry. In fact, his thought turns out to be a vehicle for his most valued and—crucially—unavowed prejudices. Schopenhauer's master Kant, for instance, put his philosophy in the service of an *a priori* desire to preserve the possible truth of Christianity, and as the later philosopher once wrote, Kant's philosophy is rather like a man who spends an evening at a ball dancing with a masked lady, whose identity is all along the Christian religion.

That even philosophers, for all their abstract rigor and relative disinterestedness, are hypocrites in thought (and in deed too, of course, just like all other humans) is testament to the profound power and ubiquity of this vice. Although, we may reasonably believe that hypocrisy is also a virtue in many instances, self-interest and survival being our paramount goods, which are frequently connected to behaviors that may only appear but not actually be wholly altruistic or self-sacrificing.

*One can readily imagine Nietzsche himself writing the sentence: "It is the courage of making a clean breast of it in the face of every question that makes the philosopher." And it was this courage that Nietzsche admired most in Schopenhauer. Indeed, even after Nietzsche became highly critical of him, he continued to praise Schopenhauer for this virtue.

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