The Nature of Hypocrisy, Part II

This essay is part two of two. Part one is here.

by Christopher DeGroot (October 2018)

Nocturne, Bruce Herman, 1982

The surest way to resist hypocrisy, this most insidious of vices, is by being honest with ourselves. But it follows from

the frailty of our nature—exacerbated, in some instances, by events that befall us which are beyond our control and which produce corrupt habits of thought—that this is one of the hardest of virtues. Extra vigilance is needed here because our natural egoism, and concomitant desire to shirk the ugly truth about ourselves, makes consistent self-honesty a task we frequently want to evade. As I put it earlier this year in an essay for *The Imaginative Conservative*,

> reason deftly furnishes ad hoc justifications for what people want. The moral character of a thing may be only partially acknowledged, if at all, and it takes only moments for the mind to interpret behavior in a false but agreeable light. Nor will the memory necessarily impel one to confront the ignored truth.

Says Emerson: "Power ceases in the instant of repose; it *resides* in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the *darting* to an aim." Now power here means the will to life itself, and grim though it may be, what advances life need not be anything true or good in a moral sense. Accordingly, as anyone can learn from history, and from watching the news and paying close attention to the world, the vast majority of us, at bottom, are not so good or moral anyway. Yet, as in the corporate world, where everyone pretends to be a "good team member," so in life generally: everyone takes care to appear better than he is, lest the show not go on.

> Our sins are stubborn, our repentance faint;
> We take the highest price for our confession,
> Happy once more to wallow in transgression,
> Believing vile tears will cleanse us of every

taint.

—Baudelaire

William Hazlitt had a trenchant understanding of hypocrisy, as of many other things, and his essay “On Good Nature” (1816) is worth quoting at length:

> Good-nature, or what is often considered as such, is the most selfish of all the virtues: it is nine times out of ten mere indolence of disposition. A good-natured man is, generally speaking, one who does not like to be put out of his way; and as long as he can help it, that is, till the provocation comes home to himself, he will not. He does not create fictitious uneasiness out of the distresses of others; he does not fret and fume, and make himself uncomfortable about things he cannot mend, and that no way concern him, even if he could: but then there is no one who is more apt to be disconcerted by what puts him to any personal inconvenience, however trifling; who is more tenacious of his selfish indulgences, however unreasonable; or who resents more violently any interruption of his ease and comforts, the very trouble he is put to in resenting it being felt as an aggravation of the injury. A person of this character feels no emotions of anger or detestation, if you tell him of the devastation of a province, or the massacre of the inhabitants of a town, or the enslaving of a people; but if his dinner is spoiled by a lump of soot falling down the chimney, he is thrown into the utmost confusion, and can hardly recover a decent command of his temper for the whole day. He thinks nothing can go amiss, so long as he is at his ease, though a pain in his little finger makes him so peevish and quarrelsome, that nobody can come near

> him. Knavery and injustice in the abstract are things that by no means ruffle his temper, or alter the serenity of his countenance, unless he is to be the sufferer by them; nor is he ever betrayed into a passion in answering a sophism, if he does not think it immediately directed against his own interest.

> On the contrary, we sometimes meet with persons who regularly heat themselves in an argument, and get out of humour on every occasion, and make themselves obnoxious to a whole company about nothing. This is not because they are ill-tempered, but because they are in earnest. Good-nature is a hypocrite: it tries to pass off its love of its own ease and indifference to everything else for a particular softness and mildness of disposition. All people get in a passion, and lose their temper, if you offer to strike them, or cheat them of their money, that is, if you interfere with that which they are really interested in. Tread on the heel of one of these good-natured persons, who do not care if the whole world is in flames, and see how he will bear it. If the truth were known the most disagreeable people are the most amiable. They are the only persons who feel an interest in what does not concern them. They have as much regard for others as they have for themselves. They have as many vexations and causes of complaint as there are in the world. They are general righters of wrongs, and redressers of grievances.

"Nine times out of a ten" is a characteristic overstatement, and there are several others, but even so there is a lot of truth in this darkly ironic passage. To see this, consider for instance Jennifer Finney Boylan's *New York Times* op-ed on February 27 of this year. While bemoaning the "oppression" of

all non-heterosexual persons, the transgender Boylan claims that Ryan T. Anderson's *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment,* "suggests that transgender people are crazy, and that what we deserve at every turn is scorn, contempt and belittlement." To the disinterested reader, Anderson's book clearly deals with the philosophical contradictions of transgenderism, and what the man actually believes is that transgender persons are *delusional* in the medical sense of the word. Nowhere does Anderson say that "transgender people are crazy" in some demeaning sense, nor that what they "deserve at every turn is scorn, contempt and belittlement." Boylan's misrepresentation is however revealing, and an apt example of Hazlitt's hypocritical notion of good nature. For her, Anderson's arguments and intentions are of no account. *She* takes the subject personally, so it is perceived only in that light, and so it is often with homosexuals and transgender persons (though of course not only them). Anxious about their own selves, they immediately become defensive and distort other people's views. The "cisgender" or "homophobe" is "targeting" them; let him be punished accordingly. (Indeed, the will to punish is ever the most reliable thing in the moral domain.)

On the other hand, with respect to the interests or "rights" of the religious, this same group, these same aggrieved non-heterosexuals, will be utterly indifferent unless they themselves are affected: for instance, by a believer's refusal to bake them a wedding cake. When well-meaning James Damore argued that some of the gender disparity at Google was not necessarily an injustice, but a result of men and women having different interests and aptitudes, he was—predictably—attacked by feminists, including those at the corporation itself. It made no difference that Damore's belief had the support of a vast empirical literature. Google's yes-mam CEO saw fit to fire him, and the engineer became an object of scorn in the

Hawthorne novel that is America. Like most of the biggest corporations, and like nearly all colleges and universities, Google hires employees *because* they are women. This is obviously unfair. Gender tells us absolutely nothing about a person's competence, nor should better qualified men be denied a job simply because they do not have a vagina. But of course, this is of no concern to feminists in general, comfortable hypocrites that they are. Without a selfish interest, their "good nature" is not called forth. Excepting a very few feminists, the specific aims and ends of men, however true and just, do not matter to them.

One could go on in this vein. Suffice it to say, Hazlitt is right. What is considered a good nature, in many cases, is nothing but a base and lowly and endlessly self-interested character. Incurious about and indifferent to whatever does not affect him personally, he will say, if asked, that he supports gay marriage, because his superficial impressions, so mindful of what the crowd thinks, tell him that that is the "good" thing to do. A generation before, he would have said homosexuality is wrong, and perhaps quoted some "expert" to that end, as he might do now to support the very doubtful view that one is "born that way." Neither does he understand that one can believe homosexuality is wrong, or rather, a perversion in the strict sense of the word, without intending malice toward homosexuals themselves. He understands *everything* in a personal sense because for him *there is no other sense*.

For the worst of this *type*, morality itself is nothing but an acting job, a petty game of imitating the majority, and even if he has the intelligence to notice that they are wrong, his cowardly nature will not allow him to give voice to that disagreement, let alone act on it. He is a bureaucratic soul,

a fitting member of committees. Easily ruffled, he does not wish to let things go, but is inclined to have “a dialogue” about them. When it comes to weighing in on any “issue,” he is inclined to ask himself that most vital question: What would other people think? Nor does he, being so averse to independent judgment, wish to go against any group, even as groups themselves are determined by regard for public perception. Thus his say or vote is determined by what he thinks others think, and what he thinks they expect of him. In all this, the strongest motive is fear: “Dare I to be—*myself*? No! I cannot.”

In complement to Hazlitt’s ironic notion of good nature, in which there is so much hypocrisy, there is this truth: that disagreeable persons, the types “who regularly heat themselves in an argument,” are often better from a moral point of view than their more likeable fellows. Hazlitt himself was a quarrelsome man, but like many such (Dr. Johnson, Carlyle, Empson, Wittgenstein), he cared much more about the true and the good than most people do, and no doubt has himself in mind in the second paragraph that I have quoted above. The interests of this sort of “bad nature” are not reducible to their own well-being. On the contrary, they are the rarest of individuals—*they will sacrifice themselves for principle’s sake*. For that they may well be despised, and truly they are lucky if they do not meet with a worse fate. Since they cannot but appear as enemies to many, theirs is typically an unhappy lot. In some cases, they are the most moral of persons, being not only good, albeit rather trying, but also the least hypocritical. Still, to *live* thus is not good news for them. Indeed, a prophet regards his own fate as something terrible. He has the most important truth to convey, but the experience itself is a sentence to ostracism at best, and to persecution at worst.

Alas, more and more, false good nature appears to be the post-Christian morality of these States. Fundamentally manipulative, it ensures that egoistic ends can be pursued so long as the puny souls pretend to value equality, diversity, inclusion, and the like cant. It is, in fact, a recipe for sociopathy, of which there should be a lot more, were it not for lack of nerve. During a job interview a man declares his "can-do attitude," and in like manner a student fills his university statement of purpose with warm and fuzzy sentiments concerning "the rights of undocumented immigrants," or of "marginalized peoples," or of God-knows-what. More than "success" is at stake, because any non-conformist may easily become an occasion for mankind's will to punish, which in many instances functions, I believe, to discharge frustrations and aggressions that have nothing to do with the particular object, although certainly this process happens unconsciously.

Meanwhile, in a comical irony, all this pretending, this whole masquerade of moral sensitivity goes on while an increasing number of people fail to practice even the most basic common courtesy. It has been my frequent experience on crowded rush hour trains to find someone sitting in the middle of a three-seater occupying the whole thing, his belongings on each side, oblivious of his surroundings as he plays his electronic game or sends text messages. Nor can the conductors be counted on to tell the fellow to move his things, despite the signs all around informing one not to occupy the other seats. When I was younger, I used to believe people when they said they would do something, because past experiences had shown the expectation to be justified. It is no longer so. Today, unless I *already* know someone to be reliable, I find it's well to regard him with skepticism, indeed with a touch of cynicism and distrust. So, in response to someone having said he will do something, it is prudent to reason: "Well, we will see when the time comes around whether he still has some *use* for me; if so, he

will probably be motivated to keep his word.”

When traditions weaken, as in our “progressive” time, there is a lack of exacting moral authority to make and keep men and women accountable. So it happens that, where in the past a hypocrite would have been made to answer for his conduct, today he may receive an easy pardon. This, of course, is in keeping with the general attitude towards misconduct. Thus the poor criminal, because he is poor, is assumed not to have known better, like a dog that could do no other than bite. Likewise, the hustler who swindled his elderly neighbor, pretending to want to assist her with a household chore in order to steal her expensive jewelry, is not actually guilty. No, he who made another a victim is himself a victim, of poverty, that is.

Such sentiments become ever more common since, absent traditional forms of thought, evaluation, and judgment, the way is clear for the leveling democratic spirit to take over. Sheer affect reigns, marked by blind pity on the one hand and cheap resentment on the other.

> Look and see yourself here,
>
> You proud, vain, ignorant century…
>
> All puffed up, calling it progress,
>
> While educated men, whose bad luck
>
> Was to be born in this time,
>
> Flatter your foolishness in public,
>
> Even as, in private among themselves,

They make laughingstocks of you.

But I won’t take such shame to the grave:

No, I shall tell the entire world

The scorn for you that burns my heart.

—Leopardi

Then, since both disinterestedness—crucially, an affair of a person’s character *and* his intelligence—and the ability to make sense of the enormous complexity of things are uncommon, while bias and downright perversity are not at all, the increase in unaccountability and the acceptance of lies, excuses, and evasions are constantly reinforced by intimates, who in their corrupting sympathy readily incline to people’s distorted perspectives and perceptions. Indeed, generally speaking, much of what is called love and friendship entails the mutual support of sustaining illusions and delusions which are hardly commendable in a moral sense. Morality amounts to huddling together in blankets of rationalization, noxious and yet thought to be otherwise: “Well, I guess it just wasn’t meant to be.” “No, definitely not. Besides, you *deserve* better!”

Closely related to hypocrisy is the common tendency to consider ourselves victims when it is actually we who are culpable. How often does it happen that, rather than recognizing his own bad behavior, a person interprets events in such a manner as to suit the view that others have done *him* wrong! I get a certain pleasure, both analytical and psychological, from watching the television show *Judge Judy*, because it is fascinating to see people time and time again

refuse to admit the correctness of the judge's rulings, even though she has shown them to be true beyond dispute. Such deep injustice is evidently intrinsic to human nature; surely any close and honest observer, if he reflects on his own conduct through the years, and on what he has seen of others, must concede that willful misperception and misrepresentation, like lying, cheating, and stealing, are common, casual, perfectly ordinary things: so much so that there are many—not so observant and not so honest—who hardly notice these phenomena, since they have become so familiar. Thus, there are countless romantic relationships in which, although each person has harmed the other in some way, each sees only his suffering, never his wrongdoing. The back-and-forth is incoherent, and therefore fruitless. Quite amusing! Yet also sad. For how much suffering and loneliness results from our selfish blindness.

Having said all this, let me be clear that we should not make too much of hypocrisy. Nietzsche's insight, that the lie is essential to life, is confirmed by ample research, and many of the parts we play are not only harmless but beneficial. For we should experience endless discomfort and disruption in our relations if we didn't incessantly say things like "nice to meet you," "let's do this again," and "thank you for calling." In "Concealment and Exposure" (2002),Thomas Nagel imagines what life would be like without all our nifty pseudo-moral games.

> A and B meet at a cocktail party; A has recently published an unfavorable review of B's latest book, but neither of them alludes to this fact, and they speak, perhaps a bit stiffly, about real estate, their recent travels, or some political development that interests them both. Consider the alternative:

B: You son of a bitch, I bet you didn’t even read my book, you’re too dimwitted to understand it even if you had read it, and besides you’re clearly out to get me, dripping with envy and spite. If you weren’t so overweight I’d throw you out the window.

A: You conceited fraud, I handled you with kid gloves in that review; if I’d said what I really thought it would have been unprintable; the book made me want to throw up—and it’s by far your best.

At the same party C and D meet. D is a candidate for a job in C’s department, and C is transfixed by D’s beautiful breasts. They exchange judicious opinions about a recent publication by someone else. Consider the alternative:

C: Groan . . .

D: Take your eyes off me, you dandruff-covered creep; how such a drooling incompetent can have got tenure, let alone become a department chair, is beyond me.

While such candor is wonderful comedy, it would be highly unpleasant to endure. In Nagel’s words, “The trouble with the alternatives is that they lead to a dead end, because they demand engagement on terrain where common ground is unavailable without great effort, and only conflict will result.” So we need certain conventions of insincerity and to overlook much that we know about others. But ah, there’s a problem here. Conditioned by therapy culture, now running over

forty years strong, we twenty-first century good team members find it quite difficult not to express our feelings. Despite the special values of politeness and reticence, our attitude is captured by the line in the old song: “Feelings, nothing more than feelings.” Poor fellows! for neither do we have the hardiness for conflict, which arises the more we assert ourselves, “*hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère*!”

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