PHIL 640: Hypocrisy

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November 8, 2021

Notions of hypocrisy

First big question: What is hypocrisy? Dover lists a number of distinct things that go under the label, not all of which naturally fit together.

1. Violating the *Do unto others* rule vis a vis forgiveness.
2. Not living up to our own ideals.
3. Not examining our own behaviour the way we examine others.
4. Engaging in self-flattering sanctimoniousness.
5. Criticising others for things that we do.

The first, third and fifth all involve comparisons between what one person does and how they relate to others. That, at least, seems to be at the heart of the philosophical literature. (And of Dover's paper.) So let's ignore the second and fourth. Hypocrisy is something about treating self and others differently. But what is the different treatment? Here are a bunch of questions.

- Must it involve a perfect parallel?

For some writers, it does. It involves, for instance, blaming others for misdeeds that one does not blame oneself for. Dover's core notion does not. It involves criticising others for an action one does. But some of her characters do criticise themselves for that action. Some don't, and she has less to say than you might like about whether that matters.

- Must it involve action towards others?

For some writers, hypocrisy involves a public action, like criticising or blaming. For others, it suffices to have a private attitude towards actions by others that one does not have towards oneself.

- Is it no longer hypocrisy if you apologise/self-blame/atone for the wrong?

This may follow from the answer to the parallel question. But there is an interesting issue that charges of hypocrisy feel less forced against people who acknowledge their own wrongdoing.

- Is the relevant public action criticism or blame?

This feels like a big deal, and a lot of the noise here comes from running them together. Any plausible view of blame will have it be something stronger than criticism.

- Empiricial question: Does the person who sincerely disapproves of their own actions, and criticises themselves as harshly as they criticise others, get labeled a hypocrite in normal discourse? I'm really not sure.

Law and Standing

One running theme in the readings is the idea that we should take the notion of a moral law seriously. And just as in secular law only certain people have standing to bring legal cases, maybe in moral law the same applies. And one way to lose standing is to be guilty of the same sins one accuses others of.

This notion of standing feels very suspicious. For one thing, the moral law/secular law analogy can, I think, be taken too seriously. For another, the whole field of standing is one of the worst areas of secular law. So I don't know that we should be going out of our way to bring it into moral law.

There are also a bunch of things different people in the readings say about standing that feel like they are talking at cross purposes.

- Fritz and Walker think that it is something that follows from equality of persons, but which can be defeated by hypocrisy. This seems wrong twice over. For one thing, it suggests that only persons have standing to blame. And that's false. Institutions can blame, pets can (and do!) blame, maybe even algorithms can blame. For another, they end up with a kind of 'finkish' standing, where a person allegedly has standing to do something, but if they did it, they would lose that standing. This seems like a useless theoretical device.
- Lippert-Rasmussen has a more interesting take. He thinks standing is just to do with public blame. And it's not really the standing to perform the underlying act that matters, but standing to demand a certain kind of response. (We could have some discussion here about whether demanding that response is constitutive of the underlying speech act.) And it is a bit plausible that something like hypocrisy could remove your ability to make this kind of demand on others. But note that even without this standing, you'd still (for all we've said so far) be able to silently seethe about others doing things you do.

A better way of thinking about hypocrisy comes from thinking about blame (and perhaps other kinds of criticism) as forms of altruistic punishment. At its worst, this can seem like vigilante justice. At its best, it is a low cost way of enforcing social norms.

One problem with altruistic punishment, one we've seen a lot over the years, is that if everyone punishes the same person for an offense, the punishment can be excessive. A good system of altruistic punishment should put some limits to that. Some of these are physical limits. It could be that there are some interesting ties to social media here - one thing that goes wrong is that heuristics for when it is appropriate to engage in social punishment fail when we have such close 'contact' with everyone. But anti-hypocrisy rules could be part of the social rules limiting informal punishment - it's a way of keeping punishment proportionate. The more people who have done what you did, the less punishment you can possibly get. That seems maybe fair and a reasonable way of limiting punishment.

Wallace Argument

INTEREST Criticism is something that we all have an interest in avoiding.

TREATMENT When I criticize you for X'ing although I X myself, I treat your interest in avoiding being criticized as less important than my own.

EQUALITY When I treat your interests as less important than my own, I offend against the equality of persons.

Dover's primary response to this turns on the importance of moral communication in moral education.

- We all have an interest in moral education.
- Given human limitations, this interest is best served by our being willing to listen to criticism from others, and to give it out.
- Of course there are more or less jerkish ways to criticise others, but that doesn't mean the criticism itself is bad

Dover's view here tracks the Mercier and Sperber view that the point of reason from an evolutionary perspective is to win arguments - we're evolved to be good at spotting mistakes that others are making.

Dover on Criticism and Blame

Here's one possible position. I'm not quite sure it is Dover's, but it seems like what she's getting at on 395ff.

- The sanction/informal punishment view of blame is plausible enough
- And like all punishment regimes, there should be rules in place for keeping it proportionate, so in principle we could justify anti-hypocrisy rules as part of what keeps social punishment proportionate.
- But criticism is not blame, and is not punishment.
- At least, criticism of the 'exhortation and advice' form isn't, even if it is advice to not do the thing that you just did.
- Rather, this kind of criticism is a crucial aspect of moral communiation,
- And a rule against communicating about X if you've acted wrongly with respect to X has no particular motivation or benefit.

To my eyes the big question here is whether it makes sense to separate out blame and criticism in this way. Are forms of criticism that do not come with any kind of social sanction - especially outside the context of a pre-existing relationship?

Conversely, is being the target of silent seething as bad as Dover makes it out to be? Is that what we should identify blame with? It feels to me blame is much more public than that.

Benefits of Moral Conversation

Dover lists four benefits of moral conversation. She only numbers three, but I think the unnumbered first one is in some ways the most important.

- Educating onlookers. I think this gets overlooked a lot. Sometimes a technique, such as shaming the wrongdoer, might be rather ineffective at changing the behavior of the purported target, but be very effective at changing the behavior of onlookers. This is something that I think gets overlooked in a lot of discussions of moral communication.
- Conversation makes us give reasons. This is something that gets left out of a lot of debates on disagreement in epistemology. The benefit of conversing about X is not just that we learn A thinks X is wrong, but we hear A's reasons that they think X is wrong. And hopefully at least sometimes they will be reasons that we can follow as well. That is, sometimes we will see that there are reasons for not doing what we do that we simply hadn't appreciated.
- Conversation lets us see how others see us.
- They are a source of "affective and cognitive energy". Preaching to the choir has value!

But then Dover makes some strong claims about the role of personal criticism in promoting these values.

> None of these three roles can be played in quite the same way by bloodless abstract debates, by joint deliberation that aims to produce consensus at the end of the day, or by personal exchanges in which anger and frustration are suppressed in an attempt to keep the discussion purely constructive.

Are we sure? What's the argument for this?! If they can't be played in the same way, can they be played in as good a way, or a better way?

> Nor can they be played very well by interpersonal moral criticism, so long as that is understood as a peremptory form of moral address aimed exclusively at holding presumptive wrongdoers accountable and upholding uncontroversial moral norms.

And here I think there is at least one misstep. This is at best misleading about where the blame/criticism boundary goes. "You shouldn't have done that" is not "peremptory" but nor is it blame. Dover is assuming that "You shouldn't have done that" is the bad form of criticism that, according to Wallace, we all have an interest in avoiding. And maybe that's what Wallace thinks, I'm not sure. But it seems like we could keep 90+% of Wallace's view while saying that non-blaming criticism like this falls under the category of "moral exhortation and advice".

Five Cases

I want to go over the five cases that Dover lists, so it's helpful to have a list of them.

1. Weak willed person who criticises others for doing what he tries and fails to prevent himself doing,
2. Insincere person who gets instrumental gain from criticising something he doesn't disapprove of, and in fact does.
3. A person with double standards who implicitly or explicitly holds others to higher standards, e.g., because of gender.

4. A person who is overly critical of others, while complacent about their own actions. This seems like the normal case that people are interested in.
5. A morally resigned person who does something that he thinks is wrong, but isn't even trying to fix.

Dover disagrees with Bell's claim that people in case 3 will usually be 'exception seeking'. I'm more sympathetic to Bell here. I think it's really common that people in fact have double standards, but they present themselves (to themselves as well as to others) as having a principled exception to a general principle that just so happens to help in their own case. That seems to me much more common than the explicit double standard that Dover discusses.

Case 5 is fairly interesting because it really doesn't have any kind of double standards. The person doing the criticism wishes that they had been criticised in the same kind of way. So the target Dover is interested in here is compatible with a really strong kind of recognition of moral equality.

Dover's Positive View

- In any case where there is hypocrisy, there is some other explanation of what's gone wrong.
- We wouldn't prefer that the hypocrisy is fixed; we'd prefer the underlying problem is fixed.
- This comes up especially clearly at the bottom of 414. It's better to have one mistake rather than two, and changing to being coherent, avoiding the hypocrisy, might mean we end up with two mistakes.

There is a reliance on counting arguments here that seems to apply equally to any kind of coherence constraint.

- Any time someone says it is good to be coherent, you can reply that there are already mistakes in anyone incoherent, and that some ways of restoring coherence are bad, in so far as they would produce two errors rather than one.
- Maybe you're happy saying "Yeah, down with coherence constraints."
- But that's a really strong conclusion, and one we should be sceptical about.

Two kinds of permissivism

There are multiple things that we can morally permissively do. Everyone except the most extreme consequentialist thinks this.

But here's a somewhat stronger kind of permissivism. There are multiple moral views we can have on the world. In particular, we can draw the line between sub-optimal and impermissible at points of our own choosing. Whether to criticise someone for doing something clearly sub-optimal might be up to us, and in particular up to whether we judge it not just sub-optimal, but wrong. This is at least a kind of relativism, though a somewhat idiosyncratic kind.

If it's true, you might think there is a meta-norm - draw the lines consistently. Don't draw them differently for different sexes, or genders, or races, or self-other. What goes wrong if you violate that? Not that either choice is wrong, if they are in permissive range. We can't explain the wrongness here by counting up the misdemeanours. Rather, the problem is a straight up violation of equality. I'm not sure how Dover

could handle this. I think she's assuming this isn't the right way to think about morality. But I'm not sure anti-hypocrisy norms make sense without this kind of picture.

Hypocrisy and Moral Equality

One big theme of the readings has been the following principle.

- What's wrong with hypocrisy is that the hypocrite doesn't respect the equality of persons.

Now most of the authors reject this line of reasoning, either rejecting that there is something wrong with hypocrisy or that this is the explanation for it. Lipper-Rasmussen argues that it has to fail for the following reason.

Relevantly Similar Equality Claim Hypocrites and hypercrites are relevantly similar with regards to the denial of moral equality of persons.

Standing Asymmetry Claim Hypocrites lack standing to blame but hyper-crites do not lack standing to blame.

Anti-Equality Conclusion So what explains hypocrites' lack of standing cannot be their denial of moral equality of persons.

So one thing is for us to discuss this argument, and whether it works. And whether, as Tierney suggests, it also undermines Lippert-Rasmussen's positive proposal.

But more generally, I think we should be very suspicious of the claim that equality requires us to blame everyone alike. We simply don't do anything like this in real life. If someone in this class is rude to someone else, I'll blame them for it, without equally blaming every instance of rudeness everywhere in the world. To get from equality to an anti-hypocrisy norm, we need something about how this is ok, but hypocrisy is not. And none of the attempts to bridge this gap seemed remotely successful to me.

There is also a question about what kind of equality violation is in question. Here are three ways of spelling out moral equality.

Equality of Beliefs One should believe that people generally are equal, and of arbitrary people that they are equal.

Equality of Value One should value different people equally.

Equality of Treatment One should treat different people equally.

And there's a general challenge for any kind of argument from equality to anti-hypocrisy.

- If you start with one of the first two, it's hard to get from hypocrisy to a violation. You can't tell from my hypocritical behaviour that I violate either of the first two. I might genuinely not have noticed that I've done anything wrong. I might be weak-willed about blaming/criticising myself. I might believe that people are equal and just not act on my beliefs, etc.
- If you start with the third, you need to qualify it in a way that, e.g., treating one's own children differently to how one treats others is consistent with the equality principle. And once you do that, it is going to be hard to make the argument work - the exceptions you add will be big enough to drive the hypocritical treatment through.