

Moral Psychology // Spring 2021

Handout 4

Hypocrisy: Wallace II

MORAL STANDING. According to Wallace, there is a certain ‘conversational mechanism’ in the general schema of moral criticism that renders the hypocrite’s criticism invalid. The hypocrite has no moral ‘standing’ to make his criticism. The rest of Wallace’s paper is devoted largely to explaining why the hypocrite lacks that standing, and what the moral fault of hypocrisy actually is. 317

Let’s offer a quick preview. The general schema again:

- (4-1) a. At t : A : Morally speaking, B was wrong to engage in ϕ -ing.
 b. At $t' \leq t$: A is ϕ -ing.

A conversationally implicates that he didn’t ϕ . Since he actually did, his assertion is misleading. Then, unless he’s already made amends for his own ϕ -ing, he is not in a position to blame another person for ϕ -ing.

CRITICISM AND EXHORTATION. Wallace distinguishes between moral exhortation and moral criticism. Moral exhortation: 317–318

- (4-2) a. H : Let’s not fly or drive, it’s bad for the environment!
 b. A : But you fly and drive yourself!

As Wallace sees it, (4-2b) isn’t felicitous, since H ’s utterance didn’t involve ‘deception or insincerity’, and therefore, didn’t ‘undermine’ the content of H ’s utterance or H ’s authority. There are several good reasons to challenge Wallace’s distinction, however. Batson

First, H ’s utterance may be paraphrased as a moral criticism. Second, here too H is ‘exercised’ about moral issues and taking a stand on them. ZC

SCANLON ON BLAME. At this point in the discussion we search for a reason why H is disqualified from making his criticism. Scanlon has this suggestion. As moral agents, we are party to relationships of moral respect. To blame A for ϕ -ing is to claim that he impaired this relationship by ϕ -ing. As a result, you would be justified to withdraw from the relationship with A . But now, if you had ϕ -ed yourself before, *you* have impaired the moral relationship with A in the first place. Therefore, you are not in the position to blame. 319

Wallace’s first complaint: on this view, there is a merely factual problem with H ’s criticism. Why would there be a further moral problem with it? 320

Wallace’s second complaint: the very idea of moral relationship. If H betrayed your friendship in the past, it would be wrong for him to complain why behave unfriendly to him now. But morality generally can’t be understood by these concepts of reciprocity: some of its demands are absolute. 321

WALLACE’S PROPOSAL. When you criticise me for ϕ -ing, you are ‘exercised’ by the moral wrongness of ϕ -ing. Thus you are subject to a reactive emotion like indignation. This is a sign that you ‘care’ about moral values—in particular, those putatively violated by ϕ -ing. Your emotion, moreover, is directed at the wrongdoer. This is the sense in which it is a form of moral address. 323

Now in the case of a hypocrite, his behaviour shows that he in fact doesn’t care about those very values violated by ϕ -ing. Hence the moral inconsistency of the hypocritical address. 324

Yet Wallace insists that this can’t be the whole story, since the fact of inconsistency doesn’t explain the egregious nature of hypocrisy—i.e. our visceral reactions to it. 325

The source of that egregiousness is the richer inconsistency of H . His *current* emotions are inconsistent with his *past* attitudes. But the inconsistency is not merely backward-looking. A reactive emotion like resentment has forward-looking characteristics. As a result of Wallace argues that H ’s criticism ‘tacitly generates’ a commitment to critical self-scrutiny. Precisely this commitment H violates with his criticism. 326

Hence this is the moral violation of hypocrisy: H failed to live up to the commitment that he put himself under when he made his criticism. But if this failure is itself a serious moral violation, then there should be a fundamental moral element in this commitment (its ‘ultimate ground’). 329

Remark 1. It's not clear to me what Wallace means in page 327 when he asks, 'What is the nature of the commitment [...]?' On the face of it, we already know what the commitment is. A better way to put this, I think, is to ask what the moral significance of this commitment, and of the violation thereof, is. 'Ground' too is an unhappy expression, since it's not clear what grounds what, or how.

This further moral element is the principle of the 'equal standing of persons'. As social beings, we have a vested interest in protecting ourselves from criticism (opprobrium) by others. Morality, Wallace says, is our shield. By acting morally we are protected from exactly such an opprobrium. Now what is the case of a hypocrite? He acted immorally by ϕ -ing, on one hand. On the other hand, he now criticises another person for the same ϕ -ing. This criticism, combined with the fact that H ϕ -ed and also (I think!) with the fact that H implicates that he didn't ϕ in the past—all together deny H the protection from the opprobrium. Importantly, we fault H not or not only for ϕ -ing. We fault him for *another* violation, which is the violation of the principle of the equal standing of persons (itself perhaps a form of the moral requirement of impartiality).

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PROBLEMS. Wallace doesn't explain how exactly this 'tacit' commitment is generated. It seems, however, that H 's utterance must somehow generate this commitment. However, it's unlikely that any pragmatic mechanism will be found to shew that in general, H created a commitment by uttering his criticism. Unless such a mechanism is found, the critic might claim that there is no such commitment in the first place.

A similar objection may be levelled against Wallace's idea that H conversationally implicates that he didn't ϕ . This claim serves to explain why the H 's criticism is a form of deception. But if there is no such implicature, it's not clear why H 's utterance counts as a deception in the first place.

Also, why should morality be a shield against opprobrium? Shouldn't we welcome the opprobrium of others as a chance for us to improve? One way to develop this point is to adopt an utilitarian perspective. However, it may be difficult for an utilitarian to understand our visceral reactions to hypocrisy. If a criticism leads to improvement, should it matter what the critic did in the past? But in fact, we *do* have this strong dislike of hypocrisy, and the burden of explanation is on the utilitarian to make sense of it.

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