

Moral Psychology // Spring 2021

Handout 5

Hypocrisy: Batson

THE KEY DISCREPANCY. We observe the following pattern: many atrocities are committed by overtly moral people—that is, by people who declare allegiance to moral principles. Let's generalise even more: many morally bad actions are performed by overtly moral people. How many? Batson doesn't say, but I venture a guess: nearly all, perhaps *all*. So there is a major discrepancy between the real moral value of the behaviour and what the agents claim the value is.

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Two explanations have been offered: imperfect moral judgement and situational pressures. Batson offers another one: moral motivation, specifically hypocritical motivation.

HYPOCRISY. Following others in the empirical tradition, Batson identifies the 'prosocial motivation', a group of principles governing our motives: egoism, altruism, collectivism, and principlism. Then we have the following notions:

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Integrity: The motive to act in accordance with the principles one publicly espouses.

Hypocrisy: The egoistic motive to appear moral (including sticking to principles), while in actual behaviour avoiding the costs of being so and often pursuing egoistic goals.

The hypocrite is a familiar amoralist, who deploys morality strategically whenever it suits him—that is, his egoistic goals. This form of hypocrisy does not involve moral criticism. However, if moral criticism is itself a strategic choice, then hypocritical criticism is simply a special case of what we now consider.

Question 1. Is Batson's notion of hypocrisy vulnerable to counter-examples like 'spy' or 'polite guest' considered earlier?

EVIDENCE OF HYPOCRISY. Hypocrisy is pervasive, and perhaps we don't need laboratory studies to confirm this. Yet Batson's data add a few interesting touches. Those people who behave egoistically nevertheless have a principle-based understanding of morality and apparently also a correct understanding how to apply moral principles in practice. So the diagnosis of an incorrect moral judgement is not too plausible in these cases. An alternative explanation: Hypocrisy results from a weak motivating force of morality.

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Batson speculates about the developmental origins of hypocrisy. It is so frequent, and integrity so rare, because children learn first to *behave* properly, to escape sanctions, and to reap rewards. Once the element of punishment and reward is introduced, children learn to manipulate the appearance to influence the judges (the adults).

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MORAL EMOTIONS. Batson's conclusion is that moral emotions are scarce. That is, if emotions motivate our behaviour, and if the behaviour is for the most part not moral, then the emotions able to generate moral behaviour are not widespread in the population. What is the argument here?

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Batson distinguishes between conflict standards and propriety standards of behaviour. Both regulate our interactions with others, but differently. Conflict standards address the interests of others to be taken into consideration when your interests are in conflict with mine. Avoidance of harm is one such principle. Propriety standards are essentially a series of taboos. They describe and prescribe how things are and should be. Of course, at a deeper analytic 'meta-level' we often connect between them. But the important point, Batson insists, is that we learn and experience these standards differently. As children, we are taught to follow certain ways of behaviour, and this explains our attachment to these ways, also our inability (as adults) even to imagine how things could have been otherwise. Conflict standards are experienced differently. We may well imagine how people could violate them, and we may be tempted to violate them ourselves.

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What of the evidence to the contrary, that people are morally 'outraged' when presented with harm to others? Batson's short answer is that this outrage, when examined closely, is directed at the harm done to the agent or the agent's cared-for ones.

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