

HYPOCRISY: AN EXPLORATION OF A "THIRD TYPE"

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As a persistent phenomenon in both morality and religion, hypocrisy has often been discussed, the result being that two major types of it are usually distinguished. First, there is the kind most familiar to modern English and classical Greek: hypocrisy as feigning goodness while in reality being evil. It is being two-faced. It is saying one thing and meaning another. Although this type of hypocrisy is rarely mentioned in the Bible, there is a fine example of it in Lk 20:19-26 (cf. Mt 22:15-22 and Mk 12:13-17) where certain individuals who "pretended to be sincere" sought to ensnare Jesus. Second, there is the kind found frequently in the Old and New Testaments: hypocrisy as unwarranted self-righteousness that is blind to one's own sins and harsh toward the sins of others. It is seeing the tiny speck in another person's character more clearly than the huge blot in one's own (cf. Mt 7:3-5 and Lk 6:41-42). It should be noted that in the first case the hypocrite is generally more aware of the hypocrisy than anyone else, whereas in the second case almost everyone is more aware of the hypocrisy than the hypocrite.

All this, of course, is to cover familiar ground. My intention is to move from this starting point into an exploration of relatively new territory. Specifically, what I wish to do here is to distinguish a third major type of hypocrisy—one which is much more subtle and therefore much more difficult to discern than the others. I shall begin by characterizing this third type of hypocrisy more fully. Having done that, I will suggest where it fits in with the biblical perspective. I shall then proceed to make some observations about its relationship to two important ethical theories, and finally will conclude with remarks on the special danger this particular hypocrisy holds for Christians.

1. *Characteristics of the "Third-Type" Hypocrisy*

The third type of hypocrisy has significant similarities and dissimilarities with the other two types. It is similar to the first in that the individual is more evil than appearances would indicate and similar to the second in that the individual is more self-righteous than the truth would warrant. However, it is dissimilar to the first in that the hypocrite is not, at least consciously, attempting to deceive anyone and dissimilar to the second in that the hypocrite is not, at least openly, condemnatory of others. Because of this peculiar combination of features, the third-type hypocrisy is seldom recognized by either hypocrite or observer.

While important variations no doubt exist among those who fall into this third category of hypocrisy, it would be useful to examine a more detailed picture of one such person. For convenience, we will designate that individual as "M." M is probably regarded as a pillar of church and community, perhaps even as a saint (or as close to that as most humans are apt to get). After all, M is never loud, harsh, aggressive, demanding, critical, or argumentative—even in the face of considerable provocation. M is also likely to be an advocate of what many view as the highest and purest ethical positions: anti-war, anti-violence, anti-discrimination, and anti-sensual indulgence of any kind (such as sex, food, alcohol, etc.). As a consequence, M leads what most Christians today see as a simple, ascetic life. All in all, M is a near embodiment of the famous monkey trio—seeing no evil, hearing no evil, and speaking no evil.

Given this sort of public posture and given the harmony of public and private life, how could a person like M ever be classed as a hypocrite? Only, I believe, by a careful and lengthy study of behavior patterns. What one discovers is that no matter what is said or done, no matter what decisions are made or actions taken, and no matter what reasons or justifications for them are offered, all things consistently work together to the advantage of an individual such as M and to the detriment of other persons.

Those who are third-type hypocrites are classed as such because they possess this crucial characteristic of pure egoism inside covered by a veneer of altruism and benevolence outside. In other words, these people never act primarily for the sake of others; and even where they give the impression of doing so, the purpose of the act is selfish (i.e., self-centered).

As was suggested earlier, this type of hypocrisy is so deeply rooted that it does not function on a conscious level and tends to remain well disguised from both public and private view. Yet, I suspect that almost every reader can now recall examples of the third-type hypocrisy. Once hypocrisy is suspected, evidence can often be accumulated to confirm it. But since third-category hypocrisy operates in such an apparently innocuous manner, initial suspicions are rather rare.

2. *"Third-Type" Hypocrisy in Relationship to the Biblical Perspective*

We now move on to consider how third-type hypocrisy relates to the biblical perspective. There is no question but that the Bible in general and the NT in particular would regard the life-style we have been describing as indeed being a form of hypocrisy and would condemn it. Great prophetic voices from Amos onward have stressed the inner life and emphasized the need for harmonizing inner life and outer behavior; words and deeds are to flow directly from thoughts and dispositions, but in the event of some disparity between them, ethical judgments are to be in terms of the latter factors rather than the former ones. Jesus, too, harking back to the prophets, placed his main concern on a person's intentions and motivations. He spoke of an inner transformation which cannot be compelled and which, at the same time, cannot be measured solely in terms of an individual's outward behavior (see, for example, Mk 7:1-23 and compare with Jer 31:31-34).

Indeed, there is some evidence that Jesus himself both noted

and condemned the very type of hypocrisy we are discussing here. Certainly the sort of hypocrisy Jesus rebuked in Mt 6:2, 5, 16 (regarding alms, prayer, and fasting) and in Mt 23:23-36 (regarding neglect of the weightier matters and having a clean outward appearance overlying inward corruption) bears a stronger resemblance to the third type than to the second, for the harshness of the hypocrite toward others is absent. And one can easily read Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32) in terms of the elder brother's being a third-type hypocrite—at least until an unusual and unexpected situation developed that brought his real, deep, and hidden feelings to the surface. In fact, this type of hypocrisy may most often be exposed to hypocrite and observer alike when some immense crisis or frustration breaks down the defenses and permits long-buried, yet still-festering, ugliness to spring forth into the light of day.

3. "Third-Type" Hypocrisy and Ethical Theories

The points made so far may cause one to wonder how this state of affairs is possible. How can an individual be so blind about his or her true motivations? How can an egoist be so completely unaware of his or her own selfishness? How can a person regularly do (or fail to do) things which harm others without even noticing it? Part of the answer, of course, lies in the insight of psychology that the real causes of our thoughts and deeds are frequently hidden from consciousness, from the "rational self." The remainder of the answer, however, lies embedded in the very nature of ethical theories.

We can find this third major type of hypocrisy among adherents of situational ethics, wherein a person tries to decide in the uniqueness of each situation what the law of love demands.¹ It is possible for decisions always to be made in such a way as to favor oneself, since the basic principle of situational ethics is so general and because its application is so subjective. Indeed, in

¹ For a presentation of this viewpoint, see Joseph F. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia, 1966).

treating the "new morality" Gabriel Fackre discusses this very problem with which we are dealing, although he does not call it "hypocrisy."²

But we can also discover this third major type of hypocrisy among advocates of rule ethics. As we know, when rules are chosen, they always involve a selection from among the total possible rules. And we know that this selection usually includes more negatives ("Thou shalt nots") than positives ("Thou shalt"). The assumption of rule ethics is that if one abides by these selected, and largely negative, rules, then he or she is righteous. The trap here is that the third-type hypocrite (either by selection of a system of convenient rules or by disposition or inattention to the full implications of the rules) *knows* that he or she is righteous for the simple reason that he or she abides by those rules. And if one is *convinced* of one's own righteousness, then it will likely seem *unnecessary* to have continual self-examination of motives, actions, thoughts, et cetera. In fact, it is an almost impossible task to shatter the complacency of such people, since their perception of reality is both filtered and skewed; besides, the fact that these people are neither two-faced like the type-one hypocrites nor harsh like the type-two hypocrites makes them improbable candidates for sufficiently direct confrontation.

4. *The Danger of the "Third-Type" Hypocrisy*

There is a final, yet significant, point which needs to be made about this third-type hypocrisy. I indicated at the beginning that this sort of hypocrisy poses special problems for the Christian. Why? To find the answer, we might start by asking why such people seem to see and hear so little evil. Is it because there is so little evil around to see and hear? Certainly not! It is part of their highly selective perspective on reality (a defense mechanism, if you please) which says, in effect, that if there is no evil outside of

² Gabriel Fackre, "The New Morality," in *Storm over Ethics* (Philadelphia, 1967), pp. 70-75.

me (i.e., intentional evil and not merely evil resulting from mistakes), then there is no evil inside of me either. Indeed, I would contend that in many cases a person's ability to look around and see no evil in others, even when it is there, is a strong indication that he or she will see no evil within, even when it is there.

But why is this a danger for Christians? May it not be because Christians, especially in recent decades, have been so fearful of imperfections in themselves (presumably on the ground that such imperfections would disqualify them for membership and/or leadership in the Christian community on earth and in heaven) that they feel compelled to deny any imperfections in themselves? In any event, the result is that the sin and evil which does exist (cf. Rom 1: 18-20 and 5:12 on the prevalence of sin) must, for many Christians at least, be "explained away"—must be rationalized, repressed, or sublimated. Unfortunately, this tactic makes sin less visible and, simultaneously, more difficult to eliminate.

A good example of this tendency can be found in Langdon Gilkey's *Shantung Compound*, a narrative account of his experiences in a prisoner-of-war camp during the Second World War.³ He depicts Christians, along with others influenced by Christian ethics, as sublimating their true impulses and replacing them with a more socially acceptable façade. Yet the true impulses continued to control their behavior. Mary Daly, though from a different slant, also makes the same point.⁴ She maintains that much so-called Christian morality stifles honesty, conceals true motives and values, and lowers critical consciousness.

I believe there is a close relationship between this phenomenon and an individual's theological position or outlook. Certainly, this is true with regard to examples we noted earlier from the NT. In our own time, too, there would appear to be a close correlation between one's theology and one's chances of

³ Langdon Gilkey, *Shantung Compound: The Story of Men and Women under Pressure* (New York, 1966).

⁴ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston, 1973), p. 102.

becoming a type-three hypocrite. Christians who have a very optimistic conception of human nature would, I suspect, be the most prone to this kind of hypocrisy; and since contemporary western culture is heavily influenced by this and other liberal presuppositions, that connection is surely important. Neo-Orthodoxy, because of its pessimistic conception of human nature, would probably be the least prone to this sort of hypocrisy; and "Conservative" Christianity would seem to belong somewhere near the middle of the spectrum.

Hypocrisy of all kinds should be studied carefully. After all, only when we are able to identify it correctly can we develop appropriate means of containing and then eliminating it. The "new" type of hypocrisy we have been exploring here is especially significant because of its relative invisibility and because it is a tempting trap for the modern Christian.