



Hypocrisy and Epistemic Injustice

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Abstract

In this article I argue that we should understand some forms of hypocritical behaviour in terms of epistemic injustice; a type of injustice in which a person is wronged in their capacity as a knower. If each of us has an interest in knowing what morality requires of us, this can be undermined when hypocritical behaviour distorts our perception of the moral landscape by misrepresenting the demandingness of putative moral obligations. This suggests that a complete theory of the wrongness of hypocrisy must account for hypocrisy as epistemic injustice.

Keywords Deception · Demandingness · Epistemic Injustice · Hypocrisy

1 Introduction

Theories of hypocrisy aim to tell us what it is that makes hypocrisy *uniquely* (pro tanto) wrong when manifested in a person's attitudes or behaviour. Hypocritical acts often involve manipulation or deceit, for instance, but we tend to think that there is something distinctly wrong with hypocritical actions or attitudes that is not reducible to their deceptive or manipulative qualities. There is something uniquely wrong about deceiving or manipulating a person *in this particular way* that calls for an explanation, or so our intuitions may suggest¹ even if careful analysis reveals that hypocrisy actually involves multiple moral phenomena. Whether we end up with a theory of hypocrisy or theories of hypocrisies² the task remains

¹ Of course, our intuitions may be mistaken. Bartel (2019) argues that all instances of hypocrisy are reducible to cases of deception or *akrasia* and that there is nothing distinctly wrong about hypocrisy as such.

² On the wide range of cases that tend to be considered examples of hypocrisy, see Dover (2019: 389) and Wallace (2010, p. 309). For an alternative perspective of hypocrisy as a kind of general social malaise, see Ginzburg (1922).

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to explain what it is about these cases that makes them wrong specifically in virtue of their hypocritical features.

Several possibilities have been suggested in the literature. Some theorists focus on what hypocritical acts say about oneself – is hypocrisy wrong because it involves a kind of self-deception, for instance, or a failure to live an authentic life?³ Others focus on how hypocrisy affects others – is hypocrisy wrong because it involves deception, manipulation or exploitation?⁴ Is it wrong because hypocrisy expresses an inegalitarian attitude that suggests others should be held to different standards than our own (Wallace 2010; Fritz and Miller 2018)? Recent literature has focused in particular on the question of ‘moral standing’.⁵ Here the thought is that hypocrisy – by treating others unfairly or unequally – undermines our right or entitlement to blame (or praise) others for their behaviour.

My aim is not to argue for any theory of hypocrisy in particular, but rather to identify and examine one way in which certain kinds of hypocritical behaviour can be harmful that has not yet been recognized in the literature. The cases I have in mind involve influential public figures or collectives whose hypocritical behaviour harms us by making it more difficult for us to discern and express facts about our own moral characters and the content and scope of our moral obligations. While many accounts focus on the hypocrite’s standing to praise and blame, mine focuses on the distorting effects that hypocritical behaviour can have upon our capacity to understand the moral landscape and our place within it. The potential for hypocrisy to create this distorting effect is sensitive to the abilities of the agent in question – in what follows I will focus mainly on cases involving highly influential individuals who are regarded as moral authorities as well as collectives comprised of ‘ordinary’ members of the public, whose individual hypocritical behaviour may combine to create an even more powerful distorting effect. If successful, I will have shown that a complete theory of the wrongness of hypocrisy must be able to take these special kinds of harm into account, in addition to whatever other features may fully explain the wrongness of hypocrisy.

Specifically, I will argue that some acts of hypocrisy constitute a form of ‘epistemic injustice’, a term coined by Fricker (2007) that describes cases where a person is wronged in their capacity as a knower. I argue that this may happen when a person’s hypocritical behaviour misrepresents the moral landscape to others, especially when this involves pretending to adhere to a particularly demanding putative moral obligation. There are two versions of the story that follows, depending on whether one conceives of the duty not to be a hypocrite as one of non-interference, or as also including a duty to contribute to public discourse on morality with a view to bringing about positive moral change.⁶ On either version, we have a strong interest in knowing what morality requires of us and whether we are meeting our moral obligations, we can find evidence of this by looking to the behaviour of others, and this interest can be undermined if those around us falsely present themselves as being capable of adhering to much more demanding standards of morality than we are.

³ On hypocrisy as self-deception, see Szabados and Soifer (2004, Chap. 3) and Statman (1997). On hypocrisy and (in)authenticity, see Wallace (2010, pp. 308–313).

⁴ “It is clear that hypocrisy is a form of deception”, according to Kittay (1982, p. 277). The connection between hypocrisy and deception is also emphasized by Shklar (1984), Szabados and Soifer (2004), and Benn (1993).

⁵ Wallace’s (2010) account is a particularly influential example, but see also Bell (2013) and Dover (2019) for dissenting views.

⁶ I have in mind here the kind of “positive moral change” described by Westra (2021) who discusses the potential positive benefits of certain kinds of “virtue-signalling”.

Thus we may form the wrong judgments about what morality requires and of our own moral characters, when in fact the putative obligation in question might be so overly-demanding that it is no obligation at all. Specifically, hypocrisy distorts when it manifests as a kind of testimony that misrepresents behaviour (when one lies about whether one is actually adhering to a particular moral standard).⁷ This distorts our moral knowledge provided that we are committed to treating other people's testimony as generally reliable (a commitment that is itself plausibly understood as part of our duties of civility to one another⁸) and provided that we take other people's attitudes and behaviour as being relevant pieces of evidence when assessing the demandingness of a putative moral obligation.⁹

Given that accounts focusing upon moral standing are among the most popular and well-developed accounts of the wrongness of hypocrisy in the literature, my aim in Section 2 is to show that these accounts are at best incomplete, and to create space for an account of hypocrisy as epistemic injustice in Section 3. There I shall argue that hypocritical acts sometimes give rise to (a modestly expanded form of) what Fricker (2007, p. 156) would call incidental hermeneutical injustice and consider the objection that understanding hypocrisy in this way has undesirable implications for the right to privacy. Section 4 concludes.

2 Acting Like a Hypocrite

Beginning a conceptual analysis with etymological observations is not always advisable, but in this case considering the origin of the concept in question can help to shed light on the sort of phenomena we want to capture. 'Hypocrisy' derives from the Greek word '*hypokrisis*', which refers to actors playing a part on stage. The idea of hypocrisy as performance seems central to the modern concept too; the paradigmatic hypocrite is someone who misrepresents themselves to the world, typically in a way that suggests that they are morally

⁷ This is not to draw a sharp distinction between "testimony" and "behaviour": to provide testimony is to behave in a certain way, and we typically speak of hypocritical behaviour not hypocritical testimony – by characterising hypocrisy as a kind of "testimony" I mean to draw attention to hypocrisy's communicative potential insofar as it invites one to believe certain (false) facts about the hypocrite.

⁸ The idea of a "duty of civility" features prominently in the literature on Rawlsian public reason, where it refers specifically to citizens' duties to provide certain kinds of justifications to one another when engaged in public political deliberation (Rawls 2005, p. 217). Here, however, I have a broader conception of civility in mind, i.e. our duty to treat people as if they are reliable authorities on their own experiences and that they are engaging with us in good faith in the absence of good reasons to the contrary: such assumptions are, I suggest, required by our duty to respect one another in any deliberative context, not just the relatively narrow confines of Rawlsian public reason. Indeed, failing to adhere to such a duty may result in forms of testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007), by failing to treat a person's reporting of their own behaviour or attitudes with the credibility to which they are entitled.

⁹ Note that we need not (and probably ought not) treat such evidence as decisive – merely that we should treat it as significant when thinking about demandingness.

better than they really are.¹⁰ Of course, the key difference between the stage performer and the hypocrite is that the latter will deny that they are acting at all.¹¹

Theorists have offered highly nuanced accounts of hypocritical behaviour, but the central theme of misrepresentation runs through most. For example, Benjamin Rossi suggests that all of the vices of hypocritical behaviour involve “representing oneself as broadly speaking ‘better’ than one is with respect to some value, norm, or ideal” (Rossi 2021, p. 58), while Paul Bloomfield understands hypocritical behaviour as an attempt to “wrongly take an advantage” by deploying a double-standard with regard to one’s private judgments or actions compared to one’s public judgments or actions (Bloomfield 2018, p. 70). Similarly, Macalester Bell describes three kinds of hypocrites: “weak-willed” hypocrites who fail to act in accordance with their values through weakness of will, “clear-eyed” hypocrites who feign values they know they do not hold, and “exception-seeking” hypocrites who deceive themselves into believing that they aren’t acting hypocritically at all (Bell 2013, pp. 276–277). Though each case aims to capture a distinct kind of hypocrisy, each depends upon a contrast between public and private, the views one endorses and the views one expresses, or the way one is and the way one presents oneself.

However, it seems clear that hypocrisy is not merely a form of self-serving deception or misrepresentation. If I pretend to you that I am a fan of classical music because I believe it will make me seem more refined, we would not regard that as a serious moral failing on my part if the truth is that I cannot tell my Beethoven from my Bach, and such behavior is unlikely to give rise to a charge of hypocrisy in particular. We misrepresent facts about ourselves all the time in ways that may strike us as signs of vanity or insecurity or even modesty¹², and for which ‘hypocrite’ would be the wrong label entirely. This is partly because we understand hypocrisy as a special kind of deception or misrepresentation. To be a paradigmatic hypocrite is not to misrepresent facts about ourselves in general, but about our moral character in particular (McKinnon 1991, pp. 322–326). This will be important later, because misrepresenting facts about our moral character sometimes leads us to misrepresent facts about morality itself, and this is where epistemic injustice shall enter the picture.

One may object, however, that this understanding of hypocrisy is still too broad, given that it suggests that any kind of misrepresentation about one’s moral character counts as a hypocritical act. Suppose that a person misrepresents themselves on a CV or dating profile, for instance – these acts may misrepresent one’s moral character, but it may be counterintuitive to say that these are acts of hypocrisy.¹³ I concede that such cases would be at least non-paradigmatic – particularly given that individuals in each case may lack what Fritz and Miller (2019) refer to as a “differential blaming disposition”: we can imagine a dishonest applicant or suitor who only exaggerates their moral character because they expect others to do likewise and would not be disposed to blame them for it. It may be then that a com-

¹⁰ For the purposes of the arguments to follow, there is no need to distinguish between the hypocrite who presents himself as saintly when he is merely morally adequate, for example, and the hypocrite who presents himself as morally adequate, when he is in fact morally contemptible. Particular hypocrites may be more or less ambitious in the roles they aspire to, but so long as the truth is worse than their fiction, we tend to think of them as hypocrites regardless.

¹¹ Such admissions may even spare the hypocrite from our disapproval: “‘honest’ hypocrites—who avoid false signalling by admitting to committing the condemned transgression—are not perceived negatively even though their actions contradict their stated values” according to Jordan et al. (2017, p. 356).

¹² Specifically, expressions of modesty that do not imply anything about one’s moral character.

¹³ I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

plete definition of hypocrisy requires more than misrepresenting facts about one's moral character (such as a dispositional criterion, for instance), however in the analysis to follow I am specifically interested in a deceptive or manipulative element which seems to be a necessary (if not sufficient) feature of hypocritical acts and which I will argue is sufficient to generate claims of epistemic injustice. Using a broad, minimalist (and perhaps incomplete) account of hypocrisy will allow me to develop a case for the epistemic harm of hypocrisy that should be compatible with any more comprehensive definition of hypocrisy provided that it includes misrepresentation about one's moral character.

At this point, it will help to consider a paradigmatic case of hypocritical behavior in more detail. Take, for example, the evangelical preacher who denounces homosexuality and infidelity from the pulpit but who secretly engages in a homosexual affair. Notice first that we are likely to consider the preacher a hypocrite regardless of our views on the morality of homosexuality or infidelity (I've chosen this case precisely because I expect most readers will see nothing wrong with homosexuality while finding infidelity morally objectionable). We are inclined to regard the preacher as a hypocrite because he misrepresents his adherence to moral standards that he publicly endorses, regardless of whether we accept some, all, or none, of those moral standards ourselves.¹⁴

One important caveat is that we assume there are no exculpatory factors that would make it permissible for the preacher to misrepresent himself in this way.¹⁵ A gay person who feels pressured to publicly condemn homosexuality for their own safety, for instance, is surely not the kind of person we want our theory to condemn as a hypocrite.¹⁶ A hypocrite is not merely someone who fails to privately adhere to moral standards that they publicly endorse, but someone who does so without some good excuse (presumably grounded in an account of the costs that they would have to but ought not have to bear should they publicly reveal the relevant facts about themselves). Such cases may often involve circumstances where the general public tends to believe that some particular practice is morally wrong, when in fact it is entirely permissible, as in the case of the closeted gay person who feels that they have to publicly express opposition to homosexuality for their own safety. One unfortunate implication of this is that the stronger the excuse, the more difficult it may be for the rest of us to appreciate its strength.¹⁷

Nevertheless, if we agree that paradigmatic hypocrisy involves misrepresenting one's adherence to publicly-endorsed moral standards without a good excuse, we can turn to a second feature of paradigmatic cases that seems to suggest that hypocrisy must be wrong, at least in part, because of how the hypocrite *wrongs others*. While I am sympathetic to the idea that hypocrisy is often or always bad for oneself, I doubt this is all that is wrong with

¹⁴ A similar observation is made by Dover (2019, p. 406).

¹⁵ Szabados (1979) makes this point in response to an overly-broad conception of hypocrisy endorsed by Ryle (1949), offering the example of a person who lies to the KGB in order to save the life of a dissident – such a person may pretend to hold beliefs they don't really hold while avoiding charges of hypocrisy.

¹⁶ One might distinguish between a moralized and non-moralized conception of hypocrisy, according to which a non-moralized conception would hold that not all forms of hypocrisy are necessarily impermissible. My preference is for a moralized conception, such that those whose behaviour is permissible for whatever reason should not be considered hypocrites at all, but nothing in what follows depends upon which conception we prefer.

¹⁷ See McKinnon (1991, p. 325). There may also be exculpatory circumstances where one has other-regarding reasons to conceal facts about oneself if one thinks that "some degree of concealment of one's private thoughts and attitudes is critical to the smooth functioning of human social relations" (Wallace 2010, pp. 310–312).

hypocrisy or that this is what lies at the heart of our intuitive contempt for hypocrisy. We may feel that the preacher harms himself because of his inauthenticity or self-deception (though note that the example as just described need not imply self-deception), but I suggest our intuitions in a case like this are also drawn beyond the man at the pulpit to those in the congregation, especially those who may be gay themselves. It seems that our intuitions, at least in paradigmatic cases, are not primarily or exclusively about the negative effects of hypocrisy upon the hypocrite but rather on those they attempt to deceive, even if we think that they are also deceiving themselves.

This brings us to a third feature worth noting in a case like this, which is that the preacher does not merely pretend that he abides by particular moral rules – he publicly denounces those who do not. Hypocrisy is not merely a shield to protect the preacher from criticism (if it were, we might not even consider him a hypocrite for the reasons suggested above), but rather a tool he can use to his advantage in cultivating kudos from those who admire him, and in some cases a weapon with which to attack those he claims to be less righteous than himself. Access to such advantage is made possible because of the preacher’s willingness to misrepresent facts about his moral character for personal gain and without a good excuse. It is not that he is dishonest and willing to lie in general (he may or may not be), but that he is willing to engage in this very specific form of deception. If he were unwilling to be a hypocrite, he would have to refrain from his public denunciations, or change his private behaviour, with the costs each course of action would imply.¹⁸ His willingness to be a hypocrite is what allows him to “have his cake and eat it too”.¹⁹

This feature of paradigmatic cases of hypocrisy has been the subject of much of the recent literature, with theorists focusing on the extent to which hypocrisy undermines a person’s *moral standing to blame* others for failing to meet standards of behavior that the hypocrite fails to meet themselves. For instance, Jessica Isserow and Colin Klein (2017) argue persuasively that to be a hypocrite is to undermine one’s claims to “moral authority”, understood as a special kind of standing within the moral community that enables one to receive and bestow esteem and disesteem. Note that this kind of moral authority is not supposed to be a kind of self-righteous moralism – if it were then we might well wish for more hypocrites and fewer moralists. Rather, the kind of moral authority in question here is supposed to facilitate a positive and productive kind of moral guidance – the giving of advice and assistance rather than holier-than-thou hectoring. Such authorities will tend to be particularly influential in paradigmatic cases though Isserow and Klein’s account allows for anyone in principle to claim some degree of authority just in case they behave in a way that suggests their opinions are worthy of consideration. In this sense, Isserow and Klein offer a “thin” or minimalist account of authority, which is highly contextual and variable²⁰ (it will be my contention that the risk of hermeneutical injustice tends to be proportionate to the weight we attribute to a moral authority). In providing a more nuanced conception of the hypocrite as a person who does not merely dispense praise or blame, but who offers a kind of moral guidance, Isserow and Klein’s account serves as a powerful challenge to alternatives which fail to explain the

¹⁸ One would hope there are plenty of preachers who do in fact practice what they preach.

¹⁹ The idea here is not that a willingness to misrepresent facts without a good excuse is constitutive of hypocrisy, though similar ideas do form part of dispositional accounts (to which I am sympathetic) such as Fritz and Miller’s (2019) or Rossi’s (2018). All I am suggesting here is that (at least in paradigmatic cases) hypocrisy provides easier access to advantage for those who are willing to engage in it.

²⁰ I thank an anonymous referee for helping me to clarify this point.

wrongness of hypocrisy in cases that go beyond specific instances of hypocritical praise or blame, but which strike us as clear cases of hypocrisy nonetheless. I take this account to be one of the most plausible in the recent literature, so it will be a good candidate to examine further in an effort to find space for my own account of hypocrisy as epistemic injustice.

One significant advantage of Isserow and Klein's account is that it can accommodate a lesser-discussed form of non-paradigmatic hypocrisy; *hypocritical praise*.²¹ Consider the celebrity who presents themselves as a deeply moral person who gives large sums of money to charities and revels in the praise they receive as a result, despite the fact that they are motivated not by any sense of altruism but rather by a particularly convoluted series of tax loopholes and a desire to turn good publicity into further profit. While the paradigmatic hypocrite publicly dispenses blame, our intuitions also condemn hypocrites who receive kudos that they haven't truly earned. In connecting the idea of hypocrisy to a person's ability to receive and bestow esteem as well as disesteem, Isserow and Klein's model accounts for this and restores a balance between praise and blame that is often missing in analyses of hypocrisy.

Isserow and Klein's model can account for other unusual cases as well. They distinguish between (1) being entitled to authority, and (2) actually being considered an authority by others and insist that they are concerned only with the former, and as such "hypocrites undermine their claim to authority, but this may or may not be discovered" (Isserow & Klein 2017, p. 207). This accommodates cases where a hypocrite is so adept that there is virtually no risk that their hypocrisy will be discovered. Similarly, they specify that their account is about claims to authority, not actual authority: "The important thing is not that the mismatch undermines what authority they have, but what authority they might reasonably claim" (Isserow & Klein 2017, p. 205). This accommodates cases where a hypocrite is so inept that they are unable to be taken seriously as a moral authority and cases where a hypocrite may have no intention of claiming moral authority (for instance, because they are misrepresenting their views merely to avoid justified public criticism rather than to influence the behaviour of others).

It is worth considering the case of the "defensive" hypocrite in more detail here, as it provides a helpful example of a situation where the concept of hypocrisy may extend beyond questions of standing to receive praise or bestow blame. The defensive hypocrite is not necessarily interested in being praised, blaming, or advising others, but simply wants to conceal their moral failings in order to escape public shame and humiliation. Note that the defensive hypocrite is superficially similar to the case of the gay person who feels pressured to publicly condemn homosexuality for their own safety. I suggested above that such a person does not warrant the label of hypocrite, however the defensive hypocrite differs in that (let us stipulate) they have no such excuse. Their motivation is merely to escape censure, despite the fact that the censure is morally justified and (let us further stipulate) that they know that it is morally justified.²² So, while being a hypocrite may often involve a desire to bestow blame on others or acquire undeserved kudos, it need not necessarily be motivated by anything more than a desire to avoid (deserved) blame.

²¹ For a recent and extensive discussion of hypocritical praise, see Lippert-Rasmussen (2022).

²² For the sake of simplicity, I assume that the hypocrite knows that they are being hypocritical. I take no stance here on whether this knowledge should be considered a necessary condition for one to count as a hypocrite.

However, for those cases where hypocrisy does involve bestowing praise or blame, the potential harm involved will be affected by the weight we assign to the hypocrite's claim to moral authority. On Isserow and Klein's conception of authority, all moral criticism implies moral authority by default, unless it is accompanied by some kind of disabling caveats – Isserow and Klein give the examples of a person who prefaces their criticism with phrases like ““Well, I'm not in a position to criticize him, but...,” and “Before I begin, I should specify that you ought to do as I say and not as I do”” (Isserow & Klein 2017, p. 199). Such caveats may serve to explicitly deny a claim to authority, or may simply contextualize it (for example, caveats like “I'm no expert, but...” seem to serve such a function). Elsewhere, they offer examples (such as a priest breaking the seal of the confessional, and a person who is accidentally taken to be much wiser in moral matters than they really are) and suggest that such people “have by their [hypocritical] act alone undermined their authority” (Isserow & Klein 2017, pp. 206–2097). This suggests that what makes hypocritical acts hypocritical is determined by the performance of the act itself (barring any pre-emptive disabling caveats), and not (for example) the intentions of the hypocrite or whether their status as a moral authority is correctly perceived by others.

In cases where moral authority *is* attributed to a hypocrite, the potential harm of hypocrisy is fairly obvious and can be inferred from what Isserow and Klein say about the value of moral authorities in general. The most valuable function served by a moral authority is to provide guidance to those who regard them as trustworthy when it comes to moral matters. This, we are told, is a practical authority, not just an epistemic one insofar as the judgements of moral authorities are taken to provide *pro tanto* reasons for action, in virtue of the fact that they have been given to us by moral authorities (Isserow & Klein 2017, p. 195). This is partly because moral authorities are not just good at making the correct judgments about matters of morality – they are also good at abiding by those judgments themselves. Isserow and Klein conclude that moral authorities “occupy a trusted position, and so they do have a correspondingly greater responsibility to get things right. If they lack the knowledge or skill, then they ought to have backed down, lest they lead others astray” (Isserow & Klein 2017, p. 196). Note that this account allows in principle for a spectrum of authorities capable of generating more or less weighty reasons – ranging from those whose opinions are at least worth taking seriously, to those to whom we ought to defer in matters of moral judgment. On this account, being a hypocrite is wrong if it involves taking an unacceptable risk in leading others astray in their moral judgments.²³

However, if the harm of hypocrisy is sometimes linked to the risk of leading others astray, and if we don't tend to take most people who criticize us as special moral authorities (even if we do take them to be worth listening to), the risk of leading others astray is likely much less for the average person than it is for those who are highly influential (notwithstanding the potential for those who are not individually taken very seriously to contribute to influential forms of collective hypocrisy that I discuss below).

Given that paradigmatic cases of hypocrisy are much more likely to involve figures who make claims to special moral authority (priests and politicians and so on), we might think that there is a rough correlation between the weight one claims for one's opinions and the potential harm (in terms of leading others astray) one risks upon engaging in hypocritical behaviour. It is bad for the closeted congregationist to hear the person behind him mutter her contempt for homosexuality, but it is probably worse for him to hear the same contempt

²³ This does not entail that hypocrisy is always wrong, nor that it is only ever wrong for this reason.

expressed from the pulpit. The fact that the latter comes from a source that he takes to be particularly authoritative will make it more likely that he takes such views seriously, which will make it more likely that he will be led astray in his views about the moral facts and his own moral character. Nevertheless, the fact that the closeted congregant may not put much stock in the mutterings from the woman behind him would make her no less a hypocrite should she return home later that afternoon to her female partner.

The key move I want to make at this point in the argument is to suggest that even hypocrites who do not act as special moral authorities can serve to lead people astray in their moral judgments, or at least risk doing so in a way that is morally unacceptable. This requires an explanation as to how we can affect others' abilities to form correct moral judgments without necessarily claiming the role of a special moral authority. A modified form of Miranda Fricker's concept of (incidental) hermeneutical injustice can help us in this task.

3 Hypocrisy as Hermeneutical Injustice

Hermeneutical injustice is one of two main varieties of *epistemic injustice*, which involves wronging a person in their capacity as a knower. The other variety – *testimonial injustice* – is more often discussed in the literature, and by Fricker herself, and refers to cases where “prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word” (Fricker 2007, p. 1). *Hermeneutical* injustice occurs at a prior stage, according to Fricker, “when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences” (Fricker 2007, p. 1). A classic example of hermeneutical injustice involves a woman who suffers from sexual harassment in a context in which the concept of sexual harassment itself is not sufficiently accessible to her.

How does this relate to hypocritical behaviour? The first claim I want to make here, (which I hope will be intuitive enough not to require substantial argument) is that each of us has a strong interest in being able to make true judgments about our own moral character. Put simply, it should matter to each of us that we are able to know whether we are good people or bad people, and to know what we would need to do in order to improve our moral characters.

The second claim is that hypocritical behaviour can sometimes make it more difficult for us to know these facts about the world and about ourselves. The specific cases I have in mind here are those involving our judgments about moral demandingness. Demandingness is thought to be a property of a putative moral requirement that can help determine whether it is in fact to be considered a moral requirement at all. The basic idea is that certain putative moral obligations might be so costly for us (either materially or psychologically or both) that they cease to be obligations at all, rendering them supererogatory at best.²⁴

Even in cases where we are confident that something is a moral obligation, demandingness considerations can help us decide what kind of moral obligation it is.²⁵ Consider, for example, the Kantian distinction between “imperfect” moral duties, which are those we are

²⁴ Traditionally, demandingness has figured most prominently in debates over consequentialism, where the alleged demandingness of consequentialist moral theories is thought to be a reason to reject them. See, for example Williams (1973) and Scheffler (1994).

²⁵ I thank an anonymous referee for raising this point.

required to fulfil, but not necessarily to the maximum extent possible, and “perfect” moral duties, which admit of no exceptions. We may think a general duty of beneficence is an imperfect duty partly because it would be highly demanding to fulfill it to the maximum extent possible.²⁶

One difficulty when considering questions of moral demandingness is that we have a clear incentive to appeal to demandingness in order to avoid taking on burdens that we ought to bear, so we must be cautious before deciding that something is so demanding that we are not in fact obliged to do it. However, if we think morality does not demand saintly behaviour²⁷, then failing to take demandingness seriously may mean taking on burdens that we are under no obligation to bear. Taken together, the task is to correctly label obligations as obligations, and supererogations as supererogations.

Hypocritical behaviour can make this task much more difficult since it misrepresents the hypocrite’s ability to adhere to the putative moral standard in question. Crucially, this effect may even be *worse* if the behaviour is widespread among large groups of people none of whom is taken to be a particular moral authority, since we are less likely to regard such behaviour as indicative of exceptional virtue and more likely to regard it as evidence that this particular moral standard is the kind of thing that even the average person is able to adhere to. Consider also that when hypocrisy is revealed we may sometimes take this as (non-decisive) evidence for the demandingness of a putative moral obligation – or as Scott F. Aiken has put it “if A doesn’t practice what he preachers, then B has evidence that what A preaches isn’t worth following” (Aiken, 2008, p. 166).²⁸

This has two distinct but related implications for hermeneutical injustice: first, if we fail to properly understand others’ behaviour toward us, we may come to regard ourselves as victims or perpetrators of injustice when we are not, or fail to regard ourselves as victims or perpetrators of injustice when we are. Second, where we fail to properly understand our own adherence (or not) to putative moral obligations, we may come to regard ourselves as morally better or worse than we actually are.

An example will help to illustrate the point. Suppose that Betty would like to be a good environmentalist, but often finds herself coming up short – sometimes she has a bath when she knows it’s better to have a shower, sometimes she just can’t be bothered making the trip to the bottle bank, sometimes her budget won’t stretch toward some the more expensive locally produced foods, and so on. Betty consults her local moral authority, an environmental activist friend of hers named Fred, who tells her that he always adheres to best environmentalist practice, and expects the same of everyone else. Betty believes Fred to be an exceptionally moral man but hopes that perhaps he is just applying his own very high standards onto ordinary folk who are not so exceptionally strong-willed as he. Betty then (tactfully) consults her neighbours in the wider community, only to find that each of them

²⁶ For a detailed discussion of this distinction, and the relationship between a duty of beneficence and demandingness, see Walla (2015).

²⁷ On the idea of “moral saints” see Wolf (1982).

²⁸ As Aiken suggests (2008, pp. 159–160, 167), the strength of such evidence will depend on the context. For example, an agent who is maximally motivated and possesses plenty of resources yet still (consistently) fails to practice what they preach provides stronger evidence that their advice is impractical or even impossible to follow (this may in turn help us to understand features of the world that we would need to change in order to make the putative obligation less demanding).

insists that they adhere to precisely the same standards.²⁹ Dismayed at the result of this survey, Betty forms the judgment that this is a moral standard that isn't overly-demanding, and that she is simply too weak-willed to adhere to it. In fact, let us imagine that Betty has the misfortune of being surrounded by hypocrites, all of whom together have helped her to form the wrong judgments about the demandingness of her environmentalist obligations and her own moral character.³⁰ In this case, Betty has been led astray by the collective behaviour of members of her community precisely because she regards them as guides, but not authorities with special expertise. Note that this is entirely compatible with the thought that Fred could also lead Betty astray, either because he is simply mistaken or is a hypocrite himself. The hermeneutical harm that is done to Betty in this case can thus be traced from its source – exposure to hypocritical behaviour (via her neighbours' lies) leading to Betty's mistaken beliefs about the demandingness of putative moral obligations which in turn leads Betty to hold false beliefs both about her own moral character and about how she is being treated by others.

This example is useful for two other reasons, besides demonstrating that hypocrites can mislead us without being taken as special moral authorities themselves. First, it presents us with an example of a kind of "collective hypocrisy" rarely considered in the literature³¹ and allows us to explain how the actions of individual hypocrites may be relatively harmless if considered individually but much more harmful when combined – perhaps even more so than the actions of individual hypocrites who are taken to be moral authorities. One reason for this is that it is relatively easy to undo the epistemic damage caused by a single individual hypocrite, no matter how influential they happen to be – a change of heart and a public confession or scandalous newspaper exposé might be sufficient to undermine an individual's moral authority, but there is no obvious equivalent for undoing forms of hypocrisy that are pervasive within a large community. Of course, attitudes and practices can change over time, but this is much more complicated in the case of collectives compared to individuals.

A second reason why it is useful to consider cases of collective hypocrisy is if we think that such cases will turn out to be much more common in the real world than cases involving powerful and influential individual hypocrites. While individual cases occupy most of the literature and provide a useful model when considering the anatomy of a hypocritical act in the abstract, an analysis of the effects of such acts upon people in the real world will be enriched by accounting for the cumulative effects of individual hypocritical actions. Here we may consider, for example, whether we are more likely to trust our judgments about the individual characters of influential priests or politicians, or our judgments about our communities taken as a whole and which of these really has more of an influence on what we believe about our moral duties and moral characters. It may well turn out to be the case that

²⁹ One may worry that Betty's neighbours have a good excuse for their behaviour, depending on the degree of unjustified social pressure they happen to feel. I have chosen to use the example of environmental obligations because it seems plausible to me that obligations of this sort are probably not too demanding, and that people like Betty's neighbours are unlikely to have a good excuse for their hypocritical behaviour.

³⁰ Note that in this case we may well think Betty is in fact of poor moral character, depending on how demanding we imagine the environmentalist standards to be – nevertheless, we may think that the hypocritical behaviour of her neighbours has made things worse for her by causing her to believe that she is an exceptionally bad person (this in turn may make it less likely that she tries to improve her behaviour if she comes to regard herself as something of a lost cause as opposed to someone prone to the same shortcomings as the average person).

³¹ Ginzburg (1922) is a notable exception.

collective hypocrisy that consists of the combined effects of many individuals – none of whom we would take to count as a special moral authority if considered individually – creates a much more powerful distorting effect than the actions of individuals, even those who are extremely influential.

We can conclude that hypocritical behaviour, whether it comes from someone we take to have special authority, or those we take to be representative of the average person or our community, can distort our picture of the moral landscape and our place within it. This distorting effect can manifest in different ways; we may be led to confuse that which is morally permissible with that which is not, or to confuse behaviour that is morally required with behaviour that is supererogatory, for example. The strength of this distorting effect can be amplified if the source is a moral authority that we trust or a widespread practice among large numbers of people whose hypocrisy may give us a false impression of how good (or bad) the average person is, which in turn will distort our own beliefs about how we measure up to the standards of morality.

We may choose to conceptualize the harm of such hypocrisy as a violation of a duty of non-interference, or we may take a stronger stance and regard the hypocrite as violating a duty to contribute to positive moral change. On the former view, we have no particular obligations to help others hold true beliefs or to increase the likelihood of them complying with the true demands of morality, provided that we don't actively undermine their attempts to do so by distorting their perception of the moral landscape via our hypocritical behaviour. On the latter view, refraining from hypocritical behaviour can help us to discharge a duty to contribute to moral progress in society more generally, by actively helping one another to discern and adhere to the moral rules.³²

In either case, when others distort our perceptions in this sense, we are wronged in our capacities as knowers. Fricker's concept of hermeneutical injustice captures this well, though it should be noted that Fricker's original aim is to capture a form of oppression that is mostly systematic and inflicted upon groups in virtue of morally arbitrary characteristics which serve as the source of wider oppression in society (for example, women or people of colour). However, Fricker does allow that some forms of hermeneutical injustice may be "incidental", in that they do not arise in this patterned and systematic way.

Nevertheless, Fricker is explicit that "[n]o agent perpetrates hermeneutical injustice- it is a purely structural notion" (Fricker 2007, p. 159).³³ On Fricker's account, hermeneutical injustice arises via background conditions characterised by "hermeneutical marginalization" – a state in which one is rendered unable to participate equally in the practices through which social meanings are generated (Fricker 2007, p. 6). This is at odds with my account, according to which hypocrites may perpetuate hermeneutical injustice by engaging in behaviour that contributes to a lack of conceptual resources. Fricker's view has been criticised on the basis that it "lacks an account of case-by-case exchanges between individuals and the ethical elements of such exchanges" (Cirne 2012, p. 49) and that it "makes it hard to appreciate any direct link between hermeneutical injustices and people's communicative and interpretative agency" (Medina 2012, p. 111). On my view (and those of the critics just mentioned), hermeneutical injustice is the sort of thing that can have individual perpetra-

³² One could conceive of this in terms of a moral obligation to engage in certain kinds of "virtue-signalling". For a detailed discussion of the positive benefits of certain kinds of virtue-signalling see Westra (2021).

³³ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

tors and so is not exclusively a structural phenomenon (though its structural aspects may be particularly significant).

It may be objected that hermeneutical injustice – even when expanded to include the possibility of perpetrators – is simply the wrong frame for thinking about this kind of harm. Strictly speaking, hermeneutical injustice involves the lack of important conceptual resources that help us to make sense of our experiences and our relations to others. To misrepresent the content of our moral obligations may well be harmful, but it need not contribute to a lack of conceptual resources, and so it should be explained via something other than the concept of hermeneutical injustice.

In response to this worry, I want to suggest that we (very modestly) expand the concept of hermeneutical injustice to include not just a lack of important conceptual resources, but a (systematic or incidental) inability to effectively exploit those resources (where this is explained by the unjust actions of others).³⁴ The basic thought here is that the mere presence or accessibility of conceptual resources is insufficient to mitigate against the harm of hermeneutical injustice if one is nevertheless prevented from utilizing those resources to articulate one's experiences.

For example, “gaslighting” is one way in which a person can be rendered unable to properly apply accessible concepts to their own experience through the unjust actions of others – such cases typically do not involve the gaslighter³⁵ disputing the coherency or validity of a particular concept but rather the application of a concept to a particular case. Indeed, the effectiveness of gaslighting may sometimes depend on or be enhanced by certain concepts being accessible but not properly applicable, as in the play and movie that gave rise to the term, where the villain Gregory aims to convince his wife Paula that she is suffering from kleptomania and other mental health disorders.

Gaslighting has already been identified as a kind of epistemic injustice³⁶, although typically the focus is on systematic rather than incidental injustice, and such forms of gaslighting usually lack the intentional aspect that can be attributed to individual agents such as Gregory. Nevertheless, neither intentionality nor systematicity would seem to be essential features of gaslighting, allowing for the possibility of any combination of intentional or non-intentional, systematic or incidental.³⁷ This allows us to use conceptual accounts of gaslighting as a precedent for a distinction between concepts and their application, which helps to explain how hypocrisy can constitute incidental hermeneutical injustice by thwarting the application of concepts that are otherwise accessible.

Specifically, while the actions of the hypocrite do not necessarily contribute to a lack of important conceptual resources that we might use to understand ourselves as moral agents, by misrepresenting the demandingness of our moral obligations the hypocrite undermines

³⁴ Hänel (2020) argues that hermeneutical injustice undermines “self-recognition”, which could be considered a precedent for interpreting the concept of hermeneutical injustice in this way, to the extent that misunderstanding one's adherence to moral rules undermines one's capacity for self-recognition.

³⁵ Typically, gaslighting is imagined to involve single or small numbers of agents acting in specific contexts as in the original movie, however other forms have been identified in the literature, such as “racial gaslighting” (Davis & Ernst, 2017) and “cultural gaslighting” (Ruiz 2020).

³⁶ See, for example, Bailey (2020).

³⁷ This is compatible with the idea that some forms of gaslighting may be more significant than others, and with the idea that some forms of gaslighting may exacerbate or contribute to others (for example, incidental cases of gaslighting may be made possible or exacerbated by the fact that the victim is a member of a marginalized group).

our ability to appreciate how we stand in relation to these concepts. We remain able to recognize a spectrum of moral characters from perfect moral saints to moral monsters, but we are unable to firmly place ourselves among them. This not only affects our ability to conceive of our ourselves as moral agents, but also our ability to articulate our experiences to others and our ability to interpret others' behaviour toward us. False beliefs about demandingness lead to (or make it more likely that we will hold) false beliefs about our moral obligations and these false beliefs will include beliefs about how we ought to react to others (for example, letting them off the hook when we should be holding them accountable or vice versa) and about how we should feel about ourselves (such as being self-critical for failing to act in a way that is supererogatory or failing to be self-critical for violating a moral obligation). When we have distorted beliefs about others' behaviour toward us, we may misunderstand ourselves as victims (or not) of injustice, while distorted beliefs about our own adherence (or failure to adhere) to putative moral obligations may lead us to misunderstand ourselves as virtuous (or not). Both kinds of belief (whether we are victims of injustice and whether we are good moral agents) are potential sites of hermeneutical injustice, on my account. In either case, in terms of the resultant harm, there seems little to distinguish the question of accessibility of important conceptual resources, as in Fricker's original formulation of hermeneutical injustice, and the question of the exploitability of these resources, which I argue is undermined by certain kinds of hypocritical behaviour.

What is to be gained from such a characterization? There are several advantages. First, as we have seen, this understanding of hypocrisy allows us to flesh out our theories of hypocrisy by identifying a form of harm that is significant and persistent in cases of both paradigmatic and non-paradigmatic hypocrisy, which has not yet been acknowledged in the literature. Second, this approach allows us to better understand how hypocrisy works in the context of hypocritical moral authorities and their ability to amplify the epistemic harms of hypocrisy, as well as helping us to understand how one can be a harmful hypocrite by acting collectively with other "ordinary" people.

It might be objected at this point that the connection between hypocrisy and epistemic injustice is tenuous given that there is no necessary connection between the two: a person may be misinformed about their moral duties without being misled by hypocrisy, and being exposed to hypocrisy need not result in a person being misinformed about the content of their moral duties. In response, it is important to emphasize that the core claim I argue for here is not that all forms of hypocrisy necessarily involve epistemic injustice, but rather that certain forms of hypocrisy (i.e. those with the potential³⁸ to distort our perception of the moral landscape) give rise to the kind of (incidental hermeneutical) epistemic injustice I have described. However, more must be said in response to the first type of case mentioned above, where our perspective may be distorted without being misled by hypocrisy, for example because those we trust on matters of morality (be they influential individuals or members of their community in general) happen to be mistaken about the moral facts, through no fault of their own.

³⁸ It is worth emphasising that not every kind of hypocritical behaviour has this potential – there may be cases where certain moral rules are just so obvious and uncontroversial that no amount of hypocritical behaviour can distort my knowledge of the moral facts. My account leaves open the possibility that such behaviour is wrong for other reasons, even though it lacks the potential to contribute to the kind of hermeneutical injustice I identify here.

Such cases involve what we might call “innocent misleadings” and it is helpful to contrast these with the type of cases discussed above where a person is misled by the (blame-worthy) hypocritical behaviour of others. It is certainly bad to be misled via the blameless actions of others, but surely worse (all else being equal) to be misled by the deliberate or reckless actions of others, since such acts imply a disregard or disrespect of our moral status which is not implicated in the case of innocent misleadings. Understood in this way, it is precisely the hypocritical nature of the act that transforms the phenomenon in question from something unfortunate to something unjust (just as we may distinguish between epistemic injustice and epistemic misfortune more generally).

One kind of innocent misleading involves (some) cases of “subjunctive hypocrisy” (Isserow 2022), in which a person professes adherence to moral rules that they would fail to follow if given the chance (but where the opportunity has not yet presented itself). In some cases, subjunctive hypocrisy will be wrong for the same reasons as “ordinary” hypocrisy as discussed above – we can mislead others by making false claims about how we would act even if we haven’t had the opportunity.³⁹ In others, we may not wish to blame the subjunctive hypocrite to the extent that they are non-culpably mistaken about how they would act, if given the chance.⁴⁰

Another interesting implication of this account is that it may suggest that we ought to understand certain forms of humility as a kind of hypocrisy (or perhaps, its mirror image). While I do not have the space to develop such an account here, there is at least a case to be made that humility can involve misrepresenting one’s adherence to moral rules in a way that distorts our perception of the moral landscape by making those rules appear to be more demanding than they actually are.⁴¹

If there is a general duty not to distort others’ perceptions of the moral landscape, what are the limits of such a duty? One obvious worry is that such a duty might be too demanding if it required us to constantly broadcast our moral successes and failures to others so that they can maintain a generally accurate picture of how the average person is able to behave. Another worry is that such public admissions of our moral failings might constitute a kind of public “debasement” that would be bad for us. Are we really required to broadcast our every moral failing to the world, as though our entire moral community is to act as a collective confession box? It is not difficult to imagine that such a stringent duty would itself be so demanding that few might be able to comply.⁴²

³⁹ If the reader is unconvinced owing to special features of subjunctive hypocrisy, they may consider the account developed here to apply only to “ordinary” cases of hypocrisy instead.

⁴⁰ Certain common sense moral practises would seem to guard against subjunctive hypocrisy and its harms, such as the idea that we should be reluctant to criticize a person until we have “walked a mile in their shoes”, or that we should be wary of giving too much credit to criticism made by those who have never found themselves in our situation.

⁴¹ I have in mind cases where one engages in morally supererogatory acts while insisting (whether sincerely or otherwise) that “I just did what anyone else would have done in my position”. It is important to distinguish the question of whether some particular person is in fact a “moral saint” or “exemplar” from the question of what such people can tell us about morality. The first question is complicated by the fact that people we tend to regard as moral saints tend to deny that their behaviour is supererogatory (Finlay 2007, pp. 144–145) and the second by the fact that our self-interest may bias us to prefer less demanding accounts of morality and so to see moral saints where none exist. However, for an argument that moral exemplars should not lead us to a radically demanding account of morality see Archer and Dennis (2023).

⁴² Indeed, we may also worry that such radical and widespread honesty may make things *worse*, if it leads us all to a more pessimistic view of what humanity is generally capable of.

Against a requirement to disclose one's moral failings, we might appeal to the value of privacy to explain why one is entitled not to reveal certain facts about oneself that would be embarrassing or shameful if publicly known. One way to understand the value of privacy is to think of privacy as "a condition in which one is protected in various respects from undesired intrusions by other people".⁴³ Some theorists go further and insist that privacy requires an element of control, not mere inaccessibility – such that to truly enjoy the value of privacy one must be able to set the terms under which information about oneself is communicated to others (Westin 1967; Fried 1968). A (moral) right to privacy, so understood, would include a claim right that others not attempt to intrude and a power to waive such a right, by granting (and controlling) access to information about oneself.⁴⁴ I do not have the space here to offer a complete reply to this worry about where our right to privacy ends and our duties to others begin, but it will be helpful to sketch a conservative response – conservative insofar as it concedes that there is a strong right to privacy which can (at least sometimes) override our duty to be honest with others about our moral failings. It is my contention that even with such a strong presumption in favour of privacy, certain (unfortunately common) forms of hypocrisy should nevertheless be considered impermissible.

First, there may be cases where we should regard an individual as having forfeited their right to privacy, at least insofar as it pertains to some limited domain of their life. An authority figure who deliberately appeals to aspects of their private life in order to praise or condemn others may have little cause for complaint if they are exposed as a hypocrite, for example.⁴⁵ In such a case, we may think that they can no longer appeal to privacy, having chosen to make their private life public. Such an approach should be used cautiously, however: to make some aspects of one's private life public is not necessarily to make all aspects of one's private life public⁴⁶ and talk of rights forfeiture is further complicated to the extent that it may depend on certain facts about a hypocrite's intentions or other mental states.⁴⁷

Second, the cases considered thus far involve those who appeal to privacy because they wish to avoid public condemnation, but the appeal looks considerably weaker if not entirely weightless if we consider a person who wishes to present themselves as an exceptionally moral person. It is not debasing to admit that one is no better or worse than the average person – only those who really are heroes or moral saints deserve to be thought of as such. Thus the celebrity who claims undeserved kudos for their charitable contributions, for example, cannot appeal to a right to privacy as a way of avoiding their duty to be honest about their motivations. Given these considerations, we can conclude that even if we have a very strong presumption in favour of a right to privacy (and I am not convinced that we should), it is still quite

⁴³ Roessler and DeCew (2023) offer this characterisation of Bok's (1982) view.

⁴⁴ For more on the concepts of "claim rights" and "powers", see Hohfeld (1919).

⁴⁵ Claudio Lopez-Guerra argues that "those who exercise political power at the highest level acquire a special duty to be subject to it in certain ways" (Lopez-Guerra, 2017, p. 322), and that this requires (among other things) that they acquire certain goods on the same terms that they make them available to the general public. Thus we may be entitled to know whether politicians who praise public health or education systems use those same services themselves.

⁴⁶ Appeals to privacy may be further complicated in cases involving celebrity (understood broadly), especially given a celebrity's ability to exert influence over others. For an in-depth discussion of the relationship between privacy and hypocrisy see Devine (2011), who argues that the right to conceal one's hypocrisy is often a price worth paying in exchange for the right to privacy.

⁴⁷ There may be cases, for example, where it is not clear that a hypocrite intended to make their private life public, or where they did not foresee that their behaviour would make them liable to have certain facts about their private lives exposed. Such cases may make us reluctant to say that the hypocrite has forfeited their rights, and we may instead wish to appeal to some of the other reasons given in this section.

easy to condemn hypocritical behaviour as epistemic injustice, especially when perpetrated by those whose praise and condemnation carries the most weight in our moral communities.

4 Conclusion

My central aim in this article has been to argue for a new way of understanding the harm that hypocrisy (sometimes) causes. This harm, which I have suggested we conceive of in terms of epistemic injustice, is not necessarily present in every case of hypocrisy, and where it is present, it will not always constitute the most morally significant feature of the hypocritical act. Nevertheless, this is a distinct form of harm that is often significant, and often present in many cases of hypocrisy, both paradigmatic and non-paradigmatic, exercised by influential moral authorities as well as collectives of “ordinary” people. A complete theory of hypocrisy, therefore, should include these epistemic wrongs in its account of what is bad about hypocritical actions and attitudes.

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