Moral Hypocrisy, Moral Inconsistency, and the Struggle for Moral Integrity

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The study of moral hypocrisy highlights the psychological importance of moral claims. For decades, social psychology has made a business of showing how, under the right conditions, individuals who seem perfectly moral will act in ethically dubious ways, such as giving electrical shocks to a stranger, ignoring a woman’s cries for help, or avoiding a peer because he is disabled. An analysis of moral hypocrisy needs to go beyond this mismatch between our assumptions about human decency and people’s surprising laboratory misdeeds. We need to focus instead on the value, function, and consequences of actively claiming to be a moral person. In this talk, we propose to review various explorations of (moral) hypocrisy in the social psychological literature, and to organize them according to this 2 by 2 framework. We begin with the most familiar case of hypocrisy as behavioral inconsistency, or not practicing what one preaches. We then extend our definition of moral hypocrisy by considering cases of hypocrisy in the absence of behavioral inconsistency. Next we look at cases of behavioral inconsistency without hypocrisy, and we finish with moral integrity, which we define as a lack of hypocrisy in the context of consistency. In each of these four cells, we will be reviewing instances where the focus of the research was on hypocritical actors (e.g., Do individuals always practice what they preach? What are the psychological consequences of moral hypocrisy?), and ones where the focus was on reactions to hypocrisy (e.g., When is inconsistency perceived as hypocrisy?).