

Hypocrisy and Hyperbole

I teach at a public university. Am I a hypocrite? Bernie Sanders' net worth is about \$2M. Is he a hypocrite? How about vegetarians who regularly eat meat?

The right answer: It depends on the details of the speakers' moral position! Consider the following cases.

1. You say, "It is *always* morally wrong to eat meat," but you still eat meat. Are you a hypocrite? Of course, because you break your own absolute rule.
2. You say, "We have a duty not to eat meat, except in extreme circumstances," but you still eat meat. Are you a hypocrite? Almost certainly, because we're rarely in extreme circumstances.
3. You say, "Eating meat is very bad," but you still eat meat. Are you a hypocrite? Probably. Yes, you could believe there are important offsetting moral factors that justify your meat consumption despite its badness. But if you thought these offsetting factors were important, you probably would have discussed them. And if you think these offsetting factors are unimportant, what are the odds that they just-so-happen to excuse *your* meat consumption?
4. You say, "We should eat less meat," but you still eat meat. Are you a hypocrite? Perhaps. If your meat consumption is low or at least falling, your behavior is plausibly consistent with your principle. Otherwise, not.
5. You say, "Government should discourage meat consumption," but still eat meat. You *don't* say anything resembling #1-#4. Are you a hypocrite? Probably not – unless you're a powerful politician who ignores the issue.

So how hypocritical are people, really? Exceedingly so. Why? Because humans love hyperbole. When they moralize, they gravitate toward *strong* versions of their moral positions. They don't like to say, "Well, government should raise taxes on the rich; but until that day, the rich are doing nothing morally wrong." Neither do they like to say, "The rich should give 13% more money to charity." *These positions aren't fun.*

Instead, people like to say things like, "It's a crime for billionaires to exist in a world with hunger" or "The rich are nothing but a bunch of bloodsucking parasites." And when you make such extreme statements, you routinely end up condemning yourself as well – at least by extension. After all, if it's a crime for billionaires to exist in a world with hunger, why isn't it also a crime for *millionaires*? For single adults who make \$30k a year? Moralizing with hyperbole is like a detonating a massive moral bomb; unless you're careful,

you end up in your own blast radius.

Which brings us back to my initial questions.

1. Am I a hypocrite? No, because I avoid hyperbole. I don't claim that anyone who teaches at a public university is a wrongdoer, evil, etc. What I do claim is that (a) taxpayer support for education is extremely wasteful, and (b) politicians and their subordinates who forcibly extract that support have a moral duty to stop.

2. Is Sanders a hypocrite? Of course. Virtually every politician is a hypocrite, because hyperbole is their livelihood. This is no surprise, because politicians are an evil bunch. And that's no hyperbole.

3. Are vegetarians who eat meat hypocrites? Usually. The modest vegetarians who eat meat once a month and say, "I'm just trying to help reduce animal suffering a little bit" are in the clear. But any vegetarian who eats meat after claiming that "Meat is murder" – or even "Animal pain is just as morally important as human pain" is indeed a hypocrite.