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David Runciman: Political Hypocrisy

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INTRODUCTION

This is a book about hypocritical politicians, and about some of the ways we might learn to view them. There is a lot of hypocrisy at work in contemporary politics—no doubt we all have our favourite examples, from the moralising adulterers to the mudslinging do-gooders. But although it is fairly easy to point the finger at all this hypocrisy, it is much harder to know what, if anything, to do about it. The problem is that hypocrisy, though inherently unattractive, is also more or less inevitable in most political settings, and in liberal democratic societies it is practically ubiquitous. No one likes it, but everyone is at it, which means that it is difficult to criticise hypocrisy without falling into the trap of exemplifying the very thing one is criticising. This is an intractable problem, but for that reason, it is nothing new, and in this book I explore what a range of past political thinkers have had to say about the difficulty of trying to rescue politics from the most destructive forms of hypocrisy without simply making the problem worse. The thinkers that I discuss—from Thomas Hobbes to George Orwell—are not the usual ones who are looked to for guidance on matters of hypocrisy and duplicity. This is because as champions of a straight-talking approach to politics they can appear either naively or wilfully cut off from the fact that hypocrisy is something we have to learn to live with. But in fact, I believe these are precisely the thinkers who can help us to understand the role that hypocrisy does and ought to play in political life, because they saw the problem of hypocrisy in all its complexity, and were torn in their responses to it. In

this introduction, I will explain why I think these particular authors can serve as a guide to our own concerns about political double standards, and why they are better suited to that task than the writers—from Machiavelli to Nietzsche—who are more often assumed to be telling us the truth about the limits of truthfulness in politics.

HYPOCRISY: AN “ORDINARY” VICE

One of the best places to begin any discussion of the problem of hypocrisy in liberal democratic politics is with the classic treatment of this question in Judith Shklar’s *Ordinary Vices* (1984). In that book, Shklar makes the case for ranking the vices according to the nature of the threat that they pose to liberal societies. The vice that emerges as the worst of all, and by far, is cruelty. The other vices, Shklar suggests, are therefore not so bad, and this includes the one with which she begins her discussion: the vice of hypocrisy. She wants us (the inhabitants of liberal societies) to stop spending so much time worrying about hypocrisy, and to stop minding about it so much. But it is difficult not to mind about hypocrisy, for two reasons. First, it is so very easy to take a dislike to it—on a basic human level, there is something repulsive about hypocrisy encountered at first hand, since no one enjoys being played for a fool. Second, for everyone who does take a dislike to it, it is so very easy to find. “For those who put hypocrisy first,” Shklar writes (“first” here meaning ranked worst among the vices), “their horror is enhanced precisely because they see it everywhere”; and this means, in particular, that they see it everywhere in politics.¹

The specific political problem is that liberal societies are, or have become, democracies. Because people don’t like hypocrisy, and because hypocrisy is everywhere, it is all too tempting for democratic politicians to seek to expose the inevitable double standards of their rivals in the pursuit of

power, and votes. Take the most obvious contemporary instance of this temptation: negative advertising. If you wish to do the maximum possible damage to your political opponent in thirty seconds of airtime, you should try to paint him or her as a hypocrite: you must highlight the gap between the honeyed words and the underlying reality, between the mask and the person behind the mask, between what they say now and what they once did. And negative advertising works, which is why it proves so hard to resist for any politician, particularly those who find themselves behind in the polls, and certainly including those who have promised to foreswear it. Shklar does not discuss negative advertising, but she does say this, which is almost impossible to dispute: "It is easier to dispose of an opponent's character by exposing his hypocrisy than to show his political convictions are wrong."²

Shklar thinks we have got all this the wrong way around, that we are worrying about hypocrisy when we should be worrying about our intolerance for it. She highlights the risks for liberal democracies of too great a reliance on "public sincerity," which simply leaves all politicians vulnerable to charges of bad faith. We should learn to be more sanguine about hypocrisy, and accept that liberal democratic politics are only sustainable if mixed with a certain amount of dissimulation and pretence. The difficulty, though, is knowing how to get this mixture right. The problem is that we do not want to be sanguine about the wrong kinds of hypocrisy. Nor ought we to assume that there is nothing we can do if mild forms of hypocrisy start to leach into every corner of public life. In some places, a tolerance for hypocrisy can do real harm. After all, some forms of hypocrisy are inherently destructive of liberalism itself, even in Shklar's terms. For example, allowing people to treat government-sanctioned torture as a necessary resource of all political societies *in extremis*, no matter how liberal their public principles, would simply let in cruelty by the back door. Equally, it would be counter-productive to tolerate hypocrisy about our tolerance for hypocrisy: it hardly makes

sense to permit politicians to get away with renouncing negative advertising while their underlings carry on spreading poison about their opponents behind the scenes. Yet negative advertising only works because it works on *us*; so politicians caught out in this way might legitimately claim that we are the ones being hypocritical about our tolerance for hypocrisy, since the reason they keep coming back to the well of poison is because it is the only reliable way to get our attention. Clearly, a line needs to be drawn somewhere between the hypocrisies that are unavoidable in contemporary political life, and the hypocrisies that are intolerable. But it is hard to see where. Shklar does not offer much advice about where and how to draw this line, except to remind us that it will not be easy, because, as she puts it, “what we have to live with is a morally pluralistic world in which hypocrisy and antihypocrisy are joined to form a discrete system.”³

This book is an attempt to tease apart some of the different sorts of hypocrisy at work in the morally pluralistic world of modern politics, using the history of political thought as a guide. It is not unusual to see the history of ideas as an appropriate place to look for guidance on these matters. Shklar herself does it in *Ordinary Vices*, where she draws not just on philosophers (such as Hegel) but also playwrights (above all Molière, the man who gave us “tartuffery”) and novelists (including Hawthorne and Dickens) for insights into the intricate dance of hypocrisy and anti-hypocrisy, the constant round of masking and unmasking that makes up our social existence. Other authors have sought to supplement Shklar’s account by going back to the great scourges of well-meaning sanctimony in the history of political thought, such as Machiavelli and Rousseau, who together provide the inspiration for Ruth Grant’s *Hypocrisy and Integrity* (1997); or Rousseau and Nietzsche, who provide two of the main sources for Bernard Williams’s meditation on the perils of authenticity in *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002). But what is much rarer is an attempt to seek some answers in the classic liberal tradition itself. Indeed,

Grant argues that the liberal tradition is precisely the wrong place to look. “The appreciation of the necessity for political hypocrisy,” she writes, “and the perspective of the liberal rationalist are simply at odds with each other.”⁴ She goes on: “Liberal theory does not take sufficient account of the distinctive character of political relations, of political passions, and of moral discourse and so underestimates the place of hypocrisy in politics.”⁵ By liberal rationalists, Grant says she means writers like Hobbes, Locke, and Adam Smith. The reason she thinks we must go back to Machiavelli when considering the role of hypocrisy in political life is that in her view none of these other authors have anything of use to tell us on the subject. But Grant is wrong about this, and she is therefore wrong about the failures of liberal theory to make sense of hypocrisy. In this book I hope to show why.

There is a weak and a strong version of the case Grant makes. The weak version says that because liberal rationalists are precommitted to the importance of truthfulness in politics, they simply don’t understand why hypocrisy is inevitable. The strong version says that they do understand, but are simply pretending not to, which makes them the worst hypocrites of all. This is often what people mean when they talk about hypocrisy as the English vice, so it is easy to see why English liberals often strike outsiders as the very worst of hypocrites, particularly when their liberal rationalism turns into liberal imperialism. In this book, I will be looking at a broadly liberal rationalist tradition of English political thought starting with Hobbes, and stretching up to Victorian imperialism and beyond. Of course, by its very Englishness it cannot be taken to be definitive of what Grant calls liberal rationalism (for example, I will only be discussing Scottish Enlightenment thinkers like Adam Smith and David Hume in passing). Moreover, it is not the whole of English liberal rationalism, since I will be bypassing John Locke as well. It includes one Anglicised Dutch writer (Mandeville) and one American detour, into the arguments surrounding American dependence and independence

at the end of the eighteenth century, since these were in their own ways arguments about the nature of English hypocrisy, and about whether there was a nonhypocritical way of confronting it. The authors discussed in this book constitute a highly selective sample in what is a broad field. But what connects them is the fact that they have important things to say about the nature of political hypocrisy, and this is related to the fact that they were often thought to be the worst of hypocrites themselves.

Certainly it is hard to think of any political thinkers who have faced the charge of hypocrisy more often than the ones I will be discussing in what follows: Hobbes, Mandeville, Franklin, Jefferson, Bentham, Sidgwick, Orwell are some of the great anti-hypocrites of the liberal tradition, which makes them in many people's eyes its arch-hypocrites as well. But this is unfair, as well as inaccurate: their anti-hypocrisy was much more subtle and complicated than that would suggest. These authors have some of the most interesting and useful things to say about hypocrisy, precisely because they were conscious of its hold on political life, even as they tried to escape it. In other words, they were struggling with the problem from the inside, and could see that it was a problem, unlike those (Machiavelli, Rousseau, Nietzsche) who have looked at the hypocrisy of liberal (or in an earlier guise, "Christian") politics from the outside, and saw only how easy it would be to pull aside the mask, which is what they did.

The writers that I will be discussing in this book are the ones who were willing to keep the mask in place, despite or because of the fact that they were also truth-tellers, committed to looking behind the mask, and revealing what they found there. Keeping the mask in place while being aware of what lies behind the mask is precisely the problem of hypocrisy for liberal societies; indeed, it is one of the deepest problems of politics that we face. These writers were also specifically concerned with problems of language, and the difficulty of saying what you mean in a political environment in which there are

often good reasons not to mean what you say. They are therefore the people we should be looking to for help in thinking about the puzzle that Shklar leaves us with, because it was a puzzle for them too, and there are no easy answers to be found here. Thinkers like Machiavelli make it too easy for us to dismiss hypocrisy as a political problem altogether. What's much harder to make sense of is why it remains such a problem for us in the first place.

THE VARIETIES OF HYPOCRISY

Something else that connects the writers I will be discussing in this book is that they all understood that hypocrisy comes in a variety of different forms, which is why it is so important to separate them out, rather than lumping them all together. There is always a temptation to sweep a range of different practices under the general heading of hypocrisy, and then condemn them all out of hand. But in reality the best one can ever do with hypocrisy is take a stand for or against one kind or another, not for or against hypocrisy itself. We might regret the prevalence of hypocrisy, but if we want to do anything about it we have to get beyond generalised regret, and try instead to identify the different ways in which hypocrisy can be a problem. As a result, I am not going to try to provide a catch-all definition of what hypocrisy is, nor of how it must relate either to sincerity on the one hand or to lying on the other. A variety of different forms of sincerity, hypocrisy, and lies will emerge over the course of this book, and a variety of different relationships between them. But I do want to offer a preliminary account of how the concept of hypocrisy is able to sustain such a range of different interpretations, in order to set these later discussions in context. To do so, it is necessary to go back to the origins of the term.

The idea of hypocrisy has its roots in the theatre. The original "hypocrites" were classical stage actors, and the Greek term (*hypokrisis*) meant the playing of a part. So in its original

form the term was merely descriptive of the theatrical function of pretending to be something one is not. But it is not difficult to see why the idea should have acquired pejorative connotations, given the various sorts of disapproval that the theatrical way of life has itself attracted over the centuries. People who play a part are potentially unreliable, because they have more than one face they can display. The theatre sets some limits to this unreliability by its own conventions (the stage is a space that provides us with some guarantees that what we are seeing is merely a performance, though a good performance will try to make us forget this fact). But actors encountered off the stage may have the ability to play a part without their audience being aware of what is going on. To play a part that does not reveal itself to be the playing of a part is a kind of deception, and hypocrisy in its pejorative sense always entails a deception of some kind.

However, this deception, once it is not bounded by the conventions of the stage, can take many different forms. The earliest extension of the term was from theatre to religion, and to public (and often highly theatrical) professions of religious faith by individuals who did not actually believe what they were saying.⁶ The act here is an act of piety. But hypocrisy has also come to describe public statements of principle that do not coincide with an individual's private practices—indeed, this is what we most often mean by hypocrisy today, where the duplicity lies not in the concealment of one's personal beliefs but in the attempt to separate off one's personal behaviour from the standards that hold for everyone else (as in the phrase "It's one rule for them, and one rule for the rest of us"). But this is by no means the only way of thinking about hypocrisy. Other kinds of hypocritical deception include claims to knowledge that one lacks, claims to a consistency that one cannot sustain, claims to a loyalty that one does not possess, claims to an identity that one does not hold. A hypocrite is always putting on an act, but precisely because it is an act, hypocrisy can come in almost any form.

Because hypocrisy always involves an element of pretence, it might be said that all forms of hypocrisy are a kind of lie. But it certainly does not follow that all lies are therefore hypocritical. Some lies are simply lies—telling an untruth does not necessarily involve putting on an act, because an act involves the attempt to convey an impression that extends beyond the instant of the lie itself. A lie creates the immediate impression that one believes something that happens to be false, but that does not mean that one is not what one seems (indeed, people who have a well-deserved reputation for lying may by telling a lie be confirming exactly who they are). Hypocrisy turns on questions of character rather than simply coincidence with the truth. Likewise, though hypocrisy will involve some element of inconsistency, it is not true that inconsistency is itself evidence of hypocrisy. People often do, and often should, change their minds about how to act, or vary their principles depending on the situation they find themselves in. It is not hypocrisy to seek special treatment for one's own children—to arrive, say, in a crowded emergency room with an ailing child and demand immediate attention—though it may be unrealistic or even counter-productive to behave in this way; it is only hypocrisy if one has some prior commitment not to do so. It is the prior commitment not to be inconsistent, rather than the fact of inconsistency, that generates the conditions of hypocrisy. That, of course, is one reason why hypocrisy is such a problem for politicians.

Broadly speaking, then, hypocrisy involves the construction of a persona (another word, as we shall see in the next chapter, with its roots in the theatre) that generates some kind of false impression. Thus one consistent way of thinking about hypocrisy, and one that will recur throughout this book, is as the wearing of masks. But the idea of hypocrisy as mask-wearing leaves open the question of what it is that is being masked. It also leaves open the nature of the relationship between hypocrisy and bad behaviour, or vice. The most common way of thinking about hypocrisy is *as* a vice—that is, to

take it for granted that it is always a bad thing to seek to conceal whom one really is. But another way of thinking about hypocrisy is as a coping mechanism for the problem of vice itself, in which case it may be that hypocrisy is not a vice at all. One way to cope with vice is to seek to conceal it, or to dress it up as something it is not. This sort of act—the passing off of vice as virtue—makes it possible to consider hypocrisy in two very different lights. From one perspective the act of concealment makes things worse—it simply piles vice on top of vice, which is why hypocrites are often seen as wickeder than people who are simply, and openly, bad. But from another perspective the concealment turns out to be a form of amelioration—it is, in Rochefoucauld’s timeless phrase, “the tribute that vice pays to virtue.” Hypocrites who pretend to be better than they really are could also be said to be better than they might be, because they are at least pretending to be good.

This does not exhaust the range of possible attitudes to vice of which hypocrisy may be a symptom. Sometimes individuals may find it necessary to pretend to be worse than they really are, for the sake of appearances. A democratic politician might feel the need to conceal some of her moral refinements of character for fear of appearing holier-than-thou and putting off the electorate—this is the curious democratic tribute that virtue occasionally plays to vice. Equally, it is possible for someone to believe that the categories of vice and virtue are meaningless in themselves, but nevertheless to wish to give the appearance of taking them seriously. This does not require dressing up vice as virtue; instead, it means dressing up morally arbitrary actions as though they had their own moral character, for better or for worse. As we shall see, the difference between concealing the fact of vice and concealing the fact that vice can be hard to distinguish from virtue turns out to be of deep political significance for a body of liberal rational thought that can be traced all the way back to Hobbes.

Finally, there remains the question of whether hypocrisy depends on the intention behind the action—that is, whether

hypocrites need to know that what they are doing is hypocrisy for it to count as such. One view is that hypocrisy must involve the deliberate intention to deceive, and that the more deliberate the deception, the worse the hypocrite. But many people conceal aspects of their true natures not out of malice or from other designing motives, but simply because it is the easy option, and one that may even be required by basic standards of social conformity. It is common to see this latter sort of hypocrisy—if hypocrisy is what it is—as essentially benign. Indeed, it is possible to understand many socially useful conventions as hypocrisy of this kind—politeness, for example, is by definition a dressing up of one’s true feelings (of course, it is possible to be motivated by a sincere desire not to hurt someone else’s feelings, but if one is sincerely motivated by concern for another, one is being something more than merely polite).⁷ It seems absurd to view good manners as on a par with the more malicious forms of hypocrisy. But precisely because hypocrisy can take these very different forms, it also follows that well-meaning hypocrisy may lack one of the qualities that is unavoidable among those individuals whose hypocrisy is of their own design: self-knowledge. Hypocrites who know what they are doing at least know that what they are doing is hypocrisy. But hypocrites who lack the sense that they are responsible for the part that they are playing can also lack a sense of responsibility for its consequences. In large groups, this absence of self-awareness can turn into a kind of collective self-deception. The least one can say for the nastier kind of hypocrites is that they are not self-deceived.

If hypocrisy is a kind of deception, therefore, it is still very important to distinguish within hypocritical behaviour between the different kinds of deception for which it allows: deliberate and inadvertent, personal and collective, self-deceptions and other-directed deceptions. And these distinctions are the ones that turn out to be of the greatest political significance in the story I will be telling in this book, of greater significance than broader distinctions between hypocrisy and

sincerity, or between truth-telling and lies. Once we acknowledge that some element of hypocrisy is inevitable in our political life, then it becomes self-defeating simply to try to guard against it. Instead, what we need to know is what *sorts* of hypocrites we want our politicians to be, and in what sorts of combinations. Do we want them to be hypocrites like us, so that they can understand us, or to be hypocrites of a different kind, so that they can manage our hypocrisy? Do we want them to be designing hypocrites, who at least know what they are doing, or do we want them to be more innocent than that? Do we want them to expose each other's hypocrisy, or to ameliorate it? These are the sorts of questions that concerned the authors I will be discussing in this book, and in their attempts to answer them they tell us something about what it makes sense to wish for in the hypocritical world of politics.

HYPOCRISY THEN AND NOW

I began this introduction by remarking that there is a lot of hypocrisy about in contemporary politics. But it would be a mistake to assume that there is *more* hypocrisy around than ever before; there is just more political exposure, in an age of 24-hour news, which makes hypocrisy easier to find. It may be that some of the hypocrisies of the contemporary world are relatively new, and potentially very dangerous—the hypocrisies surrounding the politics of global warming, for example. Others, though, are all too familiar. As religion returns as a central category of political and intellectual engagement, the question of the authenticity of the religious beliefs of both politicians and citizens is once again an issue, in domestic politics (particularly in American presidential politics, a subject to which I will return in the final chapter) and in the international arena (for example, in the exchanges between President Bush and President Ahmadinejad of Iran).⁸ In this book I will try to use history to provide some insight into

these current preoccupations, and to get a sense of the extent to which we have been here before.

Nevertheless, it is always a mistake to treat the history of ideas as a repository of timeless wisdom for us to draw on when we run out of ideas of our own, and to assume that past authors are talking directly to us, and wanting to help us with our particular difficulties.⁹ The historical period covered by this book is a broad one, and there are inevitably substantial differences between the kinds of politics being considered by the different authors under discussion. Many aspects of our politics would be unrecognizable to them, just as much of their politics has become deeply unfamiliar to us. In the chapters that follow, I will highlight the different contexts in which the various authors were writing, and seek to identify some of the particular historical controversies with which they were concerned. Nevertheless, I do want to try to draw some broader lessons that cut across these differences of context. The final chapter of this book attempts to bring the story up-to-date, and to explore what the history of hypocrisy in liberal rationalist thought can tell us about politics at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The focus of this chapter is on American politics, because it is in the United States that many of the themes of this predominantly English story are now on most prominent display: hypocrisy and power, hypocrisy and virtue, hypocrisy and empire. This is not to claim that the United States has replaced the United Kingdom as the repository for much of the world's hypocrisy. Rather it is to note that the questions at the heart of this book tend to be most acute at the centres of power. It would perhaps be fair to say that hypocrisy is currently perceived by much of the rest of the world as the American vice, which from an American perspective simply serves to emphasise the far deeper hypocrisy of America's critics.¹⁰

I believe that the history covered in this book can help us with some of these arguments; if nothing else, it shows us that many of them have deep roots in the intellectual tradition from which our politics derives. I also think it can provide us

with a sense of perspective on some of our more immediate concerns, including our endless worries about the way that politicians use empty words to conceal what they are up to. Here too we may discover that, for all our heightened awareness of and exposure to spin and counter-spin, the basic problem of fraudulent political language is nothing new, and it stands at the heart of the liberal tradition. Spin, like hypocrisy, is pretty repulsive encountered at first-hand, and it tends to make people angry, which is one good reason why it is sometimes helpful to approach it from a more tangential direction. In the great dance of hypocrisy and anti-hypocrisy that is democratic politics, it is all too easy to get wrapped up in the constant back-and-forth and to lose sight of the wider picture. Using a history stretching back over three hundred years to gain a sense of that wider picture can be hazardous—to ask, as I do in the final chapter, what a philosopher like Thomas Hobbes might think of a politician like Hillary Clinton is perhaps stretching the limits of the historical evidence. But it is nonetheless the central claim of this book that there is a line of thought about sincerity, hypocrisy, and lies in politics that runs all the way back from our own time to that of Hobbes.

Moreover, this line of thought shows much more obvious continuity with our current political concerns than does the body of writing that is usually taken to give us insights into the nature of political hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is a subject that lends itself to maxims—Rochefoucauld's *Maxims* is sometimes taken to be the definitive text on the subject—and it is to maxims that we often look to discover the timeless truth about what it is for a politician to dissemble and deceive. Truths tend to look more timeless when they come in neat little packages. But these maxims, almost by definition, are taken out of context (Rochefoucauld's book, for example, is about French courtly hypocrisy and its relationship to Jansenist philosophy). Of course, context isn't everything, and there may be times when philosophers wish to abstract away from the circumstances in which ideas were first generated. Indeed, there

is a view—often associated with the philosopher and historian of ideas Leo Strauss, himself often associated with current strands of neo-conservative political thinking—that the deep truths about politics exist beyond and beneath immediate context, which serves merely as a mask for these timeless ideas. Straussians see a line of thought that runs from Plato through Machiavelli and Hobbes up to the present, containing certain truths about the need for political lies. The idea is that these truths can be passed on to those in the know, while remaining hidden from anyone who sees only the surface concerns in which they are dressed up. In this book, I have deliberately avoided getting bogged down in the fraught methodological disputes that swirl around Strauss and the history of ideas more generally. But in offering a story that begins with Hobbes, that separates Hobbes off from Machiavelli, and that takes the surface concerns of political philosophers seriously, I hope it is clear that I take a different view.

Certainly, I believe that the idea that political morality can be boiled down to a set of all-purpose maxims is itself an illusion. We are better off looking to the past for help with our present concerns if it exhibits a deep continuity with the political ideas and institutions that we have inherited, in all their complexity. Too many participants in the world of contemporary politics, with all its duplicity and double-dealing, think they need to read Machiavelli's *Prince*, or Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, or any one of the other hackneyed manuals of managerial *Realpolitik*, in order to understand the nature of the game they are playing. If they really wanted to understand the nature of the game they are playing, they would be better off starting with Hobbes's *Leviathan*.