

# 6

## Never Say ‘Never Say “Never”’?

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We theorize with the concepts we have, not the ones we hope to have eventually, at some ideal limit of inquiry. That’s true even when it comes to theorizing *about* our current concepts. Such theorizing can therefore be reflexive, blending use and mention. To take one simple case: a standard semantics for conjunction just uses conjunction itself. More to the point of the present volume, this sort of reflexivity shows up in *normative* theorizing about concepts too. For instance, we’ll use logical concepts to reason about which logical concepts we *ought* to be using.

Now suppose you and I disagree about whether or not we ought to use some particular concept C, and we want to start arguing about it. A question of method arises. Should we suspend use of C for the duration of our debate?<sup>1</sup> After all, it would seem hypocritical of me to use C in the course of arguing that we shouldn’t use C. And it seems circular or question-begging for you to use C in arguing that we can permissibly use C (or that we must). So perhaps we should just agree at the outset to avoid using C. But then again, that policy might sound like a significant concession to me, the enemy of C. What’s more, whether or not this suspension policy would be prejudicial, it might turn out to be quite impracticable, if C is somehow central to our conceptual schemes; as concepts of philosophical interest tend to be. There are no Archimedean points in conceptual ethics. So what exactly are the rules of engagement here?

This short chapter tries to make some headway on the methodology of conceptual ethics by offering a qualified defense of “hypocrisy”.<sup>2</sup>

First some terminology. By an argument in conceptual ethics, I’ll mean an argument in the strict formal sense, whose conclusion concerns whether or not we should use some concept C. This is already a stipulative restriction in scope. I’m ignoring evaluative conclusions, for example, to focus exclusively on deontic modals. And I’m not going to say much about arguments that target multiple concepts at once (e.g., all vague concepts, inconsistent concepts, or concepts of race and gender).

My spotlight is meant to be flexible in other ways, however. “We” whose use of C is at issue could be anyone you please: we folk, we philosophers, we atheists. “Should”

<sup>1</sup> Presumably we’ll have to refer to C somehow, or at least quantify over it; but the question is about use, not mention.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the mirror-image issue of circularity, see my (2013).

can also be glossed in different ways: morally, prudentially, rationally; all-things-considered, or just *pro tanto*. And note that conclusions of this basic form can be combined to yield more nuanced views in conceptual ethics. Revisionism about C, for example, might be taken to decompose into a pair of views: that we should not use C (i.e., eliminativism) but should use C\*; where C and C\* stand in some suitable similarity relation.<sup>3</sup>

I'll call an argument that we should not use C an "anti-C" argument, and an argument that we can or should use C a "pro-C" argument.<sup>4</sup> So a "circular" argument in conceptual ethics is a pro-C argument that uses C. And a "hypocritical" argument in conceptual ethics is an anti-C argument that uses C.<sup>5</sup> When I say that an argument "uses" a concept C, I basically mean that a phrase whose content involves C appears in some line of the argument.

Now, actual anti-C arguments in this area rarely have conclusions as blunt as: one shouldn't use C, period. People rather tend to argue for parameterized conclusions, like: one shouldn't use C for these sorts of purposes, or in those kinds of contexts. Elsewhere, David Plunkett and I have spilled some ink on the range of relevant parameters in conceptual ethics.<sup>6</sup> Here I just want to think schematically. To be more realistic, we'll want to say that anti-C arguments end in the verdict that we shouldn't go in for a certain (probably improper) subset of possible uses of C. Or put another way: that we shouldn't use C in settings of type S.<sup>7</sup> To be explicit, call these anti-C/S arguments. This adjustment mandates a corresponding change to our definition of hypocrisy. The anti-C/S arguments of interest are just those that make use of C in what amounts to a setting of type S. (But I'll suppress this complication for readability when it's not relevant.)

So, should we abjure hypocritical arguments in conceptual ethics? Or more positively, is it permissible to argue hypocritically?

A number of my informants have reported that hypocrisy doesn't feel inherently problematic to them. Sure, there may be something odd about *initiating* a debate in conceptual ethics with a hypocritical argument. But if your interlocutor is already on record as endorsing the use of some concept C, then using C yourself in the course of trying to persuade her otherwise just feels like "addressing one's opponent on her

<sup>3</sup> To get closer to the conventional understanding of revisionism, one might add that C is already in circulation, while C\* is not.

<sup>4</sup> For symmetry, one could also call arguments that we can permissibly refrain from using C "anti-C". But I won't be concerned with this broader class of conclusions. Eliminativism and revisionism, which lie at the heart of conceptual ethics, both involve the stronger claim that we should not use C. And there's nothing *prima facie* hypocritical or problematic about using C to argue that we can permissibly refrain from using C.

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, perhaps, there's no analogue of hypocrisy in conceptual analysis. A circular analysis uses C to specify the content of C itself. A circular ethics uses C to argue in favor of using C. A hypocritical ethics uses C to argue against using C. But there's nothing "hypocritical" about using C to specify the content of some other concept, like C's complement, or an antonym. If anything, that would just be another kind of circularity.

<sup>6</sup> Burgess and Plunkett (2013).

<sup>7</sup> I like the word 'setting' because it's relatively free of other theoretical associations. I also like that it can be read as both environment/context and "value of a variable". I think I can enjoy those resonances simultaneously without committing any fallacies of equivocation.

own terms". Cast in this dialectical light, hypocrisy actually looks a lot like good old-fashioned *reductio*.<sup>8</sup> Witness where the presumption that it's kosher to use C leads us: to the conclusion that it's not!

Of course, if and when you persuade your opponent that we shouldn't use C, *via* some hypocritical argument, she may well reflect on her route to that conclusion, note that it used C, and hence retrospectively disavow the argument.<sup>9</sup> But that's just "kicking away a ladder" once it's been climbed. No problem there, right?

The problem with this kind of ladder-kicking is what Gilbert Harman (1986: 39) has called the principle of positive undermining. His thought is basically that a subject should stop believing P once she realizes that her basis for that belief isn't actually any good. And unless your opponent above is totally daft, she'll see that the only reason she eventually came around to your anti-C position (P) was a hypocritical argument that she's now disowned. So, according to Harman's principle, she should now stop believing that we shouldn't use C. Once she kicks away the hypocritical ladder, the rational thing to do is jump back down off the roof.<sup>10</sup>

Now, I don't take this line of thought to show that there is definitely something wrong with hypocritical arguments. After all, I aim to defend hypocrisy in the end. But I do take the Harman-inspired point to undermine (or at least problematize) the idea that hypocrisy is innocuous just because of its resemblance to *reductio*.<sup>11</sup> And we'll soon see a simple, direct argument against hypocrisy, which will take some time to evaluate.

First, though, I want to spend a moment addressing the significance of getting clearer on the status of hypocrisy. Officially, a hypocritical argument is an anti-C/S argument that uses C in a setting of type S. How often do such arguments actually crop up in conceptual ethics? And how hard is it to reformulate them without hypocrisy when they do arise? If it's not often, or not hard, then maybe we shouldn't

<sup>8</sup> It's not really *reductio*, though. I'm actually not sure how to describe the logical or formal relationship between the supposition that one can permissibly use C (which merely mentions C) and the first subsequent step of the argument that actually uses C.

<sup>9</sup> Unless the conclusion of the argument is that we shouldn't use C outside the scope of a supposition (or some such setting S), since we're assuming the argument only uses C within the scope of a supposition. But if this conclusion was derived by discharging a supposition reduced to absurdity, the supposition must have been that it's permissible to use C outside the scope of a supposition. But this supposition would not have warranted subsequent use of C within its scope.

<sup>10</sup> To make matters more complicated, though: once your opponent has dropped the anti-C view, her only reason for resisting your hypocritical argument is gone! So she should presumably climb the ladder once again. She could keep going around and around in this way indefinitely. But this possibility doesn't make hypocritical arguments look particularly attractive.

<sup>11</sup> Here's a reply due to David Taylor. Nevermind whether hypocritical arguments are themselves acceptable. The mere existence of an otherwise compelling hypocritical argument immediately provides for a compelling, non-hypocritical, anti-C argument, along the following lines. Initially adopting the pro-C position would lead to a kind of cognitive instability (in light of the previous note), where we're constantly flip-flopping between accepting and rejecting the use of C. This situation is rationally untenable, so we can only embrace the anti-C alternative. (Compare my own Reply to the Objection at the very end of the present chapter.) I'm not sure whether to accept this friendly suggestion, however. For the rational force of Taylor's non-hypocritical argument-form seems to hinge on the status of the associated hypocritical argument. If hypocrisy is a disqualifying vice, friends of C can reasonably refuse the first flip-flop. So there may be no avoiding a direct confrontation with the issue of the chapter: whether hypocrisy itself is somehow problematic.

invest too much energy in trying to understand or evaluate hypocrisy. These two issues are closely related. How “hard” it is to transform a hypocritical argument into a non-hypocritical argument depends in large part on how densely packed the field of possible anti-C/S arguments is with hypocritical ones. So let me first speak to this basic statistical issue. And let me bracket setting-sensitivity to begin with.

Conceptual ethics is a part of philosophy that’s preoccupied with concepts. The concepts that interest philosophers tend to be “central” to our ordinary conceptual schemes, in the sense that they’re implicated in the analysis of a whole host of other concepts. I’m thinking of things like modal concepts (necessary, contingent), logical concepts (exists, identical), normative concepts (should, right), epistemic concepts (know, rational), and so on.<sup>12</sup> Since we still do philosophy in something resembling natural language, central concepts like these will inevitably turn up in any sustained effort to specify the contents of the bits of language use that make up philosophical discourse. Discourse in conceptual ethics is no exception. Any given anti-C argument therefore runs a significant risk of deploying a concept whose analysis involves C itself. In a generous sense of “use”—where using the concept vixen, for example, involves using the concept fox—such an argument would count as hypocritical.<sup>13</sup>

To get a feel for the size of this risk, let’s play with some numbers. Let’s say there are 50 central concepts of philosophical interest. And let’s say the average philosophical argument (in conceptual ethics) makes overt, explicit use of 30 different concepts (central or otherwise). And let’s say the average conceptual analysis involves 4 central concepts. Of the ( $30 \times 4 =$ ) 120 token concepts implicated in the average argument, at least 70 have to be redundant (given that there are only 50 central concepts). Let’s say as many as 100 are redundant, so that the average non-redundant concept shows up 6 times in the argument. Then the chance of hypocrisy would be ( $20/50 =$ ) 40%. That’s pretty high. If there were something terribly wrong with hypocritical arguments, this level of risk might be unacceptable.

Suppose you found yourself arguing hypocritically by accident. How easy would it be to rectify the mistake, without compromising the essential upshot of the argument you were trying to make? I doubt there is any general recipe for converting hypocritical arguments into equi-plausible, non-hypocritical arguments. And case-by-case conversion won’t be as simple as paraphrasing away a few offending words. The “paradox” of analysis points up just how hard it is to know in advance which concepts will be implicated in an adequate definition. Our best efforts at paraphrase could easily end up introducing new dimensions of hypocrisy, or simply preserving old ones.

<sup>12</sup> Some concepts of interest to actual conceptual ethicists probably won’t show up in the analysis of any concepts explicitly used by those ethicists. I’m thinking of slurs, for example, or racial concepts. These are not central to our conceptual schemes in the relevant sense. So if your interest in this book stems mostly from your interest in concepts like those, this chapter may not be for you.

<sup>13</sup> It doesn’t matter if this sense of “use” feels artificial. What’s relevant is whether there’s anything intuitively objectionable about using the concept vixen to argue that we shouldn’t use the concept fox. Or to take a less frivolous example: whether there’s anything suspicious about using the concept of reliability to argue that we shouldn’t use the concept of truth (on the supposition that reliability is properly defined in terms of truth). These cases don’t feel much better to me than overt, word-for-word hypocrisy.

Doesn't this whole situation look much less dire, though, once we acknowledge the setting-sensitivity of real-life arguments in conceptual ethics? Won't the typical hypocritical argument just fall outside the scope of its own S? And even if not, can't we always just replace S with some S\* that excludes the argument by fiat?

Not so fast. First of all, as a purely descriptive matter, the most common settings you'll find in real-life conceptual ethics are by far, "for ordinary practical purposes" and "for serious theoretical purposes". Philosophical arguments may fall outside the scope of the former, but they certainly don't escape the latter. Second, excluding an argument from its own scope by fiat could be problematically *ad hoc*. If the modified argument featuring S\* seems plausible, that's probably because it borrows luster from some more natural, less gerrymandered argument. Take a toy example. Compare a hypocritical argument that we shouldn't use the notion of numerical identity "for serious theoretical purposes" to a sanitized variant that self-consciously excludes normative theorizing about that very concept. If the second argument is any good, that's probably due to its being a special case of the first.<sup>14</sup>

All of which is really just to say that it would certainly be nice if hypocrisy were innocuous. Then we could go about our business in conceptual ethics without constantly monitoring the concepts we use to mount our anti-C arguments. Unfortunately, there is a simple line of reasoning to the effect that we should never accept hypocritical arguments:

Argument X.<sup>15</sup> For any concept C, any setting-type S, and any hypocritical, anti-C/S argument H, either H is sound or it isn't. If H isn't sound, then we shouldn't accept it. So suppose H is sound (case two). Then its conclusion is true. Its conclusion is that we shouldn't use C in settings of type S. Since H is hypocritical, to accept H would be to use C in such a setting.<sup>16</sup> So we shouldn't accept H. So, in either case, whether or not H is sound, we shouldn't accept it.<sup>17</sup>

It might sound odd to counsel (in case two) against accepting a sound argument. Soundness is usually what we tell our students to aspire to. But we all know that some sound arguments are dialectically no good: the question-begging ones. Argument X just goes to show that we should treat hypocrisy similarly.

This last observation raises a question of focus for us.<sup>18</sup> When reflecting on conceptual ethics, maybe we ought to be more interested in issues of soundness and truth; less interested in issues of method or disputation. Metaphysics first, epistemology later. To make the complaint vivid, consider a hypocritical one-liner (where premise and conclusion collapse into a single claim):

(Z) We should not use 'should'.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Here I take issue with Scharp (Chapter 19, this volume, Section 8) on defective concepts in conceptual engineering.

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, there doesn't seem to be any analogous argument against circularity in conceptual ethics.

<sup>16</sup> More generally: to accept an argument that uses C is *inter alia* to use C yourself.

<sup>17</sup> This might be a confusing way to state the conclusion, if 'should' means different things in case one and case two. In case two, it means whatever 'should' means in the conclusion of H. In case one, it's just being used to track the sense(s) in which unsound arguments are verboten.

<sup>18</sup> Thanks to Herman Cappelen for pressing me here, and inspiring the following digression.

<sup>19</sup> Or never say 'never'. See Eklund (2015: section 5) on conceptual fixed points.

If Z were true, that would be headline news. It wouldn't matter much, by comparison, whether we should nevertheless avoid accepting Z. So why have I been focusing on the rules of engagement in conceptual ethics rather than the facts on the ground?

Not for any good reason, really. I think these alethic questions are interesting too. But hypocritical one-liners are few and far between in conceptual ethics. (Because there are only so many concepts involved in articulating any anti-C view.) And when it comes to full-blown arguments, my hunch is that hypocrisy should be no obstacle to validity. Soundness is a further question. I can imagine someone thinking that hypocritical arguments can't possibly be sound (and that one-liners can't possibly be true). But I have no firm view. And however these alethic issues shake out, I do think it's worth wondering whether there's something independently, dialectically wrong with hypocrisy, in the same vein as begging the question. Who knows, though, what order we should take all this in. I'm focusing on method mainly because I have something to say about it. Here, then, is the idea that precipitated the present chapter. Notice that X isn't just an argument *about* conceptual ethics, it's actually a *contribution to* conceptual ethics. Its conclusion says that we shouldn't accept hypocritical arguments. But accepting an argument involves using the concepts featured therein. So X concerns a normative question about concept use. To be more exact, we could regiment its conclusion as a prohibition against using any concept C in a certain type of setting: hypocritical arguments. (Or more narrowly: arguments that are hypocritical with respect to C specifically; the choice won't matter.) Now, the observation that X itself amounts to an argument in conceptual ethics proper doesn't immediately impugn X. But it does raise an interesting question.

Is X hypocritical? Well, we've only defined hypocrisy for arguments in conceptual ethics whose conclusions target individual concepts. So consider an argument generated from X by universal instantiation on C. And let's pick a concept explicitly used in X, like soundness, acceptance, disjunction, or even hypocrisy itself. The conclusion of this new argument would therefore be that we shouldn't use the concept of (e.g.) acceptance to mount hypocritical arguments. Call the new argument A, for acceptance:

Argument A. For any setting-type S, and any hypocritical, anti-*acceptance*/S argument H, either H is sound or it isn't. If H isn't sound, then we shouldn't accept it. So suppose H is sound (case two). Then its conclusion is true. Its conclusion is that we shouldn't use *acceptance* in settings of type S. Since H is hypocritical, to accept H would be to use *acceptance* in such a setting. So we shouldn't accept H. So, in either case, whether or not H is sound, we shouldn't accept it. In other words: we shouldn't use *acceptance* in H-type settings.

If there were something problematic about A, then presumably X would inherit the problem.<sup>20</sup> So, is A hypocritical? Like X, it uses the concept of acceptance. And unlike X, its conclusion does specifically say that we shouldn't use that very concept. But A only proscribes the use of that concept in settings of a certain type: hypocritical,

<sup>20</sup> Even if other instances of X, generated by instantiating C with other concepts, aren't problematic. After all, to endorse X in full generality is effectively to endorse each and every one of its instances. We could restrict the initial quantifier over C in X just to concepts that aren't used in X itself. But then we'd have to confront a version of the borrowed luster issue raised earlier.

anti-*acceptance* arguments. As we’ve just said, A is an anti-*acceptance* argument. So, given the definition of hypocrisy, the only thing left for us to check in order to determine whether A is hypocritical is therefore . . . whether A is hypocritical! If it is, it is; and if it isn’t, it isn’t.

This predicament is strikingly similar to the situation with truth-teller sentences in the literature on the semantic paradoxes, like “This sentence is true”. As far as the T-scheme is concerned, all we can say is that the truth-teller is true if it’s true; not if it’s not. And it’s not at all clear where else to look for guidance as to the sentence’s truth-value. Similarly, it’s unclear what might settle the status of A if not the definition of hypocrisy (together with A’s intrinsic features).

What follows from all this? At the very least, I think we can conclude that there is something odd and potentially problematic about A, and therefore X. Since X is the only argument we have managed to marshal against hypocrisy, this conclusion strikes me as a significant, if vague, defensive result. I haven’t offered a positive argument that hypocrisy is kosher. (Recall that I didn’t endorse the argument that assimilates hypocritical reasoning to *reductio*.) I won’t say that hypocrisy is innocent until proven guilty. But I will stop investing time trying to avoid hypocrisy in conceptual ethics until someone comes up with a solid reason.

Objection. The worst-case scenario you painted above was that A might be hypocritical. But you don’t think there’s anything wrong with hypocrisy. So you have no reason to resist A, and therefore no reason to resist X.

Reply. But if we accept X, then we will think there’s something wrong with hypocrisy. So accepting X is unstable. Moreover, you’ve misdescribed the worst-case scenario. The worry was rather that it’s somehow unsettled or indeterminate whether A is hypocritical. Whatever you make of (determinate) hypocrisy, this liminal status is just weird.

Conclusion. We should not yet conclude that we should not argue hypocritically when we argue about which concepts we should use.

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