

Hypocrisy as a challenge to Christian belief

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Abstract: Hypocrisy challenges religious belief in two ways. *Arguments to Absurdity* contend hypocrisy is defeasible evidence of the irrationality of a doctrine or practice. *Arguments from Betrayal* contend that hypocrisy confronts institutionally loyal believers with a tragic dilemma: that because loyalty is justified by the goodness of its object, hypocrisy requires believers to sacrifice either their conscience (to remain loyal) or their character and identity (by abandoning their loyalty). This article presents philosophical and theological reasons that both arguments are unpersuasive.

‘“For myself,” said Faramir, “I would see . . . Minas Anor again as of old, full of light, high and fair, beautiful as a queen among other queens: not a mistress of many slaves, nay, not even a kind mistress of willing slaves. . . . I would have her loved for her memory, her ancience, her beauty, and her present wisdom. Not feared, save as men may fear the dignity of a man, old and wise”.’

J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, book IV, ch. 5

Introduction

In January 2002, the *Spotlight* group of investigative journalists at the *Boston Globe* published a series of articles revealing the widespread sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests and a systematic attempt by the diocese of Boston to conceal this fact. In what can only be described as institutional complicity with evil, the Church hierarchy moved predator priests from parish to parish where they continued to prey on children. Subsequent reports in other dioceses have shown that tens of thousands of children around the world were abused by priests between 1950 and 2000, and research has shown that the resulting scandal has been responsible for ‘significant and long-lasting decline in religious participation’.¹

Since both the abusive behaviour itself and the complicity of the Church are evidence of behaviour contrary to the professed doctrines and ideals of the Catholic Church, one possible reason for this decline is that hypocrisy undermines religious belief. Putting aside the causal validity of this claim, this article represents an attempt to evaluate the moral thesis that hypocrisy *should* undermine belief in the moral and religious claims of hypocrites. After defining hypocrisy and distinguishing it from its relatives in the first section, we will construct and motivate two novel 'Arguments from Hypocrisy'. The *Argument to Absurdity* claims that hypocritical behaviour is defeasible evidence against the truth of putative moral obligations on the basis of the metaethical principle that *ought-implies-can*. The *Argument from Betrayal*, in contrast, uses a communitarian model of selfhood to show that hypocrisy can generate morally tragic dilemmas of loyalty which can motivate the dissolution of community and the loss of belief. These arguments represent psychologically powerful and morally significant challenges to religious belief, and the final section of this article provides both philosophical and theological assessments of their probity.

Hypocrisy

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus reserves some of his harshest words for religious hypocrites who 'do not practise what they preach', who blow trumpets when they give to the poor, pray loudly in public, and put on dour faces when they fast.² Such people are like 'whitewashed tombs', he says, 'which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones' (Mt. 23: 3; 23: 27). Christ counsels his own disciples to pray, fast, and serve the poor in secret, since those who do righteous deeds 'before other people in order to be seen by them . . . will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven'.³ The evil of hypocrisy, this suggests, is threefold. The first is that the hypocrite appears to be what he is not: he is a deceiver. The second is that the hypocrite illicitly uses the honour due to religion and virtue for his own ends. The third evil of hypocrisy is that it leads to scandal: it causes others to lose their faith or become vicious (see Mt. 18: 6; 23: 15).

Let us begin with a description of hypocrisy and the typical actions of the hypocrite. A hypocrite is essentially a liar, Aquinas tells us, someone who intentionally deceives others by means of his behaviour.⁴ A lie 'is an intentional deception, a way of signifying what is contrary to the truth'. Whereas verbal lies signify something other than what is in one's mind, to lie with deeds is to signify the contrary 'of what is in oneself', as the long tassels of the Pharisees signified a holiness they did not possess, or as a man practising medicine without a licence falsely signifies medical competence (Mt. 23: 5).

While hypocrisy (as a form of lying) is intrinsically evil, we should be slow to judge someone a hypocrite if only because the marks of hypocrisy are ambiguous and its conditions exacting. There are many reasons why one's deeds may not

accurately communicate one's character. Consider Bruce, the self-identified health nut, who is caught eating junk food. He could simply be *incontinent*, that is, a man who sincerely believes one should only eat healthy food but who, in a moment of weakness, was overcome by his desire for Twinkies. Alternatively, Bruce could be *delusional*: he could falsely believe that Twinkies are healthy when they are not. Again, Bruce could be an *actor* playing a health nut who intends to dissimulate but not to deceive. (All hypocrites are pretenders, but not all pretenders are hypocrites.) Yet again, Bruce could be a *poseur*: someone who wishes to be a health nut but only half-heartedly, and who therefore dissimulates negligently and not out of malice.⁵ Finally, among imitators of virtue, there is the continent *wayfarer*, who imitates virtuous behaviour in order to *become* virtuous.⁶ He also appears to be what he is not, but his intention distinguishes him from the hypocrite.

What distinguishes the hypocrite in the strict sense from those who are incontinent, delusional, actors, poseurs, or wayfarers is that the true hypocrite knows he is not virtuous and does not desire to be, yet at the same time desires that other people *believe* he is virtuous. Consequently, he intentionally engages in deceptive acts in order to bring about this false belief in others.⁷ Moreover, the true hypocrite neither deceives occasionally, like the poseur, nor slips up occasionally, like the incontinent. Rather, he is a habitual deceiver who hides a 'fierce, secret longing [for evil], which [he] will hoard in dark places', as Plato says (2016, 548a). His life is an ongoing lie.

This brings us to the second evil of hypocrisy: that the hypocrite uses morality, and sometimes religion, for his own ends. His life is therefore shallow, for he acts as if all of the rewards of virtue are external goods, preferring the outward appearance of virtue to its reality in his soul. He thereby forfeits the intrinsic rewards of virtue, especially inner peace, a sense of purpose and authenticity, and true friendship. Like a magician who believes his own tricks, he mistakes the signs for the substance of virtue and is therefore unaware of the constitutive goods of the moral life. He is a man of images who lives among shadows of real goods.⁸

Moreover, in addition to being a shallow liar, the hypocrite is a coward and a betrayer. Insofar as the goods he seeks are incidental to the virtues and relationships he imitates, he will not voluntarily suffer for the sake of these virtues or relationships (he only values them for their effects). The hypocrite differs from someone who is merely a coward insofar as he faces the difficulties of life with deception and guile; the mere coward simply retreats. Nevertheless, should the hypocrite's false face finally prove useless, he will drop it – and all the hollow virtues and relationships it represents – out of false prudence, like the mask his life is. Fundamentally, the hypocrite is someone who does not believe in the intrinsic value of anything, who therefore has no true friends or loyalties, and who in the end must despair of happiness.⁹ He lays up treasure in this world but not in the next: it decorates but does not fill his tomb, which is full of dead men's bones.

These features suggest several ways that hypocrisy can lead to scandal and a loss of belief. First, the hypocrite's shallowness is evidence that a person whom

we may have thought wise is not wise in fact, and therefore is not a trustworthy guide to the good life. To the extent we have shared common projects with the hypocrite, the depth of our own life can therefore be called into question. Second, insofar as the hypocrite is a deceiver and a betrayer, to uncover a hypocrite is also to uncover the possibility that they have taken advantage of our vulnerability to advance their interests at our expense. Indeed, it reveals the disturbing possibility that one's life contains what Plato called a 'true lie' in the soul (a concept I will define in detail later), which explains why being fooled by a hypocrite often feels more like being attacked than like being tricked. These two implications, in revised form, are the basis of the arguments from hypocrisy discussed below.

Before examining those arguments, however, it is important to review the reasons such arguments have not received the consideration they deserve. Christian responses to arguments from hypocrisy tend to mirror St Augustine's arguments against the Donatists to the effect that the truth of Christian doctrines and the efficacy of Christian sacraments do not depend on the virtue of individual Christians or the institutional structures of the Church. Rather, the grace of Jesus Christ achieves the salvation of believers, not the Bible, the Church, or priests, even if grace is always *mediated* through imperfect and fallible traditions, institutions, and persons. Similarly, from a secular perspective, one might argue that the normative force of a moral code holds regardless of how well people keep it, or that even an impossible moral code provides a useful guide to the moral life. Just as chemists who happen to be perverts do not invalidate the science of chemistry, one might argue, neither do paedophile priests invalidate Christian doctrine or a true moral code.

Such responses not only beg the question against arguments from hypocrisy, but more importantly, they ignore the *existential* force of these arguments by approaching Christian doctrine and moral philosophy *sub specie aeternitatis*.¹⁰ In contrast, the person for whom hypocrisy is philosophically significant adopts what we will call the 'Socratic' stance, one constituted both by a serious commitment to living the moral life – whatever that turns out to be – and by a serious commitment to critically evaluate competing moral and religious claims. By disposition, in other words, the Socratic believer rejects the Platonic certainty presupposed by the above objections, instead treating Christianity (and moral philosophy) as what William James called a 'living', 'momentous', and 'forced' hypothesis.¹¹ Viewed from this perspective, arguments from hypocrisy should be understood *not* as demonstrations of the incoherence of Christianity, but rather as arguments which undermine the *credibility* of Christian doctrine and the *efficacy* of its practices for the Socratic believer. Their aim is to show that reasonable *loyalty* to the Christian community and its beliefs cannot be sustained with a clear conscience – or so we will argue below.

The argument to absurdity

Let us call the first argument from hypocrisy the *Argument to Absurdity*. In this argument, one infers the incredibility of someone's beliefs from the insincerity of his life, that is, comes to doubt the truth of someone's *principles* from his failure to *practise* them. For instance, if Nigel professes ethical vegetarianism but eats steak every Tuesday, we might *for that reason*, and independently of theoretical concerns, conclude that ethical vegetarianism is not a rationally defensible moral doctrine, i.e. that we do not have a genuine moral obligation to refrain from eating meat.¹²

One possible basis for such an inference is the moral principle that 'ought implies can', or as they say in the legal profession, *ad impossibilia nemo tenetur*: 'No-one is obligated to do the impossible'. Consider an extreme example. If one is sceptical about Manfred's claim that we have moral obligations to prevent earthquakes, one way to test the reasonableness of his claim is to ask whether anyone who believes in the moral duty of earthquake prevention has been successful in preventing an actual earthquake. If it turns out that adherents of the earthquake prevention doctrine have not ever, and probably never could, prevent earthquakes, this is convincing evidence that there is no such thing as a moral duty to prevent earthquakes. If we generalize the point, we can say that the regular failure to live up to the requirements of a law, practice, belief, or ideal is evidence that it is *irrational* to do so because it is *impossible* to do so, and if it is impossible to do so, we have *no obligation* to do so.¹³

Mutatis mutandis, we can apply the same line of reasoning to situations where the putative obligation is not so obviously impossible. In such cases, we could say, our habitual failure to live up to some standard of excellence is evidence that pursuit of that standard is *heroic*, one which goes above and beyond what is legitimately required of human beings. For example, while most of us recognize the lives of mendicants like St Francis of Assisi or Mother Theresa as saintly, and while we acknowledge that detachment from worldly goods and great acts of charity are good and important to the moral life, we do not usually think worse of ordinary people for living lives less devoted to the extremes. We are 'moral centrists', one might say.¹⁴ Most people, I suspect, would reject Johannes' claims that we have a strict moral duty to live on honey and locusts, since, although this is not impossible (like Manfred's putative duty to prevent earthquakes), the fact that the locust-eating way of life is successfully practised by only a few people (mostly hermits), with much struggle and backsliding, is evidence that living on honey and locusts is a *heroic* act of temperance and therefore *supererogatory* – praiseworthy, perhaps, but not a 'normal' moral requirement of the good life.

The cogency of this argument receives additional support from moral psychology. Courage is the virtue that enables those who are vulnerable to suffer harm well in pursuit of great but uncertain ends.¹⁵ It motivates us to patiently endure and then to overcome obstacles standing in the way of the good life.

For instance, a nicotine addict displays courage while quitting smoking by enduring withdrawal symptoms and establishing new habits for the sake of health, and it is *reasonable* for him to do so both because health is a real good and because it is possible to successfully overcome nicotine addiction. In contrast, the perception that the evil suffered in pursuit of some good is *too great to be endured*, or that the good at which one aims *cannot be achieved* rightly entails the judgement that the goal in question *should not be pursued*; these are the parameters or limits of courage.¹⁶ If an obligation appears overly difficult to many people, then, this is *prima facie* evidence that the value of the end it seeks is not proportional to the difficulty of its pursuit and thus that its pursuit is imprudent.

These considerations suggest that we can frame the Argument to Absurdity in two ways. As a *general* argument, one might argue that the demands of Christian life are simply *too* demanding to constitute a plausible account of the moral life. Few Christians (let's say) actually live up to orthodox requirements concerning the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, the disciplines of prayer, fasting, and abstinence, or achieve the extreme degree of spiritual purity required by Jesus' insistence on the equal moral gravity of evil thoughts and desires and evil actions.¹⁷ On this basis, one might argue that widespread Christian hypocrisy is evidence of the absurdity of Christianity or Christian practice as such. On the other hand, one might make more focused arguments about the credibility of specific practices. For example, one might argue that the widespread failure of priests to live up to their vows of celibacy, or of the Catholic laity to practise natural family planning rather than contraception, shows that Catholic sexual morality is absurd. To those who advance such arguments, priestly paedophilia, and the Church's seeming inability to deal with it in a morally responsible way, is but an extreme consequence or illustration of this underlying absurdity.¹⁸

To summarize: for the Socratic believer who considers *practice* as well as *theory* relevant to the rationality of his beliefs, the *Argument to Absurdity* suggests that full-blown hypocrisy as well as incontinence are evidence of the irrationality of a moral doctrine or practice insofar as even its self-professed adherents do not or cannot practise what they profess to be obligatory and good. However, given the possibility that hypocritical behaviour has non-hypocritical causes, the strength of such arguments is arguably proportionate to the scope and frequency of these failures. For instance, if many people profess but fail to be ethical vegetarians, it is less likely that these failures are due to posturing, incontinence, and delusion than that they are due to the falsity of the putative moral claim itself.

Loyalty and betrayal

The second kind of Argument from Hypocrisy, the *Argument from Betrayal*, speaks to our sense that hypocrites have *betrayed* their communities in deep and lasting ways. Since it depends on a communitarian, 'extended', or 'encumbered'

view of the self, our exposition will have two parts, discussing the notion of the extended self before developing the *Argument from Betrayal* proper.

The extended self

Aristotle argues that mature human agency represents a twofold development of what he calls our first and second natures (Aristotle (1999), 2.1, 1103b ff.). On the one hand, our 'first' nature (or essence) as rational animals leads us to seek the goods, activities, and habits that fulfil that nature, which together constitute *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing. On the other hand, our 'second' nature includes the moral and intellectual habits we develop over the course of a life, what we can call our *character*. The distinction represents a difference between the *generic* and *specific* aspects of our agency. While our essence requires us to eat in order to live, for example, our character represents what, when, where, and how we habitually eat; while our essence gives us the ability to learn from experience, our character represents how we have developed that ability by becoming accountants, couch-surfers, or professors who study the mating habits of extinct rodents. Far from being contraries, our second nature represents a particular development or actualization of our first nature – *nurtured nature*, we might say; the term describes how our plastic, native abilities have been honed into effective capacities for flourishing by our choices in the context of concrete natural, social, economic, and cultural environments.

It is for reasons such as these that Aristotle claims we are *political* animals; that what it is to be a person of a certain character in part depends on the *ethos* of one's community (Aristotle (1998), 1.2, 1253a 1–3). In a contemporary vein, Alasdair MacIntyre has argued in *After Virtue* (2007) and elsewhere that the relationship between a person and her community is reciprocally creative: by participating in *practices*, that is, typical ways of seeking *eudaimonia* with others, we both shape and are shaped by these shared activities, much as each musician's performance in a string quartet simultaneously affects and is affected by the playing of the other musicians in the group (MacIntyre (1998), 100). The character of an individual and her community are thus intimately intertwined into what we can for our purposes simply call a *way of life*.

One strength of this account is its ability to explain the centrality of *loyalty* in our lives, its moral hazards, and conversely, the moral danger of hypocrisy. Loyalty (minimally) expresses our willingness to promote and suffer for the welfare of another because of a special relationship we have with them, such as friendship, a family tie, or shared history. Loyal people exhibit a kind of 'stickiness' in their relationships, demonstrating this willingness to seek and to suffer for someone's welfare even when there are strong incentives to do otherwise.¹⁹ A distinguishing feature of loyalty is its non-altruistic motivation. Whereas the altruistic person tends to see the interests of the one she benefits as being opposed to her interests, the loyal person sees the interests of the one she benefits as if they were her own.²⁰

While the altruistic person gives up her piece of pie so someone else may enjoy it at her expense, the loyal person provides her pie to someone and shares in his pleasure. As Jollimore has argued at length, the loyalist understands her action as self-defence or role-fulfilment (e.g., being-a-good-mother) rather than sacrifice, regarding the interests of her beloved as an extension of her own: benefiting her beloved is benefiting herself, and attacks on her beloved are attacks on herself.²¹

Loyalty's identification of the self and the beloved is well accounted for by an extended theory of self. Aristotle and MacIntyre encourage us to examine how *particular* relationships and communities are defined by *particular* practices and values internal to those practices. What-it-is-to-be a good professor at a small, orthodox, Catholic college, for instance, is different from what-it-is-to-be a good professor at a large, secular, State university – even if, generically, every good professor is a good academic, teacher, and colleague – because the *ethos* of an institution impacts how those generic goods are valued and expressed by historically concrete communities.²² In fact, the closer a community comes to being a community of friends and family, the more fully the *ethos* of the community shapes one's character. Aristotle goes so far as to call intimate, long-term friends, 'second selves', suggesting that in order to understand the excellences of one individual we must understand her 'other half' as well (Aristotle (1999), 9.9, 1170b 7). Insofar as our personal identities are *extended* identities, we are never *merely* ourselves, and what challenges or benefits one challenges or benefits the other. This partly explains the phenomenon of loyalty in which we treat the interests of such communities as our own.

These two ideas – that the self can be fruitfully described as an ongoing, dynamic relationship both between one's first and second nature and between one's character and one's community – help us to describe two kinds of moral struggle. The first involves conflicts between our first and second nature, that is, between our character and the conditions of human flourishing. Sometimes our habits are conducive to flourishing and sometimes they are not: gluttony undermines health, and infidelity undermines romantic relationships. The Greeks call this *vice*, and Christians call it *sin*, and both undermine human happiness because they represent an interior struggle between *what we are* and *what we could be*.

The second kind of struggle arises from the fact that, for the extended self, the character we possess, who we are, is shaped in deep and irrevocable ways by our membership in communities which may themselves be good or bad.²³ Thus, loyalty is both inescapable as well as a moral hazard. We all wish that the communities with which we identify will contribute to our flourishing, but clearly this is not always the case. Inner-city gangs and terrorist organizations like ISIS exhibit high degrees of loyalty. Their members experience these communities as an extension of their identities, internalize their values, identify their trials and triumphs as their own, and exhibit willingness to suffer severe harm, including injury, incarceration, and death, for the sake of the group. Such traits would be

admirable if the *ethos* of these groups didn't also make them violent, brutal, cruel, ignorant, and vicious. Clearly, the value of loyalty in part depends on the goodness of its object. Unreflective loyalty to bad organizations is morally blameworthy. What if a similar problem plagues the interior (and often unchosen) relation between our character and our community?

This question suggests that our loyalties can give rise to a tragic dilemma. The *ethos* of our community, which has left its indelible mark on our character, is either conducive to *eudaimonia* or it is not. If we learn the latter is the case, then we have discovered what is described in Plato's *Republic* as a 'true lie' in the soul: that by internalizing the values of our community we have unwittingly been deceived 'in that which is the truest and highest part of [ourselves], or about the truest and highest matters', that is, about those matters which are most central to our identity.²⁴ Confronted with such a discovery, the Socratic believer is faced with the following choice: he must either sacrifice his humanity in order to retain his character, or he must sacrifice his identity in order to retain his humanity. He must learn to *silence* the part of himself he rejects, either by amputating himself on the one hand, or betraying his sense of himself and his community on the other.

Such a dilemma describes, for example, the choice Sophocles' Oedipus faces upon discovering that his wife, the fruitful and loving Jocasta with whom he has made a life and a family, is his mother, and that their ongoing relationship is the source of a plague which has been killing the citizens of Thebes. Although he considered himself a capable king, a loving husband and father, and a source of health and vitality for friends, family, and polity alike, Oedipus now realizes that he is, in fact, *poison*, that he is monstrous and malformed, that he is not the physician but the disease eating away at the heart of Thebes. He must either deny his identity by affirming his humanity (and so end his reign and atone for his incestuous relationship), or deny his humanity in order to save his identity (by sacrificing his decency and his city for the sake of his family). Either way he must betray something he loves and cannot not love; he must engage in self-slaughter, the sacrifice of his extended self.

The argument from betrayal

The *Argument from Betrayal* begins with the insight that hypocrites can force us into the same dilemma as Oedipus. If our account of the extended self has been correct, engaging in community with others involves reciprocal self-definition as people jointly pursue and develop the virtues internal to a community, and this reciprocal definition of selves is the foundation of their loyalty, of regarding the interests of their community as their own. To discover that someone in the community is a hypocrite is therefore to discover that one has been deceived about the whether the community has been pursuing a common good, that while some people were internalizing the *ethos* of the community

and sacrificing on its behalf, the hypocrite was merely pretending to do so out of self-interest. The hypocrite *uses* and *discards* the values and way of life we come to regard as central to our agency; he *betrays* his community.

A single hypocrite can simply be dismissed as a vicious traitor to be expelled from or ostracized by a community. But suppose prominent members of a community exhibit patterns of hypocrisy; imagine discovering that, contrary to the community's deepest professed values, they systematically exploit the weak.²⁵ Now the community is faced with an existential threat – evidence that the way of life it thought was conducive to flourishing was nothing more than a pretence by means of which hypocrites preyed on the innocent. This is to discover a 'true lie' in one's soul. *Prima facie*, the morally serious person must either sacrifice his moral identity by severing his loyalties and leaving the exploitative community, or else he must sacrifice his humanity, his conscience, in order to remain loyal to it.²⁶

We can deepen our analysis with two further ideas. Without intending to do violence to Plato, let me suggest that some 'true lies' cut deeper than others, that we can be most deeply wounded in the most involuntary parts of our identities.²⁷ We recognize that some communities are chosen, like our circles of friends, while others are unchosen, like our families. The less voluntary one's community is, or the longer one has been a member of it and internalized its values, the deeper the betrayal of hypocrisy. Think of a child who discovers that her parents only wanted to have her in order to harvest her organs for an older sibling struggling with cancer. She has discovered that her parents' love is hypocritical. What this *means* is that her entire understanding of her family and her place in it, her whole way of life and the deepest sources of her self, have been *lies*. Such a child will both love and hate herself: she will love who she is because of her family while hating who she is because that self is illusory – and she will not be able to do otherwise.

Second, consider the possibility that 'religion' is both like and unlike other loyalties. Today we tend to associate religious participation with voluntary communities, like friendships and political parties. However, religion makes claims about the unchosen nature of reality, about who one is (in the great scheme of things) prior to being oneself, so to speak. In this sense, our relation to God is more intimate even than to our family.²⁸ A religion is therefore not merely a set of theological doctrines and moral practices, but a metaphysical community whose liturgical life is meant to shape us into the most real version of ourselves.²⁹ What, then, is the effect on the Socratic believer who discovers hypocrisy in his religious community, or worse, a systematic campaign of corruption within God's Church? Our reflections suggest that this will be experienced as evidence that the *ethos* of the community one relied on as evidence of the fittingness between one's practices and *eudaimonia* has been falsified. In other words, hypocrisy occasions a dilemma of loyalty: How can I continue to identify the interests of the Church with my own if the actions of the Church are indefensible? How can this way of life be

what it claims to be if it forces me to choose between my conscience and my sense of self? Insofar as good loyalties are justified by the goodness of their objects, the answer is clear: widespread hypocrisy and corruption gives one a moral obligation to abandon one's loyalties for the sake of one's moral integrity. If your right hand causes you to sin – cut it off.

Evaluation and response

As I hope to have shown, the *Argument to Absurdity* and the *Argument from Betrayal* are well-motivated and psychologically powerful challenges to the religious commitments of the Socratic believer. That does not in itself mean that they are rationally persuasive, however, and in this final section we will evaluate their cogency from purely philosophical and from orthodox Christian perspectives.

Let us begin with the *Argument to Absurdity*. Assuming that most putative moral claims are about difficult rather than obviously impossible actions, such as celibacy, the most plausible version of the argument is an inductive argument which establishes the *relevance* of hypocrites and incontinents to judgements about the credibility of moral claims, but does not purport to demonstrate the absurdity of moral claims on the basis of hypocrisy alone. Increases in the frequency and depth of hypocrisy and incontinence (relative to the core commitments of a community) increase the inferential strength of such arguments. That is, a few bad apples violating minor tenets of a moral community presents less evidence of that community's moral bankruptcy than a significant number of its representatives violating its core commitments. Thus, the argument claims that widespread failure to observe the requirements of Christian life, such as complicity in the violation of core Christian commitments about the inviolability of the innocent, constitute significant evidence of the bankruptcy of Christian doctrine and practice.

Despite its initial plausibility, however, an *Argument to Absurdity* is often weak, for three reasons. First, insofar as it is an inductive argument, we must recognize that contrary evidence is both possible and relevant to the inferential strength of the argument. Thus, against the evidence of hypocrisy, we must also consider the lives of those whose character counterbalances that of hypocrites and incontinents, that is, the lives of saints and the masses of 'everyday' Christians ('wayfarers') striving to live according to the tenets of Christian orthodoxy. Seen in that light, the existence of millions of Christian wayfarers suggests a preponderance of evidence for the position that, although the Christian way of life is demanding, it is also morally possible, attractive, and rewarding. Such counterevidence therefore renders *generalized Arguments to Absurdity* extremely weak. In contrast, concrete arguments about rates of hypocrisy related to specific practices, such as celibacy or contraception, are much stronger.

That said, however, *Arguments to Absurdity* tend to slide into fallacious *ad populum* arguments which confuse two kinds of evidence: on the one hand,

evidence that some practice has been tried but found impossible or nearly so, and on the other, evidence that some practice is unpopular because it is morally challenging. Proponents of the fallacious version of the argument tend to see widespread *dissent* from a practice, such as frequent contraceptive use and divorce among self-identifying Catholics, as evidence of the absurdity of moral teaching regarding the illicitness of these activities. Yet this is not what the argument claims. What ultimately warrants the Argument to Absurdity is not popularity, but the consistency of a practice with human flourishing. The Argument to Absurdity rightly recognizes that the *difficulty* with which agents accomplish an end is relevant to the purely formal determination of whether agents *can* or *cannot* achieve it, and thus whether a putative obligation is even a candidate for inclusion in the moral law (since *ought-implies-can*). Rightly understood, however, this principle is a *limiting* principle on moral philosophy, one which reminds ethicists that the moral law is a law of finite human nature rather than an *a priori* rulebook for disembodied rational agents. There is no corollary principle of morality telling us that real obligations must be easy to perform. Virtuous persons perform their obligations easily – but nothing about obligatoriness *per se* requires that an obligation must be equally easy to satisfy for every individual, especially given common variations in people's circumstances and moral maturity. Indeed, given a robust anthropology which recognizes that the human person is by nature a passionate and embodied rational agent, we might even expect otherwise.

As we are beginning to see, the cogency of any particular Argument to Absurdity will depend on the cogency of the moral psychology it takes for granted. If one is a natural law-rejecting Freudian with a pneumatic view of sexual desire, one will view orthodox Christian morality as repressive, cruel, and unrealistic. On the other hand, orthodox believers in the procreative, spousal, and nuptial teleology of human sexuality will view traditional sexual morality as liberating, as expressing the positive moral freedom constitutive of sexual, romantic, and familial excellence.³⁰ The strength of an Argument to Absurdity cannot be assessed independently of the moral psychology it presupposes, and Christians have good philosophical and theological reasons to reject the dualistic, individualistic, and nominalistic conception of the self dominant in modern culture, psychology, and law and the Arguments to Absurdity built upon it.³¹

This brings us to our final and most explicitly theological response to the Argument to Absurdity. There is something strange about an argument which uses the fact of human evil to disprove a way of life which takes as its starting point the fact of human evil. Christianity proposes that the way to beatitude runs through contrition and sanctification with the help of grace. It *begins* with sin. It does not propose that the moral life consists either in the pursuit of moral perfection through the exercise of undamaged capacities (like the Greeks) or in the preservation of our welfare or purity (like the utilitarians and deontologists, respectively). What Christ promises is supernatural friendship, help and

accompaniment for the penitent.³² Insofar as it presupposes an alien anthropology and conditions of success, then, the Argument to Absurdity either begs the question or sets up a straw man, for the Christian God desires perfection, but loves a contrite heart.³³

Let us turn finally to the Argument from Betrayal. The force of the argument comes from its conjunction of the claims that, on the one hand, loyalty requires justification – that is, that the goodness of loyalty in part depends on the goodness of its object, and can be undermined by evidence that an institution or person is not *worthy* of loyalty – and on the other hand, that many of our deepest loyalties are either unchosen or else have become ineradicable aspects of our character (which for our purposes amounts to the same thing). The discovery that one is deeply loyal to an evil and hypocritical person or institution – that one cannot but identify their welfare or the values they represent as one's own – thus appears to lead to the tragic dilemma we outlined earlier: conscience now requires us to sacrifice our humanity or our character and sense of self. Since both horns of this dilemma are persuasive, the only way to escape self-slaughter is to escape between them.

The Argument from Betrayal claims that the only legitimate responses to dilemmas of loyalty involve *silencing* one's conscience or *exiting* a corrupt community. However, the account of the extended self we articulated above suggests a third option: that one can, as it were, expand one's moral community so as to identify with one which includes the corrupt community but is not exhausted by it. Thus, for example, someone rightly disgusted by contemporary politics might defend rather than abandon his patriotism without violating his conscience by identifying with America in a broader, Burkean sense: as the land of his forefathers, the home of the free and the brave, the city on a hill. From such a perspective he will see his present, corrupt community as a temporary and contingent outlier of the true community to which he belongs, one which includes those living, those dead, and those yet to be.³⁴ To identify and denounce contemporary politicians and political parties as hypocritical and inconsistent with American ideals would thus constitute an *expression* of his loyalty rather than a betrayal of his character or his humanity.³⁵ Indeed, it is precisely through just such an extension of his moral community and his identification of this ideal (rather than present) community as the object of his loyalty that Faramir justifies his continued service to Gondor in the quotation at the head of this article.

Christians can make a similar move in response to Arguments from Betrayal, as they must, morally, if their loyalty to the Church is to be justified; and indeed, understanding the Christian moral community as a *supernatural* community has been a central part of Christian practice since the beginning. Consider St Paul's comparison of Christians to the wandering Jewish patriarchs who lived as aliens in the land of promise, describing Christians as sojourners rather than residents of earthly cities, or Dante's rebuke of the simoniacs in *Inferno* 19 – including several popes – on the grounds that they had betrayed the true Church.³⁶

The suggestion is that the Christian must find his place in the communion of saints, the brothers and sisters of Christ, rather than *solely* among the followers of particular worldly leaders who have so often led the Church with millstones hung around their necks. Like philosophy and patriotism, justified Christianity demands continuous self-examination, a humble and penitential community.³⁷ In short, while the Argument from Absurdity rightly entails that we must sometimes sever our loyalties to corrupt institutions, and so lose a part of ourselves we formerly held dear, it fails to recognize that this same moment can sometimes be regarded as an occasion of moral and spiritual maturation as we abandon unjustified loyalties and identities for those founded on a transcendent moral community. While painful, doing so is as reasonable as abandoning a house built on sand for one built on solid rock.

Yet, one might object, couldn't we justify loyalty to *any* community in this way, i. e. by supposing that any community, no matter how bad, could someday be a better version of itself? Is there some best version of Nazi Germany, say, it is reasonable to be loyal to, and which would have justified remaining loyal to the Axis powers during the Second World War?³⁸ Our argument does indeed suggest an affirmative answer to the question; every community is redeemable. However, it would be a mistake to believe that universal redeemability justifies a 'higher-order' yet *still-blind* and *complicit* loyalty to any presently existing, morally compromised institution.³⁹ True loyalty would be indistinguishable from true friendship: partial towards the good of particular persons or institutions, but willing to suffer in order to make them good. In fact, it would constitute a perfect inversion of hypocrisy, for the actions of the true friend would *appear to the vicious man* as acts of betrayal, inconsistent with the professed intentions of the friend seeking his redemption.⁴⁰ The actions of the true friend would present the vicious man with a comic dilemma: he must either abandon his vicious self for the sake of his true friend, or abandon his friend for the sake of his vice and by so doing exonerate his friend from complicity in any further wrongdoing. If hypocrisy occasions self-slaughter, true friendship is an occasion for new life.

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Notes

1. For the original series of articles in the *Boston Globe*, see 'A history of secrecy, cover-ups in the Boston Archdiocese', published online 13 October 2015, <bostonglobe.com>. For a list of reports about the extent of clerical sexual abuses cases around the world, see BBC News, 'Catholic Church sex abuse scandals around the world', <bbc.com/news>. An important paper assessing the significant impact of the scandals on religious participation and belief is Bontan & Perez-Truglia (2015).

2. Mt. 6: 1–4:

Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

3. Mt. 6: 1; cf. the 'seven woes' in Mt. 23.
4. St. Thomas Aquinas (1920), *Summa Theologiae* (ST), II-II.111.1, here and throughout this paragraph.

5. Aquinas would call this hypocrisy in a weak sense:

If . . . the end intended be not contrary to charity, it will be a venial sin, as for instance when a man takes pleasure in the pretense itself: of such a man it is said in *EN* 4.7, that 'he would seem to be vain rather than evil'; for the same applies to simulation as to a lie. (*ST* II-II.111.4)

6. Jennifer Herdt (2008) argues that modernity's confusion of the wayfarer with the hypocrite began as an Augustinian suspicion of acquired virtue as such, which was inverted during the Enlightenment into a valorizing of 'authenticity' and a suspicion of the Aristotelian attempt to imitate virtue in order to acquire it.
7. These conditions describe the mortal sin of hypocrisy as Aquinas defines it in *ST* II-II.111.4.
8. Because the hypocrite acts on the belief that it is better to seem than to be virtuous, he must either be ignorant of real goods or engaged in a kind of self-deception, as a perceptive reviewer pointed out. Both options are famously problematic. What distinguishes hypocrisy from simple ignorance or self-deception is that the condition for its possibility is life in a society which values virtue for its own sake – else the hypocrite would have nothing to ape, nor would his aping be an effective way to accomplish his ends. Alternatively, then, we might describe him as holding a belief about the good life which is contrary to the deeper *social* condition for the possibility of holding such a belief. This entails only that the hypocrite is either ignorant or dismissive of how one must act in society if we are to achieve our proper fulfilment as social beings. One of my claims in this article is that such parasitism does not leave the host society unaffected or unharmed, since it cuts at the shared beliefs and practices that are the *sine qua non* of social life.
9. Perhaps it is in this light that we should read Christ's counselling that faith is a cure for anxiety at the end of Matthew 6, a chapter which might be interpreted as an extended contrast of Christian life with that of the hypocrite with whom the chapter begins.
10. The chemistry analogy overlooks important differences between the sciences and Christianity as they relate to hypocrisy, namely, that Christianity is a moral community constituted by a distinctive set of practices in ways chemistry is not. These differences entail that one can be an ignorant chemist, or even a pretend chemist, but not a hypocritical chemist. (This is not to say that chemistry is not defined in part by normative practises; it is only to say that these norms are mostly *intellectual* rather than *moral* norms, and that they aim at the perfection of chemistry rather than of human beings.)
11. James (1896).
12. Note that it does not matter whether here Nigel is a true hypocrite or a sincere incontinent; the *Argument to Absurdity* merely requires that Nigel's actions are inconsistent with his professed beliefs, a feature common to both moral states.
13. That a practice is impossible is relevant to the truth of both practical and theoretical theories. Such was Cleanthes' strategy for refuting Philo's affectation of Pyrrhonian scepticism in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Hume (1996),1.11):

Whether your skepticism be as absolute and sincere as you pretend, we shall learn by and by, when the company breaks up: we shall then see, whether you go out at the door or the window; and whether you really doubt if your body has gravity, or can be injured by its fall.

14. For discussion, see Wolf (1982).
15. Thus, neither Hitler facing the Allies in the Second World War, nor Dr Manhattan (an invincible superhero), nor a soldier charging a tank with a bayonet can be courageous. Hitler acts for the sake of an evil end; Dr Manhattan cannot suffer for what is good; and the soldier is attempting an impossible task.
16. For analysis of the parameter doctrine referred to here, see Curzer (2012).
17. See Mt. 5: 27–28: 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery"; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart'.
18. See, for example, the arguments put forward by psychologist and ex-priest Sipes (2010).
19. Recent works on the philosophy and ethics of loyalty include Keller (2007), Jollimore (2013), and Kleinig (2014).
20. Loyalty, so understood, has more in common with the traditional understanding of Christian *caritas* than altruism as such.

21. Cf. Jollimore (2013), 4ff. For example, sports fans feel the victories and losses of 'my team' as if they were their own victories and losses, and will sometimes volunteer for outrageous suffering if doing so is perceived to benefit the team. Jollimore cites a poll indicating that 12 per cent of English football fans would be willing to be celibate for a year if this made the English team win the world cup (*ibid.*, 9).
22. See Lozano (2012).
23. See C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*: 'The dangers [of friendship] are perfectly real. Friendship (as the ancients saw) can be a school of virtue; but also (as they did not see) a school of vice. It is ambivalent. It makes good men better and bad men worse' (Lewis (1960), 100).
24. Plato (2016), book II, 382a–382d. Socrates here distinguishes between three kinds of lies: fictions (stories), the lie in words, and the true lie. One can tell fictions without the intent to deceive; one can tell falsehoods with the intent to deceive only if one already knows the truth; or one can be deceived 'in that which is the truest and highest part of himself, or about the truest and highest matters', that is, say what is false *without* realizing one is doing so. This lie is the worst when it comes to what is most truly constitutive of oneself, i. e. one's beliefs about the highest and greatest matters and who one should be – what Bernard Williams calls 'categorical desires'. To fall into doubt about such things is to experience an existential crisis of the sort described below. See Williams (1973).
25. The hypocrite need not be a prominent member of the community; it is enough that the one scandalized by hypocrisy believe the hypocrite to be a good representative of the values of the community. Nevertheless, if we understand 'prominence' to denote one who many people believe to represent the values of the community – either because of their formal office, such as a president or bishop, or because of their long association with or foundational role within a community, such as the disgraced founder of the Legionaries of Christ, Fr. Maciel Maciel – then it is more difficult to dismiss the evidential weight of prominent hypocrites than non-prominent hypocrites.
26. Cf. Michael Rezendes, one of the *Boston Globe* reporters who uncovered the Church's sex scandals:

Even though I was a lapsed Catholic, I still considered myself a Catholic and thought that possibly, some day, I would go back to being a practicing Catholic. But after this experience, I found it impossible to do that – or even think about doing that. What we discovered was just too shattering. (quoted in Pennington (2015))

27. For discussion of these 'deep' loyalties as involuntary obligations grounded in the external self, see Jollimore (2013), 32ff.
28. We can think of the existential crises of Dmitri and Ivan Karamazov in these terms: to what extent does the character of the father – earthly or heavenly – define who one is? Is there an ineradicable true lie at the heart of being?
29. See Emile Durkheim's discussion of religion in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) as 'a unified system of beliefs and practises relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practises which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them' (Durkheim (2008), 46).
30. See, for instance, Pope John Paul II (2014); Budziszewski (2014).
31. See Taylor (1992), Sandel (1998), MacIntyre (2001), and Siedentop (2014).
32. Cf. Mt. 5: 3–10.
33. Cf. Mt. 5: 48 and Ps. 51: 17.
34. See Edmund Burke (2006), 95–96:

We have *consecrated* the state, that no man should approach to look into its defects or corruptions but with due caution; that he should never dream of beginning its reformation by its subversion; that he should approach to the faults of the state as to the wounds of a father, with pious awe and trembling solicitude. By this wise prejudice we are taught to look with horror on those children of their country, who are prompt rashly to hack that aged parent in pieces, and put him into the kettle of magicians, in hopes that by their poisonous weeds, and wild incantations, they may regenerate the paternal constitution, and renovate their father's life. . . . As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, [the state] becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.

35. For a modern instance of such arguments, see Scruton (2006).
36. Cf. Heb. 11:8–16. This is a favourite theme of St Paul, who likewise admonishes the Ephesians: ‘then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow-citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household’ (2: 19).
37. For an influential development of this idea, see Hauerwas (1991).
38. Jollimore, I think, would view this as a *reductio ad absurdum* of my argument, supposing it proves that (a) loyalty is sometimes a virtue and sometimes a vice, and (b) that the virtues (like the self) are divided against themselves. For concerns about this argument, see Schulz (2013).
39. The requirement that loyalty must be justified by the goodness of its object entails that the supernatural Church must in some way be immanent in the mundane and imperfect Church. How such immanence is to be understood I leave open.
40. Consider the actions of Wehrmacht Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg, who in 1944 led a plot to assassinate Hitler for the sake of ‘sacred Germany’, events which formed the basis of the 2008 film *Valkyrie*.