

“WAVING THE BANNER OF DEMOCRACY”: DEMOCRATIC SANCTIONS AND THREE HYPOCRISY PUZZLES

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Abstract: This essay aims to advance the general discussion of hypocrisy in moral and political philosophy as well as normative policy debates regarding democratic sanctions against autocracies that often trigger charges of hypocrisy. In the process of making sense of these charges, I articulate and tackle three general puzzles regarding hypocrisy complaints. The first—the inaction puzzle—asks why a charge of hypocrisy should have any effect on the moral assessment of an agent’s actions, as distinct from the agent’s character or attitudes. The second—the ambivalence puzzle—asks why we often react to hypocrisy charges with seemingly paradoxical ambivalence, recognizing such charges for the transparent deflections they often are, but also granting their normative force. The third—the preemption puzzle—asks why hypocrisy charges do not entirely lose their force when their targets openly concede that they too have suffered from the same flaws that they highlight in others. I argue that sustained reflection on each of these puzzles can enrich—and be enriched by—normative analysis of democratic sanctions.

KEY WORDS: equality, distrust, authoritarianism, crisis of democracy, Ukraine War

“[C]orporate bribery abroad is not the simple, safe issue it seems at first blush.... [It] has been further distorted by an outpouring of self-serving, self-righteous hypocrisy on both sides. Among the biggest hypocrites have been ... those foreign governments which since time immemorial have closed their eyes and held out their hands, but which now denounce the United States for introducing corruption to their shores; those U.S. politicians who professed ignorance of the illegality of the corporate campaign contributions they received ... but who now insist that various company executives be prosecuted because they should have known of their subordinates’ improper activities abroad; those agencies of the U.S. government which long knew of and even approved of barely concealed payoffs by companies engaged in favored overseas sales and investments, but which now wring their hands at the unbelievable shame of it all.”

—Theodore Sorensen¹

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¹ Theodore Sorensen, “Improper Payments Abroad,” *Foreign Affairs* 54 (1976): 719–21, commenting on the proposed *Foreign Corrupt Practices Act* criminalizing bribery of foreign officials;

— [National Public Radio:] “Have you been on a call with a counterpart overseas and they’ve said, hey, hang on, who are you to lecture us about the state of democracy and how to run our country?”

— “Yes ... certainly there’s the occasional dig from someone on the other end of the line whom we are raising concerns with about something going on in their country.... There is no doubt that our ability to wave the banner of democracy and human rights to some extent has been tarnished by recent events.... But ... I don’t feel any hesitation about advancing our views on democracy and our views on human rights, because ... there’s actually strength in the fact that we’re confronting these things openly, that we’re confronting our own deficits, our own challenges for the entire world to see.”

—Anthony Blinken²

I. INTRODUCTION

Charges of hypocrisy are almost as elusive as they are ubiquitous. While their intuitive moral force is easy to recognize, it is also, as many philosophers have pointed out, difficult to explain.³ My overarching goal in this essay is to advance both the general discussion of hypocrisy in moral and political philosophy and normative policy debates regarding powerful democracies’ international conduct, which often elicits accusations of hypocrisy.⁴

quoted in Mike Koehler, “The Story of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act,” *Ohio State Law Journal* 73, no. 5 (2012): 979.

² U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, “Transcript: NPR’s Full Interview with Secretary of State Tony Blinken,” *National Public Radio*, February 16, 2021, www.npr.org/2021/02/16/968332308/transcript-nprs-full-interview-with-secretary-of-state-tony-blinken.

³ The philosophical literature on hypocrisy is vast. For only a few examples from recent years, see R. Jay Wallace, “Hypocrisy, Moral Address, and the Equal Standing of Persons,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 38, no. 4 (2010): 307–41; G. A. Cohen, “Ways of Silencing Critics,” in *Finding Oneself in the Other*, ed. Michael Otsuka (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 134–42; Marilyn Friedman, “How to Blame People Responsibly,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 47 (2013): 271–84; Kyle Fritz and Daniel Miller, “Hypocrisy and the Standing to Blame,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 99, no. 1 (2018): 118–39; Ori Herstein, “Understanding Standing: Permission to Deflect Reasons,” *Philosophical Studies* 174, no. 12 (2017): 3109–32; Jessica Isserow and Colin Klein, “Hypocrisy and Moral Authority,” *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 12, no. 2 (2017): 191–222. I put aside here those parts of the literature concerned with agents who have somehow caused, through their own wrongful actions, the conduct that they are now criticizing; see, e.g., G. A. Cohen, “Casting the First Stone: Who Can, and Who Can’t, Condemn the Terrorists?” in *Finding Oneself in the Other*, 115–33; Johann Frick, “What We Owe to Hypocrites: Contractualism and the Speaker-Relativity of Justification,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 44, no. 4 (2016): 223–65.

⁴ See, e.g., Stephen Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Suzanne Dovi, “Making the World Safe for Hypocrisy,” *Polity* 34, no. 1 (2001): 3–30; Martha Finnemore, “Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity,” *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009): 58–85; Henry Farrell and Martha Finnemore, “The End of Hypocrisy: American Foreign Policy in the Age of Leaks,” *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 6 (2013): 22–26.

More specifically, the applied part of my discussion focuses on the alleged hypocrisy of democratic sanctions against autocratic regimes. I assume that we have reason to be concerned with this particular issue insofar as we have reason to be concerned about the “global crisis of democracy.”⁵ For one thing, hypocrisy charges regarding democratic sanctions frequently take aim at the internal conduct of supposedly “established” democracies, highlighting the (increasing) fragility of their ostensibly robust commitment to basic liberal-democratic values. Furthermore, such charges often imply that, morally speaking, democratic countries have limited policy options when trying to push back against foreign autocrats. In other words, hypocrisy charges concerning democratic sanctions bring together two core aspects of the global crisis of democracy: the political crises engulfing multiple countries long cast as bastions of democracy, and the retrenchment of authoritarian regimes.

Public discourse regarding such sanctions has long been replete with references to hypocrisy. A recent illustration is the ongoing debate surrounding the Western response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Some critics allege that it is objectionably hypocritical for Western democracies to sanction Putin’s regime for its violation of Ukrainian territorial rights, so long as the same democracies go out of their way to prevent sanctions on Israel regarding its violations of Palestinian territorial rights.⁶ Other critics argue that even though Vladimir Putin and his cronies ought to be regarded as war criminals, it is objectionably hypocritical of the United States to demand that they be treated as such, given the United States’ recurrent refusal both to take seriously war crimes committed by its own troops and to support the International Criminal Court.⁷ Yet other critics contend that it is entirely reasonable for developing countries that have been long-standing victims of Western violations of international law, to dismiss as hypocritical Western calls to join a “moralizing crusade” in the form of extremely aggressive sanctions against international-law-violating Russia.⁸

However, democratic sanctions against autocracies have also been portrayed as hypocritical in the much more common case where sanctions have

⁵ See, e.g., Michael Abramowitz, “Democracy in Crisis,” *Freedom House*, 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/democracy-crisis>; Larry Diamond, “The Global Crisis of Democracy,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 17, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-global-crisis-of-democracy-11558105463>; Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer, “Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 1 (2018): 16–42.

⁶ See, e.g., Chris McGreal, “U.S. Accused of Hypocrisy for Supporting Sanctions against Russia but Not Israel,” *The Guardian*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/07/us-sanctions-against-russia-but-not-israel>.

⁷ Fintan O’Toole, “Our Hypocrisy on War Crimes,” *The New York Review of Books*, May 26, 2022, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2022/05/26/our-hypocrisy-on-war-crimes-fintan-otoole/>.

⁸ Trita Parsi, “Why Non-Western Countries Tend to See Russia’s War Very, Very Differently,” *MSNBC*, April 11, 2022, <https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/msnbc-opinion/ukraine-russia-war-looks-very-different-outside-west-n1294280>.

been imposed solely on the basis of the “target” autocracy’s conduct within its own borders. Here, the main thought has been that democracies’ own domestic failings undermine their moral standing to sanction many autocracies. Reflecting on U.S. sanctions against Cuba, for example, Cécile Fabre observes that “successive American administrations” have “recurrently condemned Cuban authorities for their bad domestic human rights record and have justified sanctions on those grounds.”⁹ However, the same American administrations “have committed grievous human rights violations against a large section of their own citizenry—to wit, African Americans.” Fabre continues:

I have in mind the ways in which the penal system, both state and federal, continues to discriminate, in more or less subtle ways, against those individuals, particularly men, from stop-and-search operations to the classification of criminal offences, decisions to prosecute, and sentencing decisions. Granted, what those U.S. officials have done, indeed are still doing, to so many African Americans, is not as wrong as what Castro’s officials have done to Cubans. But it has reached a threshold of wrongness, as it were, such that U.S. administrations lack the standing to condemn. If I am right, in so condemning Cuba they unwarrantedly hold its administration to a double standard and arrogate moral superiority over the latter. Therein lies their wrongdoing.¹⁰

As even this brief opening survey makes clear, invocations of hypocrisy come in many forms. In what follows, I first offer a unified normative account meant to apply to all forms of hypocrisy. I then examine how this general account can enrich our thinking about the particular issue of democratic sanctions against autocracies.

My general account revolves around three puzzles, which, to the best of my knowledge, have not been discussed in the philosophical literature. The first—the *inaction* puzzle—asks why a charge of hypocrisy should have any effect on the moral assessment of an agent’s actions, as distinct from the agent’s character or attitudes. It is obvious why we are inclined to regard hypocrites as agents who have a morally problematic character and/or morally problematic attitudes. However, if one would normally have a moral duty to perform certain *actions* in response to another’s wrongdoing—apart from any *statements* that one might make in response to this wrongdoing—why is there any appeal at all to the thought that one’s own failings somehow undermine this duty?

⁹ Cécile Fabre, *Economic Statecraft: Human Rights, Sanctions, and Conditionality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 169.

¹⁰ Fabre, *Economic Statecraft*, 169–70. Fabre, it should be noted, distinguishes the charge of hypocrisy from the charge (invoked in this passage) of double standards. In my view, though, there is nothing necessarily problematic about an account of hypocrisy that brings these two charges together.

The second—the *ambivalence puzzle*—is closely related to the first and asks why we often react to hypocrisy charges with seemingly paradoxical ambivalence. On the one hand, the charge of hypocrisy is often the wrongdoer's first rhetorical resort. Hypocrisy, in other words, is the villain's favorite vice. Awareness of this fact often makes us "see through" hypocrisy charges, immediately interpreting such charges as mere deflections by those who, subjected to morally laden criticism, opt for ad hominem attacks—such as "*You* are not the one to talk!"—instead of addressing the substance of the criticism. Yet we also recognize the intuitive appeal of hypocrisy charges; if there were no such appeal, these charges would have fallen out of use long ago. A person who says, "I am willing to take criticism on this issue, but not from *him*," may well be deflecting, but we often suspect that she nonetheless has a point. Wrestling with the ambivalence puzzle will help us sort out how to explain this mixed reaction.

The third—the *preemption puzzle*—is concerned with what is supposed to be a simple answer to charges of hypocrisy. Prima facie, such charges are supposed to lose their force when their targets openly concede that they too have suffered from the same flaws that they are (now) highlighting in others. Governments with a morally tainted record, just like individual politicians and ordinary citizens with such a record, are supposed to be able to preempt a charge of hypocrisy by prefacing their public critiques of others with some form of public admission of their own "deficits." Yet, despite the suggestions of some moral philosophers,¹¹ this does not seem to be the case when we reflect on many actual political cases. Indeed, if charges regarding hypocrisy were so easy to defuse, they would arguably not be invoked to begin with.

My discussion of these puzzles and of their implications for democratic sanctions proceeds as follows. After setting the stage in [Section II](#), I examine in [Section III](#) two general accounts of hypocrisy's wrongness concerned, respectively, with a misdirection of the hypocrite's attention and with a violation of equality's requirements. I argue that neither account provides a compelling answer to the hypocrisy puzzles identified above. [Section IV](#) accordingly turns to develop an alternative, motive-based account of hypocrisy. [Sections V](#) and [VI](#) apply this account to international politics and then, more specifically, to democratic sanctions against autocracies.

II. SETTING THE STAGE

Some terminological remarks will help to lay the basis for our inquiry, starting with the term "sanctions." For the purposes of this inquiry, to "sanction" a given foreign regime is to disrupt, through formal government policies, customary ties—be they diplomatic, cultural, military, or

¹¹ See, e.g., Wallace, "Hypocrisy, Moral Address, and the Equal Standing of Persons," 329n37.

commercial—with the regime itself and/or with the foreign society over which that regime presides. As with “boycotts,” I doubt that it is possible to give an exhaustive definition of such “sanctions.”¹² Yet central cases are familiar enough: denying visas to members of a foreign country’s ruling elite implicated in grand corruption, making it illegal to accept funds—whether in the form of investment or donation—from regimes accused of human rights abuses, making it illegal to import certain goods from a given regime and/or from state-owned companies under its control, boycotting a large-scale cultural or sporting event that would normally be attended by participants from one’s country, and so on.

As for the word “democracy” in “democratic sanctions,” I use “democracies” here as a shorthand for liberal democracies, which I take to be characterized by a core commitment to free and fair elections and the rule of law, including the protection of a familiar suite of individual rights, such as bodily integrity, personal property, freedom of speech, and freedom of association. I use “autocracies” to refer to regimes that systematically violate these “constitutional essentials.”¹³ Thus “autocracies” for my purposes encompass out-and-out dictatorships that entirely do away even with rudimentary notions of liberal democracy, but also the kinds of hybrid regimes often labeled by political scientists as “competitive authoritarian”¹⁴ systems, that is, ones where the legal system and electoral competition are not a complete charade but still face profound and recurrent transgressions by those in power.

As I noted above, the evident fragility of the commitment to free and fair elections and the rule of law, even in supposedly “established” democracies, is part of what underlies the concern that democratic sanctions against autocracies are often hypocritical. Following Judith Shklar, I take “hypocritical” agents to be agents who pretend to be morally better than they actually are.¹⁵ I assume that just like individual agents, democratic governments representing sovereign peoples as collective agents can be hypocritical in Shklar’s sense.¹⁶ The core hypocrisy worry on which I will

¹² See Linda Radzik, “Boycotts and the Social Enforcement of Justice,” *Social Philosophy & Policy* 34, no. 1 (2017): 102–22.

¹³ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, expanded ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 227–30.

¹⁴ See Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁵ Judith Shklar, “Let Us Not Be Hypocritical,” *Daedalus* 108, no. 3 (1979): 3 and passim. See also Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), chap. 2. Agents who have moral reasons to pretend to be *worse* than they are, have received far less philosophical attention. For discussion of this neglected category, see Shmuel Nili, “Hidden Redemption and the Duty to Play the Villain: A Political Exploration,” *Journal of Politics* 86, no. 3 (2024).

¹⁶ I do not mean to deny that attributing hypocrisy to a collective can be difficult, given conflicting plans, imperatives, and motivations across different members of the collective; see, e.g., Nils Brunsson, *The Organization of Hypocrisy* (1992; repr., Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School Press, 2002). Yet, elsewhere, I have argued at length that many of the relevant challenges can be avoided. See Shmuel Nili, *Integrity, Personal and Political* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), chaps. 1, 2.

focus, then, is that by sanctioning autocracies, “established” democracies are pretending to be better than they are insofar as they are, however implicitly, claiming a robust democratic status that they clearly lack.

I will assume here that this concern is most plausible in defeasible form. That is, I assume from the outset that even in those instances where democratic hypocrisy concerns have real normative weight, these concerns can only generate defeasible rather than categorical moral prohibitions against any policy response to autocracy that—in the absence of such concerns—would clearly be morally required.

Even in defeasible form, however, it seems odd, at least initially, that hypocrisy concerns can undermine the moral justification for policies that would be required in their absence. This is an instance of what I defined above as the inaction puzzle. If country A struggles with its own serious racial injustices, for example, why should this weaken its moral reasons to limit ties with racist regime B? If the government of country A fails to manage its natural resource wealth equitably, why should this weaken this government’s moral duty to prevent its resource corporations from aiding and abetting foreign kleptocrats who are stealing their own people’s wealth? If government A is failing to prevent illicit and/or disproportional use of force by its own law-enforcement apparatus against its own citizens, why should this failure weaken its moral reasons to avoid selling arms to a brutal foreign dictatorship? In these and many other similar cases, citing democracies’ own failures as reasons for inaction regarding foreign wrongdoing may initially seem to be only adding insult to moral injury. Any compelling account of the hypocrisy charge must answer this inaction puzzle. Any such account has to provide a plausible normative link between democracies’ own failings and their reasons to refrain from otherwise morally appropriate actions in response to foreign wrongdoing.

I take it that the case of democratic sanctions also triggers the ambivalence puzzle. In other words, I assume that when it comes to democratic sanctions against autocracies, as with so many other policy areas, the charge of hypocrisy seems simultaneously *on* point but also somehow *beside* the point. One important challenge is to explain this paradoxical intuition.

Finally, I also assume that the subject of democratic sanctions illustrates the aforementioned preemption puzzle. Why is it that democratic governments that face accusations of hypocrisy regarding their sanctions of autocracies cannot entirely disarm the accusers by admitting that they also often struggle to live up to (even basic) liberal-democratic values?

III. TWO GENERAL VIEWS OF HYPOCRISY

I now examine two influential views in the literature about hypocrisy to see whether they can provide the requisite answers to the puzzles described in the previous section. We can start with an elegantly simple view, according to which hypocrisy’s wrongness consists in a misdirection of

the hypocrite's *attention*. According to Matt King, the main problem with "hypocritical blamers," as with "meddlesome blamers," is that they "attend to the wrong things":

In the case of meddlesome blame, the blamers are attending to something they ought to ignore. In general, our attention to the lives of others should be modulated by the relationships we have with them. These *norms of involvement* give us reasons to stay out of the lives of others, norms meddlesome blamers flout. In the case of hypocritical blame, the blamer is critiquing others when their attention and efforts ought to be directed at improving their own conduct.... [H]ypocritical blame is best understood as running afoul [of] norms counseling improvement of one's own moral house.... [These] *norms of priority* [are] expressed in familiar idioms: 'The pot shouldn't call the kettle black'; 'People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones'; 'Don't talk the talk if you can't walk the walk'. In short, hypocrites are failing to address their own faults, which ought to take priority over critiquing others. What the pot should do is *polish itself*.¹⁷

In the context of our inquiry into democratic sanctions, the misdirection view is attractive in two ways. First, it mirrors an important feature of actual complaints regarding democratic sanctions, namely, the fact that such complaints typically combine hypocrisy and "meddling" elements. The hypocrisy complaint against the sanctioning country ("Who are you to sanction our conduct given your own flaws?") often blends in with the complaint that this country is inappropriately meddling in the affairs of another ("Our internal conduct is none of your business"). As King's remarks indicate, the misdirection view easily explains why these two distinct complaints so frequently come together.

The other, more significant point in favor of the misdirection view is that it provides a direct answer to the inaction puzzle. Hypocrites have a reason to *refrain from taking actions* in response to others' failings that might have been appropriate absent their own failings, because they should direct their attention instead to correcting the latter. It follows that a hypocritical democratic government should attend to its own misdeeds before it turns to take actions in response to foreign governments' misdeeds.

Note, moreover, that when interpreted in this way, the misdirection view aligns with at least some of the public discourse surrounding democracies' foreign policies. To take only one particularly explicit example, in the immediate aftermath of the January 6, 2021 storming of the U.S. capitol, *Foreign Affairs* doubled down on its opposition to then-president-elect Joe Biden's plan to host a global "Summit for Femocracy," with contributors James Goldgeier and Bruce Jentleson insisting that "the Biden team should hold not an international summit for democracy, but a domestic one that

¹⁷ Matt King, "Skepticism About the Standing to Blame," *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility*, vol. 6 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 276–77.

recommits the nation's political leadership to the system's institutions and to the effort to overcome injustice and inequality."¹⁸ Goldgeier and Jentleson concede that "calls for strengthening the domestic foundations of foreign policy may sound hackneyed," but conclude that "there can no longer be any doubt that fixing American democracy at a level deeper even than the damage Trump has done must be the new administration's most essential order of business."¹⁹ To paraphrase King, they clearly believe that the American pot should focus its energies on polishing itself, given the state of American democracy, instead of focusing on the state of democracy abroad.

Alongside these attractions, however, the misdirection view has several significant problems. First, it provides no answer to the ambivalence puzzle. The idea that hypocrites focus their practical attention in the wrong direction does little to explain why hypocrisy charges often seem relevant and irrelevant at the same time. Second, *ceteris paribus*, the misdirection view seems more compelling in the context of individual rather than governmental conduct. To be sure, governments, just like individuals, have scarce resources at their disposal and must always therefore assign priorities among competing demands on these resources. Nonetheless, the division of institutional labor means that governments as large collective entities are less vulnerable to "attention gaps" than are individuals. Oftentimes, reflecting on an individual with an overly developed interest in others' misdeeds, we might indeed suspect that his time and energy spent on preaching to the world would be better spent on improving his own behavior, but this suspicion does not transfer straightforwardly to the governmental context. A given governmental unit set up to monitor and advance the cause of democracy abroad, for example, does not lose the justification for its very existence merely because the country's own democracy is now facing a crisis. The obvious reason is that, within the vast apparatus that comprises the government, it is someone else's job to worry about those domestic problems. This appeal to the division of labor is typically difficult (if not impossible) to make at the individual level, but it is salient when considering large collective entities.

With these concerns in mind, we can turn to the dominant, conventional view of hypocrisy in contemporary moral philosophy. According to this view, reflected in Fabre's aforementioned remarks, the hypocrite's central sin is a sin against equality; by criticizing others for transgressions of which he too is guilty, the hypocrite unjustifiably exempts himself from the moral standards that he applies to his targets.²⁰ This exemption, in turn, means

¹⁸ James Goldgeier and Bruce Jentleson, "The United States Needs a Democracy Summit at Home," *Foreign Affairs*, January 9, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-01-09/united-states-needs-democracy-summit-home>.

¹⁹ Goldgeier and Jentleson, "The United States Needs a Democracy Summit at Home."

²⁰ See, e.g., Wallace, "Hypocrisy, Moral Address, and the Equal Standing of Persons"; Fritz and Miller, "Hypocrisy and the Standing to Blame"; Friedman, "How to Blame People Responsibly"; Cristina Roadevin, "Hypocritical Blame, Fairness, and Standing," *Metaphilosophy* 49, nos. 1–2 (2018): 137–52.

that the hypocrite illicitly treats himself as superior to his targets. Ori Herstein helpfully summarizes the conventional view:

The focus of most of the literature has been on the hypocrite's standing to blame, condemn, and hold others accountable. And although it has its critics, currently the leading explanation of the wrongness of hypocritical blame, condemnation, and holding to account is that it violates the principle of the equal moral status and worth of persons.... [T]he essence of the egalitarian account of the wrong of hypocrisy [is that] to help oneself ... to liberties under the same circumstances in which one is unwilling—purportedly as a matter of moral principle—to offer the same treatment to others is a form of disrespect. Such hypocrisy involves treating and morally judging differently what are—on one's own (purported) moral lights—morally similar cases. Accordingly, the hypocrite exempts herself from what she believes, or, at least, from what she holds herself out to believe, is a moral norm. And she does so for what are irrelevant reasons under that (purported) moral norm. Such conduct amounts to treating others as one's moral inferiors.²¹

At first glance, the conventional view appears to offer an attractive response to the inaction puzzle, explaining how hypocrisy worries can morally constrain democracies' foreign policies. This explanation focuses on an intuitive thought: that the move from condemnation to punitive measures is an *escalation*. If condemning others for certain wrongs while committing similar wrongs oneself is a sin against equality, then *punishing* others for certain wrongs while committing similar wrongs is an *especially* grave sin against equality. Supposedly "established" democracies are guilty of this especially grave sin, if and when they impose punitive sanctions against foreign autocracies in response to various wrongs committed by those autocracies, in seeming obliviousness to their own failings.

However, the conventional view also has significant drawbacks. For one thing, it sheds little light on the ambivalence puzzle. There is no clear link between an egalitarian concern with hypocrisy and the paradoxical sense that hypocrisy charges are often on point and beside the point at the same time. Furthermore, the conventional account similarly fails to make sense of the preemption puzzle. If criticizing others for flaws that parallel one's own is a violation of equality, it is unclear why this violation does not disappear if one simply admits the flaws in question. Here, however, I want to focus on more fundamental problems with two general ideas that undergird the conventional account.

The first idea is that sitting in judgment over others involves claiming some sort of *superiority* over them. A critic of another's wrongdoing, as Fabre observes, "typically evinces the reactive attitudes that ... are central

²¹ Ori Herstein, "Justifying Standing to Give Reasons: Hypocrisy, Minding Your Own Business, and Knowing One's Place," *Philosophers' Imprint* 20, no. 7 (2020): 10.

to attributions of blame and responsibility.... Moreover, the critic implicitly or explicitly compares himself favorably to his target. His criticism rankles, in other words, precisely because *he takes the moral high ground*.²² Reflecting on the famous biblical injunction, “Judge not, that ye be not judged,” Antony Duff is even more unequivocal in assuming that the judge claims moral superiority to the offender:

It would be odd to tell us never to recognise another’s wrongs, or never to criticise her for them; but if to judge is to claim a moral superiority (the judge sits above the offender), it would be less odd to advise us not to judge—not to sit in judgment on others as if we are superior to them (and as if it is therefore not for them to turn round and judge us).²³

As a description of the attitudes of many actors who sit in judgment over others, these remarks may well be accurate. However, at least upon reflection, we have reason to question their normative force. To see why, take Duff’s evocative trial imagery, featuring the judge who sits above the defendant. Rather than understanding this imagery as conveying a superiority of the judge—or, by extension, of the political community—to the defendant, it is more accurate to view it as a response to the *defendant’s* alleged violation of equality’s demands. Taken to task for his conduct, the defendant is asked to answer to charges that he exempted himself from the law that applies equally to all citizens. Accordingly, placing the judge above the defendant is better understood not as a symbolic way to assert the judge’s superiority over the defendant, but as a symbolic way to contest any illicit superiority that might have been claimed by a defendant vis-à-vis the political community, embodied in the judge.

A concrete example, drawn from tumultuous Israeli politics, shows why these observations, far from dwelling upon ritualistic minutiae, can touch directly on the very foundations of a country’s political order. In May 2020, for the first time in Israeli history, a sitting Prime Minister—Benjamin Netanyahu—formally became a defendant in a criminal trial. Repeatedly accusing the legal system of an attempted “coup” against him, Netanyahu threw the country into an unprecedented series of elections in pursuit of a parliamentary majority that would grant him immunity from criminal proceedings. As a direct result of his failure, Netanyahu was compelled to face criminal charges concerning bribery, fraud, and breach of trust. Keenly aware of the extraordinary media attention devoted to every aspect of the legal process, Netanyahu sought leave not to appear before the court in the trial’s formal opening, with his supporters (and lawyers) claiming that

²² Fabre, *Economic Statecraft*, 156 (italics added).

²³ Antony Duff, “Blame, Moral Standing, and the Legitimacy of the Criminal Trial,” *Ratio* 23, no. 2 (2010): 127. Duff, it should be noted, immediately proceeds to distinguish the judge from the everyday moral critic: “a recognition of our own sinful condition should induce a certain humility in our blame: we should blame others not as our inferiors, but as our equals.”

the trial's commencement is a mere "ceremony." A senior pundit's response captured the significance of the judges' refusal to grant Netanyahu's request, with Netanyahu's long-standing campaign to place himself above the law providing the obvious context:

Today's proceeding is indeed a ceremony ... but it is also an important day, because it matters that the state is effectively saying "even if we are talking about the Prime Minister, the country's chief prosecutor believes he took a bribe, and this means that the Prime Minister will stand up just like a common man whether he wants to or not ... he will stand up and bow his head when the three judges enter the courtroom."²⁴

Far beyond the peculiarities of Israeli politics, I take this example to illustrate a general point. Contrary to the conventional view, sitting in judgment over others need not involve any claim of superiority over them; instead, it might mean simply denying *others'* claims to superiority over *us*.

With this point in mind, we can turn to the second idea that arguably underlies the conventional view, namely, that hypocrisy is an entirely formal rather than substantive notion. According to this idea, a charge of hypocrisy relates exclusively to an actor's inconsistency rather than to the substance of the actor's (professed) views or behavior.²⁵ This pure formalism, in turn, is appealing insofar as it seems to explain the constant presence of hypocrisy complaints in politics.²⁶ As Shklar puts it, "when political actors disagree about right and wrong, and everything else, they can only undermine each other with the revelation that their opponent is not living up to his own professed ideal."²⁷ It matters, then, that one need not take a stance on "right and wrong" to accuse others of violating equality's demands by implausibly exempting themselves from moral standards that they trumpet. Moreover, this purely formal conception of hypocrisy seems especially relevant in *international* politics. Seeing as the international realm is rife with intense disagreement on substantive moral principles, a substance-bracketing conception of hypocrisy is especially bound to appear

²⁴ "Guy Peleg: I Think That Netanyahu Will Go for a Plea Bargain at Some Point," *Maariv*, May 24, 2020, www.maariv.co.il/news/law/Article-767229.

²⁵ This point is particularly explicit in Daniela Dover's helpful characterization of the conventional view, which she criticizes on grounds different from those proposed here. See Daniela Dover, "The Walk and the Talk," *The Philosophical Review* 128, no. 4 (2019): 387–422.

²⁶ Eloquently emphasized, among others, in David Runciman, *Political Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Ruth Grant, *Hypocrisy and Integrity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

²⁷ Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, 47–48. Thus, to take Dover's apt example, it was no surprise that an Idaho senator who advocated anti-gay measures, but who turned out to be a closeted gay man himself, won "the enmity and ridicule of right-thinking liberals and homophobic reactionaries alike." Although these two groups may not agree on virtually any substantive point of political morality, they were still "united, for once, in their contempt for his hypocrisy." Dover, "The Walk and the Talk," 406–7.

as a rare source of common ground among a wide range of otherwise incompatible political views.

There is no doubt that Shklar is correct to suggest that the language of hypocrisy often serves as an escape from substantive political disagreements. Even if this is true in many cases, there are at least some important cases where things look different. In these instances, there clearly *does* exist substantive moral agreement and this agreement serves as crucial background to the charge of hypocrisy. In the instances that I have in mind, the accuser alleges that the hypocritical actor is violating substantive moral norms whose universal force is widely recognized; it is this violation, in turn, that explains why this actor (supposedly) lacks the moral license to criticize others. Again, international politics is rife with examples. A government subjected to criticism from foreign powers for running a sham election may push back by highlighting those powers' use of torture. A government accused overseas of oppressing a minority might insist that it will not accept sermonizing from critics who have been pursuing a patently unjust war. In these and many other cases, the charge of hypocrisy is not divorced from substantive moral principles; rather, it is (at least implicitly) dependent upon such principles.²⁸

IV. A MOTIVES-BASED ACCOUNT OF HYPOCRISY

Having explored the limitations of two general views of hypocrisy, I now wish to defend a third alternative. Instead of zeroing in on the hypocrite's attention or on the demands of equality, this alternative focuses on the hypocrite's *motives*. In many cases, the core concern about the hypocrite has little to do with misdirection of attention or with any necessary violation of equality's demands. The concern is rather that the hypocrite is driven by the wrong sort of motives. More precisely, if hypocrites, per Shklar's aforementioned definition, are those who pretend to be morally better than are, then the present account focuses on those who pretend that their motives are morally better than they actually are.

It is not difficult to see how the motives-based view can make sense of the preemption puzzle. Conceding that one has also committed (at least some version of) the wrongs over which one is criticizing and/or penalizing others does not necessarily disarm the hypocrisy charge, because such a concession does nothing to dispel suspicion of one's motives.

More detail is needed, however, to see how the motives-based view can make sense of the ambivalence puzzle, explaining why we are often inclined to view hypocrisy charges as simultaneously on point and beside the point. The motives-based view allows us to solve this puzzle by highlighting a *lack*

²⁸ For further examples along similar lines, see Mlada Bukovansky, "Institutionalized Hypocrisy and the Politics of Agricultural Trade," in *Constructing the International Economy*, ed. Rawi Adbelal, Mark Blyth, and Craig Parsons (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 68–90.

of *seriousness* as a particular motivational problem afflicting the hypocrite when it comes to morally important topics.

A concrete example, drawn from American politics, will help in elaborating what I mean here by “lack of seriousness” and what the relationship is between this shortcoming and “morally important” topics. In the run-up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Pete Buttigieg, a rising star in the Democratic Party, contributed to the Democratic campaign in large part through appearances on *Fox News*, long identified with the Republican Party. In one interview, the *Fox* hosts, clearly keen to put Buttigieg in a bind, confronted him with apparent tensions between Joe Biden’s health-care policy statements and earlier statements made by Biden’s running mate, Kamala Harris, on the same subject. Buttigieg responded by highlighting fundamental contradictions between the two men comprising the Republican party ticket:

There’s a classic parlor game of trying to find a little bit of daylight between running mates. And if people want to play that game, we could look into why an evangelical Christian like Mike Pence wants to be on a ticket with the president caught with a porn star, or how he feels about the immigration policy that he called ‘unconstitutional’ before he decided to team up with Donald Trump.²⁹

There is an obvious sense in which this reply is beside the point—a deflection, as opposed to a real answer. Yet, at the same time, there is also a powerful (if elusive) intuition that Buttigieg’s answer touches on something salient here, that this answer somehow has *genuine* force. How do we explain this apparent paradox?

The best answer, I believe, points to the moral significance of the subject under discussion. On the one hand, it is precisely because health care is so morally important that we feel uncomfortable with Buttigieg’s implicit refusal to address it: health care is too crucial a subject to just be swatted away. Yet, on the other hand, health care’s importance also underlies our sense that Buttigieg is on point in accusing his interviewers of being hypocritical. Buttigieg is effectively accusing his interviewers of pretending to be motivated by the moral seriousness of health-care policy, while in fact being driven by a desire to score political points for Republicans—and perhaps also more generally of being hypocritical insofar as they pretend to be objective umpires of political competition, while in fact siding firmly with one of the competing camps. This accusation is pertinent, at least to an extent—it is not *solely* a transparent deflection—insofar as we can construe Buttigieg as suggesting that the stakes of health-care policy are too high for

²⁹ Quoted, e.g., in Tom McCarthy, “‘Slayer Pete’: Buttigieg Emerges as Biden’s Unlikely Fox News fighter,” *The Guardian*, October 13, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/oct/13/slayer-pete-buttigieg-joe-biden-fox-news>.

him to debate the subject with those who are only *pretending to be serious about it*.

Furthermore, our ambivalence regarding this suggestion may also reflect uncertainty as to whether Buttigieg's implicit criticism of his interviewers' motives is accurate. After all, were Buttigieg asked the same question by people whose motives are clearly benign—say, conscientious voters in a town hall meeting trying to ascertain the Democratic ticket's views on health care—it would have been at best irrelevant (and at worst offensive) for him to give the same answer. If we are not sure how to evaluate Buttigieg's answer to his *Fox* interviewers, it is arguably because we are not sure whether it is fair of him to impute to them such dubious motives. Their network's highly partisan reputation notwithstanding, they might still be serious about the ideal of impartial newsmen who pose tough questions about important policy matters to any politician who comes their way, irrespective of that politician's party affiliation. If they are serious in this way, they deserve a serious answer, just like the good-faith participants in a town hall meeting do.

I have elaborated on this specific example because it carries several generalizable lessons. One general lesson is that in order to solve the ambivalence puzzle, it is necessary to step away from a purely formal conception of hypocrisy and to examine the substance of the subject that is under dispute in any given case. A related lesson is that the higher are the subject's moral stakes, the more sense we can make of the charge that those who only pretend to be serious about the subject are ill-suited to addressing it. Finally, again related, our hesitation about whether to endorse this charge in a given case is likely to derive in part from uncertainty as to whether those accused of feigning seriousness are indeed faking it.

I will soon apply these general lessons to our core international case, but before returning to this case, we should first reflect on a natural challenge to the motives-based view. According to this challenge, notwithstanding its success in handling the preemption and ambivalence puzzles, the motives-based account of hypocrisy has little to say about the inaction puzzle. On the face of it, an agent who has compelling moral reasons to perform some action does not lose these moral reasons simply because his motives for performing the action are dubious, impure, or in any other way suboptimal.

In order to address this challenge, we need to distinguish between what we might call *motive-dependent* and *motive-independent* actions. Motive-independent actions are those that can be carried out in a morally responsible way regardless of the actor's motives. Such actions are typically one-off events that do not require any kind of follow through or perseverance, nor do these actions require special competence, skill, or interest. To illustrate first with a micro-level example, imagine that Suitor can easily return a neighbor's troubled teenage son home, upon encountering the son alone, petrified, and in clear danger. Suppose that Suitor is an utterly self-absorbed man who, left to his own devices, would not actually lift a finger for the

teenager; his sole motivation for returning the teenager home is impressing Love Interest with his supposed altruism. The fact that Suitor is pretending to be morally better than he actually is—and, more specifically, pretending to Love Interest to have better motives than the motive that actually drives him—has no impact on what he ought to do. Assuming that returning the teenager is a simple one-off event, requiring no special attitude or special aptitude on Suitor's part, then it is plainly the right thing to do, even if Suitor does it for the wrong reasons. Here, the challenge that we are considering is on the mark. The fact that we take a dismal view of Suitor's motives bears on how we judge his character, but this is independent of our judgment of how he morally ought to act.

Things look quite different, however, when considering motive-dependent actions. These actions cannot be carried out in a morally responsible way in the absence of the right sort of motives. Motive-dependent actions typically unfold over extended periods, involving repeated iterations. In addition, these actions almost always depend for their ethically responsible pursuit on special competence and skills. Finally, because they unfold or recur over time, motive-dependent actions typically require sustained attention to detail and a significant measure of perseverance.

To illustrate, we can take our micro-example in another direction. Suppose that the neighbor discovers that she has to spend two years abroad on her own (say, on a secretive military mission) and, having no other family members, seeks a volunteer who is willing to act as a *de facto* guardian for her son during her absence. In this case, Suitor's motives clearly *do* affect the moral calculus of whether he ought to assume responsibility for the son. This is because effectively raising a troubled teenager for such a lengthy period requires both certain attitudes and certain aptitudes, both of which one is extremely unlikely to possess or develop in the absence of the right sort of motives.³⁰ Suppose that Suitor recognizes that he lacks all the traits necessary to be a responsible guardian and also lacks any inclination to develop these traits. Moreover, Suitor knows that there are several other volunteers who are far better suited to acting as guardians. Despite all this, Suitor still does everything he can to become the *de facto* guardian of the neighbor's son, once again due to ulterior motives, say, because he believes he can hide his likely negligence from her, while winning her goodwill in order to execute some financial scheme involving their shared building. Here, in strong contrast to the previous scenario, our evaluation of Suitor's motives is *not* an entirely separate matter from our moral judgment of what he ought to do. Given his motives, he is extremely unlikely to carry out the role of a substitute parent in an adequate manner. Because this is so, it would be morally wrong of him of him to assume this role to begin with. Suitor's

³⁰ I take no stance on the relation between this kind of problem and the akratic issues more familiar to philosophers who have long pondered the case of "Professor Procrastinate," who is asked to take on a job that he knows he is too weak-willed to carry out successfully. See, e.g., Frank Jackson, "Procrastinate Revisited," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 95, no. 4 (2014): 634–47.

dubious motives make it morally impermissible for him to take an action (or, more precisely, set of actions) that may well have been permissible if his motives were better.

V. THE MOTIVES-BASED ACCOUNT IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

We can now tie the general discussion of the motives-based view back to our international interests. We can start with two core features that make this view especially appropriate for reflecting on hypocrisy in international politics.

First, and most straightforwardly, it is a truism that moral rhetoric in international politics frequently serves as a thinly veiled disguise for *real-politik* motivations that are amoral at best. In turn, many hypocrisy charges in international politics aim to expose this disguise. The familiarity of this dynamic makes the motives-based account a natural fit for reflecting on hypocrisy in international affairs.

Second, by highlighting *distrust* as a central current that underlies hypocrisy charges, the motives-based account unifies seemingly disparate critiques that are often directed at powerful democracies, when they pursue policies with dramatic ramifications for vulnerable people beyond their borders. Powerful democracies are often not trusted to have even rudimentary knowledge of how their policies would shape distant lives, neither at the macro level of national institutions³¹ nor at the micro level of everyday life.³² Furthermore, powerful democracies' own domestic travails breed distrust both of their *competence* when seeking to influence the shape of foreign countries' institutions and of their *steadfastness* in any long-term international efforts. The latter point, in turn, is especially salient insofar as polarization comes to dominate established democracies' domestic affairs,³³ since it is entirely possible that a given government's international policy agenda will be jettisoned by a successor government.

The fact that the motives-based account draws our attention to all of these forms of distrust is important, because their combination allows us to

³¹ Although the following, famous remarks from Michael Walzer concern specifically the relationship between a government and its people, they can fairly be applied to the context of our discussion as well: "The state is constituted by the union of people and government.... Foreigners are in no position to deny the reality of that union, or rather, they are in no position to attempt anything more than speculative denials. They don't know enough about its history, and they have no direct experience, and can form no concrete judgments, of the conflicts and harmonies, the historical choices and cultural affinities, the loyalties and resentments, that underlie it. Hence their conduct, in the first instance at least, cannot be determined by either knowledge or judgment." Michael Walzer, "The Moral Standing of States: A Response to Four Critics," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 9, no. 3 (1980): 212.

³² For one particularly harrowing example, see Tim McGirk, "How the bin Laden Raid Put Vaccinators Under the Gun in Pakistan," *National Geographic*, February 25, 2015, [news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/02/150225-poliopakistan-vaccination-virus-health](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/2015/02/150225-poliopakistan-vaccination-virus-health).

³³ See, e.g., Milan Švolik, "Polarization Versus Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (2019): 20–32.

make better sense of the way in which charges regarding lack of moral standing often operate in international affairs. I particularly have in mind here the tendency of foreign actors not only to rhetorically saddle an incumbent government with its predecessors' serious moral failings, but also to argue that these failings deprive the current government of any ability to claim the higher moral ground. Moreover, as the opening quotation from U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken makes clear, such foreign arguments persist even when the current government clearly defines itself as a *negation* of its predecessors' legacies. We can make better sense of this apparently counterintuitive phenomenon, once we see the distinct concerns regarding "established democracies'" knowledge of foreign affairs, competence in adjudicating these affairs, and steadfastness in their foreign policies, as different manifestations of the same underlying problem of distrust.

With all this in view, we can now return to the specific issue of democratic sanctions against autocracies. The same fundamental insights of the motives-based view apply when reflecting on the charge of hypocrisy that such sanctions often elicit as well as on the three puzzles associated with this charge.

The most straightforward puzzle for the motives-based view is the preemption puzzle. This view can easily explain why democratic governments accused of hypocrisy regarding their sanctions of autocracies cannot disarm the accusers by admitting that they also often struggle to live up to democratic values in their own affairs. The reason is that such admission does little to undermine the suspicion of democracies' motives. After all, the more problematic is a given country's domestic record when it comes to living up to core liberal-democratic values, the more natural it is to suspect that its foreign conduct rarely if ever gives genuine weight to such values. This general suspicion, moreover, is further amplified not only by the pervasive presence of *realpolitik* calculations in international politics, but also by straightforward observations regarding powerful democracies' long record of casting morality aside in their international conduct when seeking to coerce weaker foreign regimes to do their bidding. All of these arrows point in the same direction: a credible fear that countries who pursue sanctions do so largely (if not entirely) for reasons that are at best amoral, rather than because of any lofty moral ideals, democratic or otherwise.

Now consider the ambivalence puzzle. To understand why accusations of hypocrisy surrounding democratic sanctions trigger ambivalence, we must—as in the examples above—reflect on the substantive issues that such sanctions involve. On the one hand, democratic sanctions against an autocratic regime almost always purport to respond to some grave moral wrongs for which the regime is (said to be) responsible. The gravity of the wrong in question generates the clear sense that it is a transparent deflection to dismiss the sanctions as "mere hypocrisy." An autocratic regime that is

widely accused of profoundly repressive conduct has *too serious* of a case to answer for its answer to consist of a cry of “hypocrisy.” Criticism of typical authoritarian methods—such as deploying violence and fraud at the polls, hunting down dissidents, and systematically trampling upon the basic rights of citizens who belong to vulnerable minorities—touches on transgressions that are too important for them to be dismissed by invoking the sanctioning governments’ own wrongdoing. A government that defends itself in the “court” of global public opinion by invoking hypocrisy in this way is no more convincing than an individual politician who “defends” himself in a domestic trial concerning grave abuses of his office by arguing that other politicians have committed similar abuses. If that is the only line of defense in the face of overwhelming evidence presented by the prosecution, a guilty verdict must surely follow. The same is true, morally speaking, in the international realm.

Yet, on the other hand, seriousness cuts both ways here, seeing as sanctions themselves are often an extremely serious matter. This fact is particularly clear regarding the most biting economic sanctions, which can (and often do) harm the basic interests of huge swaths of the sanctioned country’s population. Sanctions that disrupt customary ties that have been central to an autocracy’s economy are not a trivial measure that can be taken lightly. A charge of hypocrisy leveled at a sanctioning country *is* on point, whenever it is sensible to ask whether that country is serious enough about the moral values it professes for us to trust that it would pursue such dramatic measures in an ethically responsible manner. This means, for instance, that even if we would dismiss a charge of hypocrisy as a transparent deflection when coming from the sanctioned regime itself, we may be more receptive if the charge were to come from victims of the regime, including victims who do not believe the relevant sanctions to be intrinsically problematic.

These observations, in turn, suggest a differential approach to the inaction puzzle as it applies to sanctions. More specifically, these observations point once again to the distinction between motive-dependent and motive-independent actions. *Some* sanctions are motive-independent; they can be pursued in a responsible manner irrespective of the motives of the government imposing them. Prime examples include sanctions that are relatively small in scale and that involve binary, one-off decisions. Consider, for instance, a democratic government that announces highly circumscribed sanctions against an autocratic regime, such as canceling the personal visas of members of the regime’s corrupt elite or boycotting a major sporting event hosted by the regime. Often, the real motives behind such sanctions are less lofty than the motives that the democratic government presents to the world. This government might, for instance, be pursuing these sanctions only in order to appease a powerful third country for amoral reasons rather than because of any genuine moral conviction. Still, absent other morally relevant details, the

amoral government might well be doing the right thing, even if for the wrong reasons.³⁴

However, many sanctions—especially those that draw the most international attention and criticism—are motive-dependent. In the absence of the right sort of motives, they arguably should not be adopted at all, given the real danger that they would be pursued in an irresponsible manner. Wide-ranging economic sanctions are, again, a core example. Consider, for instance, a powerful democracy that subjects a foreign autocracy to crippling economic sanctions for entirely amoral reasons, while being indifferent to the fate of vulnerable people living under that autocracy. Because of its indifference, this powerful government is far less likely to keep track of which goods or which kinds of customary trade are essential to the livelihoods of the autocracy's subjects. It is also far less likely to explore or meaningfully pursue any creative alternatives meant to minimize the foreseeable risks that sanctions will carry for those subjects' basic interests. Similarly, such an indifferent government is also far less likely to monitor how the autocracy's most vulnerable subjects fare over time or to adjust its sanctions in a way that is sensitive to relevant changes in the circumstances of the vulnerable. To the extent that these problems are predictable, they affect not just our moral evaluation of the relevant government's attitudes, but also our judgment as to what it ought (not to) *do*. These problems suggest that it would be wrong of the government to initiate the relevant sanctions to begin with.

VI. IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION: THREE UPSHOTS

Even readers convinced by the preceding arguments might worry that there is something deflationary about them. The motives-based account, after all, appears to suggest that democratic sanctions against autocracies are ultimately not very special, insofar as the hypocrisy angle is concerned. On this as on any other policy topic with serious real-world stakes, governments that are suspected of dubious motives should be distrusted to follow through, in a responsible manner, on complex courses of action as they unfold over time. Sanctions are thus not that unique.

That is one conclusion I believe we should reach, but our analysis has at least two further upshots. The first has to do with the seeming disjuncture between public debate regarding democratic sanctions against autocracies and the dominant concerns of political philosophers who have discussed such sanctions. As I noted throughout, public discourse puts significant weight on the thought that hypocrisy concerns impugng democratic efforts to sanction foreign autocracies. Yet these concerns have been almost entirely

³⁴ This is true even if there are other relevant things, including other sanctions, that would be right for the government to pursue.

absent from the philosophical conversation regarding democratic sanctions against autocracies.

Since the turn of the millennium, philosophers have debated which sanctions (if any) might justly be imposed on (which) autocratic regimes, at what costs, and to what ends. Several philosophers (myself included) have asked, for example, whether a democratic government may justly prohibit banks based in its jurisdiction from lending to kleptocrats³⁵ or oil corporations based in its jurisdiction from dealing with petrocrats,³⁶ partly given familiar fears regarding how vulnerable subjects of the “target” regimes would be affected by such prohibitions. However, philosophers have rarely asked whether a *hypocritical* government might lack the moral standing to enact and enforce such prohibitions.³⁷ Though animating much of the public conversation, concerns regarding governmental hypocrisy have rarely been considered a relevant factor in the parallel philosophical conversation.

However, the arguments of this essay suggest that this contrast is at least somewhat illusory. The fact that philosophers as well as social scientists have been overwhelmingly concerned with sanctions’ costs and efficacy in achieving certain goals, whereas public discourse repeatedly prioritizes hypocrisy concerns, does not mean that the sanctions debate features participants who are necessarily talking past each other. Instead, one of the findings that follows from this inquiry is that (as a theoretical matter, at least) these two strands of the policy debate, while clearly distinct from one another, are nonetheless much more intimately linked than might seem to be the case.

The final upshot of our inquiry has to do with a kind of pessimism that distinguishes the motives-based view of hypocrisy. Both the misdirection view and the conventional view of hypocrisy offer the (alleged) hypocrite a clearer ray of hope, in the following sense. Both views hold out a clear possibility of the hypocrite (re)gaining the moral standing to criticize wrongdoers and to hold them accountable. On the misdirection view, hypocrites can gain this standing once they have tended to their own flaws. On the conventional view, hypocrites can gain this standing, at least to a

³⁵ See, e.g., Thomas Pogge, “Achieving Democracy,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 15, no. 1 (2001): 3–23; Christian Barry, “Sovereign Debt, Human Rights, and Policy Conditionality,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 19, no. 3 (2011): 282–305; Shmuel Nili, *The People’s Duty* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), chap. 4.

³⁶ See, e.g., Leif Wenar, “Property Rights and the Resource Curse,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36, no. 1 (2008): 2–32; Leif Wenar, *Blood Oil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Leif Wenar et al., *Beyond Blood Oil* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018); Chris Armstrong, “Dealing with Dictators,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 28, no. 3 (2020): 307–31. See also Shmuel Nili, “Our Problem of Global Justice,” *Social Theory and Practice* 37, no. 4 (2011): 629–53; Shmuel Nili, “Rethinking Economic ‘Sanctions’,” *International Studies Review* 18, no. 4 (2016): 635–54; Nikolay Marinov and Shmuel Nili, “Sanctions and Democracy,” *International Interactions* 41, no. 4 (2015): 765–78.

³⁷ As far as I am aware, Fabre’s aforementioned discussion is the only exception to this generalization. It is also a partial exception, since Fabre’s focus in discussing democratic hypocrisy is on the attitudes rather than the policies that democracies may adopt toward autocratic regimes.

significant extent, if they simply concede their own flaws, that is, if they display an appropriate humility about their own moral record when seeking to hold other wrongdoers to account. Yet, at least when it comes to international affairs, the distrust view suggests that we should be more pessimistic about the future options open to (alleged) hypocrites.

This pessimism arises because powerful nations—particularly, powerful democracies—seem to be left with no good policy options from the vantage point of the distrustful. Consider again, for example, customary business ties with kleptocracies. The motives-based view seems to suggest that when it comes to such business ties democracies do not really have any morally viable alternatives. Democracies are damned if they maintain these ties, and damned if they don't. If democracies do retain such ties, they are accused by the distrustful of cheap moral rhetoric, putting aside their lofty moral proclamations whenever fidelity to these ideals involves meaningful sacrifices. Conversely, if democracies seek to end various kinds of customary ties, the distrustful are likely to worry, as we have seen, that because of their dubious motives, the results, especially over time, could very well be disastrous. Either way, democratic governments can't win.

Moreover, the absence of good options seems to haunt powerful democracies even when their reasons to step back from certain customary ties with autocrats—and indeed, to impose sweeping sanctions on autocracies—seem overdetermined. Arguably the best example of this point is the ongoing saga with which we started, namely, of Western sanctions on Russia in response to its invasion of Ukraine. If there ever was a time in which it was morally imperative for the West to step back from customary natural resource trade with Russia's kleptocracy, that time is surely now. But here, too, Western governments find themselves between a rock and a hard moral place. On the one hand, sustaining a categorical ban on trade with Russia would go some way toward building trust in Western democracies' moral motives by sending a "costly signal" of their commitment to supporting Ukraine (and its democracy) in the face of Putin's onslaught.³⁸ On the other hand, the same costs, if not kept in check, could well deepen Western democracies' internal instability, possibly bringing to power politicians and groups who do not even bother to pay hypocritical tributes to rudimentary liberal-democratic values in *any* policy realm.³⁹ The question of what a genuine, nonhypocritical commitment to democracy requires under

³⁸ The literature on "costly signaling" in international relations is vast. For its latest iterations, see, e.g., Kai Quek, "Four Costly Signaling Mechanisms," *American Political Science Review* 115, no. 2 (2021): 537–49; Joshua Kertzer, Brian Rathbun, and Nina Srinivasan Rathbun, "The Price of Peace: Motivated Reasoning and Costly Signaling in International Relations," *International Organization* 74, no. 1 (2020): 95–118.

³⁹ This worry seems like the best, if not only, moral rationale that could be offered, for example, for the buyers' cartel that the Biden Administration was trying to construct with regard to Russian oil. See, e.g., "Russia Is Making Heaps of Money from Oil, but There Is a Way to Stop That," *New York Times*, July 29, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/29/opinion/russia-oil-sanctions-biden.html>.

such tragic circumstances must be left for another day. However, by foregrounding such questions, a motives-based account of international hypocrisy points our attention in the right direction.

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