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Hypocrisy: Moral Fraud and other Vices

by James S. Spiegel

Reviewed by Jake Smith

While a review of the book *Hypocrisy: Moral Fraud and Other Vices* in this journal might appear out of place, the reader will quickly discover the usefulness of the information in this book. What follows is a short synopsis of each chapter.

Chapter one, titled “the mother of all vices,” provides an informative historical background of the problem of hypocrisy. By looking at familiar examples from literature and scripture, the pervasiveness of hypocrisy is aptly illustrated. Later in the chapter, Spiegel presents a survey of philosophical and theological reflections, which communicate in much more technical terms the complexity of the issue. The chapter ends with an excellent overview of the previous discussion. The reader is left with the very questions Spiegel intends to wrestle with over the following chapters. How is hypocrisy precisely to be defined? Is there a single concept that will satisfactorily account for all its instances? Does hypocrisy always or ever involve self-deception?

In chapter two, titled “a lie told by outward deeds,” the author offers his best attempt at a definition of hypocrisy. He begins by offering several examples of inconsistencies in human behavior. Most of us have either seen others behave in ways that match the examples, or have found ourselves behaving in ways that are inconsistent with our stated beliefs. From these examples three categories of inconsistency emerge: hypocrisy, moral weakness, and poor moral insight. An important distinction is drawn between the hypocrite and the ironical figure that intends to accomplish something morally and socially constructive through seemingly immoral behavior. For the student affairs professional, having a better understanding of what might be lying underneath the inconsistencies we see in the behavior of our students could prove to be exponentially helpful. Specifically in judicial matters, it could help steer us to more productive sanctioning.

A deconstruction of self-deception titled, “taking oneself in,” can be found in chapter three. This chapter presents some of the toughest reading in the book. For those who enjoy philosophy, this is exciting material. For the rest, bear with it; it all pays off in the end. The primary question Spiegel addresses in this chapter is “how do people deceive themselves?” In other words, is it really possible to behave in ways that contradict stated beliefs or does a temporary lack of belief occur? These questions are as difficult to

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answer, as they are interesting. Although the chapter does not leave the reader with a quick, pithy sort of response, the reader is left with a better understanding of what might be happening when a person behaves in ways that are inconsistent with stated beliefs. This chapter could prove to be particularly helpful in guiding an advisor as he or she confronts students in judicial matters.

Chapter four, titled “the spirit is willing,” provides an analysis of moral weakness. This chapter may prove to be one of the more helpful for student affairs professionals. We have all known students who make poor decision after decision and who don’t seem to be able to make better ones in their dating relationships, for example. These students know their behavior is risky, inappropriate or sinful, yet they consistently choose poorly. Such individuals, according to Spiegel, are morally weak.

Spiegel addresses the issues of sin, self-control and sanctification in chapter five, which is titled, “the now and the not yet.” Moral weakness is further discussed but in more explicitly religious or theological terms than in the previous chapter. A model for developing self-control is offered as well as a discussion of several different views of sanctification. The author does a good job of explaining the various positions with fairness. At no point in the book does Spiegel avoid expressing his own conclusions, but in this chapter he does so with great care to not misrepresent an opinion that he does not share. This chapter presents a sentiment that has been essentially missing from the book up to this point - hope. Without ignoring the efforts required of people and the “self” of self-control, Spiegel communicates hope for the morally weak.

“Cheating at the goodness stakes” is the title of chapter six, which contains a moral analysis of hypocrisy. Here Spiegel presents a surprising thought - the Bible states that hypocrisy is wrong, but does not say why. In an attempt to fill this void, a look at three broad schools of morality is undertaken. In his discussion of Utilitarian, Kantian and Aristotelian ethics, Spiegel is careful to not lose the reader with too many technical terms, yet he does not oversimplify these vast and complicated systems of thought. He concludes the chapter with a meaningful and pragmatic set of reasons for why hypocrisy is wrong.

Chapter seven, titled “at least I’m not a hypocrite: the apologetic problem of hypocrisy,” Spiegel describes the effect that hypocrisy has on the view non-Christians have toward Christianity and the ability of Christians to share their faith with the world at large. Here, an analysis of the philosophical arguments against Christianity via hypocrisy is given with ideas of how to address them in real dialogue with non-believers. For Christian colleges that do not require a faith confession for admission, this chapter could prove useful when talking with students who do not believe in Christ.

The conclusion of *Hypocrisy: Moral Fraud and other Vices* provides a succinct synopsis of Spiegel’s primary points and carries with it the author’s sentiment of hope that his work will help the reader live free of hypocrisy. Although Spiegel writes with the mind of a philosopher, he doesn’t distance himself intellectually from the common reader. His ability to meld the fields of philosophy, psychology and theology is helpful and encouraging in that he presents a well-informed template through which the problem of hypocrisy can be understood and addressed.

Many student development professionals have struggled to understand student behavior and reasoning. Hypocrisy may be just the text we need.