

# The Sticky Side of Hypocrisy: Environmental Activism in an Oil-Drenched World

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Article abstract

Environmental activists and critics are often accused of being hypocrites by the oil industry. The accusation unfurls from the view that the activists' protests and actions contradict their espoused beliefs. By presenting a simple thought experiment involving two alleged hypocrites, I discuss ways in which critics of environmental activists misapply the charge of hypocrisy, having neglected the contexts that determine the degree to which one is able to align one's lived actions with one's professed values.

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# *The Sticky Side of Hypocrisy: Environmental Activism in an Oil- Drenched World*

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## **The Polemical War**

The refrain has become painfully familiar: Resistance against the expansion of oil infrastructure sees protestors chant environmental mantras on one side while energy corporations decry an apparent hypocrisy on the other. Protestors guarding against the expansion of the Trans-Mountain pipeline on Burnaby Mountain (Bailey, 2014) were accused of being hypocrites—many were called out for having driven their cars to the base of the mountain on which they mounted their stand (Baritugo, 2014). The latest enactment of this familiar dramaturgy can be seen in Seattle, where protestors in kayaks (dubbed “kayaktivists”) surrounded Shell’s offshore oil rig to protest the company’s plans to drill in the pristine Arctic (Keim & Macalister, 2015). Familiar recriminations of hypocrisy rang again. Media outlets have been quick in pointing out the multiple ways in which such a protest depends on the use of fossil fuels, how the kayakers themselves needed fuel-burning vehicles to tow their kayaks, and how the vessels themselves are composed of oil derivatives (Herz, 2015).

Accusations of hypocrisy have become the default polemical weapon deployed against environmental activists and critics of the oil industry. Their detractors have spared no words in deflating resistance to energy projects, dismissing opponents as naïve, offering no alternatives to the energy establishment. They argue that environmental activism is itself made possible by the abundance and accessibility of fossil fuels. So long as demand for oil exists, producers must find a way to supply the market with oil commodities. After all, environmental activists are not outside market realities—in fact, they are caught smack in the middle of them. In the eyes of the industry, opposition to oil projects are fraught with inconsistency since opponents resist that which they are most dependent upon. Thus, the apparent and putative guilt of hypocrisy renders the protesters’ message incoherent and specious.

However, hypocrisy as a charge begs conceptual clarification. The vernacular use of the word refers to a phenomenon whereby one’s words fail to align with one’s actions. The word itself derives from the Greek *hypo-krisi*, the false appearance of goodness; *hypo-krisis*, a variation, denotes acting, feigning, pretending; *hypokritēs* refers to a dissembler whose credibility is circumspect (Onions, 1991). The Greek denotation points to outright dishonesty and deliberate pretence. However, in modern usage, we deem someone a hypocrite when her professed values and ethical injunctions contravene her behaviour (Hypocrite, 2010). One cannot be accused of being a hypocrite for saying “it is sunny and hot today” because, while such a descriptive statement might be true or false, it produces no normative claim against which the actions of the speaker can be measured. In order for a charge of hypocrisy to

stand, the statement must stake an ethical position with implications for action. For example, “It is wrong to eat animals” and “I believe education should be freely provided to every child” both feature strong claims that constitute ethical injunctions from which behaviours and actions can be judged. For the anti-oil protestors, the injunction might be “It is unethical to continue to exploit fossil fuels,” or “We believe dependence on oil is environmentally unsustainable.” These beliefs need not be explicitly articulated, for they can be tacitly communicated through active resistance to policies and projects that expand the oil infrastructure.

If protestors believe oil expansion to be wrong, does their own dependence on fossil fuels constitute a gross example of hypocrisy? To help illustrate my response to this question, I posit two scenarios in which one’s actions might directly contradict one’s words.

### A Case of Two Hypocrites: A Thought Experiment

Imagine the following two cases. First, a man stands on a soapbox, delivering an impassioned homily. The essence of his message: *do not eat apples*. He expounds the vices of the fruit and charges his audience to shun every apple. “No more apples!” he cries, and promptly storms away from the stage. No sooner has he left the crowd than is he caught with an apple in his hand, a juicy morsel in his mouth. Second, a man is confined to a tiny cell in a fortified prison. As an inmate, he has no say in his living conditions, much less the food he eats. He is served one apple every meal, nothing else. The man has an aversion to apples, but has no choice but to eat what he is given in order to fend off starvation. He painfully forces down every bite when the apples are delivered. All the while, he screams to the guards, “No more apples!”

In the first case, we see the preacher’s actions in direct contradiction to his directives, his own behaviour in stark relief to the imperatives issued to his audience. With all the fruits available to him, there is no compelling reason why he should be eating precisely what he riles against. Because his ability to choose what he eats is never significantly impaired, most of us will agree that his consumption of the apple makes him a hypocrite. In the second case, we see a man whose words contravene his actions—certainly his qualification as a hypocrite is fulfilled in a technical sense—but few of us would judge him a hypocrite. Because his situation robs him of agency, he is denied the choices through which professed injunction and personal action fall into line. Without any ability to affect what he is served, the man has no choice but to eat what he despises, all the while protesting what he hates. His tragic situation makes perfect integrity impossible, and should thus exonerate him from the charge of hypocrisy.

Ethical agency, it would seem, is the keystone of moral integrity. When surrounding conditions severely limit a person’s ability to align actions with values, hypocrisy ceases to be a relevant criticism. I submit that the prisoner’s predicament is similar to that of our own involvement within the current energy establishment, largely built around the extraction and consumption of fossil fuels. We are situated in a pervasive fossil fuel economy in which complex hydrocarbons are used not only for transportation and heating, but also the production of agricultural fertilizer and countless derivatives such as plastic synthetics. We are surrounded by oil—in fact, drenched in it, imprisoned by it. At the same time, the risk of continued exploitation of this substance has become startlingly clear, given the terrifying spectre of climate change (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2014). However, the fact of our milieu does not oblige us to support the expansion of oil infrastructure; neither does resistance render environmentalists hypocrites whose beliefs are undermined by their current involvement in the economic establishment.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, those who decry hypocrisy are guilty of a form of *ad hominem*, attacking the opponent rather than his claims. By calling the protesters hypocrites in the hope of impugning the validity of the protesters' stance, detractors avoid having to justify the expansion of fossil fuel projects in the face of the climate crisis. To issue an honest defence of oil, the industry apologists have the unenviable task of arguing the ethicality of oil expansion amidst overwhelming scientific evidence of environmental harm. The exigencies of the market (somebody is buying, so somebody must supply) simply do not pass ethical muster. Nor do efforts to minimize the impact of particular oil projects seem to gain purchase—a small wrong does not make a right when placed next to a sea of wrongs.

By raising the example of the prisoner, I do not mean to suggest that environmental protesters are as powerless to affect change as our hapless inmate. The example merely serves to dispatch the charges of hypocrisy. In light of growing calls to divest from fossil fuels and staunch opposition to oil projects everywhere, there is hope that the energy establishment is poised for transformation sooner or later. Meanwhile, those who are concerned about the future of the planet and the plight of the human race can proceed with vigour, without deference to charges of hypocrisy.

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