

Are you a climate change hypocrite? Here's why you shouldn't worry

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Standing on the deck of Berta Cáceres, the now-iconic pink boat, Emma Thompson addressed a sprawling crowd of protestors and gave a slew of media interviews. It was April 2019, Extinction Rebellion had occupied

Oxford Circus in London, and the actress was eager to lend her headline-generating celebrity status to the group's cause.

As it turned out, however, the tabloids told a different story. "Dame Emma Jets 5,400 Miles to Show How Green She Is!", the [Daily Mail](#) crowed. In subsequent months, it went on to [gloat](#) "Emma Thompson Admits She is a Hypocrite for Flying Round the World While Protesting Climate Change," as if to confirm its initial cod-outrage had been vindicated.

The charge of hypocrisy is slippery. It tends to get thrown around in a moralistic tone, but does it really have anything to do with morality at all? Did Emma Thompson really do anything worse than the millions of others who take long-haul flights each year and don't receive the same criticism?

As the philosopher Judith Shklar [argued](#), hypocrisy is more a like an exposed flank on the battlefield of ideas than a genuinely blameworthy character trait. The charge of hypocrisy is used against [political opponents](#) to generate what she called "psychic annihilation": it can force them to lose faith in their deeply held political beliefs and convictions, without having to offer alternatives.

Criticising someone on the basis of moral principles usually implies you endorse those principles. By mocking Thompson's hypocrisy, however, the Mail succeeded in making her cause appear less worthy, without having to pretend to be particularly virtuous itself.

So when climate activists are accused of hypocrisy, it is less a problem for the hypocrites themselves than a problem for the cause of climate advocacy. Anti-hypocritical discourse can be more pernicious than the hypocrisy it attacks—the sight of our well-meaning but imperfect neighbours in the pillory is often enough to convince us that striving to

better ourselves isn't worth the social risk.

Such arguments descend, in Cambridge professor [David Runciman's words](#), into "second-order hypocrisy," or hypocrisy about how hypocritical we must necessarily be. A puritanical obsession with casting out insincerity can actually undermine public standards. If people become convinced that only saintly true believers pass muster, the rules-based order can start to break down.

Hypocrisy you should be worried about

Is it high time we stopped moralising about hypocrisy completely, then? The story isn't over, because in certain contexts, hypocrisy can take on a more worrying aspect. The next major UN climate summit, known as COP26 and currently scheduled to be held in Glasgow in November, has been leveraged by the UK government for a ready supply of chauvinistic rhetoric, treated as a platform for the country to claim "world leader" status. There is even [speculation](#) that the "Festival of Brexit" originally planned by previous prime minister Theresa May is set to morph into an "eco-jamboree" of climate-themed boosterism for "Global Britain."

The current UK government's eagerness to signal its moral authority on the world stage is, however, at odds with its actual policy. While COP26 president Alok Sharma has been attempting to get other countries to sign up to [phasing out coal power and combustion-powered vehicles](#), at home the government has declined to overrule plans to open a new coal mine for the first time in 30 years.

As it stands, the decision will now be put to a [public inquiry](#), and therefore likely delayed until after COP26. The failure to nix the project went against the [advice](#) of the government's own Climate Change Committee.

Here we see a different face of hypocrisy: hypocrisy as an abuse of power. Making a special case of yourself involves treating similar cases differently, a type of unfairness. But the problem is more than that. There is something distinctly objectionable about using your authority to influence the behaviour of others, while refusing to submit yourself to the same principles.

This is embodied in the old republican idea that we should strive for an ["empire of laws and not of men"](#), where political leaders and private citizens alike should expect to be subject to the same standards.

We can, and should, treat the hypocrisy in a case like Emma Thompson's differently from the hypocrisy of the UK government. Unless politically powerful agents apply the same standards to themselves, attempts to control or influence the behaviour of others must be seen as illegitimate. They are instances of arbitrary power, and therefore oppressive and illiberal.

While the average activist needn't lose sleep about their own hypocrisy, then, the hypocrisy of those with real power—governments, their agencies and representatives—should be a cause for genuine concern. In an ideal world, it is here the tabloids would be focusing their attack.

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