

Grandstanding: The Use and Abuse of Moral Talk | Justin Tosi & Brandon Warmke

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Falling back on the crutch of moral talk as a way of demonstrating your value is a strategy for the weak. Real excellence is harder, but it is more rewarding, and also more honest. — JT & BM

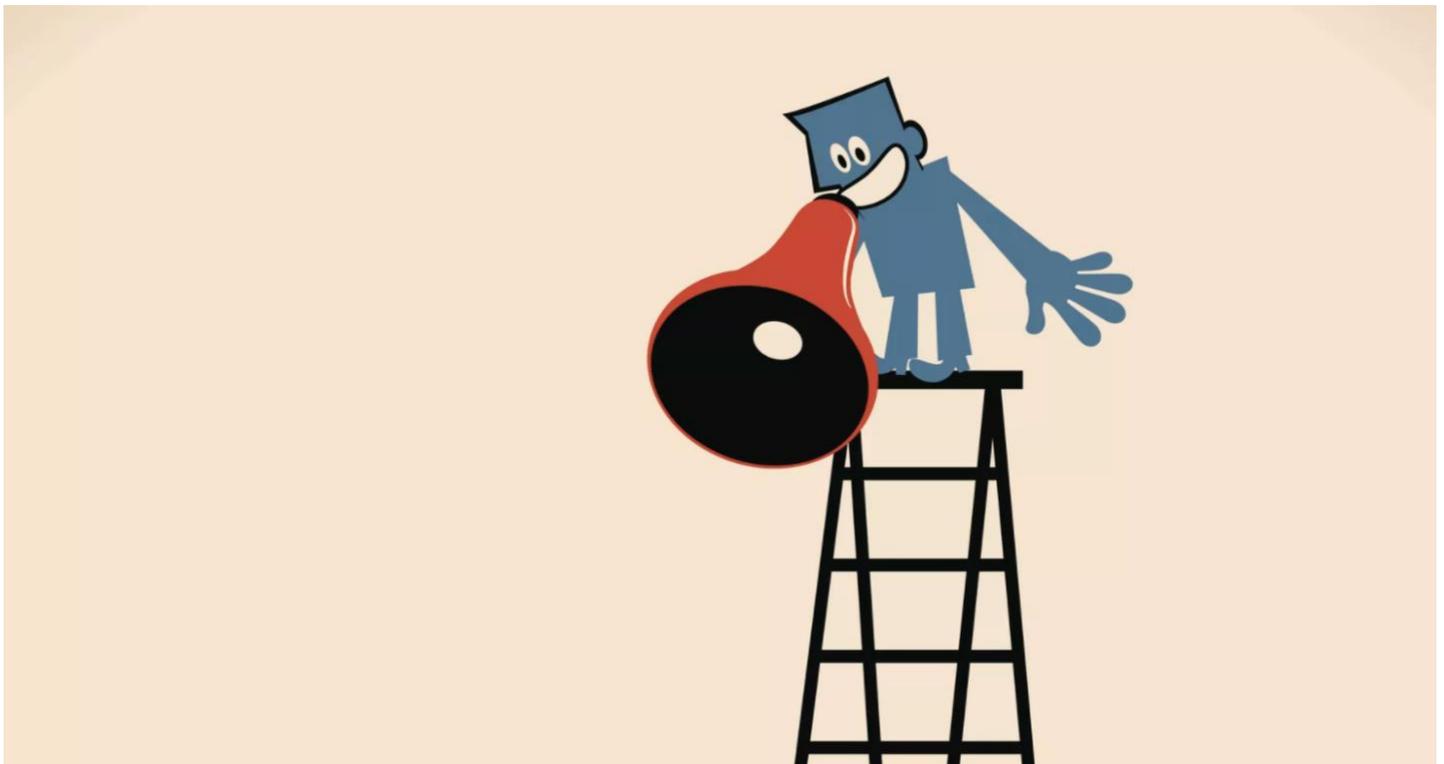
INTRODUCTION

Justin Tosi is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Texas Tech University. He was previously a Junior Faculty Fellow at the Georgetown Institute for the Study of Markets and Ethics in the McDonough School of Business, and a Postdoctoral Research Fellow and Lecturer in the Philosophy Department at the University of Michigan. He works in social, political, legal, and moral philosophy, and especially on state legitimacy, special obligations, and social morality. His work has been published in Philosophy & Public Affairs, Legal Theory, Pacific Philosophical Quarterly, and other outlets. In addition to Grandstanding: The Use and Abuse of Moral Talk, he has coauthored a second book with Brandon Warmke, *Why It's OK to Mind Your Own Business*, that will be published as part of the Routledge series "Why It's OK: The Ethics of How We Live."

Brandon Warmke is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Bowling Green State University. A philosopher working on moral and political issues, he is the author of over twenty academic papers on public discourse, forgiveness, and moral responsibility. Warmke has been interviewed on Big Think among other outlets; his work has been featured in The Atlantic, Scientific American, Vox, The Guardian, and HuffPost.

WHY DO I CARE?

I was first pitched Justin and Brandon's book in November of last year (2020) and took the bait immediately. They published a paper on this subject at the end of 2016, and having read that paper, the book feels like it could have been more economical with its language and still gotten its points across. That said, the very act of turning the manifestation of grandstanding and the arguments against it over and over again in one's head does force one to consider the importance of what could easily be dismissed as a rather insignificant (albeit rather annoying) phenomenon.



The authors suggest that moral grandstanding is a pervasive feature of public moral discourse, and that it is also morally problematic. They go to great lengths over the course of 120 pages to make both of these cases, including how an individual convinced by their arguments can reduce the incidence of grandstanding in his/her life and in the lives and moral talk of others.

One of the more surprising benefits of reading this book is that it forces you to really meditate on what we find so upsetting about grandstanding and how to distinguish it from other types of “moral talk” that are commonly recognizable in ethics & moral philosophy classrooms around the world. After all, it’s integral that society be able to have conversations about morals in public. This is how the civil rights movement advanced from private conversations among friends to the halls of congress.

Justin and Brandon define grandstanding as “the use of moral talk for the purposes of self-promotion.” “To grandstand is to turn your moral talk into a vanity project,” they write. This emphasis on “self-promotion” and the absence (or insufficient presence) of altruistic, non-egoic motivations seems important. In the authors’ own words, their book is about “looking at ourselves squarely and honestly and asking whether we are doing good with our moral talk, or just trying to look good. We will show you that trying to look good with your moral talk is the very thing that prevents you from using it for good.”

Politics arguably presents the ideal theater for narcissism to be expressed: The endless trading of insults by politicians; the anxiety-laden, personalized, and alarmist mobilization messages propagated by campaigns; the demands that one group’s needs are more important or legitimate than others’; and the intrinsic rewards people obtain from watching the champions of their cause degrade their opponents put narcissism on display and activates it in the public like few other vehicles can. — Peter Hatemi & Zoltán Fazekas

Ultimately, today’s conversation is meant to function as a template for how to philosophize about ethics in the public square. I don’t want this conversation to devolve into a spectacle of venting my own frustrations at “SJW’s” & “virtue signaling.” I want to use this platform to move the conversation forward, which is what Justin and Brandon have attempted to do with their book.

what are other words for grandstanding?



self-centered, having a swelled head, inward-looking, on an ego trip, self-interested



DEFINITIONS

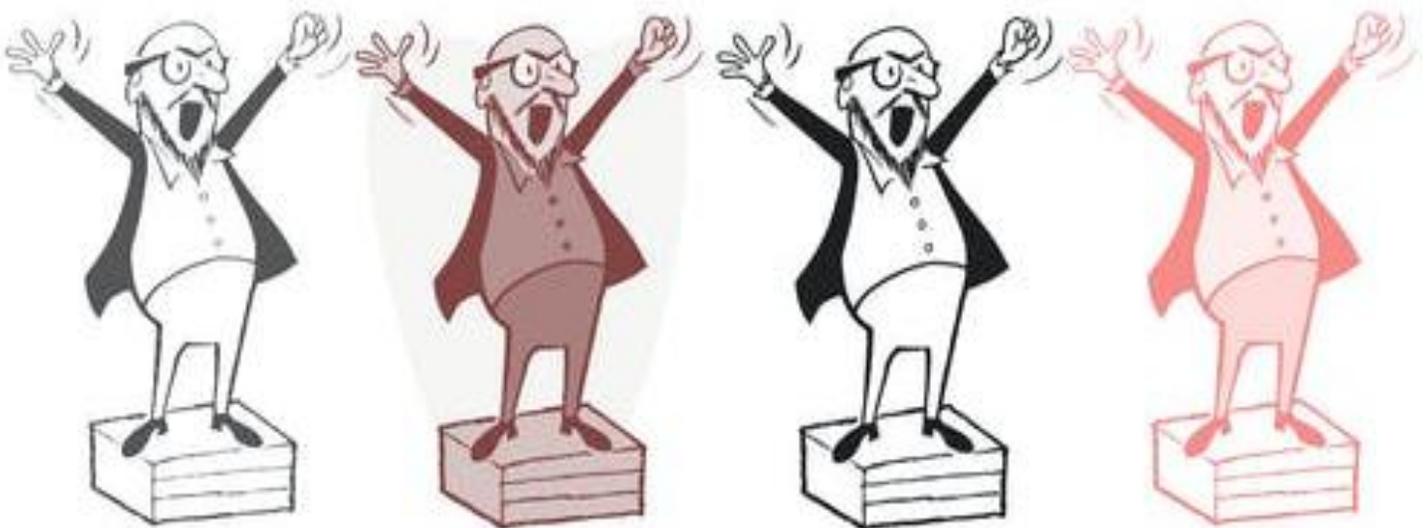
Grandstanding is the use of moral talk for self-promotion. To grandstand is to turn your moral talk into a vanity project. Grandstanders are moral show boaters trying to impress others with their moral credentials. They tend to trump up moral charges, pile on in cases of public shaming, announce that anyone who disagrees with them is obviously wrong, or exaggerate emotional displays.

The first recorded use of the term 'grandstand' in the sense of "showing off" is from a book on American baseball published in 1888. The term was used to describe baseball players who liked to show off after making an impressive play: "It's the little things of this sort which makes [sic] 'the grand stand player.' They make impossible catches, and when they get the ball, they roll all over the field." The idea must have been that such players were playing to the cheap seats—to those in the grandstands.

Grandstanding involves a desire (of a certain strength) that others think well of you for your moral qualities, and a contribution to public discourse designed to satisfy that desire. You don't have to know you're grandstanding in order to grandstand, nor do you have to say anything false.

It is difficult to know when people are grandstanding, just as it is difficult to know when someone is lying. No one can read minds and be certain of others' motivations. This makes it difficult to distinguish between grandstanding (motivated by egoistic concerns) and moral talk motivated by altruism or duty.

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with knowledge. Epistemologists study the nature of knowledge, justification, the rationality of belief, and various related issues. Epistemology is considered one of the four main branches of philosophy, along with ethics, logic, and metaphysics. Debates in epistemology are generally clustered around four core areas: (1) The philosophical analysis of the nature of knowledge and the conditions required for a belief to constitute knowledge, such as truth and justification. (2) Potential sources of knowledge and justified belief, such as perception, reason, memory, and testimony. (3) The structure of a body of knowledge or justified belief, including whether all justified beliefs must be derived from justified

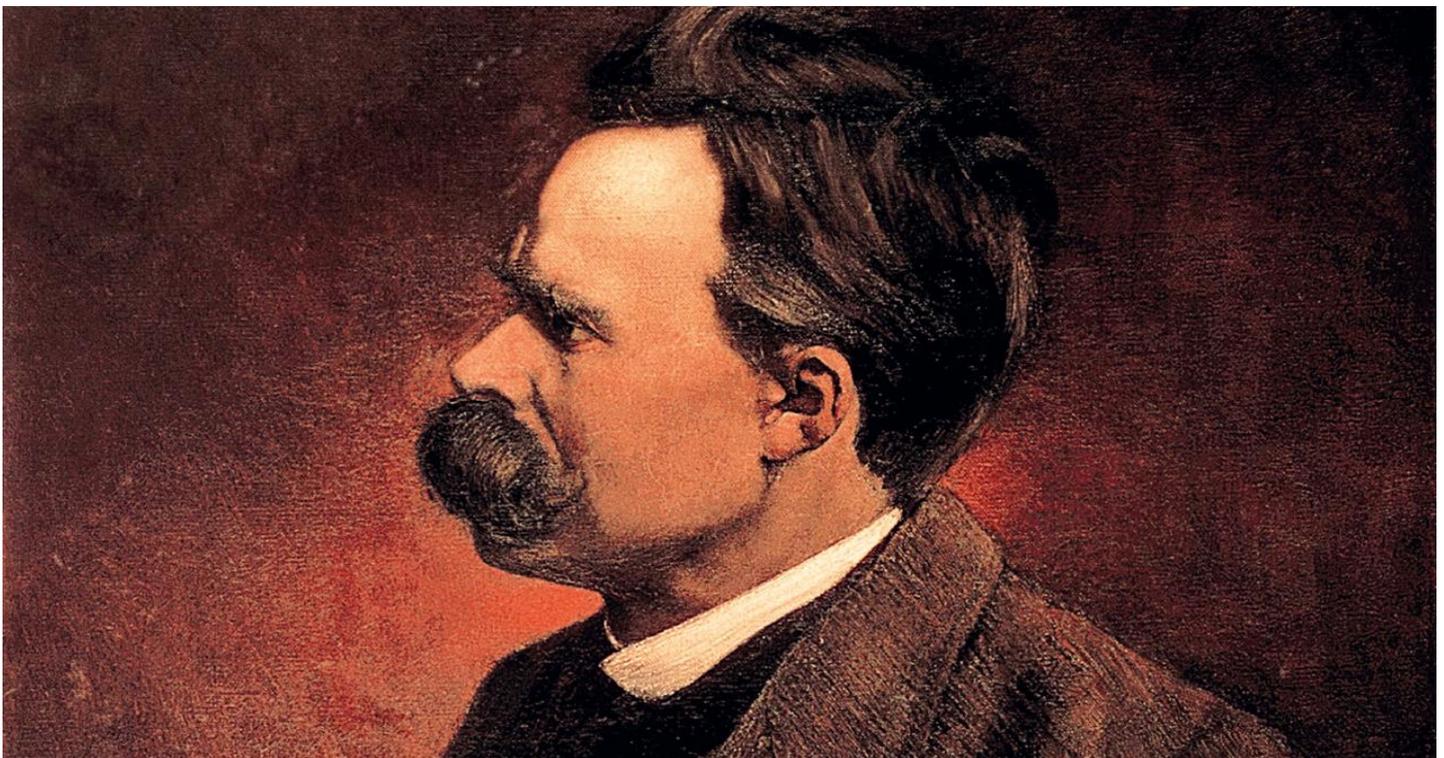


foundational beliefs or whether justification requires only a coherent set of beliefs. (4) Problems regarding philosophical skepticism, including whether it poses a threat to our ordinary knowledge claims and whether it is possible to refute skeptical epistemic arguments. In these debates and others, epistemology aims to answer questions such as "What do we know?" "What does it mean to say that we know something?" "What makes justified beliefs justified?" And, "How do we know that we know?"

Ethics & Moral Philosophy are usually broken down into three main areas of study: (1) *Metaethics*, examines the nature of moral claims and arguments. This partly involves attempting to determine if moral claims have clear essential meanings (i.e., they avoid vagueness and ambiguity). But it also attempts to answer questions such as: "Are moral claims expressions of individual emotions?" "Are moral claims social inventions?" "Are moral claims divine commands?" "Can one justify moral claims?" "How does one justify them?" (2) *Normative ethics* examines moral standards that attempt to define right and wrong conduct. Historically, this has involved examining good and bad habits, duties, or an action's consequences. In addition, historically, normative ethics has focused on the prospect of a single moral standard defining right and wrong conduct; but it has become more common for philosophers to propose a moral pluralism with multiple moral standards. (3) *Applied ethics* examines specific moral issues. For example, one is doing applied ethics when one addresses the morality of abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, environmental concerns, or homosexuality. By using the conceptual tools of metaethics and normative ethics, discussions in applied ethics try to resolve these issues.

NIETZSCHE ON GRANDSTANDING (excerpt)

For readers hoping for a **harsher condemnation of grandstanding**, we have just the thing. The 19th Century German philosopher, **Friedrich Nietzsche**, in developing one of the most interesting critiques of conventional morality in the history of philosophy, **argued that modern moral practices prevent human beings from reaching their full potential**. His reasons for thinking this apply in interesting ways to the phenomenon of grandstanding. We'll explain some of Nietzsche's ideas here to develop another take on the vices involved in grandstanding. **While the analysis we offer is**



inspired by Nietzsche's work, we are not trying to figure out what Nietzsche himself would say about grandstanding. We also disagree with Nietzsche about whether conventional morality is a good thing. But we think his diagnosis of the nastiness of some moral practice is accurate in important ways, and we'll draw on those insights here to evaluate grandstanding. apply in interesting ways to the phenomenon of grandstanding.

Let's start with Nietzsche's idea of the will to power. Nietzsche claims that all animals, including human beings, are instinctively motivated to maximize their feelings of power—that is, the feeling you get when you overcome resistance to realizing your goals. That resistance could come from an opponent, material circumstances, or any other practical difficulty. We despise this resistance, because it is frustrating, but we also need it to feel the sense of accomplishment we get upon overcoming it.

Nietzsche also holds a view of the good life for human beings that present-day moral philosophers call perfectionism. According to perfectionists, a good life is one of excellence in pursuing some objective set of goods—knowledge, deep relationships with others, the creation of works of great aesthetic value, and so on. There is no consensus about what items are on Nietzsche's list of worthwhile excellences, as his remarks on this point are characteristically cryptic, but he clearly emphasizes creativity, and frequently stresses the importance of a person "creating" herself. We need not settle this issue, though, because we are not interested primarily in Nietzsche's own view. The point is that if a person is living well, she will seek to overcome resistance as she pursues certain goals. Not just any goal will do, though. Some pursuits are unworthy of a person's time and energy. The fewer objective goods a person has in her life, the less well her life is going, even if she is satisfied with the things she pursues.

Nietzsche thinks we are not all equally good at pursuing excellence in life. Some people achieve great satisfaction in maximizing their feeling of power in attaining their goals, while others are frustrated—and sometimes greatly so. This is where the trouble starts. Rather than simply admit defeat, those who fail to exercise their will to power by achieving things that are actually worthwhile



move the goalposts. They attempt to redefine what it is to live well and denigrate others' success. The result is what Nietzsche calls a "slave revolt" in morals. By that he means that the unsuccessful tell themselves that something about them is valuable as consolation for their failures. Consequently, Nietzsche thinks true human excellence is disvalued and denigrated. When a culture's sense of what is valuable shifts in response to these efforts, this leads to what Nietzsche called a "revaluation" of values. What had previously been seen as a mark of human failure becomes moral goodness. And what had previously been seen as human excellence becomes moral evil. What is crucial for our purposes is that the slave revolt involves people using morality itself to satisfy their will to power. Nietzsche thinks that our own culture has already undergone such a revolt. Thus, our dominant moral beliefs are badly mistaken, as they are designed to shame the strong and valorize the weak.



On this overall, substantive evaluation of the state of common morality, we strongly disagree with Nietzsche. We think that some of the changes he decries—particularly the widespread recognition of all human beings as moral equals—are positive developments, and even great cultural achievements. In fact, there is much we have said in this book that Nietzsche would have rejected. But even though we disagree with Nietzsche about what specific values are good, we think he offers an important insight about morality in general: people frequently use morality to feel powerful, and even to exert their will over others. Indeed, this insight can help us think about grandstanding in a new light.

As we have been at pains to show throughout this book, people often use morality—and especially moral talk—for egoistic, self-serving ends. We said at the start of the book that moral talk is not magic, but it can be a kind of trick. People use moral talk in underhanded ways to promote their own interests, just as Nietzsche would predict. We also think he is right about why people use morality this way—to raise their status, to gain some sense of satisfaction that they are achieving something in the world. The lesson we draw is not that commonsense morality is deeply mistaken, but that moral talk is often a sheepskin worn by weak or desperate wolves. They cannot get what they want through a direct act of strength—by actually achieving excellence to the degree they desire—so they find another way. They instead tell themselves that being seen as a good person is a worthwhile achievement, and then put their self-enhanced moral qualities on display. It is a cunning gambit, in a way, but it is also underhanded, and often cruel. It might make them feel powerful, but their achievement is empty. Impressing others through grandstanding is not the same as actually achieving excellence.

But why isn't getting recognition from others for having good moral qualities a goal worth pursuing? We mentioned earlier that our own empirical studies suggest that grandstanders pursue two different kinds of status: prestige, or the status that comes from people thinking well of you for your knowledge, skills, or success; and dominance, the status you get by instilling fear in others through intimidation, coercion, or displays of brute force.

Let's first consider grandstanding to dominate others. Dominance grandstanding involves raising oneself up by tearing other people down. These grandstanders try to seize social power by treating morality as a weapon. That this comes so close to being exactly what Nietzsche describes as a slave revolt in morals should make clear why it cannot be part of a worthy goal. Just as the original "slave revolt" sought to use morality as a tool to dominate others, grandstanders use morality—and especially moral talk—to seize the high ground. Dominance grandstanding is a way of sacrificing another person, or even persons, in an attempt to exercise one's will to power.

Now for grandstanding to gain prestige. This type of grandstanding often involves reassuring the in-group that you are like them, and therefore of value. A Nietzschean will wonder of these grandstanders: isn't there some other way of demonstrating your value? The rote recitation of moral terms that people approve of seems like a cheap substitute for a more worthwhile display of what makes you an interesting person worth listening to or associating with. The same is true for more ambitious forms of prestige grandstanding. If you want to demonstrate not just that you belong, but that you are fit for a prominent role in a group, falling back on the crutch of moral talk as a way of demonstrating your value is a strategy for the weak. Real excellence is harder, but it is more rewarding, and also more honest.

In this section we argued that, from a Nietzschean perspective, grandstanding is not something an excellent person would do. Excellent people devote their time and energy to worthwhile goals—goals that are good for human beings to attain. We need not agree with Nietzsche about what those goals are. We might, for example, think that pleasure, knowledge, achievement, moral virtue, and relationships are central worthwhile human goals. Whatever they happen to be, we think that Nietzsche was right about at least this much: an excellent person will not use morality, including moral talk, as a tool to satisfy her will to power. An excellent person, therefore, would not grandstand. Excellent people have no interest in petty attempts to gain status through strategic uses of moral talk.



QUESTIONS

Philosophizing — You guys “think for a living” about important social issues. **Q:** What’s that like? **Q:** What’s it like being professors in modern philosophy departments and teaching students how to think about ethics, politics, knowledge, etc.? **Q:** Has this cancel culture or hyper sensitivity around words impacted philosophy departments in any way?



Origins — **Q:** How did you guys get your idea for this book? **Q:** Was eating nachos integral in that?

Grandstanding: a Definition — **Q:** How do you define grandstanding? **Q:** What is it that bothers us so much about people who grandstand? **Q:** Is it the hypocrisy that we can’t stand? **Q:** How does this relate to the idea of virtue signaling?

Identifying Grandstanding — **Q:** Can we know if someone is moral grandstanding? **Q:** Can you identify it in the wild? **Q:** What are some examples? **Q:** How important is context? **Q:** How important is it that we already know the person doing the grandstanding?

Characteristic Phenomena of Grandstanding — According to the authors, “grandstanding characteristically manifests itself in several phenomena: (1) piling on; (2) ramping up; (3) trumping up; (4) excessive emotional displays or reports; and (5) claims of self-evidence.” **Q:** What are some of the ways in which grandstanding manifests itself? *** MORAL ARMS RACE

Grandstanding vs. Shaming — There are moments when shaming someone can take the form of grandstanding if the focus of ridicule is a person or thing deemed to be morally reprehensible or worthy of condemnation. However, often times shaming feels to be something altogether separate. **Q:** How do these two dimensions interact? **Q:** Is this an example of grandstanding to dominate others, as opposed to grandstanding to gain prestige?

Will to Power — **Q:** Can grandstanding be a way for the powerless to exercise power?

Conservatives vs. Progressives — In the early 2000’s, grandstanding seemed to be a quality associated with members of the right-wing, who fell over one another in an effort to showcase their “love for their country,” and their “support for the troops.” Today, the opposite seems true. I haven’t been able to identify a reason for this alternation. Republicans had one of their own in office in the early 2000’s, while Democrats are in the minority this time around. **Q:** What explains why the Republicans did it then and the Democrats now? **Q:** Do people who are more extremely aligned with either side of the political spectrum grandstand more? **Q:** Can a moderate grandstand?

The Ethics of Grandstanding — **Q:** Is moral grandstanding a universally bad thing or are there circumstances in which it’s morally justifiable to grandstand?

Outrage Exhaustion/Fatigue — **Q:** Does grandstanding lead to excessive displays of outrage which ultimately turn more moderate people who might support the grandstander’s cause away?

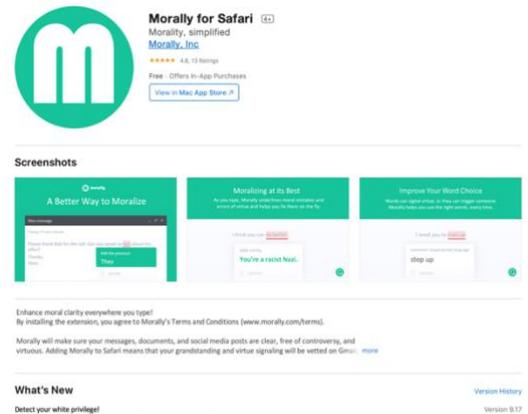
Cynicism About Moral Discourse — **Q:** Does grandstanding promote an unhealthy cynicism about moral discourse? **Q:** Why is moral discourse important anyway? *** Need for epistemic thinking

Group Polarization — **Q:** Does grandstanding tend to polarize people and groups more?

Tools for Mitigating Grandstanding — **Q:** How can a person monitor his/her own grandstanding? (Why am I sharing this?)

Civility — **Q:** What is the connection between grandstanding and incivility? **Q:** Is it important to be civil or is that overrated?

Social Media — **Q:** Has grandstanding always existed as we experience it today? Jonathan Haidt and Tobias Rose-Stockwell wrote in “[The Dark Psychology of Social Networks](#)” that “the problem may not be connectivity itself but rather the way social media turns so much communication into a public performance. We often think of communication as a two-way street. Intimacy builds as partners take turns, laugh at each other’s jokes, and make reciprocal disclosures. What happens, though, when grandstands are erected along both sides of that street and then filled with friends, acquaintances, rivals, and strangers, all passing judgment and offering commentary? **Q:** Has grandstanding qualitatively changed in the age of social media? **Q:** If grandstanding is about eliciting the moral approval of others, does the fact that people can express their approval by liking, retweeting, and commenting on what we say make things worse?



Viral Moralizing — A [2017 study by William J. Brady and other researchers at NYU](#) measured the reach of half a million tweets and found that each moral or emotional word used in a tweet increased its virality by 20 percent, on average. Another 2017 study, by the Pew Research Center, showed that [posts exhibiting “indignant disagreement” received nearly twice as much engagement](#)—including likes and shares—as other types of content on Facebook. **Q:** Have there been any studies that look for increased incidence of moral words or phrases on the Internet? Seems like an opportunity for natural language processing.

Intentions — **Q:** Do intention matter?

Will to Power — **Q:** If “moral talk is often a sheepskin worn by weak or desperate wolves,” then why do people in positions of power use it as well? It seems they use it to abolve themselves of their guilt or to divert attention away from the ills they are responsible for.

QUOTES

They hate you. Leftists don’t merely disagree with you. They don’t merely feel you are misguided. They don’t think you are merely wrong. They hate you. They want you enslaved and obedient, if not dead. Once you get that, everything that is happening now will make sense. And you will understand what you need to be ready to do. You are normal, and therefore a heretic. You refuse to bow to their idols, to subscribe to their twisted catechisms, to praise their false gods. This is unforgivable. You must burn. — Kurt Schlichter

Grandstanding does significant damage to politics in a democracy. When people treat political discourse as a forum for self-aggrandizement, their interests frequently conflict with the goal of resolving social problems. Instead of compromising with the out-group, grandstanders attack its members, and describe their beliefs and policy proposals in bad faith. For in-group members who would be willing to compromise, grandstanders question their integrity and encourage others to shun them. Rather than promote dull policies that make a difference in complicated ways, grandstanders prefer the big splash that accomplishes little but allows them to claim credit for their effort. And for grandstanders who enjoy their current roles a bit too much, there is incentive not to undercut their reason for being by solving social problems. Whether these bad effects (and the other problems we’ve identified) are enough to outweigh the good that political grandstanding can do is at least partly an empirical question to which we do not have the answer. We suspect that on balance, grandstanding does more harm than good to our political process and its institutions. At any rate, we should not cheer whole-heartedly when politics becomes a morality pageant. — JM