

Review Essay: Conversation's Seedy Underbelly

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Abstract. I provide an opinionated discussion of two recent volumes on the structure, ethics, and politics of bad conversations. In *Just Words* (2019), Mary Kate McGowan argues that despite our best intentions, we sometimes inadvertently bring oppressive norms to bear on our interactions. In *Grandstanding* (2020), Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke argue that the human desire to cut a good moral figure before others systematically distorts moral discourse. Though their authors have different political outlooks, both books converge on a similar theme: conversational bad behavior isn't always just morally obnoxious. It can be silencing.

Keywords. conversation; oppressive speech; conversational norms; silencing; moral discourse; showing off; impression management

Mary Kate McGowan, *Just Words: On Speech and Hidden Harm*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 209 pages. ISBN: 9780192897398 (pbk.). Hardback/Paperback \$27.95.

Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke, *Grandstanding: the Use and Abuse of Moral Talk*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 226 pages. ISBN: 9780190900151. Hardback \$19.95.

What's wrong with our society?¹ Whatever it is, Justin Tosi, Brandon Warmke, and Mary Kate McGowan all agree on one thing. Conversation often makes everything worse.

Not in principle, of course. They don't think something is wrong with conversation *per se*. Nor is theirs the facile point that words—much like sticks and stones—can hurt us. Rather, these authors investigate the ways in which the ordinary warps and wefts of human conversation weave much darker forces into the fabric of our society. McGowan's *Just Words: On Speech and Hidden Harm* and Tosi and Warmke's *Grandstanding: the Use and Abuse of Moral Talk* are both landmark achievements, representing distinct strands within contemporary “practical” or “sociopolitical” philosophy of language. Although I can't hope to do them justice, I'll say something brief about each book. I'll conclude by discussing a theme on which both books, surprisingly, converge: that others' bad conversational behavior can systematically silence us.

¹ This review has benefitted from helpful discussion with students, friends, and colleagues. In particular, I'd like to thank the participants of my Fall 2022 seminar at MIT for our discussion of *Just Words* and the members of MIT's Spring 2023 SHAPE reading group for our discussion of *Grandstanding*.

1. On *Just Words*

McGowan's *Just Words* appeared in print during the halcyon pre-pandemic days of 2019. But it synthesizes the vision that McGowan had already been developing across a smorgasbord of papers, the earliest of which appeared in 2003 (p. 188-189).

McGowan identifies as a feminist philosopher of language. Her starting place, therefore, is the standard feminist one: that women are oppressed on the basis of their gender, that people of color are oppressed on the basis of their race, and so forth (p. 103); that this oppression is pervasive, systematic, structural, and complex (p. 101-103); and that I can oppress you even if I neither intend to oppress you nor harbor ill will for you (p. 121-122). The book's twin climaxes— that pornography silences women (Chapter 6) and that under American free speech law, hate speech is still legally actionable (Chapter 7)—unapologetically rely on these assumptions. The title of the book is itself a nod to *Only Words*, Catherine MacKinnon's fierce and fiercely controversial indictment of American First Amendment law (p. 4fn1).

If you're skeptical of McGowan's feminist starting point, you won't find much to like in the latter half of the book (Chapters 4-7). But the first half of the book (Chapters 1-3) is unadulterated philosophy of language. There, she elaborates upon David Lewis' famous metaphor: that conversation is a game, which we can profitably model with a scoreboard.² You can read these sections without taking on board any of McGowan's sociopolitical assumptions.

That's not say they're not opinionated. In analyzing conversation, McGowan gives pride of place not to interlocutors' mental states (shared or otherwise) but rather to the totality of facts that determine the "proper development of the conversation" (p. 45). McGowan doesn't banish psychology from her theorizing. But for her, the ebb and flow of conversation is ultimately the ebb and flow of permissibility facts, not the ebb and flow of shared psychological states. In this respect, McGowan sides with Austin and Searle against Grice and his intellectual descendent Stalnaker (p. 44-45). Needless to say, she claims Lewis for her team (p. 44-45).³

When we layer McGowan's philosophy of language over her feminism, we arrive at the book's most important and most provocative thesis: that speech itself can enact oppressive norms.

Read too broadly, the claim seems obvious. If I declare to my students, "In this class, we will only refer to women as 'bimbos,'" I've imposed a rule in my classroom; that rule is oppressive; and so I've enacted an oppressive norm. What more is there to say?

² David Lewis, "Scorekeeping in a Language Game," *Philosophical Papers Volume 1* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 233-249.

³ McGowan says that the "Lewisian conception of conversational score" and the Gricean conception of conversation are "complementary or overlapping" frameworks. (p. 44). But this Gricean doubts that McGowan's opponents will be quite as sanguine. Among other things, a typical Gricean would be suspicious of McGowan's heavy-duty normative machinery.

Read too narrowly, the claim seems ridiculous. If I say to my classroom, “This next problem is so easy that even Black students can understand it!” then surely I’ve expressed something racist. In expressing something racist, I’ve given vent to pernicious white supremacist ideology. In giving vent to this ideology, I’ve causally contributed to its continued existence. In doing all of this, I’ve inflicted harm upon my students, most especially my Black students. All the same, you might think, there’s no interesting sense in which I’ve *enacted* a racist norm. Racist ideology and its attendant norms were here before I said what I said. They will continue to exist, whether I say things like this or not.

And yet it is this latter, narrow construal that McGowan aims to vindicate. The account’s main engine is her distinction between what she calls *s-norms* and *g-norms* (p. 85). The distinction is sometimes fuzzy. Clearly *g-norms*, or “global norms,” play the functional roles associated with regular old social norms (p. 85). And generally, because social norms arise from complex societal-wide patterns, we lack the power to unilaterally change them (p. 25).

S-norms, or “token-activity-specific” norms, are the murkier phenomenon but the one on which the entire account hinges (p. 85). For the purposes of *Just Words*, *s-norms* are something like conversational or interactional norms. We can and do enact them directly, via what McGowan calls “standard exercitives” (p. 20-21) and indirectly, via what McGowan calls “covert exercitives” (p. 34-37). Either way, they’re usually easy come, easy go (p. 118-120). I tell my colleague Alex, “You shall hereby refer to me as the Dark Lord of Philosophy.” Boom, *s-norm* in place. Alex says, laughing at me, “No way, Sam.” Boom, *s-norm* gone.

Paradigmatically oppressive speech usually doesn’t take the form of standard exercitives. These days, almost no one is running around, literally declaring, “I hereby deem women second class citizens!” (They may, of course, insist that we *should* be.) Oppressive speech “covertly” (meaning, roughly, indirectly) enacts *s-norms* (p. 90-91). This isn’t as esoteric as it sounds. Tamar pats me on the arm. I don’t recoil from her touch or verbally protest. In doing so, she’s changed the norms of interaction. It’s now okay for us to fleetingly and Platonically touch each other. (Dodgy characters on the Internet call this “breaking the touch barrier.”) In touching my arm, Tamar has enacted an *s-norm*.

If I declare in front of my class, “This next problem is so easy even Black students can solve it!” I indirectly enact a whole suite of nasty *s-norms*. Within the interaction, it is now permissible not just to treat Black students as less capable than my other students but to also treat Black students as second class *simpliciter* (p. 111-112). The view is most persuasive when McGowan shifts into a metaphorical register. The racist or misogynist speaker brings an entire oppressive social structure to bear on the interaction (p. 118). The enactment of oppressive *s-norms* is the “activation of...oppressive power” in the context (p.114).⁴ It “is akin...to [hanging] a sign reading: ‘It is hereby permissible, in this local environment and at this time, to treat women as second class citizens’ ” (p. 112).

⁴ Here McGowan is approvingly quoting the paraphrase in Robert Mark Simpson, “Un-ringing the Bell: McGowan on Oppressive Speech and the Asymmetric Pliability of Conversation,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 91.3 (2013): 563.

If you want to find *terra firma* for the argument that sexist or racist hate speech is legally actionable, you can see why this last analogy is so attractive. Literally hanging a discriminatory sign like “Whites Only” or “Black students are second class here” is legally actionable (p. 169). So if in exclaiming, “This next problem is so easy that even Black students can understand it!” I would have, in effect, hung up a sign saying, “Black students are second class here,” then my exclamation ought to be legally actionable too. This strategy sidesteps the messiness of harm-based justification for hate speech regulation (p. 162). If you were to argue that sexist or racist hate speech is (or should be) legally actionable because it is harmful, you’d need to tally up the harms of the speech, weigh them against the harms of regulation, and hope the moral math comes out on your side. The whole thing would be an imprecise and contentious affair.

In condemning oppressive speech not for what it *causes* but for what it *is*, McGowan continues a nearly thirty-year project in feminist philosophy of language. But McGowan’s approach is a major and salubrious breakthrough. In the literature’s original pioneering article, Rae Langton attributed actual speech acts to the heterosexual pornographer.⁵ The pornographer downranks women and legitimates sexual violence against us via the same mechanism that the lawmaker in Gilead uses, when he declares, “Women are hereafter second-class citizens.” The thesis faces a whole slew of problems: the pornographer doesn’t necessarily intend to engage in these acts (p. 131); neither the pornographer nor his audience interpret the pornographer as engaging in them (p. 132); and anyway, the pornographer, unlike the Gilead lawmakers, seems to lack authority to unilaterally downrank women (p. 133).

McGowan’s analysis considerably weakens these challenges. *I* am not the one directly downranking my Black students. Rather, I am responsible for bringing a prior social system to bear on the interaction. It is *that* social system that downranks my Black students, because it downranks all Black persons, and it has authority in the same sense that social structures and social norms have authority (p. 113). Moreover, though I may need to intend to issue some speech act *G* in order to actually issue *G*, I needn’t intend to enact a norm in order to actually enact it. Tamar, in touching my arm, *did* change the norms for our interaction, but she need only have intended to touch my arm.

Still, there is room to worry. For, at a higher level of analysis, the authority problem may rear its head again. When I make my racist remark, it is as if I said, “I hereby declare that for the purposes of our interactions together, white supremacist rules are in effect.” As the teacher in the classroom, I may have the authority to do this. But what about the misogynist men engaged in “locker room talk” in the break room (p. 110)? Is it plausible that they *really do* alter the interactional policy for the entire workplace (p. 112)? Even if the CEO is an outspoken feminist, or they are conversing in a room covered in social justice-themed poster? And though McGowan says that I can bring into effect an s-norm even if no one recognizes that I have done so (p. 141), this just raises the question: in what sense is this a true *interactional* norm? If no one knows they are there, and they guide no one’s actions, are these fleeting, local norms *really* hovering above us?

⁵ Rae Langton, “Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22.4 (1993): 306-307.

2. On Grandstanding

Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke's *Grandstanding: the Use and Abuse of Moral Talk*, which appeared in 2020, is an exemplar of an increasingly common breed: a philosophically sophisticated, splashy trade book, printed by an academic press. (The book reviews tell the story all by themselves: both the *Notre Dame Philosophical Review* and the likes of the *New York Times Magazine*, *NPR*, and *National Review* have covered it.) Like *Just Words*, this book elaborates ideas that first appeared in article form—in this case, Tosi and Warmke's 2016 article "Grandstanding" in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*.⁶

The book has two goals, pursued in parallel: to analyze the nature and moral status of *grandstanding*, their bespoke name for what we more often call virtue signaling (p. 37); and to argue that grandstanding is a problem endemic to all political factions (p. 35). The social ills that Tosi and Warmke lay at the feet of grandstanding are many: political polarization (p. 68-72), moderates' increasing indifference to politics (p. 77-82, 88-92); and policy-makers' inappropriate resistance to compromise (p. 143-153). Grandstanding also takes the blame for paradigmatically online misbehavior: deluges of hate-filled emails (p. 2); viral public shaming campaigns (p. 46, 102); and the oft-absurdist race to "problematize" what just really is not problematic (p. 55).

As with McGowan's work, it is possible to pry apart these two distinct projects. You can agree that grandstanding is both philosophically interesting and wrongful, while rejecting the claim that grandstanding is one of the primary villains of the culture wars. And, indeed, it may be crucial to do this. For though neither Tosi nor Warmke identify as philosophers of language, the book's empirically infused study of conversational dynamics is its most intriguing and rewarding contribution (Chapter 3). If you're a philosopher who studies conversation, then *whatever* your political persuasion, you'll find much to like in Tosi and Warmke's analysis of piling on (p. 44-50), ramping up (p. 51-54), trumping up (p. 54-57), displays of emotional conviction (p. 57-62), and interpersonal, conversation-ending dismissiveness (p. 62-64). The chapter is potentially agenda-setting: there's vastly more to investigate about the nature and structure of these conversational dynamics.

In slogan form, grandstanding is "the use of moral talk for self-promotion" (p. 6). More precisely, I grandstand just in case I say something "in public moral discourse" in order to satisfy my desire "to impress others with [my] moral qualities" (p. 15). Grandstanding is symptomatic of a very basic feature of human interaction. Whenever I do anything in front of you, you gain information—however flimsy and uninteresting—about me. Even in the simplest case, when I truthfully and sincerely assert that *p*, you will learn two things: one about the world, *p*, and one about me, that I believe that *p*.

Following empirical psychology, Tosi and Warmke postulate that we aren't merely *aware* that when we act, others gain information about us (p. 25). Our desire that others see us in a certain light—as certain kinds of people, with certain kinds of inner lives and values—directly

⁶ Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke, "Moral Grandstanding," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 44.3 (2016): 197-217.

conditions *how* we act.⁷ As you might expect, we want others to think well of us. So whenever you and I are talking, we each have at least two goals: the immediate shared goal that has occasioned the conversation and to which our speech acts directly contribute (learning about sharks, entertaining each other, debating departmental policy) and a more shadowy goal, left implicit but tacitly understood, that we “project a positive image of ourselves” and “control the impressions others form of us” (p. 25).

Tosi and Warmke are quite clear that it is the desire for favorable impression management alone that turns innocuous moral talk into grandstanding. I can grandstand even if my words aren't otherwise cruel or abusive. Grandstanders needn't aim high. Even if I only want you to think I'm morally decent, I'm a grandstander (p. 15). Even if I condemn sexual harassment on twitter *both* because I think it's the right thing to do *and* because I want my colleagues to realize that I oppose sexual harassment and so think favorably of me, I'm a grandstander (p. 19).⁸ Even if I know that I really *am* just as good as I want you to think that I am, I'm a grandstander (p. 30). This is harsh stuff.

So why is the grandstanding definition so capacious? Couldn't Tosi and Warmke restrict the “grandstander” epithet to those who act *only* out of a desire to win esteem? Or to those who speak in order to dominate others (p. 16-17)? The book is, after all, preoccupied with “nasty, abusive, selfish” talk that desecrates “sacred words” like “justice, dignity, rights, equality, or honor, tradition, faith family” (p. 5). But just in aiming for you to have a favorable impression of my moral character, I needn't speak abusively. It is the would-be dominator who is paradigmatically abusive. On the other hand, if acting out of a desire to “manage impressions” is so morally problematic, why restrict discussion to *moral* impression management? Is moral grandstanding joint cuttingly different from fandom grandstanding, scientific grandstanding, or philosophical grandstanding?

This question becomes most urgent in the latter half of the book (Chapters 4-6), when Tosi and Warmke morally assess grandstanding. Spoiler alert: whatever your moral persuasion, grandstanding turns out to be bad and wrong. The consequentialist should condemn it, because it tends to have bad consequence (Chapter 4). The deontologist should condemn it, because the grandstander fails to respect the target of her speech (Chapter 6). Unsurprisingly, it isn't virtuous to grandstand (Chapter 7). Even Nietzsche wouldn't like it, since the grandstander aims to win prestige not through real excellence but through a “cheap substitute” (p. 135). But with a few exceptions, these moral critiques have an unstable relationship with Tosi and Warmke's

⁷ Though now a widespread assumption in empirical psychological, it was mid-century sociologist Erving Goffman (*The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor, 1959)) who first argued that impression management pervasively structures everyday interaction.

⁸ To be precise, Tosi and Warmke say that I grandstand only if my desire for moral recognition is sufficiently strong. And my desire for moral recognition is sufficiently strong just in case, if I were “to discover that [my] audience wasn't impressed with [my] moral qualities because of what [I] said, [I'd] be disappointed” (p. 19). Still, it's a low bar. If I found out that people didn't esteem me for tweeting out against sexual harassment, I'd be disappointed. But I'd be disappointed, in part, because I think that my colleagues *should* esteem anyone who speak out against sexual harassment.

analysis of grandstanding itself. Often it is not grandstanding *per se* that bears the morally objectionable properties but only a proper subset.

Take Tosi and Warmke's otherwise illuminating discussion of ramping up and polarization (p. 51-53, 68-72). Imagine a philosophy department in which the faculty are debating how high to set the graduate student travel funds in the next budget (p. 72). Each professor wants to display greater concern for students than the last. She thinks that in doing so, she will prove that she has more refined and intense moral sensibilities than her colleagues. So what happens? The first speaker proposes, "The funds should be set at \$500 per annum." The next speaker says, "How could you think that? It must be \$650 per annum!" And then the next speaker proposed that the funds should be set at \$800. Now an out-and-out bidding war is underway. Eventually, the entire faculty endorses a number so high that it's just silly—and *definitely* too high to be approved.⁹

But notice this kind of absurdist spiraling gets going *only* if the faculty member's desire for esteem swamps her desire to speak truly and honestly. For it is only under those conditions that what each faculty member says becomes completely untethered from what each faculty member reasonably thinks. Similarly, in their deontology-themed chapter, Tosi and Warmke propose that grandstanding-fueled blaming is wrongful, in part, because it is so risky (98-104). Since the grandstander isn't sufficiently concerned with blaming someone correctly and proportionally, the grandstander risks blaming the innocent and subjecting the blameworthy to excessive castigation. But again, they're just assuming that our desire to blame rightly does not (or even cannot) hold our desire to win moral esteem in check (p. 100).

To all of these quibbles, Tosi and Warmke have a rejoinder. Underneath our desire for moral esteem lurks an even more basic and even more shadowy human tendency. Again appealing to contemporary psychology, Tosi and Warmke observe that we all have "a tendency to take... a flattering view of ourselves" (p. 23). This "self-enhancement," as the psychologists call it, is both most pronounced and most easily demonstrated in the moral realm (p. 23-24). Seemingly all of us robustly and falsely believe that we are *morally* better than other people (p. 24-25). And since we are each so emotionally invested in our self-image as not just *good* but *better*, we'll undertake extraordinary measures to protect that self-image in the face of recalcitrant evidence (p. 25, 71-72).

Presumably, Tosi and Warmke believe that our desire to *be seen* as better and our desire to *be* better create perverse feedback loops between what we say and what we believe.

⁹ For this toy model to work in the way Tosi and Warmke want it to work, we need a further non-trivial assumption. If they are rational, then each faculty member must believe that their contribution is a good means to accomplishing their ends. So if they are rational, each faculty member must believe that everybody else believes something like this: if *a* and *b* propose two numbers, and *a*'s number is higher than *b*'s number, then *a* is more morally impressive than *b*. But why would anyone think that their colleagues think that? This isn't meant as an objection. As an empirical matter, it seems plausible that people *really do* presuppose this. But investigating the source and justificatory status of this presupposition—and the similar sorts of presuppositions that enable ramping up—would make a fascinating future project.

Let's go back to the spiral-of-silliness faculty meeting. Caspar says, "The funds must be \$650 per annum!" I don't just merely want others to *think* that I'm morally better than Caspar. I want to believe that I really am morally better than Caspar. And given the psychological pull of moral self-enhancement, I probably *do* believe that I'm morally better than Caspar, no matter how much contrary evidence I have. So all of my self-rationalizations start cranking overtime. I think: if I say, "It must be \$800 per annum," my colleagues will think that I'm morally better than Caspar. I then leap to the inference: they would be impressed because I *really would be* morally better than Caspar. And then another leap: I would be morally better than Caspar because I would be speaking the truth, and he wouldn't be. And finally, the worst leap of all: since I *am* morally better than Caspar, the proper amount of funding must be \$800 per annum.

It's curious that in the book's final chapter, Tosi and Warmke only encourage us to dampen and redirect our desire for moral esteem (chapter 8). They do not encourage us to embrace our moral mediocrity, even though it is our deep-seated aversion to this truth that turns an ordinary interest in impression management into a dangerous social scourge. Perhaps that is because—as anyone who has spent time in Catholic enclaves, social justice cliques, or reading Dostoevsky knows—moral humility *itself* becomes a site for interpersonal competition, as people rush to prove that they are the most self-abnegating of all.

3. What we can't say

Superficially, *Just Words* and *Grandstanding* are odd bedfellows. McGowan is a feminist leftist. Tosi and Warmke's book aspires to an anodyne political neutrality, though elsewhere Tosi and Warmke write from a conservative perspective.¹⁰ Words like "oppression" and "race," which appear in McGowan's chapter titles, don't even make Tosi and Warmke's index. So it is all the more striking that the books converge on a similar theme: that our linguistic autonomy is *locally* co-constructed. What we can "do with words" doesn't just depend upon the practices and conventions to which we have access. It also depends upon what the people *to whom we are talking* think and do. Communicating well (both as speaker and hearer) becomes an urgent moral matter.

McGowan's take on this issue is the more familiar of the two. Unsurprisingly, McGowan devotes about half a chapter to what feminist philosophers have called *silencing* (p. 143-155). In her original 1993 article, Langton proposes that the pornographer didn't just downrank women: they silence us too.¹¹ Thanks to pornography, women can't, in some thick sense, refuse or protest sexual mistreatment. On McGowan's construal, a speaker is silenced when something "systematic interfer[es]" with her audience's capacity to recognize the speaker's intentions, authority, sincerity, or self-knowledge (p. 148-152). You can silence me just by enacting nasty

¹⁰ Tosi and Warmke, "Conservative Critiques," in *Routledge Companion to Libertarianism*, ed. Ben Ferguson and Matt Zwolinski (Oxford: Routledge, 2022), 579-592. Warmke's *Conservatism: the Basics* is also under contract with Routledge ("CV," <http://brandonwarmke.com/>, last update May 2023, accessed June 2023).

¹¹ Langton, "Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts," 320-328.

s-norms or cueing ugly stereotypes. If I say, "Graduate students are whiny babies," then I silence graduate student protests to the contrary. (After all, any protest would just be a manifestation of their whiny baby-ness.)

Pornography constitutes silencing because pornography enacts s-norms that themselves constitute this kind of systematic interference (p. 143). In effect, McGowan treats pornography as on a par with other oppressive speech. Ironically, because of that analogy, this is the weakest section of McGowan's book.

If you read MacKinnon, she repeatedly emphasizes that pornography is *not* like everyday hate speech. "Pornography," she writes, "defines what a woman is *through conditioning the male sexual response* to that definition, to the unilateral sexuality pornography is part of and provides" (emphasis added).¹² Her horror is not horror *merely* at the fact that it conditions men not to understand that women are refusing them. It is that women's refusals or protests come to *turn men on*. For MacKinnon, to narrate our rape is not to scream into the wind, ignored and unheard. It is to give men, as they say on the Internet, "fap fodder." Worse yet, according to MacKinnon, pornography encourages men to interpret their sexual arousal at women's violation not as an ignoble, animalistic part of themselves (akin to our urge to hurt a rival) but as an authentic expression of men and women's true nature.¹³

It is more surprising that Tosi and Warmke also worry about silencing. The trouble with grandstanding is that it degrades, in a quite literal sense, our collective communicative resources. If too many people misuse fiery moral rhetoric, "flood[ing]" the public realm with "outrage over petty complaints, idiosyncratic moral preferences, and pet causes," its effects will change (p. 83). A once blisteringly painful epithet like "Fascist!" becomes shrug worthy. Worse still, its actual *meaning* might change, thereby impoverishing our lexical resources. Instead of genuinely labeling you a fascist, my act of screaming, "Fascist!" might only express my mild dislike of your politics. Tosi and Warmke seem to think that our techniques for expressing moral outrage or disgust is a fixed quantity: once too much of it is diluted, that's it. But communicative systems are resilient. Wherever we find a void, we should expect new words and signals to rush in to fill it. (Just think about our constant cycling of euphemisms.)

What ought to concern all of us is a second argument they make: that under conditions of rampant grandstanding, too many people come to justifiably doubt the sincerity of *any* moral discourse (p. 79). These cynics, as Tosi and Warmke call them, believe that everyone else treats moral discourse as a grand social "pretense," akin to the paper-thin pretenses of social etiquette and workplace civility (p. 78). But what happens when I want and need to engage in genuine and justified moral discourse? *I really do* blame you; *I really do* think you should stop; *I really have* identified a moral emergency, and my motives and reasons are all the right ones. Much like McGowan's oppressive s-norms, grandstanding systematically interferes with my interlocutor's ability to recognize that I'm sincere and rightly motivated. Grandstanding silences me *qua* moral

¹² Catherine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 181.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 172-173.

agent. If, like Strawson, you think that our capacity for praise and blame makes us who we are, then grandstanding is an existential threat to our very personhood.¹⁴

There is much more to say about all of this, but I hope I've given you a sense of what's inside these two excellent books. I recommend them both most highly.

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¹⁴ Peter Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 (1962): 187-211.