

Moral Grandstanding and the Norms of Moral Discourse

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ABSTRACT: Moral grandstanding is the use of moral talk for self-promotion. Recent philosophical work assumes that people can often accurately identify instances of grandstanding. In contrast, we argue that people are generally unable to reliably recognize instances of grandstanding, and that we are typically unjustified in judging that others are grandstanding as a result. From there we argue that, under most circumstances, to judge others as grandstanders is to fail to act with proper intellectual humility. We then examine the significance of these conclusions for moral discourse. More specifically, we propose that moral discourse should focus on others' stated reasons and whether their actions manifest respect.

Keywords: moral grandstanding, intellectual humility, moral discourse, social epistemology

Introduction:

Moral grandstanding is, roughly, the use of moral talk for self-promotion (Tosi and Warmke 2020: 6, 22). Recently, some philosophers have claimed that “we recognize many instances of grandstanding, if not all of them,” and that, in context, “it often seems obvious that someone is grandstanding” (Tosi and Warmke 2020: 22, 31). These philosophers also argue that it is appropriate to sanction grandstanders in certain relatively mild ways (Tosi and Warmke 2020: 183-85). That conclusion builds on their claims about the ease with which we can identify grandstanding because that conclusion presupposes that we can figure out which moral utterances should be sanctioned as grandstanding. In contrast, we argue that people generally lack the ability to reliably recognize instances of grandstanding, and we examine the significance of this conclusion for moral discourse.

In Section 1, we say more about what grandstanding is. In Section 2, we argue that we typically lack sufficient evidence to reliably conclude that someone else is grandstanding. This is for a variety of reasons. Contributing factors include: (a) outgroup and ingroup biases, (b) differing background assumptions across epistemic bubbles, (c) competing aims of moral discourse across social groups, coupled with a lack of context, especially present on social media. In light of this first conclusion, we

then argue that, as a default rule, people should avoid concluding that others are grandstanding. By a default rule, we mean a rule that applies unless a defeating condition obtains. (We treat the terms ‘concluding’ and ‘judging’ as interchangeable. We view concluding to be a volitional mental action distinct from simply believing.) In Section 3, we consider possible exceptions to this default rule. In Section 4, we reflect on the nature of moral discourse and offer suggestions for ways to address problems in moral discourse that don’t rely on figuring out which moral claims are instances of grandstanding. We suggest that most norms for moral discourse should involve responding directly to the content of moral claims rather than conjecturing about the motives for the claims.

I. What is Grandstanding?

Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke’s most succinct description of moral grandstanding is “the use of moral talk for self-promotion” (Tosi and Warmke 2020: 6). Elsewhere, they characterize grandstanding as “when one makes a contribution to public moral discourse that aims to convince others that one is ‘morally respectable’” (Tosi and Warmke 2016: 199). On this account, grandstanding is not characterized by the content of the assertion, but by the speaker’s aims when asserting. Grandstanding is an action that aims to positively impact others’ perception of us. It consists of a recognition desire (a desire to impress others with one’s moral qualities), and a grandstanding expression (an attempt to satisfy this desire by publicly participating in moral discourse).

What is going on inside someone when they grandstand? Tosi and Warmke are explicit that the recognition desire need not be the *only* desire moving a person to participate in moral discourse. But, they specify, it must be a *strong* desire (Tosi and Warmke 2020: 19). Even with this qualification, questions still arise. Is there a phenomenological component to the recognition desire? What if the recognition desire is so deeply hidden that the person is entirely alienated from it? We set questions like these aside and presume that as long as a person has a recognition desire (no matter how

sublimated) and it is strong enough to play some causal role in a grandstanding expression, then it counts as an instance of grandstanding.

In determining what counts as having the requisite recognition desire, one other point is worth noting: We might think that participation in any moral community requires mutual recognition of goodwill. In this case, it is a condition of participation in the moral community that someone has a strong desire to be seen as a person of good will by others within the community (cf. Strawson 1962). Additionally, we might think that shared moral commitments require reciprocal judgments of goodwill. Wanting standing in a moral community is on par with wanting respect. It's not pathological; rather it is constitutive of our human condition. Moral standing and respect go together. Let's call this a non-pathological recognition desire. If this is right, then the recognition desire at work in grandstanding is presumably more self-regarding and ego driven than a mere desire for mutual recognition. In what follows, we will focus on the pathological ego-driven recognition desire, which we take to be in line with what Tosi and Warmke describe. Given this distinction, it's worth noting that one way we can fail to reliably interpret another's motivations is by mistaking non-pathological recognition desire for pathological recognition desire or vice versa.

If we take on board the definition offered by Tosi and Warmke, grandstanding is characterized by, what we will call, its perlocutionary aim. That is, grandstanding is moral talk that aims to bring about something that is tangential to the content of the moral discourse itself: it aims to boost the status of the speaker. There is nothing about the content or presentation that uniquely picks out an instance of grandstanding. To tell if someone is grandstanding, we must discern their motivations. Grandstanding is, to that extent, a sin of the heart.

The notion of a perlocutionary aim is developed from J.L. Austin's discussion of perlocutionary acts (Austin 1962). Austin understands a perlocutionary act in terms of what effect the speech *brings about in the listener*. In straightforward assertions, a perlocutionary effect will be that the

hearer *believes* the speaker. The perlocution of “I am hungry” is that the hearer comes to believe that I am hungry. But this is not the only kind of perlocutionary effect. Another perlocutionary effect could be that the hearer feels compassion for my hunger or is moved to give me food. Sometimes speakers intend to bring things about in their listeners. This is called a perlocutionary intention (Recanati 1986: 216). Because Tosi and Warmke do not formulate grandstanding explicitly in terms of intentions, we will talk about these sorts of speech acts using the more neutral term “aim.” Rather than individuating grandstanding by its *effects* on hearers, Tosi and Warmke can be understood as individuating it by *what the speaker aims to bring about in hearers*. This is the perlocutionary aim. When we sincerely assert something, our primary aim is typically to convince the hearer to believe or endorse the contents of our assertion. But we can have other aims too. We could aim to solicit an answer to a question, or change the world through a command, or engage the imagination through a vivid story.

One way to think about Tosi and Warmke’s view is that the source of at least some of our social troubles is that we use moral discourse like a beauty pageant. The stated aim of the beauty pageant is to have women compete to show excellence across many categories: intelligence, skill, deportment. But it seems quite obvious that the purpose of the pageant for many participants (judges, viewers, organizers) is to objectify women for their attractiveness. Similarly, Tosi and Warmke suggest that our moral discourse may have the worthwhile aims of reacting, reasoning and rallying. But the true aim of many participants, at least some of the time, is self-promotion. And if enough participants have this goal, the aims of moral discourse itself are coopted.

But how does self-aggrandizement become a problem, rather than an annoyance? It is not because grandstanding utterances are inherently problematic. Their content and presentation are often indistinguishable from other utterances. And it is not because successfully getting others to think well of you is *itself* bad. There’s nothing wrong with being applauded for acting well. For Tosi and Warmke, it is because, among other things, the perlocutionary aim leads grandstanders to act in ways that have

a corrosive effect on moral discourse and its norms by encouraging norm-corrupting actions like “piling on” and dismissiveness, which in turn lead to things like increased polarization, false beliefs, cynicism, overconfidence, outrage exhaustion, and moderates checking out. For Tosi and Warmke, the causal chain begins with recognition desire, which selects various norm-corrupting actions, which in turn collectively cause a host of problems in our moral discourse.

It is worth noting that our conclusions – that we are typically unable to reliably identify grandstanders and thus should generally avoid judging that others are grandstanding – do not hinge on accepting or rejecting Tosi and Warmke’s account of the demerits of grandstanding (cf. Levy 2020; Westra 2021a). As we turn in the next section to arguing that we typically lack the evidence to reliably identify grandstanding, we focus primarily on moral exchanges that take place within a community on social media or face to face. We are not focusing on domains of talk that are, to borrow Agnes Callard’s phrase, “obsessed with messaging” (Callard 2020). Politicians and preachers might grandstand. But we think that there are additional complexities in such cases that distract from our task in this paper. A democratically elected politician, for example, may have a duty to express her constituents’ desires and aims (rather than purely expressing her own). This may mean she sometimes advocates on behalf of those aims, even if she doesn’t personally share them or give them the importance that her constituents do. Whether this is moral grandstanding is not our question.

II. Why is Moral Grandstanding Difficult to Identify?

We usually cannot tell whether someone is grandstanding. This is because we typically lack the evidence needed to reliably differentiate grandstanding from non-grandstanding moral claims. We think this is especially true when it comes to diagnosing moral claims made on social media or by those whom we consider to be part of our outgroup. If we cannot reliably tell whether someone is grandstanding, then we are not epistemically justified in so judging others. Furthermore, given a widely held and plausible principle that we cannot be *practically* justified in acting on commitments

that do not meet a minimal threshold for epistemic justification, then we cannot be practically justified in so judging others (see Locke 2015; Stanley and Hawthorne 2008; Williamson 2000; Stanley 2005; Smithies 2012; Lackey 2010; Whiting 2014; Whiting and Way 2016; Robertson 2011). On these grounds, we conclude this section by advocating for the following default principle: one should avoid concluding that someone else is grandstanding when one lacks the evidence needed to make such judgments reliably. By virtue of being a default rule, it is not an exceptionless maxim. Rather it is a general principle that holds most of the time, all else being equal. This is a strong enough principle for our purposes.

We present a cumulative argument that people typically lack sufficient evidence to reliably differentiate grandstanding from non-grandstanding in moral discourse. The components of our case, in conjunction, provide sufficient grounds for our conclusions, even if none of these factors are sufficient on their own. We begin our case with some observations we share in common with Tosi and Warmke—namely, that (1) people lack direct access to the internal states of others, including their motivations and (2) there is typically an outward similarity between grandstanding and non-grandstanding moral claims. We then part ways with Tosi and Warmke by arguing that (3) we are typically unaware of a broad range of contextual factors that may motivate others to make moral claims. This is especially true when moral claims are made by members of our outgroups or on social media. When we lack a sufficient understanding of the context from which such moral claims are made, we also typically lack the evidence needed to differentiate a grandstanding claim from a non-grandstanding claim.

To begin, Tosi and Warmke realize that the recognition desire creates epistemic limits on our ability to identify grandstanding. They write that,

“[I]t is difficult to know when people are grandstanding. No one can read minds and be certain of other’s motivations. This makes grandstanding hard to monitor. Spotting grandstanders is not like issuing speeding tickets” (Tosi and Warmke 2020: 167).

We agree. This limitation also applies to the other internal states, such as desires and aims, that Tosi and Warmke use to describe the grandstander's mindset. One might find it difficult to square the above claim with Tosi and Warmke's statements that "it often seems obvious that someone is grandstanding" and that "we recognize many instances of grandstanding, if not all of them. Many of us roll our eyes at grandstanders, or text our coauthors to say, 'He's at it again'" (Tosi and Warmke 2020: 22 and 31). We think this apparent tension can be explained by distinguishing various epistemic standards. In defending the conclusion that "it is difficult to know when people are grandstanding" Tosi and Warmke go on to say that "[n]o one can read minds and be *certain* of others' motivations" (Tosi and Warmke 2020: 167, emphasis added). This suggests that they are employing a high standard for knowledge, perhaps a certainty standard. If we attribute this standard of knowledge to them, it allows their claims to be consistent with one another. Thus, we read Tosi and Warmke as claiming that while we often don't meet the (higher) epistemic standard required of knowing with certainty that someone is grandstanding, we often meet the (lower) epistemic standard that allows us to conclude that someone is grandstanding and to then convey that conclusion privately to a friend. On this reading, we agree with Tosi and Warmke that people generally don't meet this higher epistemic standard, but we disagree that people frequently meet this lower epistemic standard.

Second, Tosi and Warmke realize that grandstanders typically craft their utterances such that, when taken out of context, they are difficult to distinguish from non-grandstanding utterances. They write that "it's difficult to make up a sentence that is both an obvious case of grandstanding and also something that someone might actually say in ordinary conversation" (Tosi and Warmke 2020: 22). They theorize that grandstanding and non-grandstanding statements often sound so similar because grandstanders usually "try to imply something about themselves without just coming out and saying it." (Tosi and Warmke 2020: 21). Grandstanders understand that saying things like "I am a morally

excellent person!” will not get them the moral recognition they desire. Because of this, Tosi and Warmke posit that grandstanders typically use indirect language (Tosi and Warmke 2020: 21). We agree with this, too.

But Tosi and Warmke are much more optimistic than we are about our ability to identify grandstanding in context. They argue as follows:

“In context, though, it often seems obvious that someone is grandstanding even if she is using indirect speech... This is because much of the evidence you use to conclude that someone is grandstanding involves context: the person’s character and personality, his history of moral talk, the topic being discussed, his tone of voice, the contributions that others have made to the present discussion, and so on. These clues are important because grandstanding involves the desire to impress others, and it’s hard to know what is in someone else’s head. All that contextual evidence, together with what the persons says, can suggest they have the Recognition Desire” (Tosi and Warmke 2020: 22).

We think this is an overly optimistic picture of most people’s ability to identify grandstanding. Rather, we think that we typically lack sufficient evidence to distinguish grandstanding from non-grandstanding, even from within the context in which the statement is made. If we typically lack such evidence even in context, we typically lack justification for concluding that someone is grandstanding.

We can clarify our position by distinguishing between skepticism about grandstanding as a general phenomenon versus skepticism about our ability to tell whether a *particular* moral utterance is an instance of grandstanding. This is a distinction that Tosi and Warmke also make (2020: 170–71). This paper is about the latter, not the former. Someone can be convinced by Tosi and Warmke’s arguments that grandstanding is a common phenomenon and still agree with our conclusion that we generally lack sufficient evidence about others’ motivations to be able to reliably conclude that particular moral claims are instances of grandstanding. For example, someone might conclude that grandstanding is relatively common on the grounds that controlled experiments conducted by social scientists suggest it is common. Given that scientists conducting controlled experiments are often

privity to information and context that people normally lack, they might also still conclude that people going about their daily lives usually lack the information needed to recognize instances of grandstanding, even if social scientists can gain the necessary information in an experimental setting. Furthermore, one can agree with our conclusion that we generally lack the evidence needed to reliably identify grandstanding without also concluding that we generally lack the evidence needed to reliably identify many other motivations or internal states of others. This is because grandstanding utterances generally mimic non-grandstanding utterances in a way that many behaviors that reveal motivations and other internal states typically do not. This is an important epistemic difference.

Tosi and Warmke seem to think there are a set of contextual clues that we often have access to that provide us with sufficient evidence to determine with a fairly high degree of reliability whether something is an instance of grandstanding. We doubt that this is so, especially when dealing with moral statements made by those outside an assessor's outgroup. In what follows, the terms "ingroup" and "outgroup" will play a significant role in our discussion. Thus, it is worth explaining how we are using these terms.

In *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*, Bill Bishop writes that "when two groups think of each other, they define themselves as 'us' and 'them'" (Bishop 2009: 282). Simply put, your ingroup is who you think of as part of "us," and your outgroup is who you think of as part of "them." Whether someone is part of an ingroup or outgroup is subject-relative. A conservative Republican living in a rural area is likely to view other conservative Republicans living in rural areas as part of their ingroup. They are also likely to view liberal Democrats living in urban areas as part of their outgroup. But the reverse is true for a liberal Democrat living in an urban area.

Whether we view someone as part of our ingroup or outgroup has consequences for how we interpret their actions. Bishop notes that "[p]eople enhance their social identities by viewing their own groups positively and seeing other groups negatively" (Bishop 2009: 282). In recent years, this

has become an increasingly significant part of the social and political landscape in many places, especially the United States. As Lilliana Mason notes “Americans have been dividing with increasing distinction into two partisan teams” (Mason 2018: 3). These teams track not only differences in political preferences, but also racial, religious, and social differences (Mason 2018: 3). Research shows that members of both these partisan teams negatively stereotype members of the other team, and that this negative stereotyping has increased in recent years (Mason 2018: 3; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Van Bavel and Pereira 2018). Thus, our growing socio-political partisanship puts us in a position where we’re more and more apt to make false negative assessments of those in our outgroups, as well as false positive assessments of those in our ingroup. Our judgments are biased.

Our current socio-political partisanship is significant not only because it leaves us prone to make negative assessments of outgroup members. Our partisanship has also led us to develop separate information ecospheres, or what C. Thi Nguyen has called “epistemic bubbles” (Nguyen 2018; see also, Pariser 2011). Epistemic bubbles are information environments in which certain kinds of sources are systematically left out, sometimes accidentally. Partisanship can lead to epistemic bubbles. Conservatives listen to conservative news media and have conversations mostly with other conservatives. Liberals do the same (to varying degrees; see Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 2018). In comparison to those in our outgroup, we typically read different newspapers and magazines, watch different news sources and commentators, and have different kinds of conversations about values and morality with our ingroup friends. In short, political partisanship and epistemic bubbles create a world where some people are exposed to radically different moral ideas and conversations than others. When someone is exposed to radically different moral ideas and conversations than you, this often puts you in a poor position to make inferences about what motivates their moral claims. This is doubly true when that person is part of your outgroup, leaving you prone to negatively stereotyping them.

Our current conditions leave us unable to accurately evaluate those in our outgroup for grandstanding. But this is a somewhat contingent matter. It is contingent upon our current socio-political circumstances, which include partisanship and epistemic bubbles. Under different circumstances, our degree of reliability to make judgments about the grandstanding of others might be greater. But we do not see this contingency as a weakness in our response, given that Tosi and Warmke's arguments also focus primarily on the dynamics of moral discourse in socio-politically polarized countries like the United States.

From the perspective of the current political context, we are particularly worried that overconfidence in our ability to identify grandstanding will lead to false positives. By a "false positive" we mean an instance where someone concludes that another is grandstanding when that other person is in fact not grandstanding (cf. Westra 2021b). We've argued that context typically does not provide us with enough information to reliably avoid false positives. This is especially true for two key situations: conversations that happen on social media (where a lot of context is missing), and when one assesses the moral statements of an outgroup member (where we are predisposed to think poorly of the other person). This is significant because many of the instances where people are most tempted to conclude that others are grandstanding involve either moral statements made on social media or by outgroup members (or both). To the extent that grandstanding is viewed as bad behavior, most people are more likely to falsely attribute grandstanding to outgroup members rather than to themselves or their ingroup members.

So far we've offered several considerations for concluding that we are generally in a poor position to assess the motivations for moral claims made by outgroup members. First, we tend to think poorly of those in our political outgroups. As a result, cognitive biases may make us overly likely to attribute unflattering explanations for the behaviors of those in our outgroups. Second, our

highly polarized society has created distinct epistemic bubbles where the ideas and conversations people are exposed to differ radically depending on which partisan team one is on.

If we're not careful, political partisanship can create a perfect storm for misdiagnosing the motivation for moral statements made by those in our outgroups. Not having access to the ideas, media, and conversations that most directly impact what is morally salient for members of our outgroups is apt to make some of their moral statements incomprehensible to us. In seeking to make those moral statements comprehensible to ourselves, we risk tapping into cognitive biases that will naturally lead us to posit unflattering explanations of their moral claims that conform to our preexisting biases.

There is a third ingredient contributing to this perfect storm: the central role that social media plays in discourse. Social media puts us into situations where we're simultaneously observing the moral claims of a larger and larger number of people while also separating ourselves into more and more isolated epistemic bubbles. Consider the false intimacy of a Facebook post. A person regularly interacts with a particular subset of friends. In the context of these interactions, it may be fitting to make a particular post, as part of ongoing engagement with those friends and a shared epistemic outlook. But this post can then be seen by anyone in the friend network. To someone else, with a partially overlapping set of friends and a different information diet, the post may seem jarring, inappropriate, or inexplicable as anything other than grandstanding. This can easily happen because, in the words of Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd, social media sites "flatten multiple audiences into one" in a phenomenon that has been called "context collapse" (Marwick and boyd 2010: 122; see also Nguyen 2021). These circumstances leading to context collapse make it easy to misinterpret the motivation for others' moral and political claims.

Partisan news consumption and in-group conversations shape which moral issues we prioritize and how we approach those issues. This can affect both our background assumptions and

the moral goods we aim for via moral discourse. But unless our social networks are completely cut off from people in other groups, we will continue to see moral statements made by those in our outgroups. We receive such messages without the benefit of much of the context that gave rise to those messages. As a result, we are poorly positioned to understand what has motivated the claims.

Consider an example.

Environmental Issues Talk: Jim believes that the climate is warming but he isn't sure whether humans are responsible. He's not particularly worried about this because he is confident that if things get really bad, human ingenuity will overcome any challenges. Jim has a brother-in-law, Dan. Jim and Dan are not close. They see each other a few times a year at family gatherings and are friends on Facebook. Jim has noticed that pretty much every interaction he has with Dan eventually involves Dan making moral claims about the environment.

For example, at family gatherings if Dan sees someone put a recyclable in the trash, he will call them out for it and suggest that they use the recycling instead. Dan did this to Jim last Christmas saying afterwards "I just think it's important that we all do our part." Jim also notices that Dan is constantly posting about the environmental causes he supports on social media (e.g. "I just donated to Big Cat Rescue, you should too!"). Jim was particularly irked recently when Dan posted the following:

"If you can't see the importance of taking care of the environment, I just don't know what to say to you. This planet is our home. How can you not see that we obviously have a responsibility to take care of it!? Quite frankly, I'm disgusted by all the apathy I observe on this topic. Do better people."

Jim is confident that Dan is an attention-seeking grandstander. But Jim is mistaken. In actuality, Dan's comments are made just because he passionately cares about the environment. Dan is oblivious to how his environmental advocacy is sometimes perceived by others. Growing up, Dan's parents instilled in him care for the environment as an important value. Dan's sister is an environmental lawyer and Dan's best friend from college is a wildlife conservationist. Dan has liked a number of Facebook pages devoted to environmental conservation and has subscribed to several magazines and newsletters about environmental advocacy. As a result, issues related to climate change and care for the environment predominate his social media feed and are a frequent topic of conversation between Dan and his family and friends.

Dan has as part of his background a lot more information about climate change than Jim does. Given what Dan knows, denial of anthropomorphic climate change seems unreasonable to him, and by extension so does failing to do things like recycle. Because of the information he is constantly surrounded by, Dan is quick to think about the environmental impact of people's actions. He also reads a lot of news stories about pollution and deforestation. Because Dan cares deeply about the environment, these stories make him angry. On the day he posted the comment that Jim found so irksome, Dan had just read through a series of op-eds about cultural callousness to the effects of climate change, many of which contained devastating predictions about the future of life on this planet. He was upset about this. He also felt genuine exasperation because he cannot understand how

other people can care so little about an issue that matters so much to him. Dan's post was a way of venting his genuine anger and exasperation via the medium closest to hand.

We don't mean to portray Dan as without fault. Social media posts like Dan's are typically counterproductive. They normally only serve to rile up (for different reasons) both those who already agree or disagree with the poster. Dan's behavior suggests he may have difficulty stepping back from what he knows to think about matters from others' perspectives. Dan would likely be a more effective advocate for the environment if he were better able to think about how his words and actions are likely to be perceived by others.

But Dan's faults do not make him a grandstander. What's more, in misunderstanding and mislabeling Dan, Jim's actions suggest an inability to think about others' perspectives too. Jim's confidence that Dan grandstands about the environment is produced by Jim's inability to come up with other plausible explanations for Dan's behavior. Jim has failed to make enough sense of Dan's world to be able to grasp the true motivations for Dan's actions. What Jim mistakes for a desire for moral adulation is Dan's commitment to his cause and Dan's difficulties understanding how people like Jim see the world.

In a highly polarized climate where people are often faced with the moral claims of outgroup acquaintances on social media, we suspect that misunderstandings like Jim's and Dan's happen often. Someone makes a moral claim, without considering how it will sound to those with very different background assumptions and values. Some hearers struggle to understand why anybody would make such a moral claim. Given what the hearers know, the most plausible answer seems to be a desire for moral recognition. But what hearers know is often insufficient. As a result, hearers may falsely attribute grandstanding to explain the moral claim. Thus, another way to frame our argument for people's general inability to reliably identify grandstanding is that people are generally unable to eliminate relevant alternative explanations for what a speaker is doing when they make a statement that, from the outside, appears like it might be grandstanding.

There are moral stakes for falsely judging that someone else is grandstanding. When we incorrectly judge that someone is grandstanding, we open them up to unjust criticism. We take them less seriously and fail to give their moral statements the weight they deserve. Because (i) we often lack the necessary contextual evidence required to make reliable judgments about whether others are grandstanding, and (ii) we defeasibly owe each other charity, we advocate for the following principle: *as a default rule, one should avoid concluding that someone else is grandstanding.* By a default rule, we mean a principle that is assumed to apply unless conditions for an exception are met. We think that we have a general obligation of charity to others, however, this obligation is defeasible. Sometimes it can be outweighed by other considerations and sometimes we can be excused from the obligation (as in cases of self-defense). In the next section, we further examine this default rule by considering possible exceptions to it.

III. The Default Rule and Possible Exceptions

We've argued that we generally lack sufficient evidence to reliably determine if someone else is grandstanding, especially if they are an outgroup member or their statement is made online. Many of us operate in epistemic bubbles. And many of us communicate on social media platforms like Twitter, which by its very design denudes comments of context. In light of that, we've suggested that, as a default rule, one should avoid concluding that someone else's moral statement is an instance of grandstanding.

In this section we consider circumstances that plausibly create exceptions to the default rule. Specifically, we consider circumstances where the moral claim maker is (a) consistently hypocritical, (b) a member of your ingroup, or (c) someone you know very well.

First, one might think that evidence of someone's hypocrisy provides sufficient context to reliably conclude that someone is grandstanding. For example, if Adam frequently says that he finds the idea of cheating on one's spouse loathsome and then it comes to light that Adam routinely

cheats on his spouse, you might think it's easier to tell that his statements about cheating were grandstanding. Whether or not such a revelation provides evidence that Adam was grandstanding about marital infidelity depends on how widely one conceptualizes the recognition desire. It's plausible that Adam's main motivation for his statements about marital infidelity was something like a guilty conscience or a desire to hide from people that he is a serial cheater. Such motivations may require that he also have a desire that others view him with moral esteem, but the connection is indirect.

That said, it is plausible to think there are at least some instances where evidence of hypocrisy provides one with enough additional context to overcome the default rule against concluding that someone is grandstanding. But one might wonder how much it matters whether someone is grandstanding in a clear case of hypocrisy. In the case of Adam, it seems to matter much more that he was being unfaithful to his spouse. Perhaps it also matters that he behaved hypocritically. But it is not clear that identifying Adam as a moral grandstander is itself relevant to figuring out how one should respond to Adam as a fellow moral agent. This line of thought will be picked up again in the next section.

Second, one might think that we have sufficient context about members of our ingroup to be able to determine with reliability when they are grandstanding. This idea flows rather naturally from our argument that we are in a poor position to be able to tell if those in our outgroup are grandstanding. It is true that being part of the same ingroup, which typically involves being part of more similar epistemic bubbles, is apt to provide one with more context from which to make determinations about whether fellow ingroup members are grandstanding. However, even being part of the same partisan team often won't be enough. Consider the following example.

Statements of Solidarity: Neha holds progressive views on most social and political issues. This includes her support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Neha believes that it is important to show her support through actions, not words. Neha regularly donates money to the Black Lives Matter Foundation, makes a special effort to shop at Black owned businesses, and writes to her local elected

officials about ways in which she thinks they should take more action in support of Black lives. Neha is conscientious about trying to ensure she is not engaging in merely performative action, so she typically doesn't post about Black Lives Matter on social media. Neha's position is strongly influenced by comments she has heard several Black friends make recently about how actions speak louder than words and about their worries that much of the vocal support for the Black Lives Matter movement is merely performative. As an Indian American without Black heritage, Neha thinks it is important for her to take cues from her Black friends on these matters.

Neha has a co-worker, Divya, who also holds progressive views on most social and political issues and who also supports Black Lives Matter. Neha knows Divya's general political views and knows that Divya is also an Indian American without Black heritage. Neha and Divya follow one another on Twitter. Neha has noticed that Divya regularly tweets about the Black Lives Matter Movement. These tweets include things like "Just a reminder that Black Lives Matter," "If you think the 'rioting' is the issue, you're delusional," and "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention #BlackLivesMatter"

Neha agrees with these claims, but lately she has found herself annoyed with Divya's comments. As far as Neha knows, Divya has not actively been involved with the Black Lives Matter movement. Instead, Divya is just constantly posting about it. Neha thinks Divya might be a merely performative supporter of the Black Lives Matter movement and that Divya's tweets amount to nothing more than grandstanding.

In actuality, Divya participates in supporting the Black Lives Matter movement in all the ways that Neha does. It is just that, like Neha, Divya doesn't post or share much about these activities. Thus, Neha doesn't know about them. In addition, Divya's choice to tweet a lot about the Black Lives Matter movement is also motivated by the desire to follow the lead of Black people. Several of Divya's Black friends have posted about how silence about the Black Lives Matter movement amounts to complicity in anti-Black racism. Divya also read an article by a Black writer about the importance of statements of solidarity. Divya has taken this idea to heart and is doing her best to not be complicit in anti-Black racism.

Here Neha and Divya share membership in a variety of social and political ingroups, yet there still is misunderstanding. Divya's moral claims are guided by her view that statements of solidarity are an important kind of moral speech, and her view that the moral aim of expressing solidarity is a valuable one. Neha's interpretation of Divya's moral discourse is filtered by a different set of assumptions about the purposes and value of moral discourse. In highly prioritizing the moral principle that actions speak louder than words, Neha misunderstands what motivates Divya's actions and attributes a false motivation to her.

Our epistemic situation for determining if someone is grandstanding is improved, all else equal, when someone is a member of our ingroup because we are typically more inclined to interpret

the actions of ingroup members charitably and we often have more evidence about the kinds of information fellow ingroup members are receiving. But these improvements on their own do not routinely provide us with sufficient information to reliably determine if other ingroup members are grandstanding. This is because political ingroups are large enough that we only know a small fraction of the people who comprise such groups and because there is still a lot of viewpoint and information heterogeneity within these groups. Thus, common ingroup membership is not sufficient on its own for reliably avoiding false positives when considering whether someone is grandstanding.

Finally, one might think that having a close personal relationship with someone provides one with sufficient information to be able to reliably tell when they are grandstanding. This provides the strongest grounds for an exception. When we have a close personal relationship with someone, we generally have a lot more information about how they behave and why. With a close friend, for example, we are often able to observe how they behave in a wide variety of settings. We are also apt to have conversed with them in person about a lot of things. We are more likely to have a sense of their moral character, their preferences, and their tendencies. All this is to say, we generally have a lot more evidence on which to base a judgment that someone we are in a close personal relationship with is grandstanding.

In addition, when the close personal relationship is one of love, care, or good feeling, then we have incentives to interpret the actions of those we are in such relationship with favorably. This makes us less likely to generate false positives. Finally, we also often have a different kind of moral standing with those whom we have close personal relationships with. This kind of moral standing in relationship makes conclusions that someone is grandstanding weightier but may also render such conclusions more appropriate.

In sum, as a general matter, we should avoid concluding that someone else's moral claim is an instance of moral grandstanding. But this principle is subject to exceptions based on the strength

of our evidence and the nature of our relationship to the moral claim maker. There is a final point worth noting before we turn to the next section: All the exceptions to the default principle considered in this section are epistemic in nature. That is to say, all of them consider situations where A might be epistemically justified in concluding that B is grandstanding. That said, there may also be situations where one is justified, all things considered, in concluding that another is grandstanding for non-epistemic reasons. For example, if one is being abused or oppressed, one no longer has certain obligations to one's abuser or oppressor that one generally has toward others. It is plausible to think that there may be situations in which it is all-things-considered justified for a victim of abuse or oppression, for the sake of their well-being, to conclude that their abuser or oppressor is grandstanding, even if the evidence one has would not be sufficient under other circumstances.

IV. Addressing Moral Discourse without Attributing Grandstanding

If we standardly shouldn't judge that someone is grandstanding, what should we do instead? Our answer is that we should engage with one another's claims directly. This is the plea that Tosi and Warmke ask for themselves in addressing a reader who is tempted to dismiss their book as a case of grandstanding (Tosi and Warmke 2020) 36). Regardless of the authors' intentions, they write, the arguments in the book deserve to be taken on their own terms.

We think this point generalizes. When we sincerely engage each other in normative discourse, we owe it to each other to listen to each other's reasons. It doesn't mean we have to agree. And it doesn't mean we need to rehash old arguments as many times as an interlocutor may want us to. But we should allow others' considerations to be put on the table for discussion. This is true even if the person is quite morally confused. As long as they are sincerely engaged in moral discourse, we owe them *respect*. Respect involves allowing them to put forward their reasons (Flowerree 2023).

When another person is insincere – through bullshitting, trolling, sealioning, or a host of other subversive tactics – we do not think there is any requirement to take their contributions at face value. Subversive tactics abuse moral discourse for nefarious ends. Hannah Arendt writes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that “It has frequently been pointed out that totalitarian movements use and abuse democratic freedoms in order to abolish them” (Arendt, 1966: 10). It seems to us that trolls, bullshitters, etc. do something analogous with moral discourse. They rely on our sincerity in order to manipulate the conversation for their own ends. Insincere grandstanders may also fall into this category. If we can tell that they are insincere, then we need not take their contributions at face value. But in such cases it is the insincerity, not the grandstanding, that is doing the work.

But the grandstander might be perfectly sincere (Tosi and Warmke 2020: 39-40). And yet, the grandstander is vain. Many people manifest vice. If one could be excluded from the moral community for manifesting a vice like pride, vanity, or ignorance, then few of us would have standing to speak. But participation within the moral community is not dependent on being a saint. Saints and sinners all come together to muddle through how to live our lives in close proximity.

When engaged in moral discourse, we ought to take each other’s reasons seriously. Taking each other’s reasons seriously involves taking them at face value and giving them the consideration they deserve. This is largely accomplished by sticking to *first order normative discourse*. If the question at hand is “should we have universal basic income?” then we should mostly stick to reasons that help us answer that question. Considerations like “it would be untenable to finance UBI” should be countered with, “it would require a wealth tax that is unlikely to be popular with the wealthy, but there are proposals that address this” rather than “you must not care about the poor.” Whether the other participant cares about the poor doesn’t bear on which policy we should endorse. In addition to being irrelevant to the question of which policy is best, it challenges whether the other person is a person of good will. And this, most people find, is deeply insulting.

Not all moral discourse involves persuasion. If the discourse involves a display of solidarity, then the appropriate thing will be to enact a display of solidarity. If the aim is to express reactive attitudes, then the responses will be determined by the appropriate reactive attitudes. When we are engaged in moral discourse, as a general matter, we should engage in the discourse, not in discourse *about the moral discourse and its participants*.

But what if people are behaving badly? The cases that Tosi and Warmke are worried about are cases of bad behavior. On our view, it is appropriate to call someone out for acting disrespectfully. Respectful discourse requires pruning and weeding disrespectful talk (“your tone was dismissive,” or “you didn’t let her finish her sentence”). On our view, it is also appropriate to call someone out for subversive conversational tactics rooted in insincerity. But tending our discourse should generally be restricted to *publicly accessible actions*. It is unproductive and often insulting to sanction people for their presumed hidden motivations.

Additionally, as we argued in section II, we are often unreliable at distinguishing a grandstanding motive from other motives, especially when it comes to members of our outgroup or when context is missing. Why does our poor epistemic position matter for what judgments we make? A fundamental normative commitment motivating our default position against impugning others as grandstanders is a commitment to *intellectual humility*. While there is no widely agreed upon account of what intellectual humility is in the philosophical literature (cf. Ballantyne 2021; Hannon 2020), on a variety of accounts, proper intellectual humility seems to require that we generally not conclude that others are grandstanding and that we instead seek to influence moral discourse through tending to publicly accessible actions.

For example, on an influential account offered by Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr, and Daniel Howard-Snyder intellectual humility “consists in proper attentiveness to, and owning of, one’s intellectual limitations” (Whitcomb et al. 2017: 520). Whitcomb et al. include “gaps

in knowledge” and “unreliable processes” as falling “under the rubric” of intellectual limitations (Whitcomb et al. 2017: 516). If we’re right that we generally lack epistemic justification for or an ability to reliably identify grandstanding, then proper attentiveness to and owning of one’s intellectual limitations would seem to generally require foregoing making judgments about whether someone is grandstanding.

To take another influential account, Ian M. Church has argued that “[i]ntellectual humility is the virtue of accurately tracking what one could non-culpably take to be the positive epistemic status of one’s own beliefs” (Church 2016: 427). For Church, intellectual humility is a virtuous mean between the vices of intellectual pride and intellectual servility (Church 2016: 414). If our earlier arguments are correct, accurately tracking what one could non-culpably take to be the positive epistemic status of one’s beliefs would result in one recognizing that they generally aren’t in a sufficiently good epistemic position to conclude that one is grandstanding. Judgments to the contrary will often be intellectually arrogant. But such withholding of judgment typically won’t be intellectually servile. After all, our account isn’t advocating skepticism about people’s ability to assess or react to motives generally. Not all motives are hidden or easily confused with related motives. We ought still have the confidence to recognize motives and elements of moral discourse when our beliefs about such matters have, in Church’s phrase, sufficient positive epistemic status. Thus, intellectual humility advises that we should be careful when impugning a motive like recognition desire to others. In cases where we’re tempted to question motives (“you only say that because you don’t care about the environment!”), there is usually a way to redirect the conversation towards the question at hand without implicating the motivations of the person. You could instead say, “what about the value of environmental sustainability?” If we follow this suggestion, when we are engaging in moral discourse it will normally be unimportant to consider whether someone is grandstanding. Instead, we will be engaged in moral

discourse directly, or encouraging others to maintain respectful engagement with the moral issues at hand.

Consider one of the bad behaviors Tosi and Warmke discuss, piling on. Piling on occurs when members of the discourse repeat what has been said to express their agreement (“this is a dire moment in our history!” “hear! hear!” “very dire!” and so on). Piling on appears closely related to the practice of *expressing solidarity*, which is a legitimate moral activity that many engage in. There is nothing in itself that makes expressing solidarity objectionable. Tosi and Warmke argue that sometimes people pile on without genuinely affirming the stance. This, it seems to us, is only problematic when the piling on activity is disrespectful or harmful to others. Suppose a million people sign a petition to support ensuring clean water is available in Flint, Michigan. But, suppose, half of them were motivated by a desire to look morally upright to potential romantic partners. Have they caused harm? Plausibly, no. By contrast, if a million people tweet vitriol at someone who tweeted a picture of themselves eating at Chick-fil-a, and half of them have a recognition desire to be seen as culturally sensitive, it seems that they have caused harm. But this is because they tweeted vitriol. The thing that they did, regardless of their motivation, was disrespectful. Thus, we think that we should focus less on whether others are grandstanding and more on others’ reasons, and whether their actions manifest disrespect.

But what about all the problems Tosi and Warmke identified as stemming from grandstanding? Recall, Tosi and Warmke argue the recognition desire is harmful because it selects for norm-corrupting actions, which collectively cause a host of problems in our moral discourse, such as polarization, false beliefs, cynicism, overconfidence, outrage exhaustion, and moderates checking out. Let’s consider what role grandstanding is *distinctively* playing in the tale of woe. Some instances of grandstanding will have neutral or even good consequences. If a grandstander just copies what the virtuous person would say, for example, and as a result contributes to the development of her own virtue, this would arguably be a laudable role for grandstanding to play. As Hume aptly remarks, “But

vanity is so closely allied to virtue, and to love the fame of laudable actions approaches so near the love of laudable actions for their own sake, that these passions are more capable of mixture, than any other kinds of affection; and it is almost impossible to have the latter without some degree of the former...To love the glory of virtuous deeds is a sure proof of the love of virtue” (Hume 1985: 86; cf. Westra 2021a). Or if we were in a society of virtuous people with healthy norms of moral discourse, we can imagine that grandstanding would have little discernible effect on moral discourse. This is because the grandstander secures their status by attempting to communicate their moral qualities. So for the most part, in a virtuous society a grandstander would say what a virtuous person would say. And if the grandstander contravenes or shifts the norms, then the virtuous people will criticize them.

But what if – as seems true – we are not in a society of virtuous people with healthy norms of moral discourse? In this context, grandstanding can have corrosive consequences. Because grandstanders are motivated to gain standing, they will be drawn towards actions that result in high-adulation. This means they may engage in a range of actions that undermine healthy norms of moral discourse. But this makes the harm of grandstanding contingent upon the already existent bad practices of the community.

This shows that the path from recognition desire to bad consequences is quite complicated. It seems almost certainly true that grandstanding can play a role in bringing about bad outcomes. There is a job for social psychologists to quantify the extent to which this is true. But if our aim is to improve moral discourse, our primary concern should not be whether other people are grandstanding. When we are discussing something that matters to us (who to vote for in the next election, or how to best grieve over those who are unjustly killed), murky motivations aren’t relevant. Most of us aren’t social scientists. We are engaged in a joint moral project. The relevant considerations are those that bear on

the moral project. This might seem like a mundane proposal, but we think it would require radical shifts to the way we engage others, especially on social media.

For the sake of argument, we have granted Tosi and Warmke many of their claims. We have presumed that grandstanding should be understood the way they present it, and that it plays some causal role in the harms that they identify. Our aim has been to show that even if Tosi and Warmke are correct about all of this, we shouldn't allow the specter of grandstanding to dominate our moral discourse. This is for two reasons. First, the harm that grandstanding may do to our moral discourse is contingent on the existence of other publicly available and pre-existing bad aspects of our moral discourse. And second, unlike grandstanding, these other bad aspects of moral discourse—which are necessary conditions for allowing grandstanding to corrupt moral discourse further—are ones that we can reliably identify. Thus, if we want to improve moral discourse while avoiding disrespecting non-grandstanders by viewing them as grandstanders, we should mostly put aside the question of whether someone is moral grandstanding. We think this is what intellectual virtue calls for via proper intellectual humility. When necessary, we should identify and sanction disrespectful actions, based on public manifestations of disrespect. This may also be something that intellectual virtue calls for. Building good norms does not involve punishing others for presumed bad motives. It involves committing ourselves to engaging each other with sincerity and respect.

V. Conclusion

In this paper, we've argued that, at least in our current circumstances, people normally lack sufficient evidence to be able to reliably determine when other people are grandstanding. We have also advocated that, as a default principle, people should avoid concluding that others are grandstanding. If grandstanding has the ability to corrupt moral discourse, it does so parasitically, relying on preexisting corruption in our moral practices. This is because moral grandstanding utterances must mimic non-grandstanding utterances in order for the grandstander to gain the moral

status they desire. In virtue of this relationship by mimicry, we can eliminate the harmful effect of the parasite by reforming the host. Thus, we have also argued that, at least under most circumstances, a better way of dealing with the corrosive effects on moral discourse that Tosi and Warmke attribute to grandstanding is to engage with the content of one another's moral claims in respectful and virtuous ways.

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